The Influence of Family Functioning and Parent-Adolescent Acculturation on North American Chinese Adolescent Outcomes

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Abstract: The present study investigated the associations between family functioning, acculturation between parents and their adolescents, and adolescent adjustment problems. Chinese adolescents and their parents ($N = 41$) living in the United States and Canada participated in this study. Results showed that differences in acculturation between parents and adolescents were related to adolescent depression and that family functioning was related to both depression and delinquency. Both parental and adolescent acculturation levels and their differences were important in predicting adolescent outcomes. Implications for conducting family therapy and parent education with Chinese North American adolescents and their parents are discussed.

Key Words: acculturation, adolescent depression, Chinese adolescents, delinquency, family functioning.

Background and Significance

Most studies investigating the association between family functioning and adolescent outcomes have been done in North America, mainly with European American families. Recently, attention has focused on minority families (e.g., Greenberger & Chen, 1996; Mandara & Murray, 2000). Increasingly, Chinese North Americans are becoming a visible minority presence in both the United States and Canada. For example, in 2003, the United States Census Bureau reported 4.1% of the population to be identified as Asian. This is an increase from 3.6% in 2000. Additionally, Canadian statistics reveal that 6.6% of the total Canadian population identified themselves to be Asian (Canadian Census, 2001).

In an effort to contribute to scholarship on minority families and adolescents, this study explored how family functioning and parent-adolescent acculturation differences were associated with adolescent adjustment problems such as depression, delinquency, and social initiative, in North American Chinese families. “Chinese North American” is a term used to describe North Americans who are ethnically Chinese. They may be from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, or other Asian countries or they may be born and raised in North America. Based on previous family scholarship with Chinese Americans, the term “Chinese North American families” in this paper refers to families who are ethnic...
Chinese without distinguishing their country of origin (Skinner, 2000).

Chinese North Americans, along with other Asian North Americans, have been considered a “model” minority group by some researchers because of their low crime rate and their overall academic achievement (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Others have found more severe emotional problems such as depression among Asian American college students as compared to European Americans (Greenberger & Chen, 1996; Okazaki, 1997). Lorenzo, Pakiz, Reinherz, and Froist (1995) also found that Asian American adolescents are more depressed and socially isolated than their European American counterparts. Thus, a general description of Asian American adolescents is that they tend to exhibit more internalized emotional problems and display fewer externalized behavioral problems than European American youth.

Many of the studies related to Chinese North American families have focused on comparing different parenting practices in Asian and European American families (Rothbaum, Morelli, Pott, & Liu-Constant, 2000). Although these studies have focused on parenting styles, there is still a general lack of knowledge of overall family functioning in relation to Chinese North American families. Ho, Spank, & Young (1989, as cited by Shek, 1997) found no bibliographic citations of “family competence,” “family functioning,” or “family assessment” among 3,548 citations related to patterns of behavior in Chinese individual and family studies. Simply comparing parenting practices between Asian and European American families is necessary and interesting but may fail to identify specific areas of intervention for Chinese North American families. In an effort to move beyond these comparisons, a primary goal of the present study was to examine the association between family functioning and adolescent psychological and behavioral outcomes in Chinese North American families.

### Conceptual Framework

The McMaster Model of family functioning provides a foundation for the current study (Epstein, Ryan, Bishop, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). The McMaster model (Miller, Ryan, Keitner, Bishop, & Epstein, 2000, p. 169), based on family systems theory, assumes that:

1. All parts of the family are interrelated.
2. One part of the family cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the family system.
3. Family functioning cannot be fully understood by simply understanding each of the individual family members or subgroups.
4. A family’s structure and organization are important factors that strongly influence and determine the behavior of family members.
5. The transactional patterns of the family system strongly shape the behavior of family members.

Based on these assumptions, it is reasonable to predict a relationship between general family functioning and each of the individual family members’ functioning. Further, a systemic approach to understanding families highlights the importance of conflict relative to understanding family functioning as well as the impact of acculturation differences on family functioning.

