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The Other Side of the Model Minority Story

The Familial and Peer Challenges Faced by Chinese American Adolescents

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The image of the model minority dominates scholarly and public discourse on Asian American children and adolescents. However, recent research has shown that despite their high levels of educational achievement Asian American students report poor psychological and social adjustment. Using an ecological framework, this article sought to explore the family and peer experiences of Chinese American adolescents as these are the two most critical contexts influencing adolescents' psychological and social adjustment. Drawing on longitudinal data collected from two studies conducted in Boston and New York on 120 first- and second-generation Chinese American students, our analyses suggested that many Chinese American adolescents feel alienated from their parents and peers. The alienation from parents was due to factors such as language barriers, parenting work schedules, and high parental educational expectations. Alienation from peers was due to ongoing peer discrimination from both Chinese and non-Chinese peers. Implications and future research are also discussed.

Keywords: *Chinese American adolescent development; family relations; peer relations*

Teachers, mental health professionals, and the public at large frequently perceive Asian American children as being well-behaved, well-adjusted high achievers. In short, they are seen as "model minority." Little is known about the mental health status of Asian Americans (Chun & Sue, 1998, p. 75).

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The image of the model minority dominates scholarly and public discourses on Asian American children and adolescents, a rapidly growing sector of the U.S. child population (Zhou & Gatewood, 2000). Empirical and theoretical research on Asian American children has focused predominantly on their educational achievements (Louie, 2004; Sue & Okazaki, 1990). This emphasis, however, ignores Asian American students' psychological and social well-being. Recent research has shown that despite their high levels of educational achievement, Asian American students report poor psychological and social adjustment (e.g., Chun & Sue, 1998; Lorenzo, Frost, & Reinherz, 2000; Way & Chen, 2000), suggesting an achievement/adjustment paradox. Asian American students have often been found to report the lowest self-esteem (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Rhee, Chang, & Rhee, 2003) and the highest depressive symptom scores compared with their non-Asian peers (Centers for Disease Control, 1995, 1997). Recent qualitative research suggests that these patterns of poor psychological adjustment may be due to the numerous challenges that Asian American youth face at home and with their peers (Kiang, Nguyen, & Sheehan, 1995; Qin, 2006; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Yeh, 2003). Yet few researchers have systematically explored these family and peer-related challenges among Asian American youth. Using an ecological framework, this article presents findings from two qualitative studies conducted in Boston and New York that sought to explore the challenges that first- and second-generation Chinese American adolescents face with their parents and with their peers.

The Social and Psychological Adjustment of Asian American Adolescents

Since the 1960s, Asian American students have been documented to outperform students from other ethnic groups, including Whites, in standard test scores and high school grade point average (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). They also have lower drop out rates at high school, higher college attendance rates than students from other ethnic groups (Braxton, 1999), and enroll in elite universities at disproportionally high rates (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). These patterns have contributed to a popular media portrayal of Asian Americans as the model minority and Asian-origin children as the model children. A consequence of this idealized characterization of Asian-origin children is that most of the empirical and theoretical research on this diverse group has focused on their academic achievement and ignored a small but growing body of empirical research suggesting that although Asian American students may be doing well in school they are doing quite

poorly psychologically and socially (Chiu & Ring, 1998; Greene et al., 2006; Way & Chen, 2000; Way & Robinson, 2003).

National data show that Asian American adolescent girls have the highest rates of depressive symptoms of all racial groups and have the highest suicide rate among all women between 15 and 24 years of age (Centers for Disease Control, 1995, 1997). The Commonwealth Fund Survey (1998) of health of adolescent girls shows that 30% of Asian American girls in Grades 5 through 12 reported high levels of depressive symptoms compared with non-Hispanic Whites (22%), African Americans (17%), and Hispanics (27%). Studies on Asian American boys suggest that they tend to be more withdrawn and depressed compared with their Anglo American peers (Chang, Morrissey, & Koplewicz, 1995). Asian American boys also tend to report the highest levels of depression and the lowest levels of self-esteem when compared with African and Latino boys (Greene et al., 2006). Asian American students have reported higher levels of anxiety (Chun & Sue, 1998) and lower levels of self-esteem compared with their Caucasian, Black, or Latino peers (Greene et al., 2006; Rhee et al., 2003). Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 24 years, but second among young Asian and Pacific Islanders (unintentional injuries rank first), according to the Centers for Disease Control data in 2001. Cornell University counselor Wai Kwong Wong recently reported that Asian American students committed 50% of suicides in the past decade at the university although they comprise just 17% of enrollment. A key question that arises as the evidence mounts is what are the factors that may lead to the poor psychological and/or social adjustment of Asian American children?

An Ecological Model of Adjustment

Ecological models of development indicate that the child exists within multiple intersecting and overlapping contexts (peers, family, and school), and it is these multiple ecological systems that determine the course of adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Consequently, the child, who is at the core of the ecological system, and the contexts in which she or he is embedded should not be considered in isolation from one another but rather viewed as a web of interacting systems. This framework suggests that adolescents' psychological and social adjustments are influenced by multiple layers of the ecological system, including the family, peer, and school contexts. Over the past decade, there has been a surge of research directed at understanding the ways in which the multiple contexts influence child development (e.g., Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2002;

Weisner, 2005). These studies, however, have yet to explore the ecological contexts of Asian American youth.

