# Conflicts in Chinese American Families: The Role of Guilt and Anger

**Toni Li[a], Jack W. Berry[b], Suluck Chaturabul[c], Yanlin Li[a], Lynn E. O'Connor[a], Kevin W. Choi[a], Shin Er Teh[d], Ila Srivastava[d], Zena Dadouch[d] and Rella J. Kautiatinen[d]**

*a The Wright Institute, b Samford University, c Western University of Health Sciences College of Pharmacy , d University of California -Berkeley*

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## Abstract

We explored conflicts between Chinese immigrant parents and their Chinese American adult children. Eight young adults were interviewed. Themes emerged including: Parents inducing guilt in children, parents denigrating acculturation, parents micromanaging children's activities, and children worrying about disappointing parents. Worrying about one another was pervasive as was anger. The often heated conflicts between Chinese immigrant parents and their adult Chinese American children are familiar to clinicians working with multicultural families. However, little research has addressed this phenomenon. The present study was designed to begin an investigation of this apparent struggle between generations in ethnic Chinese families that may have implications for other immigrant families and may be helpful for mental health providers working with our increasingly diverse populations.

## Introduction

Four million Chinese American immigrant families are living in the US today, and acculturation stresses are known to affect the quality of parent-child relationships. Studies have noted the alienation, conflicts, anger and frustration commonly found between Chinese immigrant parents and their Chinese American children due to differing rates of acculturation. Few studies, however, have explored the role of empathy and altruism as fundamental to the dynamics that may lie behind parent and child conflict.

Traditional Chinese families expect children to help in familial and household duties, in addition to meeting a high standard of academic excellence. Chinese American children have numerous obligations, often in conflict with mainstream American culture. While such conflict often appears as anger and fighting, it is likely, given the loyalty common within most families, that altruistic motivation, empathy, and guilt exist in parents and children in these families. Parents feel that if they don't insist upon their children following old traditions they will harm them, and children feel that if they follow their new American cultural norms, they will be harming their parents. Both parents and children thus feel guilty towards one another.

Empathy-based guilt, measured by the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire, represents the feeling of empathic or altruistic guilt towards others. Chinese immigrant parents feel responsible for pushing their children to have a successful life by emphasizing familial support and academic excellence. Americanized children feel responsible for making their parents happy; they tend to internalize harsh self-criticism, in addition to feeling guilty for having a more privileged life in America than their parents. Conflicts ensue when children and parents feel they are failing to meet these responsibilities; guilt may be a driving force in the frequent family fighting. Prior research has found that higher levels of empathy-based guilt are significantly associated with higher levels of depression. Studies designed to examine the role of empathic guilt with this population may provide clinical insight for both clinicians and families.

This present hypothesis-generating pilot study explores conflicts between eight Chinese American adult children of Chinese immigrant parents through semi-structured interviews of adult children's experiences, with an examination of the role that empathy-based guilt may be playing in their families.

Zhang Xiaogang

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## Methods

Eight self-identified Chinese American adults raised by Chinese immigrant parents were recruited for this study through various websites (e.g., Craigslist, Reddit), social media, and word of mouth. The participants agreed to take part in a semi-structured interview with the principle investigator, either in person or through a video call. Questions in the interview included "Have there been conflicts with your parents? If so, can you describe what kind of conflict and what you felt triggered these conflicts?"; "Do you feel an obligation towards your parents?" and "What are your feelings towards your parents?"

The interviews were then transcribed for analysis. Initial analysis included undergraduate Research Assistants reading through the transcripts for any obvious themes that arose. Then, two doctorate clinical psychology students read the transcripts independently and found themes present in the interviews. Results were then compared between the two readers to come to a unified consensus of results.

All eight transcripts were also analyzed for themes using James Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, 2nd edition (LIWC2007). LIWC was developed for the analysis of various grammatical structures and the distribution of a variety of cognitive and emotion words that arise in individual's written and verbal speech samples. LIWC2007 analyzes text word-by-word, calculating the percentage of words in the text that can match up to 82 language dimensions. Words analyzed by LIWC2007 may fall into their dictionary of over 4,500 words and word stems that convey emotions such as positive affect, negative affect, anger, and sadness, among many others. Using one-sample *t*-tests, the relative frequencies of word categories from the transcripts were compared to those of published normative control texts.

