

Adolescents' Problem Behaviors and Parent-Adolescent Conflicts in Hmong Immigrant Families

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether Hmong adolescent problem behaviors and school difficulties influence parent-adolescent conflicts above and beyond the variables of adolescents' embarrassment about their parents, the acculturation gap between parents and adolescents, and age of adolescents. The sample included 209 Hmong adolescents living in Minnesota. There were 123 males and 86 females, ages 12 to 25 years. A survey was administered in several community agencies to adolescents that included their perspectives on the frequency and intensity of parent-adolescent disagreements on 28 issues and the problem behaviors of delinquent peer affiliation, gang involvement, truancy, and school performance. Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicated the set of problem-behavior independent variables explained 26% of the variance in the frequency-intensity of father-adolescent conflicts and 21% of the variance in the frequency-intensity of mother-adolescent conflicts. Ideas for parent education in the Hmong community are discussed.

Adolescents' Problem Behaviors and Parent-Adolescent Conflicts in Hmong American Families: Introduction

Parent-adolescent conflicts in immigrant families have been frequently studied over the past two decades, and most studies have consistently found that acculturation gaps between parents and adolescents have significantly contributed to parent-adolescent conflicts (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002; Fuligni, 1998; Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rick & Forward, 1992; Rosenthal, Ranieri, & Klimidis, 1996). Despite this extensive knowledge about parent-adolescent conflicts, little is known about smaller groups of new immigrants in the United States, such as the Hmong. Most parent-adolescent conflict studies have focused on larger immigrant groups, such as Mexicans (Roosa et al., 2005), Chinese (Fuligni, 1998), Asian Indians (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002), and Vietnamese (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Only a few studies with small samples ($n < 100$) have included Hmong (Lee, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rick & Forward, 1992), yet the studies have assumed that acculturation gaps contributed to parent-adolescent conflicts, rather than considering the impact adolescent problem behaviors and school difficulties have on parent-adolescent relationships.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether adolescents' problem behaviors and school difficulties influence parent-adolescent conflicts above and beyond adolescents' embarrassment about their parents which hereafter is referred to embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age of the adolescents. We hypothesized that adolescents' problem behaviors and school difficulties would significantly explain the variance of parent-adolescent conflicts, even after controlling for the adolescent's embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age.

Literature Review

Context of Hmong Parent-Adolescent Relationships

It is acknowledged that parent-adolescent conflicts are rarely an issue in Laos because parent-adolescent relationships in Hmong families are, to some extent, based on the precepts of Chinese Confucianism. The Confucian code of ethics that has shaped Hmong family values includes collectivity, order and hierarchy, wisdom of the elderly, moderation and harmony, family obligation and filial piety (Suzuki, 1980). These values have shaped the context in which Hmong parents and adolescents interact. For instance, some studies suggested that Hmong parents expected their children to be obedient, docile, be friends with “good” people, and attend school regularly (Morrow, 1989; Xiong, Eliason, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2005).

Another factor that influenced a harmonious Hmong parent-adolescent relationship in the past was the lack of the adolescence stage of human development. Thus, the transition to adulthood happened relatively quickly. By the time children entered adolescence, most of them had married and started their own families. For example, some studies found that most Hmong adolescents were married between 12 and 18 years of age (Donnelly, 1994; McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer, 1994; Mottin, 1980). Mottin (1980) observed Hmong in Thailand and found that girls typically married at 12 years and boys at 14 years. Some scholars have argued that because of the lack of adolescence as a developmental stage in the traditional Hmong society, the needs for parents to continue to set limits, monitor, enforce curfews, and control children’s access to certain types of friends and activities were irrelevant (McInnis, Petracchi, & Morgenbesser, 1990).

Since the Hmong have lived in the United States, the nature and dynamics of parent-adolescent relationships have changed dramatically. Children growing up in the United States

have become more acculturated, integrated, and oriented toward individualistic values compared to their parents. Studies on acculturation gaps have found that parents and adolescents experience different rates of acculturation because adolescents adopt the language and behaviors of the mainstream culture more quickly than their parents who are still emphasizing values and standards from the country of origin (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rick & Forward, 1992).

