In the path of establishing ethnic identity: stories of young Korean-American women

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Coming to an understanding of what it truly means to be a Korean-American is not an easy task, nor is there much known about the struggles relating to the discovery of cultural identity. According to Kim (2004), young Korean-Americans constantly struggle with negotiating boundaries of two dominant cultures (American vs. Korean) as well as sub-cultures including (a) the first and second generations, (b) Korean and American cultures, (c) parents and peers, (d) adults and children, (e) home and school, (f) Korean and English, (g) the Korean ethnic community and the American society. Kim (2004) observed that the most successful adaptation to US culture by young Korean-Americans is obtained by reframing oneself to successfully integrate two cultures.

In reality, developing a positive ethnic identity is obstructed by several factors including cultural conflicts, discrimination, and intergenerational conflicts. Intergenerational conflict is recognized as one of the major sources of distress among immigrant families (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). This paper focuses on young Korean-American women’s perspectives on intergenerational conflicts within the context of struggling to develop their ethnic identity.

The Origins of Intergenerational Cultural Conflicts

Intergenerational cultural conflict in immigrant families is the confrontation between the parents’ culture, described as “old tradition,” and children’s culture, described as “new or modern.” When these two cultures clash, conflict is created between the generations (Portes, Zhou, 1993). The intergenerational cultural conflicts between the first generation (parents) and 1.5 or second generation (children) are inevitable among many Asian families. The Asian cultural contexts in which parents have grown up are fundamentally different from the American cultural contexts which children have been exposed to on a daily basis. The dramatic differences in these systems of thought are pervasive, powerful, and persistent. Nisbett (2004) articulates that the roots of these cultural differences originate from differences in historical, ecological, and economical perspectives. Fundamental Western thoughts are traced back to ancient Greece where critical thinking and the illumination of ideas and logic were at the center of Athenian life. Citizens were empowered to believe they were in charge of their lives, and they highly valued the individual freedom to act as they chose. The ancient Greeks’ individualistic and independent view has influenced the cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes among Westerners (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

In contrast, fundamental Eastern thoughts were heavily influenced by the Ancient Chinese culture. The heavy emphasis on agriculture played a defining role in minimizing the development of an individualistic ethos. Agricultural societies require more interdependence, cooperation, and mutual agreement when compared to the Greek trading and fishing culture (Nisbett, 2004). Additionally, whereas “happiness” was viewed as “a life allowing the free exercise of distinctive talents” in Greek culture, “happiness” was viewed as “the satisfaction of a life shared within a harmonious social network” in Chinese
culture (Nisbett, 2004). Given the enormous differences in cultural heritages and values, conflict is normative when two cultures clash. Understanding the context of where the different values come from may provide insights to immigrant families.

Benefits of Cultural Integration and Consequences of Segregated Assimilation

Integration of Eastern and Western cultures does not come naturally, nor should it be taken for granted. Rather, it should be considered a major accomplishment because the integration of two cultures cannot be achieved by the children of immigrants alone. It requires constant and persistent efforts by individuals, families, and communities. Because of these fundamental cultural differences, both immigrant parents and children can go through a stressful period while adjusting to the new culture and lifestyles. Even though the parents and children may immigrate at the same time, children become assimilated much faster than their parents, through a process known as segregated assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993). As this happens, it becomes easy to dismiss the task of discovering the ethnic identity to children alone, without proper parental intervention. The discord in speed of acculturation between parents and their children may also alter the nature of their relationships and create confusion, misunderstanding, conflicts, and rebellion on the part of children.

Empirical evidence exists that there are benefits of integrating both Eastern and Western culture. According to Berry (2002), those who integrated both host as well as the culture of origin have better mental health function than those who were assimilated, those who were segregated to one culture, and those who do not belong to any culture (marginalization). Additionally, in a study by Oetling and Beauvais (1987), adolescents with less cultural identity were more likely to have poor scholastic performance, fewer personal resources, weak personal adjustment skills, and low self-esteem. Thus, the process of establishing a strong ethnic identity is crucial for Korean-American adolescents. Nonetheless, most of the studies focused on ethnic identity formation do not provide a framework for the development of a healthy ethnic identity that integrates both Eastern and Western culture. The purpose of our study is to understand the conditions and context necessary to foster the development of successful integration of the two cultures.