Family Context

One of the most important developmental contexts for adolescents is the family. Decades of research has suggested a link between the family context and adolescent adjustment (Fuligni, 1998; Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004). Family relations, in particular, have been considered as one of the most important predictors of adolescent mental health (Cook, 2001; Olson et al., 1983). Positive family relations, characterized by high degree of emotional bonding between family members, have been found to be negatively associated with both externalizing and internalizing behaviors among adolescents (Barber & Buehler, 1996). For example, high quality of family relations is inversely related to depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness (Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001). Few studies, however, have explored family relations among Asian American families, particularly the challenges in parent–child relations. Extant research suggests that in immigrant Asian American families, parentification, in which children shoulder many parental responsibilities and parent their parents because of their relatively superior English skills and knowledge of the host society, may cause tremendous stress for the children, leading to depression and other internalizing behavior (Huang & Ying, 1998). Lack of parental supervision and guidance for children and adolescents has also been implicated in the proliferation of gangs in Asian American communities (Chun & Sue, 1998). Although this small body of research has described the potential challenges faced by Asian American youth at home, few studies have closely examined these challenges.

Peer Context

In addition to the family context, the peer context is also considered a critical context of development for adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Peer relations have been shown to have a significant impact on adolescent psychological well-being (Harter, 1990; Roeser & Eccles, 1998). High-quality peer relations protect adolescents from social anxieties (La Greca & Harrison, 2005), enhance their social competence and interpersonal sensitivity, and are linked to positive psychological adjustment (Greene et al., 2006; Way & Pahl, 2001). Negative peer relations (e.g., peer discrimination and victimization) have also been found to be related to low self-esteem

(Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Greene et al., 2006), social avoidance and loneliness (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004), and depressive symptoms and social anxiety in adolescents (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). The media (see "Asian Youth", 2005) as well as the scholarly research (Way, 2005) suggests that, in fact, peer discrimination and victimization by non-Asian peers are a major challenge for many Asian American youth across the United States. In one study conducted by Way and her colleagues, peer discrimination, or the extent to which students experienced racial or ethnic discrimination by their peers, was more influential in the prediction of psychological well-being than peer support (Greene et al., 2006). Similar to the topic of family relations, the research on peer relations has rarely included Asian American adolescents and has not closely examined the challenges that Asian American youth face with their peers or why these challenges may occur.

Our Study

The purpose of our investigation was to explore the challenges that Chinese American youth growing up in Boston and New York City face with their parents and peers. For this study, we rely on our qualitative in-depth data from two longitudinal studies of Chinese American youth that took place from 1996 to 2001.

Method

Sample

Our sample consisted of 120 adolescents from two qualitative studies. One study was conducted in the Boston area and had a sample of 80 students, and the second study was conducted in New York City and had a sample of 40 students (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). All students were recruited from public schools. Of the participants, the great majority (88%) were first-generation immigrant students born in China, Hong Kong or Macau and immigrated to the United States before the age of 10. The Boston participants were primarily first-generation immigrants and typically spoke primarily Cantonese or Mandarin. The New York study adolescents were recruited from mainstream English classrooms and were mostly fluent English speakers (with only a few speaking fluent Mandarin or Cantonese). The sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender: 55% ($n = 66$)

of the participants were girls and 45% ($n = 54$) were boys. The average age of the adolescents was 12 years at the beginning of the study. Students came from mixed socioeconomic families. Roughly, a quarter of the parents received elementary education, a quarter of the parents received middle school level education, and close to a quarter of the parents had some college or beyond college education. Overall, our sample was loosely representative of the Chinese American population in the United States in terms of education level. The large range in years of education in our sample is consistent with census data that Chinese immigrants are overrepresented at both high and low ends of the educational spectrum (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Mills, 2004).

Procedure

The data for both studies were collected from 1996 to 2001 (the first study was from 1997 to 2001, and the second study was from 1996 to 2000), using semistructured and structured interviews with Chinese American adolescents. A team of trained researchers, including the authors, conducted interviews with the adolescents. In the student interviews, we asked questions about family and peer relation (e.g., "describe your relations with your mother/father/friends?" "what has changed about these relations since immigrating to this country or since you were young?"). Given the English fluency of the adolescents in the New York–based study, all the interviews with these adolescents were conducted in English. For the Boston-based study, the participants chose the language in which they wished to be interviewed. All interviews were taped and translated into English (if conducted in other languages).

Data Analytic Method

We used a process of open coding (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to generate themes from the interview data from both studies. The authors of this article first read through each interview and created narrative summaries that condensed the interview material while retaining the essence of the stories being told by the adolescents. Each narrative summary was read independently by the data analysts who looked for themes in the summaries. A theme retained for further analysis had to be identified as a theme by at least two of the three authors, independently, in any one year of the study. Once themes were generated and agreed on, each data analyst returned to the original interviews and noted the time and place of the project and the interview in which these themes emerged.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics (*n* = 120)

