

Understanding a Unique Aspect of Intergenerational Conflict among Korean American Adolescents

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Abstract : This study examines unique manifestations of intergenerational conflict related to the acculturation process of immigrant families. No scale that measured the acculturation aspect of intergenerational conflict existed. Thus, a new scale was developed to investigate this unique aspect among Korean American adolescents. The study design was cross-sectional, and employed a convenience sampling method. The participants were Korean American adolescents of junior and senior high school age, 14 to 18 years old. The study was conducted at eleven Korean churches and one *hakwon* (private out-of-school studies institute) in Fairfax County, Virginia. Korean American adolescents expressed that the issues related to education, such as academic pressures and high expectations, caused intergenerational conflict most frequently. Unlike findings from previous studies, the participants indicated that language differences between parents and children rarely caused intergenerational conflict. Contrary to previous findings, none of the characteristics variables, such as age, gender, length of residency and language preference, were significantly correlated with this unique conflict. This study provides a rare opportunity to enhance our understanding on how Korean American adolescents interact with their immigrant parents.

Key Words : intergenerational conflict, Korean American adolescents, acculturation, immigrant families

I. Introduction

There has been a great deal of work in understanding intergenerational conflict between parents and their children. The term “generation gap” was commonly used to describe the condition of intergenerational conflict in early literature. The concept of generation gap was much scrutinized during the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s. Early theorists perceived intergenerational conflict as an unfortunate but inevitable byproduct of

adolescence (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Anna Freud further claimed that storm and stress in relation to adolescent development was universal and inevitable (Arnett, 1999). Arnett (1999) claimed that prior to the 1970s, theorists advised parents to expect rebelliousness, defiance, and conflict in dealing with their adolescent children. Moreover, the absence of such conflict, in relation to adolescent development, was considered abnormal. However, contemporary studies have shown mixed results concerning the

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seriousness and ramifications of intergenerational conflict in the lives of adolescents.

Although there have been mixed outcomes in the research of intergenerational conflict, much research has asserted that conflict between parents and adolescents generally increases during adolescence and that such conflict may have harmful effects on adolescents (Arnett, 1999; Laursen, Coy, & Collins; 1998; Montemayor, 1983; Smetana, 1989; Steinberg, 2001; Steinberg & Sheffield, 2001; Traub & Dodder, 1988).

Studies have also found that intergenerational conflict is more severe and problematic with immigrant families, Asian families in particular. These studies argue that differences between parents and their children are far greater for Asian immigrant families than for non-immigrant families in the United States (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002; Kwak & Berry, 2001; Lee & Liu, 2001; Rosenthal, Demeriou, & Efklides, 1989). The following section further illustrates why intergenerational conflict may be more severe and problematic with Asian immigrant families than indigenous families.

1. Intergenerational Conflict Due to Acculturation

Yau and Semtana (1993), in their study of cultural conflict between Chinese American adolescents and their parents, illustrated that “intergenerational conflict in Chinese-American adolescents has its roots in normal developmental process but may be accentuated by cultural differences” (p. 435). This study introduced an interesting perspective, as it investigated

intergenerational conflict in relation to the acculturation process as well as the developmental process. It is critical to acknowledge that Asian American youth have to deal with the unique process of acculturation.

Studies have indicated that intergenerational conflict may be exacerbated after migration (Dinh, Sarason & Sarason, 1994; Nguyen & Williams, 1989). Rosenthal (1984), in a study of Greek and Italian families who immigrated to Australia, reported significantly more parent-adolescent conflicts among these immigrants than among the non-immigrant Anglo-Australian families. This study reported that the greatest level of conflict occurred among those adolescents who were most assimilated into the host culture a finding which suggests that the acculturation gap may play a role in determining conflict levels. A study by Dinh, et al. (1994) supports the theory that different rates of acculturation on the part of parents and adolescents have a magnifying effect on intergenerational conflicts. The situation is further complicated by the fact that all family members do not have the same opportunities to learn and adapt to the host culture.