Methods

The following findings are based on the Healthy Women, Healthy Communities: Asian American Women’s Sexual Health Initiative Project. This research study is part of a larger mixed method study, designed to describe mental, physical, and sexual health as well as sexual risk behavior and substance use among Asian American women who reside in the greater Boston area. To be eligible for this study, participants had to be (1) 18-35 year-old women; (2) self identified as Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, or mixed of one of these ethnicities; (3) children of immigrants; and (4) residing in the Greater Boston Area. The data in this ongoing project were collected from January to May 2010.

Computer Assisted Interview Survey (CASI) was employed for the cross-sectional survey. A total 349 CASI surveys were completed and of those who completed CASI, 27 Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese women were selected to participate in in-depth interviews to investigate mental, physical, and sexual health as well as sexual risk behaviors. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore these topics qualitatively. Each interview has lasted from one-half to three hours. This study focuses on the intergenerational cultural conflicts of Korean-Americans, and the analysis was limited to Korean-American women (n = 5). The mean age of these women was 21 years old, and the mean years of education was 15 years (16 years is equivalent to receiving a college degree). Of the five women, four were born in Korea and all five reported that they speak
English and Korean equally well. The theme of intergenerational conflict emerged when the participants discussed their immigration histories, family values, and family practices during the interviews. The scope of this paper focuses on the relationship between intergenerational conflicts and ethnic identity formation among these five Korean-American women.

All of the research protocol was approved by Boston University's Institutional Review Board and the participants signed consent forms to participate in the research study. If the participants felt uncomfortable, they had the option to stop the interview at any time. Nevertheless, all participants successfully completed the in-depth interviews.

Results

Within the overarching domain of intergenerational conflict, five themes were identified from the in-depth interviews of Korean-American women:

1. "We are different"

All five women recognized differences between their parents and themselves in several domains including values, ideas about education, and ways of thought.

A 19-20 year-old Korean-American woman acknowledged some differences, "I am more Americanized. Just in every way possible from um... the way I dress, the way, I guess, I talk."

Similarly, a 23-year-old Korean-American woman contrasted her mother's differences with her own claiming, "Sometimes, I can't think of the specific example but, when I talk to her, I feel like, oh we're different, whereas we think differently because she is more like Korean and I'm sort of Americanized." Both of these Korean-American women were aware of the cultural differences and were able to recognize the components of the differences between their parents and themselves.

2. Bitterness over the double standards for gender roles

A majority of the women interviewed articulated bitterness over the double standards prescribed for gender roles in the Korean culture. They expressed anger and frustration about how women are generally treated in Korea and how they were treated at home.

A 19-year-old Korean woman detailed:

[Women's roles] do actually frustrate me. You know how it is in the culture... The wife follows the husband, supports what he does, always obeys him. So just like my dad always had the most say in everything... [Women are] just not really treated as human as much. They're just there to clean, cook, take care of the kids...take care of problems around the home, issues.

Providing an example, a 23-year-old Korean-American woman also noted, "[Korean men] don't like women who smoking, and I smoke. Not regularly, but sometimes I do. [Since] a lot of Korean guys are pretty conservative, they don't want to see women smoking outside." In response to her views on men's roles, she responded by saying, "I guess men's role would be tell women not to smoke. Tell them, 'Don't do that' or 'Don't drink too much' or whatever. They have their own...own federal rules for women, I guess. That's unfair." Overall, both of these women have strong feelings about the unfair treatment of women in Korean culture. They believed that women's roles in Korean culture were restricted to subservient, domestic work. They were frustrated by the cultural limitations because they impeded women's desires to enjoy life and make their own decisions.
In contrast, a 21-year-old Korean-American woman reported a more egalitarian relationship between her parents at home, saying:

"I’m not sure if gender mattered a lot for me or not... we didn’t have the typical patriarchal kind of... relationship in my family. [My parents] look to me... I have a lot of responsibility... they trust me more, and with my brother, they’re more relaxed about things like that.