	Sample Characteristics
Origin	Mainland China 77% (*n* = 92)
	Hong Kong and Macao 23% (*n* = 28)
Generation status	Born outside the United States 88% (*n* = 106)
	Born in the United States 12% (*n* = 14)
Gender	Girls 55% (*n* = 66)
	Boys 45% (*n* = 54)
Age at the beginning of studies	Mean age = 11.98 years (range, 9-14)
Mothers: Education	27.5% (*n* = 33) finished their elementary education
	27.5% (*n* = 33) finished some postelementary education
	15% (*n* = 18) graduated from high school
	6% (*n* = 7) finished some college
	8% (*n* = 10) graduated from college
	9% (*n* = 11) received a graduate or professional degree
	7% (*n* = 8) missing data
Fathers: Education	23% (*n* = 28) finished elementary school
	28% (*n* = 34) finished middle school
	17.5% (*n* = 21) graduated from high school
	3% (*n* = 4) finished some college
	10% (*n* = 12) graduated from college
	7.5% (*n* = 8) missing data

Our thematic analyses indicated that when Chinese American youth were asked to describe their relations with their parents and peers, they overwhelmingly discussed the challenges that they faced in these relations. Although we were originally interested in hearing about the positive and negative aspects of their relations with their parents and peers, the vast majority of our participants focused on the negative and/or challenging aspects of their relations with their parents and peers. Given the students' focus on the challenging aspects of their relations with their parents and peers, we chose to focus our analysis for the present article on such aspects. The content of these challenging aspects were focused on perceived cultural and generational differences between themselves and their parents, language barriers, demanding work schedules, and high educational expectations. The primary challenges that the Chinese American youth faced with their peers were peer discrimination and victimization by primarily non-Chinese peers. Such peer discrimination was exacerbated by the model minority myth of the Chinese American students maintained by the teachers within these schools. In the next section, we describe these challenges with parents and peers in greater detail.

Results

Adolescent/Parent Alienation

Our qualitative data indicated that when the Chinese American youth were asked about their relationships with their parents, they spoke primarily about their feelings of frustration and alienation with their parents. This alienation appeared to be primarily due to a lack of communication between themselves and their parents, particularly as they grew older. Carl, a 16-year-old boy from Hong Kong, felt a sense of sadness over how his relationship with his parents had changed over time.

> I feel that there isn't much warmth in my family. Now it's almost impossible to gather the entire family to sit down and talk. Before when we were in Hong Kong, we seldom went out at night. Now I don't want to go home. There is nothing to do at home. . . . Before, when we were in Hong Kong, sometimes we sat down and talked. It happened more often in Hong Kong than in here. [Here] we have to work. Even if we have time to talk, I mostly stay in my room. When I get home I stay in my room to play with the computer, listen to the music, sleep, whatever. I just can't communicate with my parents (sigh). I don't know what to say.

Qing, a 15-year-old girl who described her relationship with her parents as good in the beginning, said a couple years later, "I just don't like to talk to them. I don't want them to come bother me." When asked if he told his parents about what he did or felt, 14-year-old Jack said the following.

> No. I don't really tell them anything nowadays because it's kind of like "I live my life and you live yours" kind of thing. I do tell them about what they're interested in hearing, but that's about it. It's like a "don't ask don't tell" kind of thing.

When asked about her relationship with her mother, 15-year-old Mei said "Um, not . . . really that close cause I don't tell her anything that's happening in my life cause . . . I'm not used to telling her anything, we don't talk that much cause she's always busy."

Emotional detachment between parents and children occurs in many families as children enter adolescence and shift their social worlds toward their peers (Fuligni, 1998). This is neither a new phenomenon nor is it unique to Chinese American families. However, in our analyses, we found that the reasons for this alienation and detachment may be unique to the immigrant adolescents in our studies and may lead to particularly high levels

of discord and estrangement in Chinese American parent–child relations. Our quantitative data have consistently suggested that levels of support between adolescents and their parents are significantly lower in Chinese American families than in Black and Latino families (Qin, 2005; Way & Pahl, 2001; Way & Robinson, 2003). Our qualitative data suggest that the frustration with their parents and their alienation from them is the product of cultural and generational clashes, language barriers, parents' busy work schedules, and high educational expectations.

A clash in cultures and generations. In the interviews, adolescents attributed their sense of alienation with their parents to the generational and cultural differences between themselves and their parents. For example, 17-year-old Henry complained about his parents thus.

> It's like they lived in different times and have different expectations of life. It doesn't matter where they are in the world, their expectations of certain things wouldn't be different. They expect you to behave in ways that they are used to.

The adolescents' frustration with their parents' traditional ways was often revealed when the adolescents compared their Chinese parents with their image of American parents. In the eyes of the adolescents, Chinese parents are stricter and expect more one-way obedience, whereas American parents are more relaxed and give their children more autonomy. For example, Feng, a 16-year-old Chinese boy, said, "American parents are more relaxed, and most of the time they let their children make their own decisions. Chinese parents, on the other hand, already made all the decisions, and you are just supposed to follow." Similarly, 14-year-old Tina said the following.

> American parents emphasize educating their kids. Chinese parents only reason with their kids. For example, when kids do something wrong American parents will teach and educate their kids. In China, parents will use family rules to reason with their kids when the kids do something wrong. Chinese parents expect their kids to listen to them without talking back to them.

It is the clash or mismatch between the Chinese and the perceived image of American parenting that often has a negative influence on parent–child relations. For example, 14-year-old Jack clearly expressed the mismatch between the two cultures and the impact on his relationship with his father.

> The way of teaching a child is different in China. They hit people in China. In America, you teach them. You don't force them and stuff. So it just don't [sic] match . . . I grew up in China but I really grew up mentally in here. So we got like different ways and stuff so it don't [sic] match. So we just like don't like each other . . . I just don't like my father.

