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The impact of parenting on stress and stress coping in Asian American Youth:

A qualitative study

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Abstract

Exposure to high academic achievement pressure and parent-child conflict is associated with poor psychological adjustments among Asian American Youth. Analyzing qualitative interview data of COEAA project, this study explored how parenting is related to youth's internalizing the high achievement motivation and impact youth perceived stress and stress coping strategy. Participants consisted of 15 youth aged 15-24 born in US or have been living in US since 4th grade and 7 parents who identified themselves as first generation immigrants from East Asian counties and had children aged 14-24;

Results: Findings revealed that 1) Parental “setting career path for children” “sheltering children from making mistakes” “when parents say no, the communication is closed” are identified themes about parenting behaviors supporting/suppressing youth autonomy; “Hesitate to give positive feedback” and “lack of clear and consistent rules” are identified themes about parenting behaviors supporting/suppressing youth competence; 2) cross case analysis revealed that youth whose perspectives suppressed by parenting behaviors in communication reported more source of stress, didn't perceived support from parents and reported using predominantly passive coping strategy compared to youth whose parents taking their perspectives in communication. Parents' stress coping style also impact youth' support seeking behaviors. Implications for interventions that help Asian American youth to develop resilience to stress are discussed.

Keywords: Asian American youth. Psychological adjustments. Autonomy. Competence. Parenting. Stress. Stress- Coping.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	page 2
Introduction.....	page 4
Methods.....	page 5
Results.....	page 7
Discussion & Implication.....	page 12
References.....	page 14

Introduction

Asian American youth are the fastest growing population in the US (Gee, 2004). The dominant image of the “model minority” overshadows the poor psychological adjustment and mental health problems among this population (Qin 2008). Inconclusive findings suggest that Asian American youth have poor psychological adjustment, including higher levels of depressive symptoms than their white peers (Brown, 2007; Schoen, Abrams, & Davis, 1997; Young, 2010) and lower levels of self-esteem compared to their peers from other ethnic groups (Twenge, 2002).

The acculturation gap between immigrant parents and Asian American youth often leads to parent-child conflicts (Lee, Su, & Yoshida, 2005; Park, Kim, Chiang, & Ju, 2010). The detrimental effect of such conflicts on Asian American children’s psychological adjustment has been well established in the literature (Lee 2000, Juang, Syed et al. 2007, Ying 2007, Ahn, Kim et al. 2009, Hwang 2010, Lee, Su et al. 2005).

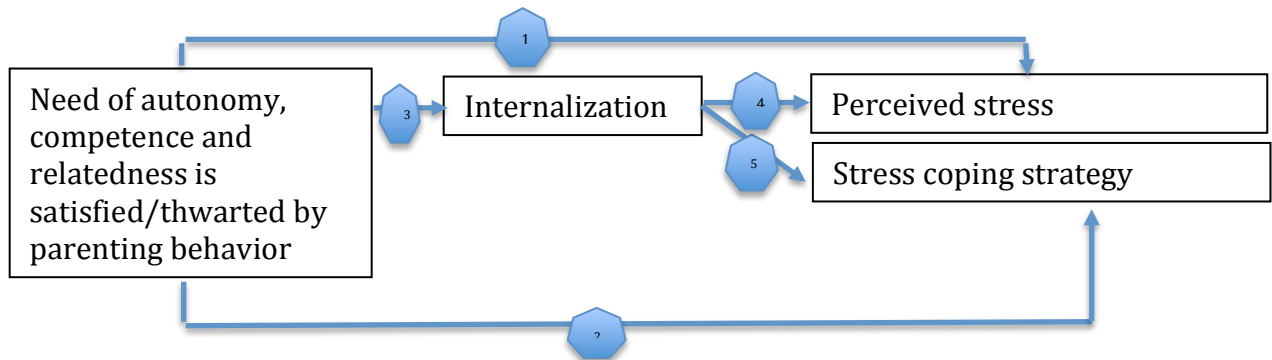
High Achievement expectation is one major domain of conflict salient to Asian American families (Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000; Tsai-Chae, 2008; Juang, 2012). Meeting high achievement expectation from parents is common source of stress expressed by Asian American youth (S. Lee et al., 2009; Yeh, 2001) and contributes to the risk of developing depressive symptoms (Hawley, Chavez, & Romain, 2007; Hishinuma, Chang, McArdle, & Hamagami, 2012).

