

The Effect of Acculturation Stress Asian-American Immigrants on Parent-Child Relationship

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the impact and effect of acculturation stress on parent-child relationships within Asian immigrant families. The literature review highlights the significant rise in the Asian immigrant population over the past few decades and addresses the prevalence of mental health issues among the demographic, citing acculturation stress as a key contributing factor. By conducting a series of interviews on 14 East-Asian families, the study investigates how the age and timing of immigration profoundly influence an individual's ability to assimilate into the host country, thereby differently shaping parent-child dynamics. Notably, those who came as infants face relatively lower acculturation stress, yet have the most conflicts with familial relationships due to clashing cultural backgrounds and generational differences. Conversely, those immigrating in their teenage and adult years are more prone to acculturation stress. However, they tend to maintain a relatively positive familial relationship due to a reliance on family for mental and emotional support. Understanding the interplay between acculturation stress and parent-child relationships in first-generation Asian immigrant families can offer valuable insights on improving support and fostering healthier familial relationships.

Literature Review

In recent years, the influx of Asian immigrants to the United States has notably surged. In 1960, the Asian immigrant population stood at approximately 491,000. By 2019, this figure had risen substantially to about 14,099,000—an increase of roughly 13,608,000 Asian immigrants (Batalova, 2021; Gibson & Jung, n.d.). With this surge in Asian immigrant numbers, it's crucial to recognize and assess the potential impacts on their mental well-being. Statistics indicate that 17.3 percent of Asian immigrants face the risk of being diagnosed with mental health issues during their lifetime, with only 8.6 percent seeking assistance (Mental Health Among Asian-Americans, n.d.).

Acculturation Stress

A significant contributing factor to the mental health challenges in the Asian community is acculturation stress. Coined by John W. Berry in 1970, acculturation stress refers to the psychological and emotional difficulties experienced by individuals and groups while adapting to a new culture. It encompasses the tensions arising from the interplay between one's original culture and the new environment. Research on immigrant children and their adjustment to host countries describes it as the psychological changes required to adapt to a new cultural setting. Acculturation stress encompasses issues like language barriers, limited educational opportunities, and more (Gualdi-Russo et al., 2014).

Asian Communities

Understanding the cultural backgrounds of Asians sheds light on how changes can trigger specific stressors. Research on the mental health of South Asians highlights significant differences between Western and Asian societies. While Western countries, like the United States, prioritize individualistic traits such as independence and personal achievement, South Asian communities emphasize interdependent traits like family cohesion and cooperation (Karasz et al., 2019). This difference aligns with the social psychological concept of the self: an independent self views itself as distinct and shaped by personal traits, whereas an interdependent self sees itself interconnected with others, defined by communal responsibilities. The latter is more prevalent in East Asian, South Asian, Latin American, African, and Mediterranean cultures, where strong emphasis is placed on close-knit communities and familial bonds (Leu et al., 2011).

Moreover, studies focusing on the influence of family activities on Asian Americans' ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle emphasize the pivotal role of family. Mothers, in particular, exert a significant influence on a young Asian individual's adoption of a healthy lifestyle (Ali et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). Given the high expectations placed on children in Asian culture, parental support becomes crucial, as excessive expectations can negatively impact children's mental health (Fung et al., 2023). Supportive environments within a child's social systems contribute positively to their mental well-being (Ren & Jiang, 2021).

Impact of Immigration

Immigrating to a new country exposes Asians to acculturation stress, a key factor influencing their mental health, albeit not the sole one. Studies have highlighted the association between acculturative stress and mental health issues among South Asians. Factors like financial difficulties and social isolation, inherent in acculturation stress, contribute to the prevalence of major affective disorders among this group. Additionally, challenges such as language barriers and reluctance to seek help further hinder access to treatment. Similar results link psychological disorders in children to migration, showing increased levels of depression due to acculturation stress (Ren & Jiang, 2021). The age at immigration also presents challenges within immigrant families. While different age groups face distinct difficulties, certain patterns emerge, such as the influence of adult subjective social status on the health of immigrants arriving at 25 years or older (Leu et al., 2008). Clear goals for immigration also impact the mental health of Asian immigrants, as those with strong migration reasons are less likely to experience mental health problems (Gong et al., 2011).

While acculturation stress isn't the sole cause of poor mental health among first-generation Asian immigrants, it does play a significant role alongside other complicating factors (Karasz et al., 2019). Thus, it's reasonable to conclude that acculturation stress contributes to the mental health challenges faced by these immigrants.