Embarrassment, Acculturation Gap, and Parent-Adolescent Conflicts

The effects of the acculturation gap and adolescents' embarrassment about their parents on parent-adolescent conflicts have been documented (Nguyen-Chawkins & Williams; 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rick, & Forward, 1992; Rosenthal et al., 1996), but with mixed results. Some studies reported that less acculturated adolescents reported higher levels of conflict, compared to more acculturated individuals (Rosenthal, Ranieri, & Klimidis, 1996; Sodowsky, Lai, & Plake, 1991). Other studies suggested that the second-generation adolescents, compared to the first-generation adolescents, who are highly acculturated, tended to report more embarrassment about their parents and therefore encountered more conflicts with their immigrant parents (Fuligni, 1998; Nguyen & Peterson, 1992; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Studies that focused on Hmong have supported the finding that higher levels of parent-adolescent conflicts were present in families with second generation adolescents (Ngo, 2002; Rick & Forward, 1992; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Xiong, Detzner, & Rettig, 2001). These studies did not include adolescents' problem behaviors and school difficulties in their analyses however.

Age and Parent-Adolescent Conflicts

The effects age has on parent-adolescent conflicts have been examined in the non-immigrant literature, indicating that age significantly affected parent-adolescent relationships (Galambos & Almeida, 1992; Larson & Richards, 1994). "The early to middle adolescent years

represent a time of heightened orientation toward peers, and children of this age often desire less parental control over their lives so they can increase involvements with their friends” (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986, cited in Fuligini, 1998, p. 782). Laursen, Coy, and Collins (1998) conducted a meta analysis of parent-adolescent conflict studies and found that early adolescents (10- to 12-years-old), compared to mid adolescents (13- to 16-years-old) and late adolescents (17-to-22-years-old), had more frequent conflicts with their parents. Mid adolescents, tended to experience more intense conflicts with their parents, compared to early and late adolescents. This turbulent relationship during the early to middle adolescence is a natural process resulting from the transformation and negotiation of parent-child relationships (Collins, 1990; Fuligni, 1998).

The extent to which age plays a role in parent-adolescent conflicts in Asian and Hmong families is yet to be determined. Fuligni's (1998) cross-sectional study with Asian American students in California found that “older adolescents (10th graders compared to 6th graders and 8th graders) reported a great endorsement of disagreeing with both parents than did younger adolescents” (p. 786). This result suggests that for Asians, older adolescents may be less likely to accept parents' authority over their lives, compared to younger adolescents.

Problem Behaviors, School Difficulties, and Parent-Adolescent Conflicts

Qualitative studies have found that parents with troubled adolescents, compared to non troubled adolescents, complained more about conflicts (Detzner, Xiong, & Eliason, 1999; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Zhou and Bankston (1998) who studied more than 100 Vietnamese families in the St. Louis area found that many of the parent-adolescent conflicts were related to the adolescents' problem behaviors such as truancy, delinquency, and affiliation with delinquent peers. Barber (1994) and Collins and Laursen (1992) also studied different ethnic groups in the United States and found that parent-adolescent conflicts were significantly related to the

adolescents' histories of problem behaviors. This relationship has also been established longitudinally. For example, Shek and Ma (2001) conducted a longitudinal study with 150 Chinese students in Hong Kong and found that antisocial behavior, such as truancy and telling lies to teachers at Time one, was significantly related to father-adolescent conflict at Time two.

Method

Participants

The sample for this study included 209 Hmong adolescents from Minnesota. There were 123 males and 86 females, ages 12 to 25 years ($M = 16.11$, $SD = 2.24$). Fifty four percent of the participants were born in the United States, 36% were born in Thailand, and 10% were born in Laos. Participants were recruited from churches, non-profit organizations, and community centers serving youth in the metropolitan area of Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota. All individuals were offered \$10 for participating in a survey requiring 30 to 60 minutes to complete depending on reading abilities.

Measures

All variables in the study were derived from previously established scales. The variables are described below in the order of entry into the multiple regression analyses beginning with the two dependent variables, followed by the four control variables and then the two independent variables.

Dependent variables. There were two dependent variables: Father-adolescent conflict and mother-adolescent conflict. These two measures created variables that resulted from combining scores of frequency of conflict and intensity of conflict. The dependent variable originated from a modified version of the *Issues Checklist* (IC) (Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O' Leary, 1979; Robin & Foster, 1989) that assessed the frequency and intensity of parent-adolescent disagreement over

44 potential areas of conflict in households with adolescents. The instrument was first translated to Hmong, reviewed by a panel of experts, and then pilot tested with a group of Hmong parents and adolescents in Minnesota resulting in a 28-item measure that was culturally relevant.

