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Family Conflict Among Chinese- and Mexican-Origin Adolescents and Their Parents in the U.S.: An Introduction

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Abstract

This volume explores how cultural and family contexts inform parent–adolescent conflict and adjustment among Chinese- and Mexican-origin families in the United States. Collectively, the chapters examine outcomes associated with family conflict and provide an in-depth analysis of how and for whom conflict is related to adjustment. Findings, for example, illustrate how cultural factors (e.g., acculturation) modify the links between conflict and adjustment. Furthermore, the collection allows for a simultaneous examination of normative, everyday parent–adolescent conflict and conflict that is specific to the process of cultural adaptation, and furthers our understanding of how both developmental and cultural sources of conflict are linked to adjustment. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

All families fight—some more than others. From a developmental perspective, conflict with parents during adolescence (at least at moderate levels) is a healthy part of youth development (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998) and serves several important and interrelated developmental functions. One important function is to promote autonomy during adolescence (Fuligni, 1998; Smetana, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). As adolescents become older, they are expected to manage their daily activities (e.g., behavioral autonomy; Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991), as well as take part in families' decision-making process (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004). Another function of parent–adolescent conflict is to provide opportunities to revise and transform parent–adolescent expectations, roles, and responsibilities so that parent–adolescent relationships remain developmentally appropriate (Laursen et al., 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Finally, conflict is important for establishing and defining a value and belief system, contributing to adolescent identity development as adolescents reflect, evaluate, and construct who they are and what they believe in (Bruner, 1990). Taken together, parent–adolescent conflict serves to promote adolescent development in key areas such as autonomy, relationships, and identity.

However, viewing conflict as healthy and developmentally adaptive has been traditionally limited to conclusions drawn from empirical studies focused primarily on European American families (Laursen et al., 1998; Smetana, 1988). In these studies, the emphasis has been on normative conflict over "minor" everyday issues (Laursen et al., 1998; Smetana, 1988). In contrast, studies of parent–adolescent conflict involving immigrant families of Asian and Latino heritage have primarily focused on disruptive conflict over more "serious" issues concerning core cultural values, namely, acculturation-based conflict (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Rivera et al., 2008). Less is known about whether acculturation-based conflict is normative and whether it is a healthy part of youth development. Indeed, Smetana (2008) has recently highlighted the need for more studies on conflict in ethnically and culturally diverse families. Specifically, there is a need for studies that identify culturally relevant characteristics contributing to parent–adolescent interactions and relationships, and subsequent adolescent outcomes.

To address this need, the current volume explores family conflict among Chinese and Mexican heritage adolescents and their parents, as these two national origin groups, respectively, represent the largest subgroups within the panethnic Asian and Latino populations in the United States (U.S. Census, 2010, 2011). We address questions such as, Are everyday and acculturation-based conflicts similarly linked to youth adjustment, and do they follow similar pathways in their links to adjustment? How are conflicts resolved? Are the negative effects of family conflict exacerbated by parent–adolescent acculturation discrepancies and other aspects of the family context? And to whom do adolescents turn to

make meaning of the conflict in which they are engaged? Given the limited research in this area with these populations, we know little about within-group variability that may exist in youth and families' experiences with parent–adolescent conflict. Our goal for this volume is to not only examine the "outcomes" associated with family conflict but to also provide an in-depth analysis of the contexts and processes that explain *how* family conflict is related to adjustment and for whom. The current volume provides a unique opportunity to showcase the complexity of parent–adolescent conflict among Chinese- and Mexican-origin families in the United States and makes an important contribution to a literature in which there is limited knowledge on normative developmental process among ethnic minority populations (García Coll et al., 1996; McLoyd, 1998).

A Focus on Chinese- and Mexican-Origin Families in the U.S.

In the last two decades, almost 80% of immigrants to the United States have originated from Asia and Latin America (Passel, 2011). Today, individuals of Chinese and Mexican origin represent the two largest national origin groups within the panethnic Asian (23%) and Latino (66%) populations in the United States, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). These two groups experienced tremendous population growth because of continued migration to the United States. In addition, they experienced such high fertility rates that between the years 1960 and 2006 the foreign-born population from China increased by 300%, and between 1980 and 2008 the foreign-born population from Mexico increased by 100% (Migration Policy Institute, 2010a, 2010b).

Beyond the shared distinction of being among the most rapidly growing subpopulations in the United States, the two groups share other important characteristics: Both represent numeric ethnic minorities in the United States, and both include large numbers of immigrant families. To understand the development of Chinese- and Mexican-heritage adolescents, three factors must be considered: issues pertinent to normative adolescent development, issues pertinent to ethnic minority status, and issues pertinent to the immigration experience (Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000). García Coll and colleagues' (1996) integrative developmental model of minority children is a useful theoretical framework that carefully considers all three factors.