In some cases, the difference in parenting style is particularly manifested in the communication between parents and children. Across the board, Chinese American students complained that their parents often lecture them instead of discussing things with them. For example, 16-year-old Tom said, "parents from China, they tend to yell at the kids for hours and hours . . . and Chinese parents often lack communications with their kids. In contrast, American parents sometimes do have more communication. They talk more to each other." Similarly, Christina, a 15-year-old Chinese girl, had the following to say.

> American parents are nicer. They treat their children as if they were their friends. They can talk about anything. Chinese parents are very strict. They yell at or lecture their kids all the time. Chinese parents do not allow their children to reason with them. When you reason with them, they then say you are talking back at them. You have to listen to whatever they say.

Another Chinese girl put it more poignantly,

> My parents don't agree with communicating, they believe that "I'm your dad, I'm your mom, I give you life, you should listen to me, you should agree with me, you should really feel my beliefs." Basically those kind of things that makes them old-fashioned.

To avoid getting lectured, many participants said that they often chose not to communicate with their parents about their personal lives, particularly around poor grades or dating issues. For example, 17-year-old Mei said the following.

> They do not know that I am dating. If they knew, they probably would kill me. They warned me about going out with boys. They said if I went out with boys and my grades dropped everything would fall into the drain. Or if I had problems with my friends, I would not tell my parents especially my mom. My mom is not the comforting type. She would only lecture me.

In the interviews, the adolescents also complained about their parents' physical distance and lack of affection, particularly after children have grown older. For example, 15-year-old Sophia thus described her parents.

> I think Chinese parents are more affectionate when you are younger. . . . I can't understand why Chinese are more distant to each other, parents, and sons and daughters. It's sort of what they expect you to do. I don't know. I don't get it. . . . They are more distant with their families, they wouldn't kiss you and say "I love you" like that. It's taught that you shouldn't display your feelings, you should be more quiet and not be so crazy. . . . I don't understand why. . . . I do that to my sister, I am like "I love you" and it will be fine. But not with my mother, even worse [with] my dad.

As the adolescents grow older and are exposed to more American culture, they become increasingly more American in their desires as well.

In the Confucian Chinese culture, parents play a central role in childhood education and control the direction of children's future development (Chao, 1994). A fundamental Confucian tenet is filial piety, which dictates that a child should honor, respect, and be obedient to parents (Ho, 1996). In contrast to the U.S. parenting style, parent–child relations tend to be more hierarchical in China (Chan & Leong, 1994). Chinese parents are likely to be more control oriented and demand more obedience (Chiu & Ring, 1998). Although control and discipline is out of care and concern for their children's well-being from the parents' perspective (Chao, 1994), the adolescents in our study appear to experience it quite differently. The adolescents moved back and forth between blaming the Chinese parenting style and their parents' traditional or old-fashioned expectations and indicated that the two are often conflated for them.

Language barriers. Another factor that appeared to contribute to conflicts and alienation between adolescents and their parents was language barriers. Although some children are able to learn or maintain their Chinese language through participating in cultural activities outside school, many other children gradually lose their native language or never become fluent in their parents' native tongue. This can be quite frustrating for both parents and children. For example, for 14-year-old Ting, the biggest issue since her family immigrated was that she could not communicate well with her mom. "There's something I don't know how to say in Chinese, my uncle knows English, but my mom doesn't." The language barriers appear to be a bigger issue in families from the province of Fujian in China (who speak Fukenese), because their children tend to attend Cantonese–English bilingual programs in school. For example, in Ling's family, her mother spoke only Fukenese. Her dad spoke Mandarin, but she was separated from him for 8 years and hence never felt close to him emotionally. Ling said to her interviewer the following.

> I want to communicate with my parents and share my feelings, but I can't. It's difficult to say, because of language issues. If there was no language barrier I would. I can't really communicate with my mom because she only speaks Fukenese and many words about emotions I don't know how to say in Fukenese. My dad speaks Mandarin but I'm not used to talking to him.

Ling picked up Cantonese in the bilingual program on her way to learning English, and her two best friends both speak Mandarin. Therefore, Ling speaks Mandarin and Cantonese better than her mother's native tongue, Fukenese. For 16-year-old Na, maintaining her native language Fukenese is becoming more difficult as she is growing older.

> My parents speak Fukenese. I now speak Cantonese most of the time. My Fukenese is getting bad. I don't remember a lot of things. So I don't know how to communicate with them. . . . At home only my parents speak Fukenese with me and very simple things, such as "It's time to eat." I don't have any body else to speak it with. I've forgotten the language a lot.

It is important to note that when children or adults lose their native language, it is often the words that describe more complicated thoughts and emotions that are the first to go (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). This vocabulary conveys deeper meaning and enables intimate and effective communication between people that are beyond the most superficial level. Thus, although most parents and children communicate relatively well around daily life topics (e.g., "It's time for dinner"), the more meaningful and deeper personal communication is becoming endangered. In relationships, it is precisely this type of communication that contributes to emotional closeness. When this type of communication is lost in families over time, alienation appears to occur between those who maintain fluency in the native language and those who do not.

Parents' work schedules. Our participants portrayed relationships with parents that were not only alienated by language barriers and cultural and generational gaps but also by the realities of parents' work schedules that did not allow parents and children to spend much time together. For example, 16-year-old Carl said the following.