For example, previous research by Fang and Wark (1998) suggests that when parents and their children acculturate in different ways or at different levels, intergenerational conflicts are almost inevitable. Tseng and Fuligni (2000) also found that intergenerational conflicts stemming from acculturation differences have a significant negative influence on family cohesion. Both parent-child conflicts and low family cohesion may lead to adolescent internalization and externalization of emotional problems. Therefore, the present study investigates the relationships between parent-adolescent acculturation difference and adolescent depression, delinquency, and social initiative among Chinese American families.

### Literature Review

#### Elements of Family Functioning

Researchers have tried to understand family functioning within several dimensions. Emphasis tends to be placed on dimensions like family structure, family communication, adaptability, cohesion, and problem solving (Combrinck-Graham, 1990). Family structure refers to family intactness, the number of members in the household, the number of siblings, and sibling rank (LeFlore, 1988). In their review of the impact of family structure on family functioning, Martin and Colbert (1997) noted that birth order and number of children cause changes in
the parenting process because resources and parenting practices vary when group size and composition change.

Family communication refers to a set of norms regulating the exchange of information among its members and can be conceptualized through two dimensions: conformity orientation and conversational orientation. Conformity orientation implies that parents use their power to force their children to obey and agree with them. Conversational orientation means that parents allow and encourage the open exchange of ideas and feelings within the family unit (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972, as cited in Fitzpatrick & Marshall, 1996). As a result, the method of communicating influences parent-child interactions and could affect child or adolescent outcomes.

Perhaps the most widely emphasized dimensions of family functioning in the family therapy literature are adaptability and cohesion (Olson, Spremkle, & Russell, 1979). Family adaptability refers to the family's ability to alter its functional structure when developmental changes occur within the family or when the outside world places demands on them. When a family is extremely adaptable, it imposes no rules, leadership, or consistent discipline on its members. To the contrary, when a family's adaptability is on the other end of the spectrum, it regulates its members with rigid rules and discipline. Family cohesion reflects the degree to which family members are connected and involved with one another. Highly cohesive family systems restrain the development of healthy individuality among their members, whereas low cohesive family interactions withhold constructive intimacy among family members (Beavers, 1977; Olson, 1986).

In addition to dimensions such as adaptability and cohesion, family functioning researchers have investigated problem solving. Problem solving within families is assessed by a family's capacity to resolve problems while at the same time maintaining efficient family functioning. Emotional tone in a family is represented by the ability of the family to encourage expression of and response to the emotions of its members (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983). Both problem solving and emotional tone are associated with improved family functioning.

To summarize, family functioning has been studied predominantly in association with family structure, family communication, adaptability, cohesion, and problem solving. These elements of family functioning are also relevant for immigrant families; additionally, acculturation is an element of family functioning that should be considered for immigrant families.

Research on Adolescent Adjustment Outcomes

In addition to general family functioning research, many researchers focus on family outcomes. In the study of adolescent adjustment outcomes, empirical research emphasizes three dependent variables: depression, delinquency, and social initiative (Skinner, 2000). It is notable that the dependent variables include both negative (depression and delinquency) and positive (social initiative) adolescent outcomes.

Depression may be particularly salient with respect to the experience of Chinese North American Adolescents. Although the research is not conclusive, it appears that Asian American adolescents may exhibit more symptoms of depression than their European American counterparts (Greenberger & Chen, 1996). Researchers investigating the origins of this prevalent mood disorder have found that parental warmth and involvement are negatively related to adolescent depression (Sweeting & West, 1995). This association has also been found in two studies of Chinese North American adolescents and their families (Greenberger & Chen, 1996; Skinner, 2000) and suggests that family functioning dimensions like cohesion, affective responsiveness and involvement, communication, and problem solving may be related to adolescent depression in Chinese North American youth.

In terms of delinquency, research with Chinese North American adolescents shows that they tend to have a relatively lower level of delinquency than European American youth (e.g., Chang, Morrissey, & Koplewicz, 1995). They also report fewer substance abuse problems than other racial groups in North America (Bachman, Johnston, & O'Mally, 1993). Studies consistently show that several dimensions of family functioning contribute to adolescents’ delinquent problem behaviors. For example, family dysfunction appears to be related to adolescent alcohol and drug abuse (McKay, Murphy, Rivinus, & Maisto, 1991). Troubled adolescents who use drugs and alcohol perceive their families as less cohesive and more inhibited than adolescents who do not have these problems (LeFlore, 1988).