According to self-determination theory, parenting behaviors supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness help children to internalize and develop more autonomous motivation in education (Grolnick, 2009). Autonomous motivation is associated with better academic achievement (Rivers, 2006) and psychological well-being (Froiland, 2011). Parenting behaviors that help children to feel autonomous, competent and supported in dealing with stress results in active coping include problem solving and support seeking behaviors among youth (Skinner & Edge, 2002; Weinstein, 2011). These findings are synthesized in a model showed in diagram 1.

Parenting behaviors supporting autonomy vs. control and academic achievement is the mostly studied domain in Asian American. Findings remain inconsistent in terms of parenting style contributing in internalization and academic achievements (Chirkov, 2009; D’Ailly, 2003; Jiang, Yau, Bonner, & Chiang, 2011). There is no research to uncover relationship between parenting and poor psychological adjustment in Asian American youth through the exploring how parenting impact stress and stress coping development of Asian American youth.

Attempting to identify characteristics and patterns of how parenting behavior impact stress and stress coping among Asian American youth, the current study to contribute knowledge and public health efforts helping Asian American youth to develop resilience to cope stress and preventing mental health illness in this population.

Diagram 1.



This thesis aims to understand the relationship between parenting behaviors, internalization, stress and stress coping among Asian American youth. (Arrow 1, 2, 3 in the model (Figure 1))

Specifically, the following questions guide the data analysis:

1: What parenting behaviors are related to internalization of high achievement motivation among Asian American youth?

2: How do parental behaviors that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness impact stress and stress coping strategy adopted by Asian American youth?

Methods

This thesis is secondary data analysis of the Inter-Generational Culture Gaps, Stress Coping and ATOD Risk and Resilience among Chinese and Other Eastern Asian American study. Referred as COEAA study hereafter, this is an ongoing community participatory research study conducted by the Institute of Community Research. Six Eastern Asian parents, high school and college students were recruited as community researchers. Treated as equal partners of the research team and received research skill training, the community researchers were actively involved in the process of conceptual model development, interview guide development, conducting interviews, transcribing and coding interview data, analysis and interpretation of results.

The research team use modified respondent driven sampling (RDS) (Heckathorn, 1997; Volz & Heckathorn, 2008), a special type of snow ball sampling to recruit first-generation Eastern Asian immigrant parents and Asian American youth (14–24 years of age) into the study. Research team members recruited the initial seeds from their personal social networks. Students and parent participants who completed the interviews were also asked to recruit their network members to join the study. Sampling bias related to initial seeds selection can be addressed as the recruitment wave goes on further from the initial seeds (Heckthorn 1997). All participants completed a 1-1½ hour in-depth interview via phone, Skype, or in person at the participants' convenience.

Data used for the thesis research consists of 22 in-depth interview transcripts collected from July to November 2014. Interviews were done with seven parents and fifteen youth. Among the seven parents who are first generation immigrants from mainland of China, Japan and Taiwan, five parents reported they mostly speak cultural language (i.e. Chinese) with their children and three parents speak both English and cultural language equally when with their children and one parent mostly use English. Two thirds of Asian American youth were U.S.-born (n =10) whose parents emigrated from East Asian countries (i.e., mainland China, Korea, Japan). Youth age 15 to 24 years old (Mean = 20.2 years), six are male and nine are female. All their parents have at least some college education and most of their parents finished a graduate degree based their report. Six youth reported that they speak English with their parents and five youth speak mostly cultural language with their parents and four use both languages equally when communicating with their parents.