> My family has to work much more than before. They are working so much more, and they are always not at home. Before when we were in China, my mother did not have to work and although my father had to go to work, he certainly didn't have to work such long hours as he does now.

Fourteen-year-old Wei reported a similar experience in her home.

> When we came here to the U.S., we don't see each other much because they are always busy with certain things. Now that they are here, they are always busy working, so I wouldn't be able to tell them anything.

Our participants, in particular, complained about their father not being around that much and not having opportunities to talk to their fathers. For example, 15-year-old Xia, whose dad worked in a restaurant, said during the interview, "I don't really know my dad because, my dad always works in the restaurant and he comes home really late. I only see him on Thursday nights." Similarly, 16-year-old Ming, whose father worked as an electrician, also shared the following.

> [I don't like that my dad] didn't spend a lot of time with me. He will just spend a real, real little time with me. So he only spends like one to two hours on the weekends talking to me, and he got to go somewhere else. I can't really talk to him, cause like he works a lot. I don't usually see him on the day. I only see him like really late, like even two or three in the morning.

The problem of decreasing time parents and children spend together was particularly pronounced in the families where parents have to work very long hours in Chinese restaurants or other service-type jobs. What made matters worse in many families is that parents usually operate on a schedule that has very little overlap time with that of their children's time at home. For example, when asked "What is the biggest change to your family after immigration?" 15-year-old Lilly said, "My family has less time to be together. My dad works. When he gets home it's about time for us to go to bed. The timing is not right." Similarly, Yuchen said the following about her family.

> In terms of my family, we seldom see our parents and they seldom see us. . . . Here I leave home at 6 am and come home at 7 or 8 pm. When they come back from work, I am usually asleep . . . we live here but we do not really talk or communicate with each other in the family.

Although parental work may have raised the family's overall living standard, particularly compared with their standard in China earlier, what had been sacrificed after migration by many of the families in our studies is the time parents and children spent together. For example, Di thus talked about the changes of her family after immigration.

> My parents found jobs and hence bought a house. Our house is larger than the one in China. Things we use in the U.S. are much better than that we used in China. At least we have a couple computers at home now. In China, a computer cost some 10,000 dollars. We could not afford it! Also we earn more money in the U.S. than we did in China . . . however, in the past, my parents and I saw each other more often. Now they have to work all the time. So we see each other less often. My mom did not have to work in China but now she has to work in the U.S.

High academic expectations. Education is another area that generated tension and feelings of alienation between adolescents and their parents in our studies. In student interviews, many talked about parental pressure to succeed in school. The high expectations Chinese parents have for their children have been well documented in the literature (e.g., Kao, 1995; Louie, 2004). Although studies tend to focus on the positive outcomes of high expectations, they ignore the pressure put on children and the negative impact exceedingly high expectations have on the parent–child relationship. In some cases, the adolescents understood and interpreted high parental expectations as beneficial for their future. However, in many cases, high parental expectations appeared to create tremendous pressure for the adolescents and led to many conflicts at home. For example, Tim, a 14-year-old boy, said

> I think parents in general want you to succeed in life. You know it's like one of those Chinese phrases, *wang zi cheng long* (expecting son to become a dragon). They want you to be like this great, great person. So they're constantly pushing you to get like 1600 on your SAT and everything . . . but from the movies and everything, what you see is you have all these [American] parents who want their child to have fun in their life instead of having success or whatever it is.

Similarly, Sally, a15-year-old girl, said the following of her parents.

> They have very high expectations. They expect their children to succeed in everything. Sometimes they are a little unreasonable. They think you have to be academically successful if you want to be a successful person in life. They tend to want more than what you can give them. They are good at making nerds, because they think academics are more important [than anything else].

In interviews, adolescents complained that their parents focused too much on their schooling and ignored other aspects of life. For example,

Sarah complained in the interview that "my parents have three sentences to say to us—is your homework done? Did you have exams? And how did you do in exams?"

What was particularly hard for many adolescents was how their parents responded to either poor or positive academic performance. When they did not do well in exams or when they received a bad grade their parents often spent a lot of time lecturing. For example, 13-year-old Fang said, "If I ever fail a test [my mother] will just keep lecturing even when you go to bed, she's still lecturing. I would dream that she's lecturing me." However, when the adolescents did do well in school their parents seldom praised them or provided positive feedback. Often students felt that they would never be able to achieve what their parents expected of them, which is endorsed by 16-year-old Tom as follows.

> When I get a good grade, 80 or something or brought it and let her see my grade and she says, "that's not good enough. You have to get a 90" or something. And I feel kinda sad. . . . But she was like angry . . . I think she might be happy. But she says you need to get higher . . . Just like she pushes me a lot.

As a result of this academic pressure, many of the adolescents chose not to tell their parents about their schooling, particularly when they were not doing well. As Qi, a 13-year-old boy, reported, "Whenever I get bad grades my family would raise hell. But when I get good grades, they don't say anything. Actually my father doesn't know (what I am doing)."

In sum, when we asked Chinese American adolescents to describe their relationships with their parents, they described numerous challenges with their parents that caused them to feel alienated at home. The challenges were focused on cultural and generational clashes, language barriers, parents' long work hours, and academic pressure. We did not find any gender differences in these family patterns. Boys were as likely as girls to report cultural and generational clashes, language barriers, parents' long work hours, and academic pressure.