This participant clearly did not feel the pressure of the double standard within the family but did see some comparisons her parents established between her and her brother. Overall, however, she did not show bitterness toward gender roles due to her upbringing.

3. Striving to please the parents

All five Korean-American women expressed that their parents have been trying to fulfill their own dreams through their children. They talked about their parents making sacrifices in order to ensure their successes in America. Parents often suffered from homesickness, language barriers, limited social networks, and long hours at work to compensate for their low salaries.

During one interview, a 19-year-old Korean-American woman described the parental pressure that she experienced from her father:

"I almost kind of felt like I was like living his life for him and my mom’s as well because my mom passed and my family were always telling me, ‘Oh, you have to do all this stuff that your mom couldn’t do’... Ever since I would say like seven or eight years old, I was really like forced to study hard and study hard as in they didn’t think young kids needed sleep... [My dad] thinks that like I should really study hard and, umm, also I guess between, umm, church members and his friends and other family members, there is always a competition, like who’s child’s smarter, who gets better grades, who goes to what school, umm, and I almost felt like he got to pursue his what he wanted in art work and I almost felt like I was living his life for him and my mom’s as well.

Similarly, a 21-year-old Korean-American woman also expressed her own burden with her efforts to please her family:

"If I did something wrong it would reflect bad on my parents... and I, I wouldn’t have risked that... And everyone knew me as the pastor’s kid... Because I had to play the [pastor’s kid] and I wouldn’t want to like shame my family or make my parents look bad.

The burden of striving to please parents leaves these Korean-American women overly stressed. Thus, the failure of meeting their parents’ superior expectations often results in the children’s lower self-esteem and self-worth.

4. Negative effects related to intergenerational cultural conflict

The higher intergenerational conflicts have shown to be associated with negative effects on the health of Korean-American women. Many times, these young Korean-American women will turn to drugs, binge drinking, or other risky behaviors in order to escape from the intergenerational cultural conflict between them and their parents.

In an interview with a 19-year-old Korean-American woman, evidence of some negative effects were revealed. This woman sought refuge from intergenerational detachment by turning to drugs:
[My dad] just, umm, really, really pushed me and then, umm, in high school, in my senior year, I kind of got like very, umm, I couldn't handle it anymore, so then I just rebelled...I was very open to people...I was happy you know? I liked everything and when I started doing drugs that it was like the worst time of my life? when I, like, rebelled from my family and didn't want to go to school. So turning to drugs made me really happy.

The same woman also delved into more serious consequences such as acquiring self-destructive tendencies as she explained:

So I did get really depressed between that age, and I did become bulimic for about two years. Um, I had like a little incident, like a one-time thing where I cut myself...And um, I think it was another attempt to figure out where my pain was coming from...I didn't know someone my age was supposed to feel this way. I think I started causing, just pain to myself.

In an effort to alleviate her mental sufferings, the Korean-American woman turned to self-mutilation and drugs as a means to remove herself from the pain.

5. Mutual efforts for the integration of two cultures

Of the five Korean-American women interviewed who have made an effort to accept their parents' cultures, have found it easier to overcome the difficulties stemming from intergenerational cultural conflicts. It appears that investing in a mutual commitment to better understand each others' cultures can improve the relationship between parent and child.

A 21 year-old pastor's daughter described how her parents gradually became more integrated into the American culture, affecting the way they perceive her responsibilities:

I guess [my parents] are becoming more Americanized...in the sense that, you know, the Asian...kids take care of their parents after they retire. So I think that would have been me...if that kind of thought continued.