The data analysis proceeded in two stages involving in 2 levels of coding. In the first stage, author worked with another member of COEAA research team coded cases using broad conceptual codes developed by COEAA team. High inter-coder reliability was reached. After coding, the two coders built profiles and aimed to identify relationship between different conceptual domains.

In the second stage, the author developed conceptual model and codes for secondary level data analysis. Since self-determination theory is the main theory supporting the conceptual model of this study, codes related to parenting behavior only focused on autonomy, competence and relatedness supporting parenting behavior. Detailed and descriptive definitions of codes were based on self-determination theory and literature review.

Autonomy supporting parenting include four dimensions, “taking children’s perspectives”, “allowing children choices making”, “Supporting their initiatives and problem solving attempts” (Grolnick, 2009) and “Provision of rationales”(Turner, 2009).

Competence supporting parenting include three dimensions, “Provide appropriate tools to promote success and feelings of efficacy”, “Provide feedback to promote success and feelings of efficacy”, “Clear rules, guidelines, and contingences are spelled out and implemented” (Grolnick, 2009).

Relatedness supporting parenting. Children perceived parental acceptance (Rohner, 2005) is a commonly used measurement of parental child relatedness in western culture. Chao and her colleague (Chao & Kaeochinda, 2010) tested this measurement among Asian American youth and concluded that this measurement is relevant to Asian American youth. At the same time, they also find children perceived “parental sacrifice” and “parental involvement in children’s education” is cultural practice of parental child relatedness. In hence, working definition of parental relatedness support include these three main dimensions. “Parental warmth”: “expression of affection, love, appreciation, kindness, and regard; emotional availability, support, and genuine caring”(Skinner 2005); “Parental involvement in children’s education”, “Parental sacrifice”: children perceived

parent's give up or relinquish something of high value for the sake of children's benefits"(Toh, 2015).

The conceptualization of stress coping is based on the active coping framework (Zeidner & Endler, 1996). **Active coping** efforts "are intended to achieve control over source of stressor and one's emotions." (Malka, 2010) Active coping includes solving problems, seeking information, seeking social support, seeking professional help, changing environments, planning activities, and reframing the meanings of problems(Li, 2006). **Passive coping** is opposite of active coping. Examples of passive coping include denial, avoidance and ATOD use.

After defining each code, the author coded the interview text using Atlas.ti. In the third stage, the author conducted cross case analysis to look for patterns and relationship between different study domains. The author created an excel document. In the excel document, each code labeled one column and each case labeled one line. Coded text was put into each cell accordingly. Author evaluates the text in each cell according to code and put Y, N and NA to summarize the text. "Y" presents assigned text does reflect the code, "N" presents assigned text that does reflect opposite of the code, and "NA" presents no assigned text. Quotes pulled from Atlas during earlier stage analysis were also included to illustrate secondary coding value in Excel.

Results

Parental factors that facilitate internalization of high achieving expectation

Most Youth reported that their motivation to work hard for high achievement is getting into a good college and having a good job. Interviews with both youth and parents suggested that parents often explain the value of high achieving, such as having a good future, going to a good college, getting a good job, and not worrying about life to motivate children to internalize high achievement expectation. This finding is consistent with Ryan's (A. M. Ryan, 2001; R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggestion that parents have dominant influences in helping youth to learn the usefulness and importance of academic achievement.

Youth also reported that they strived for high achievement as paying back to parents. For some youth, they identify traditional Asian values of saving face. Working hard for high achievement is part of their family responsibility to save family face. In other cases, youth recognize and appreciate parents' sacrifice and they felt having good grade and don't let parents disappoint is the way they are paying back their parents. Some youth worked hard to gain a scholarship for college and relieving financial burden from their parents.

One girl reported that her parents covered all her tuition. She accepted that her parents share ownership of her education and have some say over achieving standards and outcomes. Two girls perceived their parents value them just based on achievement and they strived for high achievement to gain parents' acceptance.