In addition to adjustment difficulties such as depression or delinquency, researchers often examine
processes associated with positive outcomes such as prosocial behavior or social initiative. Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber (1984) suggested that effective problem solving and positive reinforcement of prosocial behavior in the family are positively associated with prosocial peer relations among adolescents. In studies specific to Asian American adolescents and social behavior, researchers have consistently found that Asian American adolescents are less socialized in group settings than European American adolescents. Additionally, Okazaki (1997) found that, in comparison with European American adolescents, Asian Americans experience more social anxiety and concern in interpersonal situations. Also, Lorenzo et al. (1995) found that Asian American adolescents are significantly more isolated socially than their European American counterparts. Finally, Florsheim (1997) noted that Chinese North American adolescents who reported having controlling parents tended to perceive themselves as less socially adept than those with less controlling parents. One wonders if differences in expectations regarding social activities might be problematic for families.

Acculturation, Family Functioning, and Adolescent Outcomes

Acculturation occurs when a person is introduced into a new cultural environment and that person begins to acquire traits from the new country’s culture (Chen, Unger, Cruz, & Johnson, 1999; Pham & Harris, 2001; Schnittker, 2002). So, acculturation for North American Chinese families begins as immigration happens. Acquiring traits may refer to the adoption of similar beliefs, values, and lifestyles (Chen et al., 1999). Common terms used to describe the process of acculturation are assimilation (Schnittker, 2002), adaptation (Pham & Harris, 2001), and adoption (Chen et al., 1999). Thus, when families relocate from one setting to another, the process of acculturation is one aspect of their experience.

Whether acculturation is viewed as a positive or negative process for minority groups in North America continues to be a subject of debate. Historically, there is evidence of a bias toward greater acculturation (Schnittker, 2002), for instance, referring to the United States as a “melting pot.” Whether or not such a bias is healthy for minority groups is still unclear. To date, reports concerning this issue are contradictory. For instance, Skinner (2000) found that highly acculturated Chinese North American adolescents did better academically than those who are not as acculturated. In contrast, several studies show negative results for adolescents reporting high acculturation. For example, Chen et al. (1999) reported that a greater degree of acculturation among Asian American adolescents was associated with a higher likelihood of cigarette smoking. Additionally, Wong (1997, 1999) found that a greater degree of adolescent acculturation was associated with a greater degree of adolescent delinquent behaviors. Finally, Florsheim (1997) found that more acculturated Chinese American adolescents reported more difficulties in social adjustment.

Thus, based on the existing literature, it is unclear how acculturation differences between parents and adolescents may result in family conflict and acting-out behaviors in Chinese North American adolescents. An important limitation of the empirical research on acculturation and adolescent outcomes is that the parents’ level of acculturation is not considered. For example, Schnittker’s (2002) study of acculturation among Chinese immigrants does not even identify parental acculturation as a factor affecting an individual’s acculturation. However, a systemic emphasis suggests that parental acculturation would certainly influence an individual’s level of acculturation. Thus, from a systems perspective of family functioning, it is likely that acculturation differences between parents and adolescents and their inability to resolve these differences through communication skills like empathy, acceptance, and effective problem solving account for greater family disruption and poorer adolescent outcomes.

Some investigators have hypothesized that when family members are at different levels of acculturation, family conflicts are more likely to evolve (Fang & Wark, 1998). In minority families, the acculturation difference is most likely to present itself between parents and their adolescent children (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). It was assumed that the effect of acculturation on adolescents partially depends on the difference in degrees of acculturation between parents and adolescents and their ability to communicate effectively about it. However, the hypothesized negative impact of acculturation difference on adolescents and their families has never been empirically evaluated.
Research Questions

In sum, the literature highlights the importance of family functioning including family acculturation and adolescent outcomes such as depression, delinquency, and social initiative. As previously discussed, limited research has shown that under certain conditions, Chinese North American adolescents may experience similar emotional and behavioral problems as their European American counterparts. Thus, there is a great need to understand the family dynamics related to these problems, especially the role of family functioning and acculturation. With those issues in mind, we investigated both parent and adolescent reports of family functioning, acculturation, and adjustment outcomes. We asked the following research questions:

1. To what extent do family functioning and acculturation differences between parents and adolescents contribute to adolescent depression, delinquency, and social initiative in Chinese North American families?