Peer Harassment

When we asked Chinese American adolescents about their relationships with their peers, they spoke overwhelmingly about the challenges they faced with their peers, particularly the peer discrimination and victimization by non-Chinese and Chinese peers.

Harassment by non-Chinese peers. The form of discrimination that the adolescent described included both physical harassment and verbal taunts and slurs. For example, Lin, a 13-year-old girl, had the following to say.

> I was beaten and bullied here in the U.S. It seldom happened to me in China. Those Black and Whites [beat me and bullied me], like when I am in a park, they'll throw things at me for no reason. It happened three or four times . . . There are some Blacks here, and Whites as well, they bully us all the time. They call us "girls from the country." They don't respect us. They said we are Chinese girls. We are bilingual. They are regular [students].

In 16-year-old Lisa's school, where the dominant groups of students were Chinese, Black, and Latino students, she talked about being bullied by her Black and Latino peers and the segregation at school.

> I feel that people are bigger than I. . . . Like, I feel that they discriminate against us Chinese. If you go to the restroom, if they are checking themselves in the mirror, because they block the way, we can't walk past them to go to the toilet. Then I will say, "Excuse me." Then they curse you, say something like "crawl out," and they say bad things against Chinese. This makes me very unhappy. . . . And during lunch time, people only sit with people of their own color. Also when I took the school bus, some students put their school bags on the chair and not let Chinese students sit, or they put their legs out in the aisle to trip us over.

This bullying occurred in the hallway, in the classrooms, as well as in school buses. Similarly, 14-year-old Vivian said the following.

> I was in a mainstream classroom when I was in 9th grade. There was a boy who always teased me during English class. Also I was in a bilingual program (when I first came to the U.S.). Black students in my class always occupied the seats and would not allow Chinese students to sit. Each Black student could occupy two seats.

Another girl, Dalila, also complained about her experiences.

> When I was at the park playing ball and stuff, then there's this group of kids, and then they be saying that, like "You're in my property" and things like that. And then they—I cannot, like, exactly remember what happened, but it's just like—they told us to go back to China. . . . And sometimes call us Chino and stuff like that.

Chinese boys also indicated that they were discriminated by their non-Chinese peers. Similar to the girls, the discrimination was a combination of both physical and verbal harassment. For example, Matt, a 14-year-old Chinese boy, said that "people cut me in line at lunch time. They don't cut Black people and stuff or Puerto Ricans. Only Chinese people." Michael, a 14-year-old Chinese boy, said the following.

> They usually walking up to me [and go] "Hey Chino." They just insult me [and] my race. I wanted to like start a fight but it's not really worth it—its like 4 of us together and they're like 8 of them.

Similarly, Chong, a 17-year-old Chinese boy, said the following.

> [They] call me names. I didn't bother say anything; I just walked by. I don't want to get in trouble. I don't know if they're bored with their life or . . . well maybe they think Chinese people are weak . . . I don't know . . . we don't stick together or something like that, so they just pick on us.

Although both boys and girls indicated that discrimination experiences were common, girls appeared more at ease discussing these negative experiences in interviews. When asked about the quality of their relationships with other students in the school building, the female students often were quick to point out the harassment they confront on a daily basis. The boys, however, were less likely to point out such harassment although our observational data suggested that the Chinese American boys experience more physical harassment than girls. These gender-based patterns may be due to boys' resistance to being perceived as victims. In support of this interpretation, we often found that boys were more willing to report that other Chinese American students were harassed than that they themselves were harassed. The girls were often willing to discuss their own experiences of harassment.

Harassment by Chinese peers. In our interviews, adolescents also talked about harassment and tension among different groups of Chinese students in their school. In the New York study, the tension was primarily between the Cantonese students and the Fukanese students. In New York, the Fukanese are the newcomers whereas the Cantonese are the ones who have been in the United States for longer periods of time. The form of harassment among Chinese was primarily verbal. For example, Hui, a 14-year-old Chinese girl from Fujian, had the following to say.

> Sometimes when I hang out with some people and then the other people start saying something about me . . . like the Cantonese people will say something about me . . . like I don't speak English really well like I talk to some people so people . . . they just start saying I have bad English whatever, and I say that . . . I think that they're stupid of saying that. And I think that I'm not that stupid because when I've only been here for 5 years and they those ABC's (American born Chinese) they've been here since they were born; now that I'm learning English they shouldn't be teasing me.

Mary, a 16-year-old Chinese girl, talked about similar experiences in her school and felt perplexed by the tension between the Cantonese and the Fukenese.

> Some people would just you know making fun of us, of Chinese people, and even Chinese people tease Chinese people, I mean like Cantonese people and Fukenese people—they don't get along with each other. I mean I could get along with anyone fine as long as they don't judge me, but I don't get what's the point of having Cantonese against Fukenese people and Fukenese people against Cantonese.

In sum, our interviews with the adolescents suggested both within- and across-group harassment. Verbal harassment was more common in within-group discrimination, whereas both verbal and physical harassment were common across groups. The reason for these experiences of harassment lay with multiple factors, including immigration status and languages, education, and physical size.

Reasons for Harassment

Language. The most dominant reason for being verbally and physically harassed by non-Chinese as well as by Chinese students was based on not speaking proper English. This was particularly the case for first-generation immigrant students. For example, Sally described her experience when she first arrived as follows.