More often than not, the parents in Asian immigrant families abide by traditional Asian values, such as collectivism, conformity, self-restraint, and silence. Their children, on the other hand, tend to adopt such American values as individualism, autonomy, assertiveness, and self-expression, leading to conflicts within these families. Many such conflicts are culturally related. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the strong cultural obligation imposed on Asian American adolescents to meet the high expectations of their

immigrant parents will result in serious conflict between these children and their parents, which in turn will affect these children adversely. In addition, the parents' lack of familiarity with American culture and school systems makes it difficult for children to turn to their parents for guidance. Moreover, many of these children lack fluency in their native language while the parents lack fluency in English, a disparity which intensifies the problems between the children and their immigrant parents (Chung & Ruth, 2001).

Most Koreans in the United States are recent immigrants. More than ninety percent of all Korean immigrants entered the U.S. after the 1965 Act (Kwon-Ahn, 2001). The process of acculturation has had a major influence on both the children and parents of these families. Parents have tended to stay within the confines of close-knit Korean communities and to have little interaction with the host culture, whereas their children have tended to learn the new language and culture quickly, and thus have been assimilated into the host culture at a faster pace. The possibility is great that parents and adolescents in these Korean families have experienced and will continue to experience conflict due to acculturation differences.

Min (1989) conducted a survey among Korean children and their mothers on their three most common complaints about each other. Two of the most common complaints of the children were of their parents "restricting freedom too much" and being "too strict." The mothers complained about their children "not respecting parents" and "talking back." These complaints can be understood in the context of the Korean immigrant parents'

adherence to the principles of Confucianism, including the importance of family hierarchy, respect for one's elders, and filial piety. Min (1989) summarized the intergenerational conflict among Korean families as follows.

Most Korean immigrant parents try to teach their children Korean customs, including the Korean way of speaking politely to parents and other adults. They usually discourage their children from talking back even when they are wrong... Naturally, Americanized Korean children want to escape parental control and authority, leading to a high level of intergenerational conflicts (p. 199).

Intergenerational conflicts may be intensified when family roles are reversed, as when adolescents become family spokespersons because of their parents' lack of proficiency in the host language and lack of understanding of the host culture. Parental authority can easily erode when parents have to depend on their children in order to carry out the activities of daily living, such as paying bills or talking to authorities (Rosenthal, Ranieri, & Klimdis, 1996). In addition, conflicts between parents and children can be exacerbated when the parents are unable to provide their children with the guidance and help that children need in order to adjust to the mainstream society. It is difficult for parents to guide their children while they themselves are struggling with the task of adjusting to the host society (Rick & Forward, 1992).

Hauh (1999) conducted a study to elicit prevalent conflictual themes among Korean American adolescents. He identified two most frequently mentioned issues, "pressure me to

study” and “compares me to others,” regardless of four gender-related dyads (e.g., mother-daughter, father-son, etc.). Other issues were “show bias based on my gender,” only for daughters and “complains about my social life” in all dyads except the father-son dyad. These conflictual issues also appeared in other studies (Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000; Min, 1989). Moreover, studies (Min, 1995; Sung, Bae, Song, Kim, & Cho, 2002) have identified language barriers and cultural difference between Korean American adolescents and their parents as sources of conflict as well.

In order to understand intergenerational conflict among Korean American adolescents, it is essential to investigate this unique aspect of intergenerational conflict. This study investigates the acculturation aspect of intergenerational conflict by analyzing a thirty-item scale which is specifically designed to measure this unique aspect of conflict. Moreover, the study investigates whether conflictual items indicated by this study are consistent with the items reported from the previous studies.

II. Methods

The current study was designed as a cross-sectional study, which employed a convenience sampling method. This study was administered at eleven Korean churches and one *hakwon* (private out-of-school studies institute) in Fairfax County, Virginia. The study participants were Korean American adolescents of junior and senior high school age, that is, between the ages of 14-18, who either came to the U.S. before age 18 or were

American-born with one or both parents of Korean heritage.