García Coll and colleagues (1996) argue that beyond normative developmental issues relevant for all adolescents (e.g., biological and cognitive changes associated with different developmental ages), explicit attention must be paid to the role of social position variables (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status [SES], ethnic minority status). Social position variables such as ethnic minority status indirectly contribute to child development by exposing children to powerful social mechanisms (such as discrimination

and prejudice) as they attempt to navigate their way through the majority culture. These negative experiences within social hierarchies can be challenging and may adversely impact family relationships by contributing stress to family interactions. Such experiences can be critical influences in children's development.

In addition to issues related to ethnic minority status, immigration-related issues must also be considered. Notably, about 85% of Asian-heritage children and 60% of Latino-heritage children are of immigrant background (i.e., have at least one parent who was born outside of the United States; Passel, 2011). These numbers underscore the need to consider processes related to migration such as acculturation. As an example, because Chinese- and Mexican-heritage parents and adolescents are negotiating two cultural systems, and because children tend to acquire the values and behaviors of the mainstream culture faster and more thoroughly than their parents do, a discrepancy in values and behaviors may result. This parent–child acculturation discrepancy has been termed the *acculturation gap* (Kwak, 2003), *acculturation dissonance* (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996), and *acculturative family distancing* (Hwang, Wood, & Fujimoto, 2010). Acculturation researchers have hypothesized that the greater the acculturation gap, the greater the potential for parent–child conflict, and subsequently child maladjustment (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). A common assumption of immigrant families (for which there is some evidence) is that because they must balance two different, sometimes opposing, cultures, they are at risk for greater family conflict (Kwak, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001). However, a recent review of the acculturation gap literature suggests that the relation between acculturation gaps, family conflict, and adolescent adjustment is much more complex than is usually presented (Telzer, 2011). Importantly, Telzer's (2011) review suggests that the acculturation process and resulting acculturation discrepancies do not inevitably occur and, when they do occur, they do not inevitably lead to greater family conflict. In this volume, we consider family conflict in relation to characteristics of the adolescent, family context, and broader sociocultural context, to demonstrate that the consequences of family conflict depend on all of these variables, and not simply on the absolute difference between a parent's level of acculturation and an adolescent's.

What Can We Learn from Studying Parent–Adolescent Conflict in Chinese- and Mexican-Origin Families?

To understand conflict within Chinese- and Mexican-origin families, it is important to consider the aspects of family conflict that are salient for all adolescents, the aspects that are salient only for adolescents of a particular cultural/ethnic background, and the aspects that may be unique based on particular family or individual characteristics. Some aspects of family conflict appear to be relevant to both Chinese- and Mexican-origin families

and all families in general. There is evidence that the level, function, and consequences of parent–adolescent conflict show similarities across various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. For instance, in general, using varied methodologies such as surveys and daily diaries, studies have shown that the frequency of everyday conflict is rather low or moderate for families of Chinese and Mexican heritage (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009; Fuligni, 1998; Yau & Smetana, 2003). Further, engaging in low or moderate parent–adolescent conflict is normative for families of diverse cultural backgrounds, with the important role of promoting autonomy during adolescence (Fuligni, 1998; Smetana, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Studies have also established that greater parent–adolescent conflict is associated with negative adolescent adjustment, such as greater emotional distress, at least in the short-term, for both Chinese-origin (Juang, Syed, & Takagi, 2007; Kim, Chen, Li, Huang, & Moon, 2009; Qin, 2006) and Mexican-origin adolescents (Lau et al., 2005; Pasch et al., 2006; Updegraff, Delgado, & Wheeler, 2009). Because parents of all cultures share the developmental goals of promoting autonomy and maintaining connectedness with their children (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008), and adolescents of various cultures increasingly believe that certain domains of their lives should be under their own personal authority (Smetana, 2002), similarities in parent–adolescent conflict should be expected in families across diverse groups. Therefore, by studying both Chinese- and Mexican-heritage families, we can uncover what aspects of parent–adolescent conflict may be similar and applicable across ethnic groups, and what aspects may be unique to each group.

