Acculturation and Stress within Asian/Asian American Immigrant Families

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What is Acculturation?
Asian American history is a story of resilience and pride. In 2012, Asians became the largest group of new immigrants in the U.S.1 Once arrived in the U.S., immigrants in general, and Asian immigrants in particular, face unique challenges in balancing their cultural traditions and American mainstream culture. This process is known as acculturation. Having to navigate different cultural norms, values, and lifestyles can lead to stress or pressure on the family. This is called acculturative stress. In a study of over 2,000 first-generation Asian Americans who came to the U.S. as adults, researchers found that 7 out of 10 people reported that they have experienced acculturative stress.2 Acculturative stress has also been found to negatively affect different aspects of life, such as academic achievement of Asian American youth 3,4 and mental health of adults.5

Acculturation is the process by which immigrants to the U.S. navigate the challenges of balancing their cultural traditions and American mainstream culture. The accompanying stress of this process is acculturative stress.

Community Workshops
Pictured here are glimpses of the parenting workshops facilitated by Dr. Cixin Wang and 2016-2018 Calvin J. Li Postdoctoral Fellow K. Anh Do. Community workshops are conducted with first-generation Asian American parents to improve their knowledge and skills in parenting their second-generation children. Workshops covered topics such as youth’s ethnic identity development, bullying prevention, and mental health promotion.
Types of Acculturation

According to John Berry, a well-known researcher of acculturation with immigrant communities, there are four general acculturation strategies that immigrants often use: 1) assimilation, 2) separation, 3) integration, and 4) marginalization. Research also found that Asian American adolescents who adopt a bicultural or integrated acculturation strategy, where they maintain their strong ethnic root but also feel connected to the mainstream culture, tend to have higher self-esteem, better relationships with peers, and a stronger bond with their parents than those who do not have this integration.

Assimilation

Assimilation is when an immigrant participates and adopts the mainstream culture while letting go of their cultural heritage.

Separation

Separation is when an immigrant practices their cultural heritage mostly without adopting the mainstream culture. This could be due to personal preference or because the person feels that mainstream society does not accept their background.

Integration

Integration is when an immigrant adopts the mainstream culture and also keeps the cultural traditions.

Marginalization

Marginalization is when an immigrant neither adopts the mainstream culture nor keeps their cultural heritage. This could be due to personal preference or because the person feels excluded by both cultural communities.
Acculturation Gaps in Asian Immigrant Families

Acculturation gaps or acculturative differences also exist between family members when some members participate in and identify with mainstream American culture more than others.\textsuperscript{9, 10} This is particularly true for children and youth, who tend to take on American norms and beliefs, while their parents and those in the older generations tend to adhere to their cultural traditions.\textsuperscript{10} This gap in acculturation can add tension and conflict to the family. Some studies found that acculturation gaps are associated with negative outcomes for youth, such as poor academic performance and substance use.\textsuperscript{10, 12}

Even though acculturation gaps may be common, acculturation in immigrant families is very complex. One study with Vietnamese parents and youth, conducted by Dr. K. Anh Do, a Calvin J. Li Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Maryland, showed that not all youth are more Americanized than their parents. In fact, in 11\% of the cases, parents reported being more acculturated to American culture than their adolescent children.

When we break acculturation down into different types, we also see that not all acculturation gaps in families lead to negative outcomes.\textsuperscript{14} For instance, there may be more stress in families where parents are more Americanized than their children compared to families where the children are more Americanized than their parents. Children in the first type of family may experience adjustment problems that prevent or hinder their adaptation to American culture and society, which could cause stress to the family.

Acculturation can be difficult, but having a supportive social network, such as strong relationships with family, can help to lessen the stress of adapting to a new cultural environment. It is undoubtedly hard to have strong family relationships when there are cultural differences between parents and their children. Having open communication, learning effective problem-solving skills, and understanding the acculturative differences will make it easier for immigrant parents and their children to understand and to build stronger bonds with each other. Here we offer more tips for parents.

**Tips for Parents**

- **Be aware of generational differences and acculturation differences** between parents and children. For example, some behaviors children engage in, such as shrugging their shoulders, may be acceptable from an American perspective but may be seen by immigrant parents as a sign of disrespect. Verbal explanations can help children understand their parents’ cultural beliefs.

- **Parents can explain what they believe is important to their children and ask their children what they want and hope for.** What feels satisfying and what “good cultural adjustment” means can be very different from person to person. Differences are not problematic, but ineffective ways of solving differences lead to tension and conflict.

- **Be willing to learn and try different parenting techniques**, such as active listening (for example, saying: “I understand why you are upset”), giving specific praise (e.g., “You showed that you can handle responsibilities well by helping to take care of your younger sibling”), and providing appropriate rewards (e.g., doing a special activity of choice with a parent).

- **Parents can provide encouragement to their children and adolescents for helping with language translation.** Children may feel proud to help their family in this way, but it is also important for parents to know that this activity can be stressful. (e.g., “Thank you for translating the materials for me. I know you worked really hard to help our family.”)

- **Build a support network with other families that face similar challenges.** Seek out community resources to improve your parenting, such as joining parenting workshops like the ones sponsored by Asian American Studies or local school district or form your own parenting support group.
References


Dr. K. Anh Do is the 2016-2018 Calvin J. Li Fellow in Asian American Studies. She is a Post-Doctoral Associate at the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Maryland and has a PhD in Child, Youth and Family Studies from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2016.

The Calvin J. Li Fellowship, proudly hosted by the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Maryland, is intended to support a recent PhD with expertise in the issues facing second-generation children of Asian immigrants to the United States, such as identity formation, racial and ethnic representation, acculturation, transnationalism, family dynamics, or closely related topics. Li Fellows also teach courses related to their research for the Asian American Studies Program.

Yun Lu is a counseling psychology doctoral student in the Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education. Her research interests include cultural adjustment and acculturation, racism and health disparity, multicultural psychotherapy process, and culturally responsible interventions.