Adolescent respondents were asked to recall disagreements about specific issues over the past four weeks with their father and mother simultaneously. For each item the respondent endorsed, s/he was asked to rate the intensity of the disagreement on a five-point scale (1 = *very calm*, 5 = *very angry*). The *Issues Checklist* yields two scores for each respondent, one for the frequency of conflict, which is a count of the total number of issues endorsed, and the second score is for the intensity of conflict indicated by the mean intensity index score. Due to high correlations between these two scores for the father ($r = .95$ and for the mother $r = .93$), the two scores were combined by summing the cross products of the two scores for each respondent into a single conflict score. Therefore, high scores reflect frequency-intensity of conflict or more conflict in the relationship.

Control variables. Four variables were used as control variables in the analyses. These included embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age. *Embarrassment* is a single item that was developed by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) to assess the extent to which the adolescent feels embarrassment about his or her parents' cultural ways using the following scenario: "Feng and Long are both students whose parents are Hmong. Feng says I am sometimes embarrassed because my parents don't know American ways, and Long says I am never embarrassed by my parents, I like the way they do things." Each respondent was asked to rate "which one comes closest to how he or she feels" with three response options: Feng, Long, or neither. Responses were assigned 1 for Long, 2 for neither, and 3 for Feng. Thus, higher scores indicate feeling more embarrassed by their parents' cultural ways.

Acculturation gap. The acculturation gap was assessed with the single-item: "To what extent have you adopted American ways of doing things?" (Ranieri, Klimidis, & Rosenthal, 1994). The rating provided four choices: 1 (not at all), 2 (a little bit), 3 (much), and 4 (very much, just like an American). In order to determine the acculturation gap between the adolescent and parents, the parent's acculturation score, as reported by the adolescent, was subtracted from the adolescent's acculturation score on this single item. Thus, higher scores indicate wider acculturation gaps between adolescents and parents. *Age* is a continuous variable.

Independent Variables. The independent variables included in this study were adolescent reports of problem behaviors and school difficulties. *Problem behavior* was measured by a composite score of eight items taken from the Multicultural Events Schedule for Adolescents (*MESA*; Gonzales, Gunnoe, Jackson & Samaniego, 2001). Sample items included "Your close friends got drunk or high," "a close friend had a serious emotional problem," and "a close family member or someone you live with participated in gang activities." Each adolescent was asked to respond with a "yes" or "no" response. Responses were coded 1 for "yes" and 0 for "no." The scores were summed across the eight items for each respondent. A higher score for the index indicates a greater number of problem behaviors or exposures to problem behaviors.

School difficulties were measured using two items; one item is about truancy and the other is about school performance status (Conger & Elder, 1994). The truancy item asked: "How often have you been in trouble for skipping or not attending school?" Response options included 0 (never), 1 (seldom), 2 (fairly often), and 4 (often). The school performance status item asked: "How well do you think you keep up with your schoolwork?" The possible responses included 1 = "I am ahead of most classmates in class work," 2 = "I am current with most class work," 3 = I am a little behind and can easily catch up," 4 = "I am somewhat behind and can probably catch

up,” and 5 = “I am very behind and it will be hard to catch up.” Higher scores indicate having more difficulties in school.

Results

The results from the bivariate correlations (Table 1 at end of paper) showed that there were insignificant correlations between the dependent variables and the control variables. The two independent variables, however, were significantly related to the dependent variables. In other words, youth who reported more frequent and intense conflict with their fathers and mothers were also more likely to report problem behaviors and school difficulties. Problem behaviors and school difficulties were significantly related to the age and acculturation gap of adolescents. Put in another way, older adolescents tended to report more problem behaviors, and adolescents who scored larger on the acculturation gap tended to report more problem behaviors.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

The central aim of the study was to examine whether adolescents' problem behaviors and school difficulties would significantly predict parent-adolescent conflicts, even after controlling for embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age of the adolescents. We controlled for these variables because previous studies found them to significantly relate to the dependent variables. Hierarchical regression analyses were used to examine the relative contribution of problem behaviors and school difficulties on parent-adolescent conflicts. Specifically, in each model, embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age were entered in the first step of the regression in order to control for their effects on the dependent variables. Problem behaviors and school difficulties variables were entered simultaneously in the second step because the hierarchical order of these variables was not hypothesized.

