Chapter 7
Conclusions: The Role of Asian American Culture in Parenting and Parent-Adolescent Relationships

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We have shown in this book that ideas about parenting and family relationships are rooted in culture. We argue that "mainstream" thinking about parenting and parent-child relationships is grounded in Western cultural assumptions, beliefs, and practices regarding parenting and family life. These assumptions and beliefs are reflected and reinforced everyday—through daily family interactions, but also through popular media and cultural representations of families. These images tell us what it means to be parents, and what adolescents and their relationships with their parents are *supposed to be* like.

Scientific research on adolescence, parenting, and family life has been conducted alongside these dominant cultural ideas. As both a product and contributor to that culture, science has reinforced many of the ideas that have become part of the collective understanding of what is believed to be fundamental to family relationships. Historically typical approaches to the study of parenting—the choices of samples, methods, and measures—reflect dominant Western thinking about parents and adolescents. That is, Western ways of thinking about contemporary families are dominant among researchers, as well as among parents and adolescents themselves. These conceptualizations of family and parenting have been the basis of (and derived from) studies of European Americans (or, in the case of Asian Americans, samples have been largely limited to Chinese Americans). Too often prior research has been based on assumptions that there is conceptual similarity in the meanings of fundamental dimensions of parenting (parental support or warmth and control) across cultures. Most of the research in this field has been based in the United States and has been conducted through studies of European American families. Such thinking obscures cultural differences in expectations about and understandings of parent-adolescent relationships.

Using multiple methodological and analytic strategies, this unique set of studies has highlighted differences between European, Chinese, and Filipino Americans, the two largest Asian American ethnic groups in the United States. Our quantitative

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analyses of surveys from adolescents and parents and qualitative analysis of adolescents' perceptions of parental support and control show that understandings of parenting vary by ethnicity, as well as by adolescent and parent gender.

Our purpose is not to suggest that Asian American parenting is fundamentally different from European American parenting; many of our results for Asian American families are relevant for all families. However, we suggest that the combination of across and within ethnic group analyses presented here highlights culturally distinct dimensions of parenting and parent-adolescent relationships among Asian Americans. These distinctions have historically been absent from models and conceptualizations of parenting. By bringing these cultural distinctions to light, more can be learned not only about the parenting and family relationships of Asian Americans but, more importantly, about how well our theories and conceptualizations of parenting and family relationships fit current populations of youth and their families in the United States. Our results allow us to highlight the variability in family and cultural processes beyond that which has been represented in Western cultures and Western research on families and parenting.

In this chapter we synthesize the key findings we have presented. We then acknowledge the limitations of these studies and point to avenues for future research that may be particularly fruitful. Parent-adolescent relationships and parenting strategies are undoubtedly crucial for child and adolescent adjustment; we close with a consideration of the implications of this work for future studies of adolescent adjustment. Our work suggests the need for continued attention to the ways that ethnicity and culture shape human development through family relationships.

The Cultural Basis of Asian American Parenting

Our analyses focus on two dimensions that have been central to the literature on parent-adolescent relationships and parenting: warmth and support, and autonomy-granting and independence. We consider the implications of our studies for each dimension below, highlighting cultural distinctions that characterize Asian American parent-adolescent relationships and parenting, as well as the differences between Chinese and Filipino Americans.

Understanding Parental Warmth and Support

Using data from a large, nationally representative study, we examined the equivalence of measures of maternal and paternal support for European, Chinese, and Filipino American adolescents. We showed that measures of parental support are essentially equivalent for European and Filipino American adolescents but not Chinese American adolescents; among Chinese American adolescents, parental support appears to be interpreted differently or to have different meaning. Results of the

study presented in Chapter 3 follow up on these analyses in a study of perceptions of Chinese and European American adolescents and parents. The findings show that Chinese American adolescents report lower warmth from their parents compared to European American adolescents. These reports of warmth are lower perhaps due to conceptual differences in the behaviors that signify warmth, or in the meanings of parental support and warmth for Chinese American adolescents. That is, in daily family life, the differences reported in our study may be indications of ethnically distinct experiences of and meanings associated with warmth and support. This idea is explored further in the fourth chapter, in which we show that sacrifice is a measurably distinct dimension of parental support.