Chinese- and Mexican-origin families share an important characteristic—both groups are defined by a relatively strong cultural emphasis on family obligation, interdependence, harmony, and conformity to parental expectations (i.e., filial piety and familism). Indeed, a recent study found that individuals of Asian- and Latino-background reported similar levels of filial piety and familism and that both groups reported higher levels compared with European American individuals (Schwartz et al., 2010). Given the similarities between Chinese and Mexican cultures with respect to the emphasis on the family, it is possible that we could extrapolate what we find with Chinese-heritage families to what we find with Mexican-heritage families and vice versa. Indeed, the common thread that runs through the chapters in this volume is the focus on understanding how features of the cultural and family contexts give meaning to the experiences of parent–adolescent conflict in Chinese- and Mexican-origin families. Specifically, Juang and colleagues (Juang, Syed, Cookston, Wang, & Kim, this volume) examine the role of parenting and family cohesion in the associations between parent–adolescent conflict and Chinese American youth adjustment; Updegraff and colleagues (Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, Perez-Brena, & Pflieger, this volume) and Cookston and colleagues (Cookston, Olide, Adams, Fabricius, & Parke, this volume) examine how

features of the family context introduce variability into parent–adolescent conflict and its link to Mexican-origin youth adjustment; finally, Qin and colleagues (Qin, Chang, Han, & Chee, this volume) consider how cultural norms regarding parent–child relationships may shape parent–adolescent conflict in Chinese American families. Given the strong emphasis on family in both of these cultural groups, understanding these complex associations in one ethnic sample may shed light on the mechanisms that are at play in the other, and vice versa.

There are, of course, variations within the broad ethnic groups of Chinese- and Mexican-heritage families. For instance, both Updegraff et al. and Cookston et al. (this volume) explore how variations in the family context (i.e., mother–adolescent relationship within the context of teenage pregnancy; two-parent versus single-parent family constellation) have implications for adolescent well-being and whom adolescents turn to when sharing stories of engaging in conflict with their parent. By systematically exploring the diversity inherent within each group, we move away from the simplistic and inaccurate view that families categorized under the same ethnic label are uniformly alike. Further, measuring culturally relevant characteristics, such as cultural orientation to heritage and traditional culture, allows researchers to study ethnicity as a dynamic and developmental variable—attitudes, values, behaviors, and beliefs can change over time, but ethnic group categories do not.

How Do the Chapters in this Volume Collectively Move the Field Forward?

Two chapters in this volume address parent–adolescent conflict within Chinese-heritage families and two chapters address parent–adolescent conflict within Mexican-heritage families. Juang and colleagues examine how everyday conflict and acculturation-based conflict uniquely relate to Chinese American adolescent development. The chapter draws upon two longitudinal survey-based data sets to illustrate the importance of understanding both types of conflict for Chinese American adolescent adjustment. Qin and colleagues focus on family conflict and communication between high-achieving Chinese American adolescents and their parents. In contrast to the previous chapter, Qin and colleagues' chapter adopts a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth exploration of various domains of conflict that high achieving youth and their parents engage in, the process by which these conflicts emerge, and youths' perceptions of how conflicts are resolved. The next two chapters focus on Mexican-origin families and consider adolescent conflict with mothers and fathers separately. Updegraff and colleagues explore how Mexican-origin mother–daughter conflict varies by family context (e.g., families with pregnant adolescent daughters vs. families with nonpregnant adolescent daughters). This chapter draws upon two datasets of Mexican-origin mothers and daughters and

adopts an ecological approach by assessing family conflict within contrasting family contexts and the broader sociocultural context. Cookston and colleagues, in contrast, focus on Mexican-origin adolescents' conflict with fathers. Their findings illustrate how adolescents deal with conflict with fathers by turning to confidants, and subsequently how they make sense of the conflict after talking with confidants. This chapter, like the previous, also pays attention to varying family contexts (by comparing adolescents with a biological father vs. stepfather). A recurring theme in each of the four chapters is consideration of family conflict within the context of the acculturation process for both parents and adolescents. The final chapter in the volume is a commentary provided by Andrew J. Fuligni who has worked extensively with immigrant adolescents and families. His commentary emphasizes the need for a more nuanced and in-depth examination of the different aspects of family conflict that were covered in the four chapters (i.e., acculturation gaps, conflictual feelings, and actual arguments) in an effort to differentiate them from one another, allowing for a better understanding of the links between family conflict and adjustment among adolescents of Asian and Latino backgrounds.