> When I was in 6th grade, the people would always said [sic] that I was speaking Chinese with others. They would imitate what we said and laugh about it. I feel that Americans have almost no knowledge about things about China. They are pretty ignorant about China, yet pretty subjective. Because my cultural background is different and the Americans didn't learn about China in depth. They don't know anything, yet they think what I do is strange.

Students also reported being teased for having accents when they speak English. Tommy said that after three years of being in the United States, "the most difficult thing is English. My English is still not as good as my classmates. If I make a mistake while I'm talking, they laugh at me."

Xing, 15-year-old Chinese girl, talked about being teased about language by her Chinese peers who had been here longer.

> When I had just come to United States because I am Chinese right and I don't understand English then my classmates were, just like, teasing me just like, "you don't know English, why are you here?" And because I don't understand English, right, so they just like say bad [things] to me, and I don't understand. All the teasing people who just like born in here, like ABC [American born Chinese]. I think they should not do that to me because the same thing is they are Chinese right and they [are] just like Americans, but still they are Chinese they cannot just treat people like that.

Although the students often attributed the harassment to actual or perceived language barriers, language barriers are confounded with immigration status so that those who are more recent immigrants to the United States are more likely to feel harassed, because of language barriers, both by non-Chinese students and native-born Chinese peers.

Model minority myth. The students in our studies also talked about being harassed or treated poorly at school because of the perception that Asian students tend to do better than others academically. For example, Bobby said, "In school some Americans will bully Chinese and tease [us] because we're too smart." Similarly, Xing remembered what happened when he first came here.

> Some students in my school asked me what nationality I was. I answered "Chinese," they then give me this disgusted looks. Besides, we Chinese always get good grades at school, they again asked "why do you Chinese always have to do better than us?"

Resentment regarding their perceived academic skills from other students toward the Chinese students was heard among the Black students as well. When asked if she has ever experienced discrimination, Sheerah, an African American student, said "the teachers think that the Chinese kids can do everything." Our interview data illustrate the challenges created by the image of the model minority at school for Chinese American students.

Since the 1960s, Asian Americans have been represented as the model minority and Asian-origin children have been portrayed as the model children in the U.S. media, scholarly circles, as well as public policy (Takaki, 1989). Although, on one hand, the model minority myth may serve some Chinese American students well by encouraging the teachers to have high expectations of their behaviors and performances, on the other hand, this myth appears to haunt the Chinese kids as it often leads to other Black, Latino, and White students to resent and harass them for their perceived competence (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Along with the resentment is the perception that Chinese students are often nerds and not cool, because of their emphasis on education and their good behaviors at school. This image is often in sharp contrast to the image of someone popular (Qin, 2005). This complex dynamic was evident across all the schools in which we conducted our research, in Boston and New York City. The ways in which the model minority myth ignores the diverse academic needs of Asian American students have been addressed (see Lee, 1996; Lew, 2004). However, few scholars have noted the ways in which this myth has a negative impact on the social worlds of Asian American students. Our data suggest that it has a direct effect on the levels of peer acceptance and peer harassment in schools.

Physical size. Another reason for peer harassment was related to the physical appearance. This was particularly pronounced in the boys' interviews. For example, Qiang, a 14-year-old-boy, said the following.

> All American people that think all Chinese people are weak, they always bother Chinese people, always call them "Chinos" and all this stuff, 'cause they think that Chinese are like all weak, that these Americans should beat the Chinese up, that's why they bother them.

A 16 year old boy Bing, who attends school with mostly Chinese, Latino, and Black students, said something similar.

> It's [harassment] usually mostly by Black students. So last time I thought that Blacks hated Chinese people 'cause they always picking on me. So I'm not sure it's 'cause I'm skinny or the glasses or something. But they the way they always calling me "Chino" and stuff; that's the Spanish word for Chinese people. That's what . . . why do they have to, like, call us that, you know? I really hate it. That's why sometimes I don't like being Chinese 'cause they're small. They get picked on by these big Black and Spanish people.

Thus, for Bing peer bullying may be attributed to physical size, strength, and also the image of a nerd with glasses.

Physical size and perceived weakness was a struggle that at its root is a struggle of masculinity for many Chinese American boys. Traditional Chinese culture places education, morality, self-cultivation, and gentleness in men as valued qualities (Sung, 1987). In Chinese culture, physical strength is often contrasted negatively with mental or intellectual capacities. The Chinese idiom “strong limbs, simple mind” clearly shows the bias against physical size and strength. However, in the U.S. context, proving one’s masculinity through activities involving physical strength, such as sports is such an important part of male identity development that boys learn to wear a masculine straightjacket (Pollack, 1998).

In sum, when we asked the Chinese American adolescents in our studies about their peers, they spoke repeatedly about being both verbally and physically harassed by their Chinese American and non-Chinese American peers. These experiences of harassment are likely to be a significant source of stress, and they have been found to be linked to poor psychological adjustment for Chinese American youth (Greene et al., 2006). The reason for these experiences of harassment lay with the students’ immigrant status and language, the myth surrounding academic ability, and their physical appearance, particularly for the boys.

Discussion

Empirical and theoretical research on Asian families in the United States has focused predominantly on their children’s academic achievement and the contribution Asian parents have made to their children’s educational success in different forms of financial, human, and social capital (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Louie, 2004). Relatively less research has been conducted to understand parent–child relations or peer relation, and very few studies have focused, in particular, on the challenges that Asian American youth face at home and with their peers (Uba, 1994).