Interviews

To investigate the impact of acculturation stress on parent-child relationships, interviews were conducted using Zoom. Eligible interviewees had to meet specific criteria: (1) they were born in an Asian country and (2) they had immigrated to the United States of America. Emails were sent to individuals within a designated area of Bergen County, New Jersey, introducing the study. Those who agreed were sent another email with preparatory questions to consider beforehand. Once schedules were confirmed, each interview lasted between fifteen to thirty minutes, tailored to the interviewee. The process began with basic demographic inquiries (e.g., name, gender, ethnicity) and progressed to explore personal experiences (e.g., immigration effects, major challenges, and impacts on relationships).

The 14 responses were then analyzed using a series of different factors. Assessing whether an interviewee's immigration experience was positive or negative relied on their use of positive terms (e.g., helpful,

improved) or negative terms (e.g., depressed, isolated, challenging). To ensure accuracy, participants were asked at the end of the interview to summarize their experience with a simple yes or no response regarding whether their journey had been positive or negative. Factors such as the significance of the language barrier were deduced from direct statements made by interviewees when asked broad questions about their immigration experience. Most of the information gathered stemmed from the interviewees' narratives about their immigration journey or from one-word responses they provided.

Results

Language Barrier

In each of the interviews conducted, all fourteen participants acknowledged encountering some sort of a language barrier that had an adverse impact on both them and their families. However, when specifically questioned about the most significant challenge they faced as Asian immigrants, only 10 out of 14 individuals (71.4%) said language barrier. In addition, while a majority of individuals also acknowledged experiencing a degree of isolation upon their initial immigration to America, 7 out of those aforementioned 10 people (70%) were all (100%) part of 7 out of 14 (50%) respondents who specifically highlighted a substantial problem with isolation.

On the other hand, the 4 out of 14 (28.6%) individuals who did not have a significant issue with the language barrier shared a common trait—they had individuals in their vicinity who were proficient in both languages. These same people were a part of the other 7 out of 14 (50%) respondents who were not affected much by isolation. Interestingly, all 4 out of 4 (100%) of participants who arrived in the United States during their early childhood (between the ages of 3 and 7) did not raise the issue of isolation as a concern at any point.

Age During Immigration

Infants

Those who arrived as infants experienced the most positive impact of immigration. Throughout the interviews, their focus remained on positive aspects, except when discussing their parents. Consequently, their main challenge revolved around differing viewpoints from their parents. Around 75% of these individuals who immigrated as infants reported facing disagreements and pressure from their parents regarding their academics. They perceived their parents as overly stringent, a perspective that seemed inconsistent with American culture. Worth noting is that these three participants were males, while the fourth was female. This greatly contrasts the teenage immigrants as they initially highlighted more negative experiences, frequently expressing feelings of isolation, which caused them to gradually develop a closer relationship with their parents, where none of them mentioned experiencing stress from their parents.

Teens

Teenagers who arrived in America recalled experiencing heightened levels of isolation, particularly if they arrived without anyone who could communicate in English. Among the four teenage immigrants, three-fourths (75%) of them migrated to America with their families, yet none of them possessed a proficient command of

the English language. This lack of English fluency was consistently associated with feelings of isolation. Conversely, the remaining one-fourth (25%) of teenage immigrants faced a different scenario. This individual had a parent who was proficient in both English and Korean, reducing their sense of isolation. Those who are currently teenagers or young adults (8 out of 14), 4 out of the 8 (50%) were males and they mentioned frequent arguments with their parents. Topics were mostly about academics and how to spend their time. On the other hand, the other 4 out of the 8 (50%) were females and they had no mentions of fights with their parents about it.

Adults

Those who came to America as adults mentioned their problem with the language barrier most frequently. They had the biggest impact from acculturation stress as all of them constantly talked about the difference between the two cultures. Korea was much better in terms of social aspects such as mannerisms, they were more used to Korean systems such as going to the doctor, and they could actually communicate comfortably. Therefore, they mentioned feelings of alienation, discomfort, and uncertainty when they first immigrated. However, while all of them mentioned that it was—and still is—difficult to speak English, they managed to be able to speak to a certain amount. In addition, five out of the six adults (83.3%) came for their children (the other came for their academics) and four out of five of those adults (80%) felt that it eventually got better due to their commitment to their family.

Familial Relationship

5 out of 14 individuals (35.7%) explicitly highlighted that their migration to America played a pivotal role in strengthening family bonds. Notably, every single one of them (100%) had immigrated to the United States within the past 2 to 4 years. Among this group, the teenage demographic accounted for 3 out of 5 (60%), all of whom acknowledged experiencing a sense of isolation upon their arrival in America. In addition, of those who indicated that their family cohesion was a result of the move, slightly less than half (2 out of 5, or 40%) acknowledged grappling with significant mental health challenges for a considerable duration. Therefore, they stated that since the only person they had was their family, they became their source of solace, strengthening their bond.