**Table 1. 10 Most Prevalent Themes**

| Theme | P01 | P02 | P03 | P04 | P05 | P06 | P07 | P08 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Guilt Induction | 0 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 9 | 3 | 12 | 43 |
| Oppression / Power | 6 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 27 |
| Anger | 10 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 4 | 33 |
| Worry | 1 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 23 |
| School / Career Pressure | 0 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 22 |
| Omnipotent Guilt | 4 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 17 |
| Cultural Differences | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 18 |
| Understanding Parents | 8 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 23 |
| Obligation | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 15 |
| Helplessness | 6 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 1 | 18 |
| Difficulties Communicating | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 12 |

**Figure 1. Quotations from Interviews**

"*We came here for you.*"

"*. . . When they said we moved here for you, that always made me angry.*"

"*You have no idea of how much I struggled to give you this life you have.*"

"*. . . Every time we would get into an argument, whether it's about me cleaning my room, the conversation would veer off to how they came all the way here from China to take care of us. And like, obviously that has nothing to do with me leaving my clothes on the floor but somehow that always works its way into our arguments. And so, yeah, I mean they definitely do that because they feel like, obviously they didn't come here for me. Because I wasn't born then. I can't say they haven't done a lot for me, they do work really hard and they paid for all my college and everything. Yeah, I don't deny that I do feel an obligation to them. Um, and I don't deny some of that feeling of obligation comes from them saying "we came here to give us a better life.*"

"*. . . I was born here going to school here and seeing American children and seeing the way they grew up and behaving, and I was always thinking to myself that I can't do that. I have no freedom. I have no voice . . . I guess the way I can describe it was I was frustrated that I had no voice, and also I think vicariously through my mother frustrated too, because she had no voice too, even though she's my mother.*"

## Results

Clinically relevant themes were found across all eight transcripts. While 28 themes surfaced from the transcripts, the ten most prevalent themes that emerged are shown in Table 1. Although anger was expressed in all transcripts, the most frequently mentioned problem was parents inducing guilt in their children (see Figure 1 for specific quotations). This included that parents implied they sacrificed enormously for the children. The transcripts also revealed frequent expressions of prosocial concerns and emotions, such as omnipotent guilt, obligations, and worry about family members.

In every interview, subjective guilt – defined as an internal emotion felt when you believe you are harming another – played a central role. Guilt induction was present in the conflicts of seven of the eight participants. This included parents placing pressure on their children to be obedient, or excelling at school by using phrases such as "we came here for you," implying that the parents sacrificed enormously for their children. According to participants, the response to guilt induction was often anger and/or feelings of guilt. Additionally, the feeling of oppression and power by the parents, sometimes multi-generationally, also arose.

The LIWC analyses found that the interviews had a significantly higher relative frequency of anger words compared to norms ($p<.05$; Cohen's $d$ effect size = 1.16, a large effect).

## Discussion

Analysis of interviews using multiple coders and LIWC analysis suggests that feelings of anger and oppression are present in the conflicts between Chinese immigrant parents and their American children in this pilot study.

More prominently, however, is the occurrence of guilt induction within these conflicts. The results are compelling, and may offer insight to clinicians working with clients within this population.

While we suspected that the role of omnipotent guilt would be the most salient drive in such intergenerational conflicts, guilt induction was not a surprise. The expectations, pressure, and failure to meet obligations within families in turn fuel feelings of anger and feelings of powerlessness.

From a theoretical perspective, we suspect that the underlying reasons for expressions of anger in these family conflicts are feelings of interpersonal guilt toward family members.

With such a small sample size and a limited number of coders, the present results are only preliminary. More studies with larger samples are needed to explore the role of interpersonal guilt in intergenerational conflicts in this population.

For further information, please contact Toni Li at toni.li711@gmail.com or Lynn O'Connor at lynnoc@lynnoc.com .