1. Participants

The study was conducted during May and June of 2004. Fifteen Korean churches and two *hakwons* in Fairfax County, Virginia, were contacted regarding participation in the study but four Korean churches and one *hakwon* declined to participate. Approximately 300 consent forms and cover letters were distributed in the remaining 11 Korean Churches and one *hakwon*. However, one of the churches produced only one study participant. Therefore, to protect that individual's anonymity, that participant was excluded from the study. A total of 142 questionnaires were collected from the final 10 Korean churches and one *hakwon*. Of these, four cases were excluded from the study due to numerous missing responses. Thus, 138 cases were analyzed.

There were 57 (41%) female and 81 (59%) male participants with an average age of 16 years. Twenty-nine (21%) were 14 years old; thirty (22%) were 15 years old; thirty (22%) were 16 years old; twenty-eight (20%) were 17 years old; and twenty-one (15%) were 18 or older. Twenty-one (15%) were 8th graders; twenty-six (19%) were 9th graders; thirty-one (23%) were 10th graders; thirty-nine (28%) were 11th graders; seventeen (12%) were 12th graders; and four (3%) were in college. Seventy five (54%) were born in Korea, sixty-two (45%) were born in the United States, and one was born in Japan. The average length of residency in the U.S. was 119 months or 9 years 11 months, with a range from 4 to 218

months, approximately 18 years.

2. Measurements

1) Intergenerational conflict due to Acculturation

After a thorough investigation, no existing scale that would allow for measurement of the effect of acculturation for use in this study would be found. Therefore, a new scale to measure the effect of the acculturation factor, a unique aspect of intergenerational conflict among Korean immigrant families was developed.

The new scale, the Intergenerational Conflict due to Acculturation scale (ICA), included the issues most often mentioned in studies as causing conflict (Hauh, 1999), such as high educational expectation and pressure, language and communication barriers, and culture differences. Two meetings were held, one with two Korean social work doctoral students and three Korean mothers with teenage children to discern the unique issues that have caused conflict for them or that they thought most important. Through these extensive meetings, and the findings of empirical studies, items for the new scale were generated. The ICA includes 30 items; 24 of which were developed from domains suggested by previous research to explore culturally unique issues of conflict.

In addition, six items were adapted from the Asian-American Family Conflicts Scale (FCS) (Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000). The FCS consists of 10 questions that reflect acculturation conflicts between parents and children. The scale used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*almost*

never) to 5 (*almost always*). Lee and his colleagues (2000) reported strong reliability of the scale for all three tests on FCS (.89, .81, and .89 respectively).

Items drawn from the FCS were reworded to better suit the current study. For example, "Your parents want you to sacrifice personal interests for the sake of the family, but you feel this is unfair" from the FCS was modified to "Your parents want you to sacrifice personal interests for the sake of the family." These slight changes also made the FCS items more consistent with other newly developed items. Other new items, developed by the researcher, include, "Your parents' academic expectations exceed your performance," and "Your parents tell you to take Korean language classes." The new ICA scale asked how often each item resulted in conflict between Korean American adolescents and their parents with five-point Likert scale ratings from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost every day*).

A pilot study was conducted on 21 Korean American adolescents in Pittsburgh. The pilot study had two purposes: One was to test the questionnaire to detect and eliminate any ambiguities or misunderstandings. The other purpose was to evaluate face validity of a new scale developed to measure intergenerational conflict due to acculturation. The participants were asked to indicate whether each item of the scale was persuasive and seemed right to measure conflict with their parents. The results of the pilot test indicated that the scale was clear and valid.

In addition, in the primary study, reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) and factor analysis, using Principle component analysis, were conducted in order to investigate the psychometric properties

and to investigate the underlying structure of the scale. The scale showed a good reliability, 0.95 with 30 items. The initial analysis showed that all 30 items loaded above .40 on the first factor, with loading values that ranged from .46 to .80 with an average factor loading of .64. The scree plot suggested a two-factor solution. The two-factor solution, however, did not yield meaningful factors with distinguishable connotations. Therefore, a single-factor structure was considered more appropriate and parsimonious than a two-factor solution.