Our research suggested that contrary to the stereotype of the highly cohesive Asian family (Greenberger & Chen, 1996; Nee & Wong, 1985), adolescents in our studies, who were primarily from low-income immigrant families, reported experiencing much tension and feelings of alienation. The adolescents often blamed their parents’ traditional beliefs for their conflicts with their parents. The adolescents understood that they are a part of two contrasting cultures, American and Chinese. The former was perceived as idealizing egalitarian relationships between parents and children and open emotional expression whereas the latter was perceived as idealizing

discretion and parental control. The adolescents felt caught in the middle of these cultural contrasts—imagined or real. The mismatch between parents' belief systems and the beliefs of the host culture has been noted repeatedly in the research literature (Chan & Leong, 1994; Florsheim, 1997). Interestingly, however, the adolescents did not perceive it only as a cultural conflict but also as a generational conflict. Their parents' traditional beliefs were perceived to be both a product of their culture and also of their parents' age. Previous research on immigrant populations have, perhaps, overemphasized the cultural aspects of parent/adolescent conflict in immigrant families and have not paid enough attention to the ways in which the conflict, as perceived by the adolescents, is both cultural and generational. Additional research is needed to further explore the ways in which various types of both cultural and generational conflicts are associated with psychological and social adjustment.

We also found that in some families language barriers were a central challenge to emotional closeness. As children learn more English at school, they lose more of their native language or they do not learn the language of their parents. Although sociolinguistics have long noted the issue of language loss (e.g., Wong-Fillmore, 1991), our findings contribute to existing research by linking the issue of language loss to parent–child relationship at home and examining the impact of home language loss on parent–child bonding in Chinese American families. Strikingly, a language barrier existed not only with respect to the actual language spoken but also with respect to the content of what was spoken with adolescents, describing how their parents cannot understand what they want (a psychological barrier wrapped up in a language barrier).

Another challenge faced by most of the adolescents in our studies was related to parents' work schedule that left little time for parents and children to be together. Our findings demonstrate that besides the growing cultural, generational, and language barriers, adolescents and their parents also have a structural barrier between them. Whereas cultural and generational barriers may be more abstract, language and structural barriers can concretely prevent adolescents and their parents from communicating and building close relationships. We also found that high parental expectations regarding academics contributed to family tension. The issue of high parental expectation has also been found in previous research on Asian American parents (Louie, 2004). However, most of this research has been on how it contributes to children's educational achievement. Our findings point to the influence of parental academic expectations on parent–child relationship. Understanding how academic-related topics such as parental expectations in school as well

as the model minority myth influence not only the academic adjustment of Asian American students but also their social and emotional well-being is critical to advancing our ability to support Asian American students.

Our findings also suggest that the peer-related challenges that Chinese American youth in our studies faced is that of peer harassment by their Chinese and non-Chinese peers. Furthermore, these reports of harassment were more common among the girls than among the boys despite the fact that our observational data suggested that the boys were more likely to be victims of harassment than the girls. This finding suggests that the experience of peer harassment and the willingness to discuss this harassment is shaped by gender norms and conventions of masculinity. It also suggests that one of the primary challenges with peers for the Chinese American boys in our studies was to be both masculine and confront the reality of being the victim of constant physical harassment from other students.

Furthermore, our peer-related findings suggest that the harassment that the students experienced was due to multiple factors, including immigration status, language ability, the model minority myth, and physique. The last factor was mostly evident among the boys, further supporting our contention that gender norms and expectations regarding masculinity greatly shaped the peer-related experience of the Chinese American boys in our studies. Interestingly, although language and education created problems between adolescents and their parents at home, they also created problems for adolescents at school, symbolizing the double bind of students caught between two cultural belief systems. At home, they cannot communicate well with their parents because they do not speak their native language; however, at school they get teased for speaking their native language and not being able to speak English as fluently as nonimmigrant students. In terms of educational achievement, at home, adolescents feel that parents push them to work harder at school whereas their peers harass them for paying too much attention to their studies. Research on the mismatch between home and school (see Phelan & Davidson, 1993) has primarily focused on the mismatch in values between the parents and the teachers or the school more generally. Our research, however, indicates that the most difficult mismatch for students to manage between home and school may, in fact, be between parents at home and peers in school. Additional research is needed to further explore the ways in which this mismatch influences the well-being of Asian American students.

Although our findings provide insight into many of the challenges that Chinese American adolescents experience at home and with their peers, particularly those in low-income urban areas, there were numerous limitations

to our studies. The primary limitation is that we only collected data from the adolescents and thus do not know, for example, if and how these familial challenges are experienced by the parents of these adolescents. Typically, research has found that parent–child relations, particularly those that are more negative, are often perceived differently between children and parents (Knafo & Schwartz, 2003). Furthermore, the processes by which family or peer support leads to positive mental health or the ways in which peer harassment shapes psychological adjustment is unclear from our data. Additional qualitative data are needed to explore these questions.

Our data underscore the challenges that Chinese American adolescents, both recent immigrants and those who are second- or third-generation immigrants, experience in their family and peer relations, particularly in a diverse urban context. It is important that Asian American adolescents' struggles as well as their successes are represented in the research literature. Only by understanding both components of their experiences will we be able to determine ways to support Asian American adolescents in and out of school. This understanding could also move us one step forward toward a more balanced approach to the education of all our children growing up in a multicultural context.

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