2. Which variable is the stronger predictor of these outcomes for Chinese North American adolescents?

Method

Subjects

Forty-one adolescents (19 males and 22 females) of Chinese descent and their parents participated in this study. Adolescent participants were secondary school students attending classes in the United States and Canada where they received instruction in the Chinese language. Participants’ ages ranged from 12 to 19 ($M = 15.36$, $SD = 1.75$). The study participants came from Vancouver, Canada ($n = 7$), and California ($n = 19$) and Utah ($n = 15$) in the United States ($n = 34$). Sixty-four percent ($n = 26$) of the adolescents in the study were born and raised in North America and 36% ($n = 15$) were born in Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan and immigrated to Canada or the United States.

All the parents were born and raised outside North America, primarily in China or another Asian country. Parents’ average education levels were $M = 17.15$ ($SD = 3.04$) years for the fathers and $M = 16.17$ ($SD = 2.54$) for the mothers. The average age of parents who participated in our study was 47.2 ($SD = 4.25$) years for fathers and 43.3 years for mothers ($SD = 3.4$). All parents who responded to the survey reported themselves as being married.

Procedure

Questionnaires included three booklets: one for the teenager and one for each of his or her parents. Participants were a convenience sample identified through schools in California, Utah, and Vancouver. Adolescents completed the questionnaires in their classes, and their parents were invited to complete the questionnaires within their own homes. Questionnaires were returned in prepaid envelopes. A response rate of 30% from parents was realized. This low response rate was not surprising to us given that the context of immigration research is often characterized by a mistrust of researchers by potential participants who feel misrepresented and stereotyped by outsiders and even by would-be insiders (e.g., Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998). In addition, very few studies have been done with Chinese American families, so it is hard to determine what constitutes an “acceptable” response rate. For example, in a recent review Bean, Crane, and Lewis (2002) found that fewer than 3% of all family-related publications were conducted using Chinese American participants. This suggests that research involving such respondents is potentially difficult.

Adolescents completed the questionnaires in English, whereas their parents completed a Chinese version. The assessment packet was initially written in English and then translated into Chinese. In order to establish face validity of the translated assessments, two native-speaking Chinese faculty members provided a review of the translation. After the faculty members agreed that the translation was accurate, the instrument was translated from Chinese back into English by an independent translator. The items were then compared to the original English version. A comparison of the original English text and the “back-translation” procedure indicated that more than 90% of the questionnaire items had identical or almost identical meanings.

Outcome Variable Measures

Depression. The Child Depression Inventory (Short Form) (CDI-S) was used to measure depression.
This inventory measures cognitive, affective, and behavioral symptoms of depression with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptoms. The CDI-S has high internal reliability ($\alpha = .80$) (Kovacs, 1992) and has adequate internal consistency reliability with Chinese adolescents, girls ($\alpha = .77$) and boys ($\alpha = .80$) (Lorenzo et al., 1995).

**Delinquency.** Adolescent delinquency was measured by the Delinquent subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist—Youth Self-Report (CBC-YSR) (Achenback & Edelbrock, 1987). Eighteen items assess problematic behaviors, and higher scores represent more delinquency. Elliott and Busse (1992) report good test-retest reliability at 1 week ($r = .81$) and 8 months ($r = .67$) for the CBC-4SR delinquency items.

**Social initiative.** Social initiative was measured with a 13-item scale from the Monitoring the Future Study (Bachman et al., 1993). Subjects responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never/ almost never true) to 5 (very often/always true). Factor analysis of the 13 items revealed two factors indexing (a) group social initiative and (b) interpersonal social initiative. The items measuring Group Social Initiative were: 1. “I actively participate in topic clubs (e.g., political, history, honor society),” 2. “I actively participate in the school newspaper or yearbook,” 3. “I actively participate in drama (e.g., school plays) or music (e.g., band),” and 4. “I actively participate in student government.” Cronbach’s alpha for this subscale is .65 (Barber & Erickson, 2001). Sample items from the nine items measuring Interpersonal Social Initiative were the following: 1. “I enjoy doing things and talking with peers,” 2. “I share feelings and ideas with peers,” and 3. “I am comfortable joking with teachers and staff.” Cronbach’s alpha for this subscale is .88 (Barber & Erickson, 2001).