The qualitative study of Chinese and Filipino American girls' and boys' under-standings of parental support highlights the tension experienced by first-generation Asian Americans in the United States: they are clearly acculturated to U.S.-based ideas of what "good" parent-adolescent relationships are, enough so that their descriptions of maternal and paternal support shift seamlessly back and forth between dominant cultural and Asian cultural expectations for parent-adolescent relationships. Wu and Chao (2005) show that Chinese American adolescents report a greater disparity between ideal parental warmth and their perceived experiences compared to European Americans. Our focus group discussions provided a rich basis for interpreting their results; the adolescents with whom we spoke discussed these issues as tensions that they negotiated, rather than static disparities between what was "ideal" and "real" for them. Good relationships are characterized by caring communication, but not necessarily the type of communication that these youth con-sider typical or normative in the dominant cultural context: overt, directly expressive warmth and support. Instead, "you just know" that parents care, and you know this because of the instrumental support and attention provided to these youth through maternal labor and paternal economic provision; this is consistent with descrip-tions of Asian American family relations in prior research (Uba, 1994; Wu & Chao, 2005), and with the idea that parental sacrifice may be an unspoken part of the fam-ily story of immigration, and of ongoing daily instrumental support. Through their discussions, Chinese American adolescent girls in particular struggled with recon-ciling Western ideals for openness and parental friendship with their experiences and understandings of good parent-adolescent relationships.

Recent research shows that for immigrant Chinese parents, parenting becomes more difficult in the years following immigration: physical discipline is less accepted in the United States, and other parenting practices that were typical in China no longer work in the United States (Qin, 2008). From the adolescents' per-spectives, Wu and Chao (2005) argue that Chinese American youth from immigrant families often prefer mainstream American norms of parental warmth to ethnic ones; Asian American adolescents may perceive parents as less warm than their ideals, especially when compared to European American adolescents (see also Kim & Choi, 1994). Our qualitative results extend this work while suggesting something slightly different: the youth in our study acknowledged the differences and tensions that they experienced in day-to-day parent-adolescent relationships. It is not nec-essarily the case that Asian American adolescents "prefer" mainstream American

norms; rather, the adolescents whom we interviewed acknowledged the distinct cultural traditions of their parents while describing the tensions that resulted from growing up in a distinctly different dominant culture. Our studies suggest that adolescents are actively negotiating and interacting in multiple cultures; perhaps adolescents would benefit from an acknowledgement of this dynamic and of their skills. Parke and Buriel (2006) suggest that ethnic minority children could be taught how to interact effectively in dual cultural contexts by encouraging adolescents to understand ethnic as well as dominant cultural norms of parenting (see also Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993;Wu & Chao, 2005).

This cultural negotiation lends support not only to the contextualized nature of development, but also its dynamic nature; the negotiation of dominant and ethnic cultures adds even greater complexity to the course of development. Youth from immigrant families experience a dual frame of reference involving both the mainstream culture and their ethnic culture, sometimes referred to as "biculturalism." This dual frame of reference contributes to a complexity in the cognitive and social development of youth that current theories of development have not fully captured. Likewise, theories of "biculturalism" have not yet examined the developmental processes underlying the negotiation of a dual frame of reference. Much of the research on biculturalism has been undertaken by social psychologists or sociologists interested in social identity and the notion of cultural frame switching (Tajfel, 1984). However, this research has not explored the dynamic nature of one's social identity and the capacity for cultural frame switching in terms of how they change or become more complex with development. That is, the ability for cultural frame switching requires a degree of socio-cognitive ability that may not begin until children are at least capable of recognizing multiple perspectives. For instance, we know from Piaget's stages of development that children develop the ability to focus on more than one dimension of a problem at a time, a process referred to as "decentering." This often coincides with children also becoming more cognizant of their abilities, and capable of social comparison. Perhaps, at this time, children may also become more conscious of their dual or multi-faceted cultural frames of reference, and may be more critical of one cultural perspective, often their ethnic culture, relative to the other. This developmental appreciation of cultural frame switching then may help us understand how to support children in this process.