But now that they're kind of Americanized, they're talking more about their retirement...retirement funds and things like that...being independent.

When a 22 year-old Korean-American woman asked how her mother’s cultural values shaped the way she sees herself as a woman, she responded, “When I talk, I try to talk carefully...try not to talk too loud, use proper vocabulary and language.” She goes on to say, “I would consider her bilingual...But she [my mother], like, always tries to be a better, I mean, she always tries. That's what she does. She’s like always reading, always watching the news because she feels that she doesn’t know enough...She’s really motivated.” This Korean-American woman reflects her mother's sincere efforts to acculturate and highlights her own efforts to integrate two cultures as well.

Discussion

All five subjects were acutely aware of the major cultural differences that they experienced at home (Korean culture) versus outside of the home (American culture). On one hand, when the women perceived parental desire to instill Korean values as reasonable or rational, they were much more likely to accept those values. On the other hand, when the parents' requests were interpreted as unreasonable or unrealistic, the women resented their parents or rebelled against them, especially in the presence of an already weak relationship.

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It should be noted that the women interviewed were more concerned with establishing positive relationships with their parents as opposed to developing a positive ethnic identity. Our interviews also revealed that women who presented less risky behaviors were much more likely to have fewer conflicts with their parents. When women felt that they were trusted and respected by their parents, they were more likely to incorporate the parents’ opinions into their decision-making process. Significantly, these trusting parents were also perceived to be making efforts to integrate American cultures by their daughters. Smoother integration of the parental culture is strongly tied to the establishment of a positive parent-child relationship.

This leads us to conclude that efforts by both parents and children are necessary to construct a child’s ethnic identity. Although we had a limited number of subjects, the in-depth interviews affirmed that each woman’s path to realizing her ethnic identity is inseparably intertwined with her interactions with her parents. The most important finding of this study is that in order to for Korean-American women to integrate two cultures, the specific relationship between parents and children needs to be established: the formation of a strong, trusting relationship between parents and children is crucial.

**Implications for practice**

Often times, we ask the question, “What does mean to be a Korean-American?” Many people will define Korean-American identity by cultural heritage as well as their physical location. Yet, this definition has a fundamental flaw; it does not necessary capture what it really means to be a Korean-American because it lacks any real understanding of the two unique cultures.

Although we had a limited number of subjects, our study provides some crucial insights to answering the question of what it really means to be a Korean-American. The path to discovering ethnic identity requires multiple steps including a firm understanding of the two cultures as a basic foundation. Whether or not an individual makes efforts to integrate these cultures depends upon the motivation of the individual. Yet an individual’s motivation is heavily influenced by the dynamics of the relationship between the parents and the child and their mutual efforts to understand and adopt each other’s cultures. When the parents of the participants made an effort to understand the American culture and respected the differences between their child’s views and values of their own, the intergenerational relationships strengthened. A positive relationship between parents and children through mutual acceptance of two cultures becomes a fertile soil for building the foundation of the one’s ethnic identity.

When Korean families immigrate to other countries, they are often left without proper resources to understand or predict the cultural differences that the family members will inevitably experience. While they may have a superficial understanding of the cultural differences, they certainly lack a clear framework of how to manage acculturative differences or adaptation problems. Development and application of this framework are necessary for healthy ethnic identity formation among Korean-Americans.

It should be noted that communities have the ability to help foster this process (Brofenbrenner, 1981). More specifically, resources such as Korean schools, churches, and families that have already undergone the acculturation process, can provide assistance to newly immigrated families. Workshops and peer-led groups focusing on topics such as culture shock, cultural differences, and the acculturation process should also be provided. In addition, American schools should be equipped with similar resources to better enable immigrant families to prepare for the enormous changes that lie ahead. All these collaborative efforts may enhance the solidification of ethnic identity among Korean-American families and, in essence, strengthen the identity and the existence of Korean-American community in the America.
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