Both youth and parents reported that parenting behavior that instills hard working value help children to internalize the high achieving motivation. Some youth shared that they will keep up working after parents gave positive feedback on their achievement.

How parenting behavior that supports autonomy, competence and relatedness impact youth' stress and stress coping

Parents setting the career path for their children. Some youth reported that their parents pushed them very hard to go to certain major and career path, especially medical or law. Parents and other youth interviewed also observed this phenomenon. Youth perceived parents' mindset is, doctors and lawyers are good job and children will live a better life with good job. One girl said that her parents push her brother and herself to go to medical school or law school so parents can brag about it. She thought that the reason her parents are so passionate about bragging children achievement is because they gave up their American dream for children and children are living up for parents' American dream. Her brother is lawyer now and she thought it is disastrous for her brother.

A female Korean colleges student shared her experience of feeling stressed to uphold her parents' expectation of major path.

Quote: I guess the most biggest trigger point (for my mental breakdown) was me just like hating everything that I was doing. Hating all the classes that I was taking, like not being good at it, and not liking it and then, and then like there was just like a lot of things going on in my life at that point, including this and, I just kind of like stopped caring for awhile. And then, um, my grades started to suffer a lot. (116, female, college)

Another girl shared her feeling of stress following her parents' choice of medical school:

Quote "Thinking about pursuing medical makes me queasy, I could not handle it mentally." (108, female, high school)

There were two girls who felt very lucky that they happen to like the idea of becoming a doctor or a major that is close to medicine. Otherwise, they thought their parents would not support their choice of major.

Quote: (My Dad told me) you should be a doctor you're not doing the right thing (if you don't). Being a doctor is so great but I told him when hanging out with him I don't wanna be a doctor.My dad is ok because it's pretty close (author notes: The girl chose neuroscience as her major). If I choose freelance photographer or artist, they'd probably tell me that I can't and I'd probably be like pick something else (107, female, high school)

Parental control over major and career choice collide youth' desire for autonomy and undermines their perceived competence. It added stress to youth, which might lead to mental health problem, as shared by the girl in case 116.

When parents say no, the communication is closed.

Taking the children's perspective is one dimension of parental support for children's autonomy. Both youth and parents recognized the importance of parents' taking children's perspective and its impact on parent-child communication during interviews. Cross case analysis suggested that youth reported that they relate to and trust parents who take their perspectives in communication. They perceived social support from parents and they feel comfortable opening up to them if they have problems. Parents also recognize the relationship between taking children's perspective and children's seeking support from parents to solve problems.

Quote: I have a good friend, her son went to college and after a year, and he decided he want to be a farmer. So she told me that first she doesn't approve of the idea, but she said yes, if that's what you want to do, do more research to find out what it takes to be a farmer. So she said after he got all the details, he changed his mind. Because she's not saying no, the communication is not closed.you really respect them even though you think it's not a good idea. It's not because I said so. (203, Mom)

Some youth did report their parents didn't take their perspectives. One reason being reported is that parents hold Asian value that parents are "authoritative" figure and children should respect and follow their opinions. One reason being reported is that parents think they know more because they are experienced and mature. Another reason being reported is that language barriers prevent effective communication between parents and children.

Quotes: They have a view that they, as parent and "elders", know better than we do and we're just children who don't know what's for our own good. (103, girl, High School)

Quotes: One problem I has is the language barriers....The way you(I) are saying things gets lost in translation...I couldn't communicate it in the language that made most sense to them, I think they misconstrued the meaning or the intention....and then it would make the problem worse. I think it just closed me off from them. (110, girl, graduate)

The relationship revealed here is consistent with previous finding(R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Youth reported having close relationships and seeking social support from parents who take their perspectives.