Scores for each of the two factors were summed and higher total scores indicate more social initiative. The scale has been demonstrated to be reliable for North American Chinese adolescents with Cronbach’s alpha score of .87 (Skinner, 2000).

**Independent Variable Measures**

**Family functioning.** The McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) was used to measure family functioning. It consists of 60 items with seven subscales: (a) problem solving (5 items), (b) communication (6 items), (c) affective responsiveness (emotional expression) (6 items), (d) affective involvement (support of each other’s activities and concerns) (7 items), (e) behavior control (9 items), (f) roles (clarity of roles) (8 items), and (g) general family functioning (12 items). Higher scores are equated with higher family dysfunction. All the scales show test-retest reliability (Miller, Epstein, Bishop, & Keitner, 1985) ranging from .66 to .76. The validity of the subscales was established by comparing them to other measures of family function such as FACES (Olson et al., 1979). Correlations between FACES and FAD subscale ranged from −.11 to −.53. Because the concepts measured by the FAD were theoretically different than those measured by FACES, correlations were considered to be appropriate (Miller et al., 1985). The same study presented descriptive validity data by comparing family scores with ratings given by experienced family therapists. These analyses demonstrate that the FAD could reliably differentiate between clinician-rated health and unhealthy families.

**Acculturation.** Acculturation was measured by the Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (Suinn, Richard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987). This 21-item scale examines six areas of acculturation: (a) language preference, (b) identity, (c) friendship choices, (d) behaviors (e.g., movie choices), (e) generational/geographic history (e.g., place of birth), and (f) attitude about ethnic group. Scores range from 21 to 105 with higher scores indicating greater acculturation. This scale has been used with several Asian ethnic groups including those of Chinese ethnicity and has demonstrated reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .87) (Skinner, 2000).

**Analytic Strategy**

Preliminary analyses were conducted to first determine the appropriateness of using the assessments with Chinese adolescents. Reliabilities were calculated for dependent measures of social initiative, depression, and delinquency. Second, correlational data was examined for all variables included in the study. We sought to determine if the FAD subscales could be used independently for the current sample. Finally, a series of hierarchical stepwise regression analyses were conducted to answer our research questions.
Results

Preliminary Analyses

Reliabilities. Our measures of acculturation, depression, delinquency, and social initiative were reliable when used with Chinese adolescents. For the present sample, alpha scores were .87 for acculturation, .80 for depression, .90 for delinquency, and .82 for social initiative. Consequently, these concepts were deemed appropriate for further consideration.

Correlational data. Second, because the subscales of the FAD have been found to be correlated (Ridenour, Daley, & Reich, 1999), Pearson correlation analyses were performed to check for high intercorrelations between the seven FAD subscale scores. The results showed correlations of .38–.80, with most of the correlations lower than .70. As a result, the subscales were examined independently. Additionally, correlational data revealed that all aspects of family functioning were associated with adolescent depression, delinquency, and social initiative. Correlations ranged from –.63 to .25 and were statistically significant (p < .05 in all cases). Higher family functioning scores were associated with less depression and delinquent behavior and higher social initiative scores.

Table 1 also summarizes information pertaining to the associations between parent and child acculturation, acculturation differences, family functioning, and adolescent outcomes. Three sets of acculturation scores (adolescent, mother, and father) were used. Two options existed for using the parents’ scores. The first was to use separate mothers’ and fathers’ acculturation scores, the second was to average the two scores if the scores of mothers and fathers were found to be correlated. The correlation between mothers and fathers scores was found to be .66; consequently, parental scores were averaged in the remaining analysis. The variable, parent-adolescent acculturation difference, was obtained by subtracting adolescent acculturation scores from parental average scores. The correlational data suggests that as differences in acculturation between parents and adolescents increases, adolescent’s depression (r = .63, p < .01) and delinquency scores also increased (r = .32, p < .05). However, acculturation differences had a negative association with social initiative in adolescents (r = −.30, p < .05). The greater the acculturation difference between parents and their child, the less the child engaged in social initiative activities.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

The purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which family functioning variables and acculturation differences predicted adolescent adjustment outcomes for a sample of Chinese North American youth. We controlled for adolescent age and gender variables because previous research has found that outcomes vary by these variables (e.g., Barber & Olsen, 1997; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Table 2 summarizes

Table 1. Correlations of Family Functioning and Acculturation With Teen Outcome Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Delinquency</th>
<th>Social Initiative</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family functioning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General family functioning</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>−.30*</td>
<td>135.48</td>
<td>22.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>−.25*</td>
<td>13.59</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>−.40**</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>−.39**</td>
<td>23.68</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective responsiveness</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>−.28**</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective involvement</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>−.32**</td>
<td>16.44</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral control</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>−.33</td>
<td>18.61</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family acculturation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent</td>
<td>−.30**</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>60.56</td>
<td>11.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>.37*</td>
<td>41.58</td>
<td>8.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>−.30*</td>
<td>−14.07</td>
<td>10.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>12.92</td>
<td>22.69</td>
<td>41.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>10.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the results of hierarchical regressions designed to address our primary research questions. For each adolescent outcome variable, we constructed two linear regression models. In the first model, we controlled for gender and age, and we added parent/child acculturation difference to the analysis. In the second model, we then added family functioning to the analysis.

The regression findings regarding depression revealed two significant models: age and gender controlled and parent/child acculturation differences in the first model (\( \beta = .64, F = 8.03, p < .01 \)) with 39% of the variance explained. The second model included age, gender, and parent/child acculturation difference plus family functioning. The second model provided the strongest prediction and explained 62% of the variance in adolescent depression (\( \beta = .49, F = 13.28, p < .01 \)).

The results for delinquency showed that age, gender, and family functioning were the best predictors for delinquency, accounting for 26% of the variance in this dependent variable (\( \beta = .37, F = 2.75, p < .05 \)). Acculturation differences did not significantly predict delinquency.

In terms of adolescent’s social initiative, none of the variables under investigation were significantly associated with this aspect of adolescent functioning.

Overall, these findings indicate that differences in acculturation between parents and adolescents may have a stronger association with adolescent depression than has been hypothesized in the past.

### Discussion

On the whole, the results of this study support the general findings in the literature that low family functioning and large differences between parents’ and adolescents’ acculturation are positively related to adolescent depression and delinquency. However, differences in acculturation between parents and adolescents appear to be a stronger predictor for depression than is general family functioning.

It is important to recognize several limitations of this study. For instance, the sample size was small and used a sample of convenience, which makes generalization difficult. Future studies should include greater numbers of participants and include procedures for increasing parental participation. In addition, future research should address issues of acculturation with other ethnic groups. Although the
present study does not allow extensive generalizations, it would be interesting to see if the influence of acculturation differences might apply to a wide range of cultures or if it might be restricted to groups where language acquisition is a major acculturation variable.

This is the first known study to investigate parent-adolescent acculturation difference as an independent variable. Future larger studies are advised to take this same direction to understand the dynamics of different amounts of acculturation in the family system and its consequences. Studies are also recommended to determine the relationship between family functioning and acculturation difference. However, because these associations are mutual, it may be that family functioning affects acculturation difference instead.

**Family Functioning and Adolescent Adjustment**

Previous studies have shown that parenting styles are associated with adolescent depression, delinquency, and social initiative. Relatively fewer studies have investigated the relationship between general family functioning and adolescent outcomes. Even so, researchers have identified a relationship between negative family functioning and poor adolescent adjustment. Shek (1997) found that adolescents in Hong Kong who reported positive family functioning had fewer mental health problems, better school performance, and fewer delinquent behaviors. The results of the present study are similar to those identified by Shek (1997) and others. Worse family functioning was associated with worse outcomes for youth in depression and delinquency.

**The Role of Acculturation Differences**

To date, there are conflicting findings on the optimal acculturation level for minority adolescents’ well-being in North America. Some studies have shown a positive relationship between acculturation and adolescent outcomes such as academic performance (Skinner, 2000). Other studies have found a positive association between acculturation and delinquency and social incompetence (Florsheim, 1997; Wong, 1999). However, none of these studies took parental acculturation or acculturation discrepancies between parents and their adolescents into consideration.

