

The Role of Guilt in Cross-Generational Conflicts in Asian American Families



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Abstract

In a preliminary exploration of the role of empathy-based guilt in conflicts between Asian immigrant parents and their adult children, we interviewed ten young adults. Themes emerged including: Parents inducing guilt in children, parents denigrating acculturation, parents micromanaging children's activities, and the adult children's frequent expressions of anger tied to fear of disappointing parents. Both parents and adult children appeared to worry about harming one another, and often expressed anger when overwhelmed with guilt. While underlying affection was obvious, the association between anger and guilt was explicit in only one interview.

The often-heated conflicts between Asian immigrant parents and their adult children are familiar to clinicians working with multicultural families. The present study was designed to explore the role of anger as a defense against guilt in this apparent struggle between generations. This reinterpretation of conflict may be helpful to families engaged in frequent fighting. Reframing ongoing disputes as a reflection of guilt driven by underlying altruistic motivation may help to reduce what feels like an atmosphere of hostility and allow both parents and adult children to recognize their mutual affection and worry about one another.



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Introduction

In 2011, an estimate of 18.2 million Asians resided in the United States, including immigrant Asians and their families. In immigrant families, acculturation stresses are known to contribute to the quality of parent-child relationships. Studies have noted the alienation, conflicts, anger and frustration commonly found between immigrant parents and their children due to differing rates of acculturation. Few studies, however, have explored the role of underlying empathy and altruistic motivation as fundamental to the dynamics that may lie behind parent and child conflict.

Many Asian families expect children to help in familial and household duties, in addition to meeting a high standard of academic excellence. Conflicts arise in households surrounding these expectations and perceived failures to meet them. 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 both parents and children. Parents believe that failing to insist their children follow old traditions will harm them, and children believe that by following new American cultural norms, they will be harming their parents. Both parents and children thus feel guilty towards one another.

Empathy-based guilt represents the feeling of empathic or altruistic guilt towards others. Many Asian 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 survivor guilt 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 guilt in this population may provide clinical insight for both clinicians and families.

Methods

Ten self-identified Asian American adults raised by Asian immigrant parents agreed to take part in a semi-structured interview. 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?"

Transcripts were reviewed and themes were identified in a narrative summary of each interview. All ten transcripts were also analyzed using 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 others. Using one-sample *t*-tests, the relative frequencies of word categories from the transcripts were compared to those of published normative control texts.

Discussion

Analysis of interviews and LIWC analysis suggest that feelings of guilt and anger are present in the conflicts between Asian immigrant parents and adult children. More evident however, is guilt induction within these conflicts. While we suspected that excessive feelings of responsibility for one another 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. Additionally, the worry both parents and children exhibited towards the other lend fuel to their conflicts.

Given the small sample size, using anecdotal data for the purpose of preliminary exploration, these results are only suggestive. We approached this pilot study from a theoretical perspective, namely that guilt and affection may underlie family conflict and the appearance of hostility. Future studies including larger samples are needed to explore the role of altruism and guilt in intergenerational conflicts in this population.

Results

Table 1
 Comparison of Chinese interview sample (*N*=10) with controls on LIWC relative frequencies of emotion word categories.

	Chinese Sample			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	Control Mean	Mean	SD			
Positive Emotion	2.74	2.63	.88	-0.38	.71	-0.12
Negative Emotion	1.63	2.06	.71	1.88	.09	0.63
Anxiety	0.33	0.38	.18	0.91	.39	0.30
Anger	0.47	0.90	.38	3.54	.006	1.18
Sadness	0.37	0.31	.19	-0.92	.38	-0.30

Note: *t* = one-sample *t*-test value; *d* = Cohen's *d* effect size.

One-sample *t*-tests were used to compare mean relative frequencies of emotion word categories from the interviews with those of published control texts. As shown in **Table 1**, the study interviews had significantly higher rates of anger words compared to controls (*p*<.01; Cohen's *d* effect size = 1.16: large effect). A higher rate of overall negative emotion words in the interview sample approached statistical significance (*p*<.10) and had a moderately large effect size (*d* = .63).

Worry from both immigrant parents and their American adult children towards the other were salient across all interviews. Often, there was a wish for the other to be well or successful. This led to conflicts and frustration. In several interviews, the adult children expressed feelings of survivor guilt towards the parents, while parents utilized guilt induction in attempts to motivate their children to obey their wishes: "We came here for you"-implying sacrifice of parent's own desires to come to America and provide child with a potentially better life, or comparing their own historic behaviors of being an obedient child, chastening their children for not being an obedient, therefore, filial child).



Quotes from interviews

I'll say no, and he'll have this look of really intense pain in his face. It's like as if I stabbed him in his heart or something.

...I really do want to move out and have my own place. But at the same time it's like, I think to myself, who's going to take care of my parents? They don't know English, my dad gets all these scam letters in the mail all of the time. If I'm not translating them for him he can get scammed out of money. All these everyday things they rely on me on, like somebody calls and speaks in English he hears one word of English and he thinks it's the government or police...

Quotes from interviews

I mean it's getting better but it's not the best you know, like I still feel I can't live my life, like it's not just my life, it's their life too. I have to consider them and my family and how my actions affect you know their plan for me so...I'm trying to find that balance because I don't wanna, I don't wanna hurt them anymore than they've been hurt because they've been hurt a lot...

I've always wanted to make them (subject's parents) happy.

I appreciated the fact that my parents weren't trying to be my friend, they were trying to make me a good person.



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