2) Demographic Information

This section of the questionnaire included questions regarding gender, length of residency, age, income, parents' level of education, birthplace (Korea or U.S.), and the primary language used when talking to parents. These variables provided specific characteristics of the sample.

III. Results

1. Analysis of the Intergenerational Conflict due to Acculturation Scale (ICA)

Korean American adolescent participants indicated that the ICA items, which measure conflictual topics due to aspects of acculturation, rarely caused parent-child conflict (mean = 2.3 (between "rarely caused conflict" and "caused conflict several times" in the past 6 months), standard deviation = .87). The scale uses a 5-point scale ranging from "almost never" (1) to "almost

every day" (5). The mean and the number of participants who answered that the item caused conflict almost every day are shown in <Table 1>. The items with the top five means were "Your parents link education success to life success", "Your parents compare you with other kids", "Your parents want you to obey everything that they say", "Your parents' academic expectations exceed your performance", and "Your parents seem to care about nothing but your grades", in that order. The first two items had mean scores that were higher than 3 (between "caused conflict several times" and "frequently caused conflict").

In addition, thirty-two percent of adolescents answered that *the link between education and life success* issue caused conflict almost everyday. Seventeen percent of adolescents said this issue frequently caused conflict. In total, almost half of the participants indicated that *the link between education and life success* issue caused conflict with their parents at least frequently or everyday in the past 6 months. Twenty-five percent indicated *the comparing to other kids* issue caused conflict almost everyday. Another fifteen percent indicated this issue frequently caused conflict. In sum, approximately fifty percent of participants indicated that *the comparing to other kids* caused conflict at least frequently or everyday in the past 6 months. Twenty-five percent also indicated that *the demand to show respect for elders* issue caused conflict almost everyday. Another ten percent indicated this issue frequently caused conflict. In sum, approximately thirty five percent of participants indicated that *the demand to show respect for elders* caused conflict at least frequently or everyday in the past 6 months.

<Table 1> Item Description of Intergenerational Conflict due to Acculturation

Items	Mean (Female/Male)	Number of Participants (Female/Male)
1. Your parents want you to obey everything that they say	2.9* (2.9/2.9)	19 (7/12)
2. Your parents enter your room without knocking on the door	2.2 (2.0/2.4)	24 (6/18)
3. Your parents complain when you talk to a friend of the opposite sex	1.9 (2.1/1.8)	12 (6/ 6)
4. Your parents expect you to date only Koreans	2.0 (1.8/2.2)	18 (6/12)
5. Your parents tell you to speak Korean at home	1.9 (1.7/2.2)	16 (3/13)
6. Your parents seem to care about nothing but your grades	2.7* (2.7/2.8)	28* (10/18)
7. Your parents decide things (e.g., career, job, major) for you without asking your opinion	2.4 (2.3/2.5)	17 (5/12)
8. Your parents act like you are their property	2.1 (2.0/2.3)	13 (3/11)
9. Your parents' academic expectations exceed your performance	2.8* (2.7/3.0)	28* (9/18)
10. The communication between you and your parents becomes difficult because of language differences (e.g., you speak English whereas your parents speak Korean)	1.7 (1.6/1.9)	4 (0/ 4)
11. Your parents tell you to take Korean language classes	1.5 (1.3/1.8)	7 (0/ 7)
12. Your parents want you to sacrifice personal interests for the sake of the family	2.0 (1.9/2.2)	7 (2/ 5)
13. Your parents argue that they show you love by housing, feeding, and educating you	2.3 (2.2/2.5)	14 (4/10)
14. Your parents don't want you to bring shame upon the family	2.4 (2.2/2.6)	16 (6/10)
15. Your parents expect you to behave like a proper Korean	2.3 (2.0/2.6)	16 (3/13)
16. Your parents treat you differently because of your gender	1.9 (1.9/2.0)	9 (4/ 5)
17. Your parents demand that you show respect for elders	2.6 (2.2/3.0)	35* (6/29)
18. Your parents link education success to life success	3.2* (3.2/3.2)	45* (18/27)
19. Your parents tell you to hurry up (빨리 빨리)	2.6 (2.6/2.6)	20 (6/14)
20. Your parents do not show enough affection for you	2.1 (2.1/2.1)	10 (4/ 6)
21. Your parents judge you based on their Korean standards	2.6 (2.6/2.7)	20 (6/14)
22. Your parents put too much emphasis on Korean traditions	2.1 (1.9/2.3)	12 (4/ 8)
23. Your parents do not approve of open displays of affection (e.g., kissing or hugging) between you and your girl/boy friend	2.2 (2.3/2.2)	19 (7/12)
24. Your parents tell you to participate in Korean traditional activities	1.8 (1.7/2.0)	7 (2/ 5)
25. Your parents are uncomfortable talking to you about sexual behaviors (e.g., kissing or hugging)	2.0 (1.8/2.3)	16 (3/13)
26. Your parents do not let you have any free time to hang out with your friends	2.3 (2.5/2.1)	15 (5/10)
27. Your parents hardly ever compliment you	2.1 (1.9/2.3)	13 (3/10)
28. Your parents compare you with other kids	3.1* (3.1/3.1)	35* (13/22)
29. Your parents seem to live their lives through you	2.4 (2.3/2.6)	14 (3/11)
30. Your parents embarrass you because of their problems with English	1.9 (1.9/2.0)	9 (2/ 7)