Scholars have suggested that some intergenerational conflicts in minority families are the result of parent-adolescent acculturation discrepancy (Fang & Wark, 1998; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980). Additionally, the conflicts affect family cohesion, and low family cohesion has been found to be related to poor adolescent adjustment (Fang & Wark; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). The findings of the present study support this idea; higher differences in acculturation between parents and adolescents were positively related to adolescent depression.

It may be that larger acculturation differences between parents and adolescents are related to greater family conflict and disruption. The present study supports previous researchers (Fang & Wark, 1998) who suggested that acculturation differences are associated with adolescent depression, which may be an expression of internal conflict within the youth. It is possible that while parents are holding on to the norms, beliefs, and practices of their culture of origin, which emphasizes interdependence and respect for authority, their adolescent children are under the influence of the North American culture, where independence and self-assertion are more valued. Parents and adolescents are then likely to have conflicts over discipline, social interaction, activity choices, curfews, and so on (Fang & Wark; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). It may be that youth are more likely to internalize these conflicts and have feelings of depression and sadness. However, it is likely that the roots of these conflicts are pressures from the external culture that impact the individual and family. Such pressures may lead to uneven changes in expectations and roles that compromise family functioning.

This study showed that both the differences in acculturation between parents and adolescents and family functioning best predicted adolescent depression. However, family functioning alone was a better predictor for delinquency. Immigrant families experience a great number of challenges, such as trying to define their identities between two cultures, mastering a new language, and adapting to a new set of customs, in addition to the difficulties that mainstream families experience. A systemic perspective suggests that this pressure likely affects all family members. When studying individual acculturation or minority adolescents and developing interventions, researchers ought to consider the acculturation differences among different members in the family.

**Implications for Intervention**

The results of this study support the McMaster theory of family functioning in that adolescent
emotional health and relationships should not be considered independently from the rest of the family (and larger) systems. What at first may appear to be the problems of adolescents are more often family system problems or problems of adaptation to external cultures. Low family functioning was positively related to adolescent depression and delinquency. Thus, clinicians and parent educators who work with immigrant families need to address family functioning as part of their early assessment and programming.

In addition, for Chinese North American adolescents, acculturation differences between parents and adolescents are an equally important factor to consider. This study showed that differences between adolescents and their parents need to be considered when discussing adolescent outcomes. In working with Chinese North American families, clinicians and educators should have several goals. First they should put the issue of acculturation and acculturation differences “on the table” and bring this issue to the immediate awareness of family members and help them to understand it as a normal challenge for Chinese North American families. It may also be helpful to reframe the conflict as an intercultural problem (i.e., North American vs. Chinese) rather than an intergenerational one. Reframing differences in this way has been shown to be effective with Hispanic American families who struggle with acculturation issues (Szapocznik, Santisteban, Kurtines, Perez-Vidal, & Hervis, 1984).

Second, clinicians and educators could work to foster mutual understanding between parents and adolescents. For instance, help adolescents and their parents understand that some of their conflicts are likely due to differences in acculturation. Clinicians and educators can help them communicate and understand each other’s struggles, frustrations, and accomplishments while living as minorities in North America. Third, parents should be encouraged to consider some of their own expectations of their adolescents that may conflict with the North American culture in which they live. Fourth, adolescents should be supported in communicating with their parents about their experiences living in the new culture. With more empathy for each individual’s point of view, destructive interpretations (e.g., “You are just rejecting your traditional values because you do not love us”) that elicit family conflict may be reduced or eliminated. Parents and adolescents can then work on being more accepting of each other and learn to collaborate and compromise when it comes to conflicting needs and expectations about everyday interactions.

There are at least two “natural” opportunities for support for families dealing with acculturation. One opportunity for offering educational programs could include schools and youth community centers. These programs should be offered bilingually so that all family members can participate. To date, there are no known programs providing these services. In addition, because Chinese North American families may seek to help their children maintain their language and culture through private language school, these organizations could include educational information on topics such as “successful transitions” to North American culture. If families can anticipate issues frequently encountered in the acculturation process, it is likely that they will be able to adjust more easily.

References