Overall Experience

Out of the total respondents, 13 out of 14 individuals (92.9%) reported having a positive overall experience. The main reason behind this rating was that their life in America felt more relaxed, and provided better opportunities for their children or themselves. However, the lone 1 out of 14 expressed a negative viewpoint. This individual explained that while they would consider the experience positive for their child, they personally felt it was negative. They felt detached from their social life and a perceived loss of their own potential. While the initial stages of immigration were marked by challenges arising from acculturation stress, as time passed and they settled into their new lives, the general consensus was that the overall experience significantly improved.

Discussion

To address the impact of acculturation stress on first-generation immigrants, the overall consensus leans toward an affirmative stance. However, the effect on parent-child relationships tends to sway between positive and

negative trajectories, contingent upon several influencing factors. Two primary determinants stand out in delineating the extent of influence on these relationships: (1) the age at the time of immigration and (2) the period of immigration.

Firstly, immigrants who arrived in America as infants (around three to four years old) often lack vivid recollections of their lives in their home country, consequently being less directly affected by acculturation stress. Given that many Asian families make concerted efforts to preserve their cultural heritage within their households, these individuals often feel a sense of connection to both their native culture and American norms. While managing this cultural duality appears seamless for them, their parent-child relationships are susceptible to strain due to their parents' struggles with acculturation stress. Previous research has established correlations between positive emotional well-being in infants and parental self-efficacy, showcasing the profound influence parents wield over children as young as six to twelve months old (Liu, Sandman, Davis, & Glynn, 2022). The language barrier specifically challenges adult Asian immigrants, prompting their children, who arrived as infants, to assume responsibilities and grapple with communication issues. Confidence in their native language inversely correlates with the closeness of the parent-child relationship. This discrepancy in acculturation levels between adolescents, with lower identification with Asian culture, and parents, who retain stronger ties to Asian identity, often leads to diminished cohesion (Ho & Birman, 2010).

Moreover, as immigrants assimilate more, bolstering their language proficiency, they tend to encounter fewer cultural conflicts. However, the divergence in perspectives on authority and autonomy between young immigrants growing up in a vastly different cultural milieu and their parents contributes to increased parent-adolescent conflicts (Yeh, 2003). Extensive research spanning a decade on immigrant families emphasizes the challenges older immigrants face in accepting familial changes from their home country's norms, resulting in heightened conflicts with their infant immigrant children (Glick, 2010).

Conversely, adult immigrants undergo the most significant struggles with acculturation stress, markedly influenced by their upbringing in Korea and the profound cultural shock experienced upon relocation. These individuals frequently cite marked disparities in social norms, manners, efficiency in services, and spatial proximity between Korea and the United States, leading to feelings of isolation. Separation from familial support networks coupled with discriminatory experiences exacerbates their mental health issues (Chae et al., 2012). Primarily hindered by language barriers, these adults encounter difficulties in daily interactions, further intensifying their challenges in social integration. The impact on their relationships with their children hinges on the latter's age at immigration. Notably, when children arrive as teenagers, the relationship tends to be more positive, fostering increased cohesion and communication when they share the same native language (Tseng & Fuligni, 2004). Studies emphasize that enhanced understanding of the host country among parents correlates with improved relationships with children raised in distinct cultural environments (Hwang & Ting, 2008).

However, recent immigrant teenagers (arriving approximately three to four years ago) exhibit a different pattern. Despite the general struggle of Asian adolescents in communicating with their parents compared to other ethnicities, those who recently immigrated display a more favorable familial bond (Rhee et al., 2003). Their heightened sense of isolation in the new environment drives them closer to their parents, often becoming their primary confidants amidst a dearth of familiar connections. Nevertheless, preteens and teens facing immigration without clear objectives often experience psychological distress, a scenario typical when adults make migration decisions (Gong et al., 2011). Adolescents, meanwhile, perceive acculturation as an avenue for gaining competence across multiple cultures, viewing it as a positive developmental factor (Oppedal et al., 2004).

Limitations of this research necessitate consideration. The homogeneity in socioeconomic status among participants, predominantly within the middle-class spectrum, might skew results compared to a more economically diverse sample. Additionally, the study's reliance on participants from a specific area with a substantial Asian-American population might yield outcomes differing from those settling in regions with minimal Asian presence. Volunteer bias might have influenced responses as participants were directly approached, potentially affecting the candidness of their narratives. The breadth of questioning might not have fully captured

the nuanced complexities underlying familial conflicts and personal issues, possibly leading to variations in responses. Moreover, social desirability bias might have led individuals to portray their families in a more positive light, potentially obscuring underlying problems.

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