* Top Five Items

Two items showed different results in the mean scores and the number of participants. *The obey parents* issue showed a high mean score but it was not among 5 items with large number of participants who indicated that the item caused conflict almost everyday, whereas *the demand to show respect for elders* issue did not have a high mean score but was identified as one of those items with large number of participants who indicated that the item caused conflict almost everyday.

The 5 items rated lowest for conflict were “Your parents tell you to take Korean language classes”, “The communication between you and your parents become difficult because of language differences”, “Your parents tell you to participate in Korean traditional activities”, “Your parents embarrass you because of their problems with English”, and “Your parents complain when you talk to a friend of the opposite sex.” Only five percent of adolescents answered that the item (Korean language classes) caused conflict almost everyday. Only three percent indicated the item (communication difficulty because of language differences) caused conflict almost everyday. It is noteworthy that three of these five items were related to issues with language, which will be further addressed in discussion.

2. Secondary Analysis

Much of the research indicates that most children become quite distant from their parents during adolescence and that this differs from their closer relations in preadolescence, and they remain distant until late adolescence (Arnett, 2001; Galambos & Almeida, 1992; Hall, 1987; Paikoff

& Brooks-Gunn, 1991). In fact, the intensity of conflict with parents tends to increase during the stage of mid-adolescence to late adolescence (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). However, the frequency of such conflict may decrease in late adolescence due to separation from parents as children move out or go away to college (Montemayor, 1983).

Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that those adolescents with longer residency in America could indicate higher intergenerational conflict than those with a short period of residency due to greater cultural differences with their parents. In this study, length of residency and language preference were used as proxies of acculturation. The purpose of this analysis is to explore and possibly replicate any correlations between demographic information (e.g., age, gender, length of residency, and language preference) and intergenerational conflict.

Pearson's correlations between intergenerational conflict due to acculturation and several demographic factors were investigated. In order to administer a parametric test, normal distributions of the variables were tested, using Skewness, Kurtosis, and histogram. The mentioned criteria showed that the testing variables were normally distributed. Pearson's correlations, shown in <Table 2>, indicated that primary language used when talking to parents was significantly correlated with length of residency ($r = .54$ with mother, $r = .46$ with father). However, none of the demographic variables were correlated with intergenerational conflict due to acculturation (ICA). In addition, a t-test was conducted to test the difference in intergenerational conflict between

<Table 2> Pearson's correlations between testing variables

	Age	Length of residency	ICA	Language with mother	Language with father
Age	1				
Length of residency	-.03	1			
ICA	-.01	.10	1		
Language with mother	-.12	.54*	.03	1	
Language with father	-.20*	.46*	.06	.75*	1

*p < .05

female students and male students. The result indicated that there was no difference between female and male adolescents in expressing intergenerational conflict due to acculturation ($t = -1.54, p = .13$).