Our studies also suggest that the negotiation of ethnic versus dominant cultural frames may vary depending on characteristics of the ethnic culture. A unique contribution of our work is that it highlights what appear to be fundamental differences between Chinese and Filipino American adolescents in the meanings of parental warmth and support. Analyses of maternal and paternal support from the Add Health study show that although the measures are largely equivalent for European and Filipino American adolescents, they are not equivalent for Chinese American adolescents. The underlying meanings of these differences can be inferred from the different ways that Chinese and Filipino American boys and girls described good relationships with mothers and fathers. Among all of the Asian American youth who participated in our study, implicit support was a crucial dimension of parental support: you "just know" that parents care. Combined with results from the

fourth chapter, our findings suggest that parental sacrifice may be central to youth's understandings of good relationships and parental support, but the rich descriptions provided by youth in Chapter 5 suggest that "sacrifice" per se is only part of the story. For Chinese American boys, fathers are providers, authority figures, and role models; for Chinese American girls, closeness and affection is not realistic between fathers and daughters. In contrast, for Filipino Americans, boys described fathers as friends as well as providers, and girls described fathers' instrumental support as affectionate. Similarly, while both groups of boys described the instrumental maternal activities that show caring, Filipino American boys also characterized maternal support as including trust and affection. For girls, maternal relationships were based on generational obligations among the Chinese Americans, whereas Filipinas consistently described strictness in their explanations of maternal support and caring.

We have described the Chinese Confucian compared to Filipino Western colonial histories that serve as the basis for the differences in adolescents' descriptions of parental support. For Chinese American adolescents, parent-adolescent relationships are grounded in Confucian understandings of parental authority and intergenerational responsibility and in nonverbal indirect emotional communication styles. Filipino American adolescents also describe an interdependence that is characteristic of Chinese American adolescents, including an emphasis on intergenerational obligation and support. However, in comparison, Filipino family culture has been described as more egalitarian, allowing for affection and closeness, along with a strictness that is based in a history of colonialism that shaped the role of parents as protectors of children, particularly daughters (Espiritu, 2001).

In summary, parental warmth and support clearly matter to Asian American adolescents and their parents. However, the definitions and understandings of warmth and support differ in important ways from European Americans, and between Asian American subgroups. In fact, warmth and support are described in ways that overlap with autonomy and parental control which have traditionally been conceptualized as distinct from or orthogonal to warmth and support (Maccoby & Martin, 1983): perhaps parental warmth and support cannot be defined separately from control as is the case in the West.

Understanding Autonomy and Parental Control

Analyses of the measure of autonomy-granting from the Add Health Study showed that it was not equivalent across any of the three groups; these measures do not capture the dimension of autonomy equally well for European, Chinese, and Filipino adolescents. The comparative study of Chinese and European American parents and adolescents demonstrates that there are distinct parenting beliefs that inform parenting practices, particularly related to parental control and autonomy, and that these beliefs are culturally influenced. Chinese American adolescents and parents endorsed Confucian parental goals and parental control (with the

exception of Restrictive Control) more than European American parents. At the same time, results show that Confucian parental goals are not exclusively relevant for Chinese American families. Further, not all results were as expected. There is evidence that for Chinese American parents, contingent autonomy (*guan*) is more strongly linked to child-centered parenting goals than was true for European American parents, whereas the Confucian goals were also linked to this aspect of guan, but for both groups of parents. On the other hand, as expected, the components of guan that involve explaining and expecting obedience were more strongly linked to Confucian parenting goals for Chinese Americans parents than European Americans.