Three youth (103, 105 and 110) perceived their perspectives were not taken by parents and reported more sources of stress including family conflict stress. Another three youth (102, 106 and 107) who perceived that parental taking their perspectives in communication, didn't feel much stress or family conflict as sources of stress either. Comparing the two groups showed that youth whose perspectives being suppressed in communication didn't perceived parental support. The two groups also have differences in adoption stress coping strategy. The first group reported using predominantly passive coping strategy. Passive coping strategies adopted include avoidance, denial, ATOD use, eating, withdrawal and self-harm. The second group reported using active strategies in

coping stress including problem solving, relaxation and seeking social support.

Sheltering children from making mistakes

One girl (110) who experienced a lot of parental control shared her understanding of her parents' "sheltering" mindset. She summarized that her parents don't let her have experiences and control of everything because they don't want her to make mistakes and fall into traps.

Actually other youth also observed parenting "sheltering" youth has detrimental effect when children enjoy a lot of freedom after going to college. One adolescent observed: "They (Asian American students) don't know how to do impulse control, and when they are at home their parents will be like 'don't do that' or like don't go out or stuff like that. But I think once they get to college, like any other teenage kid that goes to college and has an excessive amount of freedom, they just kind of go off the deep end."

One girl saw the benefits of her parents' supporting her to learn from her own mistakes.

Like I said we have a lot of freedom with friends and I think that helped me a lot. I've seen a lot of my friends being very sheltered when they grew up so they kind of just go crazy in college. The way my parents raised me and my brother we were able to have more control. (114, girl, college)

Parents' reluctance to give positive feedback to children

Both youth and parents reported that Asian American parents are reluctant to use positive reinforcement. Parents seldom praise children on achievement or tell children they feel proud of them. Parents use negative reinforcement and emphasize their weakness and areas they still need to improve to keep them working hard.

Quote(110): I would go to school with all these other children so you know with western philosophy and stuff and it was always about teachers giving you positive reinforcement and telling you how great you are and how smart you are and giving you exercises that made you list down what your strengths were so I think some of those homework assignments required parents participation where you have to interview your parents and say hey mom what do you think are five of my strengths I remember there was a time and it being really difficult for my mom and she would never treat it seriously she would kinda laugh when I told her this is my assignment and be like well that's hard to say I can tell you all the things you need to work on but naturally I don't think she's used to compliments and they're not used to giving their children praise and for me I think that was really hard because I would start having self esteem issues because I would go to school and the other kids would have a bunch of things they were proud of about themselves and for me I really didn't know what was good about myself because I've never been told you know

Um I mean I think for the most part growing up at least through my teen years I had self confidence issues I mean I never felt like I was good enough I was really

hard on myself just always striving to make my parents proud but never gaining that full acceptance at least verbally from them and I think when you're a kid you really try to achieve verbal acceptance because its hard for you to just think oh how am I supposed to know if my parents really love me and care about me and are proud of me without them telling me.

Parents use negative reinforcement to foster children's self-regulation to work hard. However, Asian American youth who are exposed to western culture might feel differently. They receive encouragement and praise at school. When they don't receive same encouragement and praise from parents, Asian American youth perceive that their parents do not accept them. It force children to work harder to gain verbal acceptance from their parents. What is worse, children may also hide problems from parents. Using negative reinforcement excessively impacted children's self esteem and self-confidence. It also distance children from parents. (See quotes 110)

Lack of clear and consistent rules.

As one dimension of parental support for competence, youth understood that it was for their own good to have clear and consistent rules. One boy reported that his parents set and implement rules that help him to learn industrious value, which help him to handle school related stress well. (109, male, High School) One boy reflected his mom's parenting efficacy and he thought that lack of clear and consistent rules impedes his internalization of the high achievement motivation and developing competence. When he went to college, he felt that he was less competent than his classmates and experienced a lot more stress and low self-esteem. He also reported using passive stress coping strategy.