Collectively, the chapters and commentary in this volume move the field forward in several ways. First, the contributions in this volume illustrate how cultural characteristics and experiences (e.g., acculturation, enculturation, cultural values, communication patterns) modify the links between family conflict and adolescent adjustment, and how culturally related factors contribute to the experiences of family conflict in general. Second, the collection provides an opportunity to simultaneously consider normative, everyday parent–adolescent conflict and conflict that is specific to the process of cultural adaptation. A side-by-side examination of these two aspects of family conflict moves the field forward by considering the unique contributions that each of these types of conflict makes to the family experiences of Chinese- and Mexican-origin youth. Finally, the volume includes studies that describe diverse methods (i.e., qualitative and quantitative), and between the four empirical chapters, draws upon six datasets that were collected in California, New York, and Arizona. These three states have among the largest proportion of youth who are of immigrant background (California 49%, New York 34%, and Arizona 32%; Passel, 2011).

In sum, although parent–adolescent conflict in immigrant families has long been conceptualized as inevitable due to the inherent stresses of the acculturation process, the chapters in this volume expand that view. The four empirical chapters illustrate the central role of acculturation for understanding conflict in immigrant families, identify variables that modify the consequences of parent–adolescent conflict on adolescent adjustment, and identify mediating factors that explain the link between parent–adolescent conflict and adolescent adjustment. Importantly, the chapters provide a more complex view of the interplay between parent–adolescent conflict

and acculturation within immigrant families beyond the acculturation gap-adjustment hypothesis.

Questions Left Unanswered: Directions for Future Research

Although this volume provides in-depth accounts of correlates, processes, and contexts related to family conflict and adolescent adjustment, there are still many questions left unanswered and important issues to consider. As such, there are many avenues for future research. To date, there are few long-term longitudinal studies examining parent–adolescent conflict in immigrant families. What are, for instance, implications for engaging in conflict at age 12–13 versus at 17–18? For example, among Chinese-heritage adolescents, parent–adolescent conflict may peak during later adolescence, rather than early adolescence as is the case for European American adolescents, given that the push for autonomy among Chinese-heritage youth occurs at later ages compared with European American adolescents (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Greenberger & Chen, 1996). To our knowledge, there are no longitudinal studies documenting the stability and change in parent–adolescent conflict through the course of adolescence for ethnic minority youth. Longitudinal studies are necessary to also examine possible differences in trajectories, correlates, and consequences of family conflict in relation to gender or nativity—two key variables that have not received adequate attention in studies of immigrant youth (Fuligni, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Qin, 2006). Future studies could consider generational status in depth, perhaps by comparing third-generation families (both adolescents and parents born in the United States) with first- or second-generation families to explicitly test what features of parent–adolescent conflict are attributed directly to the migration process. It also will be important to understand whether acculturation-based conflict becomes irrelevant by the third and later generations, or whether there are unique aspects of acculturation-based conflict that persist across generations.

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, Smetana (2008) made the call to search for relevant cultural characteristics that may have implications for family conflict. Future research could explore, for instance, whether adolescents' and parents' cultural notions of shame, loss of face, or *respeto* may be consequential to family conflict. It will also be informative to move beyond examining cultural values in isolation, and consider them in concert with immediate contextual demands. García Coll and colleagues' (1996) notion of the *adaptive culture,* defined as "the product of the group's collective history (cultural, political, and economic) and the current contextual demands posed by the promoting and inhibiting environments" (p. 1904), suggests that cultural values interact with the immediate context (e.g., neighborhood safety, neighborhood resources, and support), to create another distinct context with implications for family

processes. Inspired by the notion of adaptive culture, Lau's (2010) recent study of Chinese American parents found that parents who endorsed greater parental control (a key cultural value) also used more physical discipline, but only for those who also reported engaging in greater acculturation conflicts with their children (a current contextual demand). Thus, parental cultural values intersected with contextual demands to influence parenting, which may then have implications for family interactions such as family conflict. These complexities require further examination (and with multiple ethnic groups) to determine whether these are universal experiences for ethnic minority youth and families.

Finally, the chapters in the current volume contribute significantly to the literature in a number of ways, but a significant omission is a focus on understanding how parent–adolescent conflict can serve a positive function for ethnic minority youth. García Coll and Magnuson (1997) highlighted over a decade ago the need for theories to incorporate a developmental and positive orientation to immigrant children and adolescent development. For example, it will be important for future studies to explore how conflict may be constructive in immigrant families by providing opportunities to revise and transform parent–adolescent expectations, roles, and responsibilities, which is a necessary part of growing up (Laursen et al., 1998). Hopefully, this volume will contribute to the discourse on parent–adolescent conflict so that it is not viewed as an inevitable, negative, and defining characteristic of immigrant families undergoing acculturation, but rather a normative process that occurs for all families with the understanding that the broader sociohistorical contexts of immigration and ethnic minority status, coupled with each individual's unique family context, inform this important process.

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