It is unclear from analyses here what role acculturation may play in shaping these results; Chinese American parents are undoubtedly influenced by majority parenting values in the United States, while also maintaining aspects of their ethnic cultural values, and these dual influences may explain some of the unexpected findings from this study. It may be that even when guan is maintained, it is translated to fit within the more dominant child-centered perspective in the United States. We did find that the goals for Confucian and child-centered values were more than twice as highly related for the immigrant Chinese parents than the European American parents. Thus, these sets of goals may become more related or integrated over time as immigrant Chinese parents become acculturated to U.S. values, whereas the European American parents do not begin with such values, but may be exposed to them as they come into contact with the Confucian-based values that some immigrants from Asia may bring with them.

Throughout the focus group discussions of autonomy, Asian American adolescents claimed some degree of independence from parents. We argue that the autonomy they describe is interdependent, which leads us to conclude that researchers should re-consider definitions of independence, particularly when applied to non-European cultural groups. Others have argued that independence in collectivistic cultures is qualitatively different in that it is defined in fundamentally interdependent ways (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This makes sense: maintaining harmonious relationships is paramount in interdependent cultures. To make independent decisions without concern for the collective would be certain to upend many Asian cultural norms. At the same time, adolescents from cultures characterized by individualism may also experience the intermingling of interdependence with independence, but to a lesser degree than adolescents from interdependent cultures. Anecdotally, it appears that some European American adolescents recognize specific obligations to parents (e.g., to be home on time) and accept the legitimacy of some parental rules; Smetana's work (1988) has shown that European American and African American adolescents distinguish multiple domains of autonomy (much as the Filipino Americans did in this study) and accept the legitimacy of parental authority in particular domains. Thus, it may be useful to reconsider European Americans' experiences and understandings of autonomy through the lens of interdependent-independence as well. For example, in what domains of influence (behavioral, emotional) and in what situations and settings might interdependence characterize independence for European American adolescents?

Differences Between Asian American Groups

Taken together, results from our studies also point to important ethnic group differences among Asian Americans. In developing the measure for parental sacrifice (Chapter 4), items that tapped whether an adolescent felt "grateful" to parents or that she or he "owed a lot" to them appeared as distinctly related to sacrifice for Chinese American youth, but were linked strongly to both sacrifice as well as parental acceptance for Filipino Americans. These items were dropped from further analyses, but the difference between the two ethnic groups is notable. These items are clearly relevant to the broader construct of parental support, but appear to be distinct, particularly for Chinese American adolescents. Western conceptualizations of parental support have not incorporated gratefulness and the concept of owing a debt to parents, yet undoubtedly these are feelings shared by many European American adolescents about their parents. Future research should explore the relevance of these concepts for understanding parenting and parent-adolescent relationships across multiple ethnic groups in the United States.

Results from the Add Health Study (Chapter 2) indicated that a single-factor solution for the measure of autonomy-granting was only equivalent for European and Filipino American boys; all other comparisons failed tests of factorial invariance. Thus, this measure appears to have different meaning across these groups. The focus group data provide some basis for understanding the cultural foundations for these differences. Although Filipino American youth described interdependence, they also acknowledged that their parents do want them to develop independence and to be self-reliant in the future. In contrast, this sentiment was not expressed by Chinese American youth; rather they described their parents' immigrant status as creating opportunities for unexpected independence, or independence that they would not have had were their parents native-born. Chinese Americans described times when they as adolescents had information and language skills that their parents lacked. There were also notable gender differences in the discussions of independence and autonomy. Although all of the boys described responsibility and self-reliance as central to autonomy for Asian American boys, the Filipino American boys specifically noted the importance of financial independence. In girls' discussions of independent decision-making, it was notable that decisions about finances and self-sufficiency were prominent for Filipina girls, whereas discussions about education and college selection were central in discussions by Chinese American girls.

These differences in understandings of adolescent autonomy can be explained by historical differences between Chinese and Filipino culture. Grounded in a history of Western colonialism and Catholicism, Filipino American families may be more egalitarian than patriarchal (Agbayani-Siewert, 1994). This may account for the degree to which Filipino American adolescents described autonomy in interdependent terms, but at the same time indicated that the ultimate goal of their parents was for them to become independent. Notably, the emphasis on financial independence among Filipino American youth is consistent with prior work that has suggested the particular importance of instrumental support among Filipino American families

(Dubrow, Pena, Masten, Sesma, & Williamson, 2001; Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). In contrast, based in the values of Confucianism, the Chinese Americans appear to be the most collectivist in their worldview (Ho, 1994) in that autonomy, distinct from familial relationships and obligations, simply does not appear to be a primary value. This explains why autonomy is described almost without exception in interdependent and relational terms by Chinese American adolescents.