Quote: My mom's like do your homework or else I'll take away your phone. Then I don't do my homework, she gets super angry and she yells at us and she takes away my phone for, like, one day. And then I'm super upset, right, because now I don't have my phone, so I sulk and I'm like a little, whiny kid, all unhappy. And then she can't, she can't deal with seeing me angry, so she gives back my phone and then the whole thing starts again because I didn't learn my lesson, right. I thought she was, in terms of the whole anger and discipline, very ineffective. (105, male, college student)

Other parenting behaviors impact youth' stress and stress coping

Some youth reported that they recognized parents' sacrifice. One girl said that her parent emphasize sacrifice and used it as "staple" to induce guilty.

Quote: my mom is like always, 'oh, I didn't leave my country and my comforts so that I could wipe feet all day so that you could get 1900 on your SATs, what the fuck are you doing?' So like, it makes me feel bad. (Author note: Her mom works in nail salon) (116, female, college student)

Another two youth also reported stress introduced by such "guilty induction" parenting behavior. Unsurprisingly, all these three youth did not report seeking social support from parents to cope stress.

Youth reported their parents have poor stress coping or anxiety. All these youth disclosed that they hide problems from parents because they don't want to burden their parents. Problems reported include: poor grades at school, being bullied at school, abusive relationship and ATOD use.

Youth reported their parents don't know how to deal with mental health and ATOD problem. The way that parents deal with those problems gave more stress to children on top of mental health problem. It alienated children from seeking support from parents.

One time I told my mom that I smoked pot once, in high school, and she like flipped out. She, we were driving, she like veered off to the side and she like yelled at me. She was like 'I gave you this wonderful body, and like you like fucking dare to like smoke pot and ruin it, boys are going to think that you are a loose girl'. I am thinking" ok, i am not tell you any more" (116, female, college student)

Youth perceived that having intimate relationship before college is discouraged and parent interviewee also confirmed this attitude. In hence, youth who disclosed they would never let parents' know about their relationship.

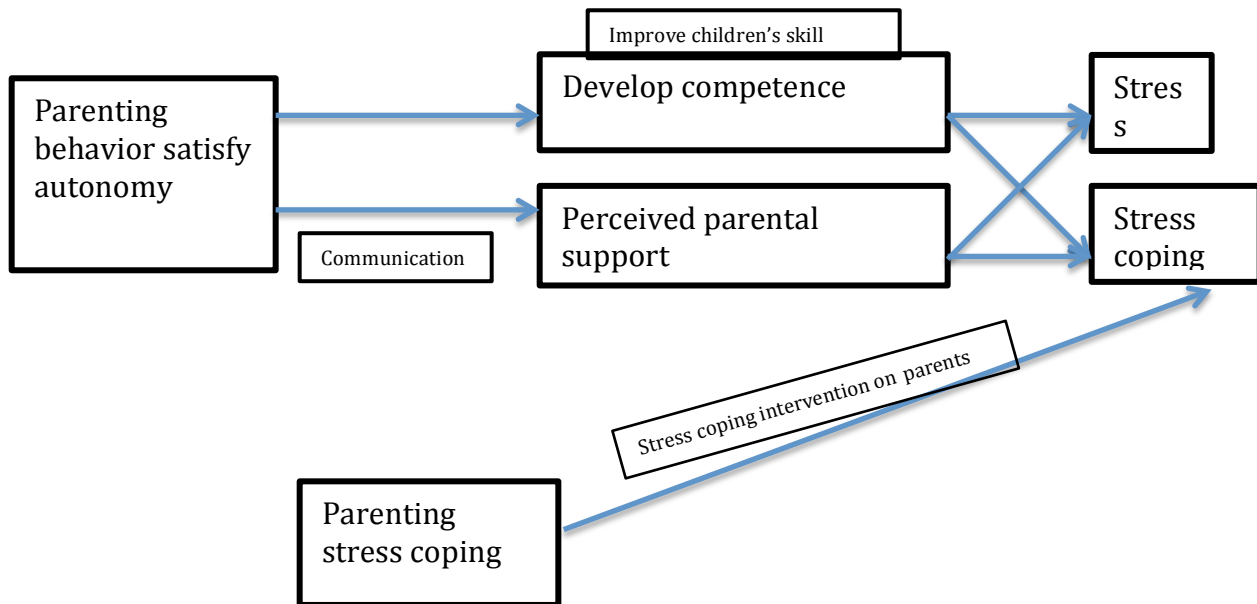
Discussion and Implications

Being exposed to stressors is part of normal development. The role stressful experiences have in mental health depends on coping strategies being adopted (Compas, 2001). Knowledge that contributes to understanding the process of youth developing resilience to cope with stress and adversity has significant implications on public health intervention and prevention efforts on mental health issues in this population.