Table 2 (at the end of the paper) summarizes the results of hierarchical regressions designed to address the primary research question. As can be seen in Table 2, embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age of the adolescent did not explain the variance in father-adolescent (Adjusted $R^2 = -.004$) and mother-adolescent conflicts (Adjusted $R^2 = -.01$). After controlling for these variables, step two of the hierarchical regressions found problem behaviors and school difficulties variables explained 26% of the variance in father-adolescent conflicts and 21% of the variance in mother-adolescent conflicts. In the father model, both of the problem behaviors and school difficulties made significant independent contributions to father-adolescent conflicts while in the mother model only problem behaviors made significant contributions to mother-adolescent conflicts.

Discussion

The current study extends the research literature on immigrant parent-adolescent conflicts beyond embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age of the adolescent by focusing on adolescent's problem behaviors and school difficulties. As expected, parent-adolescent conflict was significantly predicted by the adolescents' problem behaviors and school difficulties after accounting for embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age of the adolescents. What was unexpected, however, was that none of the control variables were related to the dependent variables. This was surprising since most studies in the past have found these variables to predict immigrant parent-adolescent conflicts (Dinh, Sarason, & Sarason, 1994; Fuligni, 1998; Galambos & Almeida, 1992; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rick & Forward, 1992; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). This result could be explained based on the ecological-cultural context of Hmong immigrants in the United States.

Hmong immigrant parents in the United States are deeply concerned about their children's education and "good" behaviors (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). They want their children to be obedient, go to school, and stay away from delinquent peers (Xiong et al., 2005). Although these practices may serve as protection against problem behaviors and school difficulties, they may also serve as sources of conflict, particularly when the adolescent children deviate from these expectations (DuongTran, Lee, & Khoi, 1996; Xiong, Detzner, & Rettig, 2001). It is acknowledged that since 1985, juvenile crimes and arrest rates in the Hmong community have increased by about 20% compared to 5% for Asian Pacific Islanders for that same period in Minnesota (Minnesota Planning, n.d.). At the same time, student dropout rates continue to increase while academic achievement is on the decline for Hmong children (Lee, 2001; Lor & Chu, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Walker-Moffat, 1995). Given what is known about Hmong parents and these trends, it is not surprising to find problem behaviors and school difficulties to be more robust in predicting parent-adolescent conflict compared to embarrassment, acculturation gap, and age of the adolescents.

Conflicts over the adolescents' problem behaviors and school difficulties may also be explained based on the face-saving orientations of collectivist cultures such as the Hmong. The Hmong community of the participants in this study is close and cohesive, and most people seem to know one another. Therefore, a family that has a problem child (e.g., a child who has problems in school and/or engages in delinquent activities) tends to become a "headline" during social gatherings. Consequently for parents, preventing troubled children in the family becomes extremely important. For example, Xiong, LaBlanc, Tuicomepee, and Rainey (2006) conducted a study with Hmong adults about what issues they considered secrets and found family conflicts and children's problem behaviors to be among the issues reported. Given this context, we

speculate that because of this fear of losing face for having problem children, parents are more sensitive to these behaviors, compared to the more expected developmental behaviors, resulting from adolescent's embarrassment about their parents, acculturation gap, and age. In addition, arguments between parents and adolescents were not expected in Hmong traditional families, regardless of the child's acculturation level and age (McInnis, Petracchi, & Morgenbesser, 1990).

The results of the study do not rule out alternative explanations however. First, we did not directly measure the acculturation gap between immigrant parents and their adolescents. The acculturation gap variable included in the regression models was based on a single item and only based on the adolescents' perspectives. Future studies need to include data from both parents and adolescents. Second, the way in which participants were recruited to participate in this study may also play a role in the insignificant finding. Future studies need to design a better sampling frame to recruit participants.

Finally, it is still unclear whether problem behaviors and school difficulties cause parent-adolescent conflicts or parent-adolescent conflicts then lead to adolescent problem behaviors and school difficulties as suggested by others (Barber, Chadwick, & Oerter, 1992; Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Roosa et al., 2005; Rumbaut, 1996; Sivan, Kosh, Baier, & Adiga, 1999). Due to the nature of the cross-sectional design of the present study, this knowledge is still limited. Although Shek and Ma (2001) and Patterson, Reid, and Dishion (1992) suggested that these two variables were more interactional rather than linear, future studies need to use a prospective design to clarify the probable relational dynamics.