Beyond Support Versus Autonomy: Supported Autonomy

The emphasis on role obligations and respect for parental authority are greater among adolescents from collectivistic cultures, at least in the immigrant generation (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). Values of familial obligation and obedience appear to be the fundamental axes for Asian American adolescents' understandings and interpretations of parental support and autonomy-granting—and the meanings of these values vary between Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans. Ultimately, what is important here is to identify and understand the cultural basis for the observed ethnic group differences. Our results suggest that for Asian Americans, one develops independence in relationships with others, while in the West independence is developed in counter-distinction to primary relationships. In fact, it may be that the distinctions between parental warmth and support and parental control and autonomy-granting are reasonable in the West, but not applicable in the same way in collectivist societies. That is, at least among Chinese Americans, it is possible that the development of autonomy by adolescents is fundamentally relational (or interdependent), defined in part by the support of and relationships with parents, and thus the affective quality of those relations.

By highlighting fundamental conceptual differences based on culture and ethnicity, our work also brings to light possibilities for expanding our understanding of parenting among European Americans. The history of research on parenting practices and behaviors has assumed that support and autonomy-granting are distinct. We suggest that a next step in this field would be to explore the possibilities of an integrated model of parenting in collectivistic—and individualistic—cultures. For example, based on our quantitative and qualitative results from Chinese American adolescents, we question the distinctions made between support and autonomy. Existing studies of ethnically diverse populations that include measures of parental support and control could be used to examine the possibility of a one-dimensional construct of "good parenting" among those from collectivistic cultures. It is plausible that Chinese Americans' notions of parenting, grounded in Confucianism, emphasize the parents' responsibility to socialize the child for harmonious (interdependent) relations with others, and thus is defined as fundamentally control oriented and child-centered (see also Chao, 1994). It is unclear whether this pattern is purely a legacy of traditional Chinese culture or an amalgamation or synthesis of Chinese and U.S. parenting principles that has evolved in the process of acculturation.

Limitations

There are, of course, limitations to the current collection of studies. We began with analyses from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the great benefit of which is our ability to study the reports of parental support and autonomy-granting among European, Chinese, and Filipino American adolescents in a nationally representative sample. These analyses are limited, however, in a number of crucial ways. The measures of parenting, while relevant to the key constructs of parental support and control, were not standard measures familiar in the developmental literature. Thus, the quantitative results are suggestive of ethnic group and gender differences in the conceptualization of these key dimensions of parenting, but the conclusions are limited by our reliance on what is ultimately brief, idiosyncratic measures based on availability. However, it is also the case that the Add Health Study is the largest and most comprehensive ongoing study of adolescent and young adult development in the United States. It continues to offer unique possibilities for the study of human development, family relationships, and health. Given the lasting importance of this data archive, we argue that it is important to understand the cross cultural applicability of the Add Health measures of parenting in spite of these limitations in the measures.

Finally, in the comparative study of Chinese American and European American parents and adolescents, most of the internal consistencies of the scales for parental practices reported by parents were low for both ethnic groups. This may have been due to reductions in the number of items in each scale due to dropped items, or to the need to develop subscales made up of smaller total numbers of items, both of which were necessary in order to maintain comparability in factor structures for adolescents and parents of both ethnic groups. Alternatively, if adolescents from immigrant families use multiple frames of reference, it may be unrealistic to expect consistency in their reports of parenting practices in the first place. Nevertheless, scales with fewer items commonly yield modest or poor internal consistency values. The particularly poor internal consistencies based on *parents*' reports is rather striking, and was only found for the scales for parental *practices*, and not parental goals. Also, parents' and adolescents' reports of parental practices were based on a widely used measure, the CRPBI (i.e., the subscales of Firm versus Lax Control, and of Parental Acceptance). As the alpha coefficients of scales reported by adolescents were adequate to excellent (with the exception of Explains Expectations), it may be that the measurement properties of parental control and warmth scales do indeed differ for adolescents and parents. These findings lend support to arguments that parenting practices may be interpreted very differently by adolescents compared to their parents. These differences in interpretation may be compounded when studying immigrant families. Not only do these families experience the adolescent-parent generational gaps common among all families, they may also experience intergenerational *cultural distancing* due to acculturation differences among family members (Wu & Chao, 2005). Because all the Chinese American *parents* in the study presented in Chapter 3 were first-generation immigrants, the potential intergenerational difference is compounded relative to all the other subgroups. This