IV. Discussion

The current study attempts to understand the culturally unique aspect of intergenerational conflict between Korean immigrant parents and Korean American adolescents. Although previous research had investigated and claimed that intergenerational conflict may be more problematic with immigrant families compared to indigenous families due to cultural difference, it was not clear what issues were specifically related to this unique problem.

Therefore, a new scale, designed to investigate the unique aspect of intergenerational conflict due to cultural differences within immigrant families, was developed for the study. Although the new intergenerational conflict due to acculturation scale needs to be tested further, the scale did provide additional information about challenges that

Korean American adolescents may face.

Previous studies have indicated that academic pressures, value differences, language differences, and communication difficulties were the issues that frequently caused intergenerational conflict (Hauh, 1999, Lee, et al., 2000; Min, 1989; Nho, 2000; Sung, et al., 2002). In the current study, the issues identified as causing conflict most frequently were the items that measured academic pressure and stress related to academic expectations. Three of five items with high means and with large number of participants (who answered almost everyday) were related to education. This result indicated that Korean American adolescents were highly likely to have conflict with their parents in relation to school performance, a finding that is consistent with previous research. That is, academic expectations and pressures are great stressors for the Korean American population (Hauh, 1999; Min, 1995). In addition to the issues related to education, when parents compare their children with other kids and when parents demand obedience, the participants respond that those issues become great stressors. These are the issues that are culturally unique to Korean immigrant families. Therefore, it is significant to acknowledge these differences when

working with Korean American adolescents.

However, unlike the claims from previous studies (Hauh, 1999; Lee & Cynn, 1991; Nho, 2000; Sung, et al., 2002), the current study found language differences between immigrant parents and their children to be the least conflictual topic. One can speculate that it is not the language differences that may cause the conflict but rather the lack of effective communication between parents and children which may cause the conflict. Further research is needed to explore this factor of intergenerational conflict due to acculturation among children of immigrant parents.

One salient finding from the current study is that Korean American adolescents experience great conflict with their parents over issues related to academic pressures and cultural differences. Such findings can be incorporated in helping Korean immigrant families. Helping professionals such as social workers, counselors, or clinicians in general need to understand these unique problems and provide proper interventions for Korean immigrant families.

1. Limitations of the Study

There are a few limitations of the study that need to be mentioned. First, generalizability of the study to the Korean American adolescent population in the United States is limited. The study was conducted using a convenience sample method. The majority of the participants were recruited through Korean churches and a *hakwon* in Virginia which might not represent those Korean American adolescents not affiliated with such institutions, organizations, or who reside on the west coast. It

should be also noted that those who closely identified themselves as Korean were possibly oversampled because the study was conducted through Korean ethnic churches and a *hakwon*. Therefore, generalizability of the findings beyond the current sample should be conducted with caution.

In addition, some limitations arise from a newly developed scale. Although the psychometric properties of the intergenerational conflict due to acculturation scale were favorable, further investigations are necessary to validate the scale. The scale can be further tested with different populations, i.e. comparisons between indigenous adolescents and Asian American adolescents, to test whether it validates the assumption that it is reflecting unique cultural sources of conflict.

Although the study posts some limitations, it provides a rare opportunity to investigate the culturally unique aspect of intergenerational conflict between Korean immigrant parents and their children. The study also proves that the issues related to academic pressure are the most significant stressor. However, further research is required to better understand intergenerational conflict in relation to language differences between Korean American adolescents and their parents.

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Received March 29, 2005

Accepted June 7, 2005