The results of the current study suggest that there is a strong relationship between adolescents' problem behaviors, school difficulties, and parent-adolescent conflicts. Thus, it is

imperative for agencies to develop early educational efforts to assist parents and adolescents in preventing adolescents from falling behind in school, affiliating with delinquent peers, and participating in gang activities during adolescence. It is evident from previous research that the more the adolescents engaged in delinquent activities, the harsher parents became in disciplining them, thus creating a coercive process that nurtured further delinquent acts (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

Based on the results of the present study, the following suggestions are proposed for parents, adolescents, and professionals who work with Hmong families:

1. Develop programs to bring joy and excitement back to family life. Hmong parents could be taught to concentrate more on maximizing family togetherness and family activities, instead of scolding, criticizing, and blaming each other. As leaders, parents need to find activities, such as fishing, gardening, and sewing, that the whole family enjoys doing together and then make time for these activities. Studies show that low conflict families tend to enjoy each other and share common activities together (Larson & Richards, 1994). In addition, adolescents whose parents are actively involved in their lives are less likely to experience school difficulties and engage in problem behaviors (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).
2. Expand Hmong parents' parenting repertoires. In traditional Hmong families, parents tend to nag, scold, and yell at children, especially during teachable moments. This cultural practice of socialization worked in the past when children grew up in a monoculture where both generations understood the meanings behind these practices. However, children who grew up in the United States tend to lack the understandings of the meanings behind parents' nagging, scolding, and yelling. Thus, they tend to react

negatively to parents' socialization efforts resulting in more frequent and intense conflicts. Since children react negatively to these practices, continuing to practice them may bring more harm than help. It is suggested that parents could expand their parenting repertoires by communicating with their children differently. For example, parents could try to be more conscious of how they talk with their children by avoiding old habits

3. Adolescence is a special developmental period that is considered more difficult for both parents and adolescents due to multiple changes (Arnett, 1999). During this period, children experience biological, cognitive, social, and school changes, in addition to the relational changes between parents and adolescents. Since most Hmong parents in this study had limited adolescent experiences during their teens, particularly the adolescent experience in the context of inner-city life and school, it is suggested that they be targeted for educational programs that teach the reality of growing up in inner-city America and then connect them to multiple resources to support their most important job – parenting adolescents in America.
4. Conflict related to adolescents' school difficulties is a serious concern to Hmong parents. However, scolding, name calling, and continuing to pressure adolescents are unlikely to be effective. It is suggested that Hmong parents need to be more proactive in their adolescents' school. They need to work closely with school counselors and teachers to prevent school difficulties. If school difficulties become a problem for the adolescent, then parents need to seek after-school programs and tutors to support the adolescent. After-school programs and tutoring services are readily available in most inner-city schools and culturally based non-profit organizations. Parents need to learn to take the initiative and take control over their children's education.

5. Conversely, Hmong adolescents should also be targeted to learn about the Hmong culture and socialization practices. For example, adolescents could be taught to understand that parents who nag, scold and yell at them tend to be involved and concerned parents; parents who want nothing but the best for them. Instead of listening to *how* parents tell them, they could concentrate on *what* their parents tell them. In doing so, adolescents can be selective in what they hear and still maintain a cooperative relationship with their parents. By establishing this cooperative habit, adolescents could also learn to deal with difficult parents (or adults) and be able to resist the burning temptation of rebelling every time they encounter with their parents.

Author Identification Notes

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Table 1

Correlations Among Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. F-A Conflicts	—	.91**	.02	.003	.10	.52**	.29**
2. M-A Conflicts		—	.03	.08	.03	.47**	.23*
3. Embarrassment			—	.09	-.02	-.01	.02
4. Acculturation Gap				—	-.19**	.15*	.07
5. Age					—	.18*	.14
6. Problem Behaviors						—	.28**
7. School Difficulties							—

Note: n varied from 183 to 209.

Two-tailed significance: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Results of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses on Parent-Adolescent Conflict, By Sex of Parents

	Father-Adolescent Conflict					Mother-Adolescent Conflict				
	R ²	Adjusted R ²	B	SE B	β	R ²	Adjusted R ²	B	SE B	β
Step 1:	.01	-.004				.01	-.01			
Embarrassment			.14	.53	.02			.15	.53	.02
Acculturation Gap			.21	.72	.02			.86	.74	.09
Age			.23	.16	.10			.11	.16	.05
F for step			F (3, 205) = .71					F (3, 205) = 0.62		
Step 2:	.28**	.26**				.23**	.21**			
Problem Behaviors			1.49	.29	.48**			1.38	.20	.45**
School Difficulties			.51	.20	.16**			.34	.20	.11
F for step			F (2, 203) = 38.28**					F(2, 203) = 28.85**		
Change in R ²			.27**					.22**		

*p<.05. ** p<.01.