may make comparability of constructs and measures even more challenging. Further research is needed to better understand the comparability of parenting measures from the perspectives of adolescents and parents in immigrant families.

There are several important limitations to our qualitative study, including the small number of participants, and the limited geographical region from which they were recruited. Because of its historically large immigrant population from the Pacific Rim, Northern California is a strategic location for the study of diversity among Asian Americans. We were able to interview groups of adolescent boys and girls who attended schools with quite different economic status compositions, yet we find striking similarities in discussions of adolescents of the same ethnicity. Nevertheless, the degree to which the responses of these youth are representative of the experiences and understandings of Asian American adolescents in other regions remains to be explored.

The Cultural Bases of Parenting and Adolescent Adjustment

Ultimately our work should inform the literature that is concerned with parenting and adolescent adjustment. We have examined the cultural roots of parenting using distinct methodological approaches, but we have not examined the links between different parenting practices and adolescent adjustment outcomes. A growing literature examines the role of ethnicity and culture in the associations between parenting and adolescent outcomes. Although the notion remains controversial, ample evidence exists to indicate that the effects of parenting practices on child adjustment differ across ethnic groups (Chao, 2001; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Parke & Buriel, 2006; Shumow & Lomax, 2002; Steinberg, 2001). For example, authoritative parenting is more consistently related to positive adjustment for European American and Hispanic adolescents than for African American and Asian American adolescents (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). Moreover, authoritarian parenting seems to have fewer detrimental effects among minority youth, compared to European American adolescents (Rudy & Grusec, 2001; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, & Mounts, 1994), and Asian American adolescents appear to benefit more from permissive parenting than do other adolescents (Lamborn et al., 1991). Yet some research conducted in China and other parts of Asia indicates that authoritative parenting is beneficial and authoritarian parenting is detrimental for adolescents (see review by Sorkhabi, 2005), whereas other research, also conducted in Asia, does not support this pattern (Lau & Cheung, 1987; Leung, Lau, & Lam, 1998; Pearson & Rao, 2003). As an explanation for these conflicting findings, some researchers argue that perhaps Asian parents (specifically Chinese parents), are more authoritative than authoritarian, or else are a combination of both authoritative and authoritarian (Sorkhabi, 2005). However, neither parenting style may adequately capture the most central features of parenting for Asians, including Asian Americans.

We hope that a better understanding of the subtle and diverse meanings of parent-adolescent relationship qualities will provide the basis for further refinement

of models of the link among parenting, parent-adolescent relationships, and adolescent adjustment. Analyses that directly examine the effects of parental goals and practices on adolescent adjustment are ultimately needed to determine the consequences of culturally distinct parenting goals and practices for adolescents. Additional studies are needed that examine the cultural processes underlying the effects of parental control and warmth on adolescent adjustment. Ethnic differences in the effects of parenting are often explained in light of cultural distinctions, but these cultural features are often not explicitly examined in studies. Parental beliefs and goals are part of parents' cultural scripts for parenting that may also explain why differential effects for parental control and warmth on adolescents' adjustment have been found across ethnic groups. In particular, we suggest that it is important to measure adolescents' and parents' subjective meanings or interpretations of parenting; these are the products of their cultural frames of reference, and are important for fuller understanding of parenting behavior and adolescent adjustment.

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