This research explores processes of how parenting behavior impacts stress and stress coping development of Asian American youth. "Parents setting career path", "sheltering children from making mistakes" and "saying No to Children" are examples of parenting behaviors that suppress autonomy of children. These behaviors were identified in research on parental control among Chinese American parents. (D. B. Qin, 2012) "Hesitate to give positive feedback" and "lack of clear and consistent rules" are identified themes about parenting behaviors supporting/suppressing youth competence. Cross case analysis revealed that youth whose perspectives suppressed by parenting behaviors in communication reported more source of stress, didn't perceived support from parents and reported using predominantly passive coping strategy compared to youth whose parents taking their perspectives in communication. Parents' stress coping style also impact youth' support seeking behaviors.

Based on what has been found, the following model is proposed. Parents' allowing children's choice on activity, major and career pathway; supporting children initiatives, problem solving attempts and learn from their own mistake help children to develop competence, reduce stress and facilitate more active stress coping strategy. Parents' taking children's perspective foster children' trust in parents, which helps them to seek social support to cope stress. Parents' stress coping is also related to youth adoption of

passive stress coping strategies. Parents' stress coping style itself impact children's action to seek social support from parents. Etiological model and experiment suggests impact of parental modeling anxiety on children (Burstein, 2010). It is possible that youth modeling their parents' behavior and developed passive stress coping. Further study should test this hypothesis using parents and youth dyads data.



The finding of this research has implications for public health intervention to help Asian American youth to develop resilience to coping with stress.

In consideration of the impact of parenting behavior on stress and stress coping among Asian American youth found in this research, parenting based interventions would be an effective way to help Asian American youth to develop resilience coping with stress. Study designed to improve parenting skills and parental children relationship result in collateral benefits for children in preventing depression. (Gillham, 2006)

Parental-children communication-training sessions can be used to help Asian American parents to take children's perspective and keep the door for communication open and to encourage Asian American parents to provide positive reinforcement to their children. Improvement in parental-children communication will help children to build confidence and self esteem and foster children's social support seeking. Interventions should also help parents to develop more adaptive stress coping strategy. This will help children to seek social support from parents. It might also prevent children from modeling parents' poor stress coping strategy.

It takes more effort to influence parents in allowing children's choice and support children to learn from their own mistake compared to influencing other the dimensions of parental autonomy support. However, youth and parents reported parents learn from their experiences raising older child, from failure, from other parents' experience and from more acculturation, which suggests tangibility of parental autonomy-support behavior.

Even though parental support can play important role to enhance youth resilience and coping with stress and disadvantage, however, finding in this research suggested that parents were not perceived as social support in face of intimate relationship related stress. Interventions that try to help youth in dealing with relationship need to consider this cultural context. Peer support has huge implication on psychological adjustment and mental health issue among youth. However, a considerable adolescent reported they don't want to seek social support from peers because they don't want to burden them. Further study should explore the underlying reasons in depth. Such research will help understanding and interventions that fostering peer social support as way of stress coping.

Limitation

There are several limitations in this study. First, there was only one coder for qualitative data and there is risk of subjective interpretation of data. To address this limitation, the authors developed detailed and descriptive definition of codes, based on theory and literature review. Second, the conclusion was made on analysis of small sample of youth grown up in families where parents are highly educated. Thus, conclusions may not be generalizable to a larger population. Third, parents and adolescent interviewee in this data set are not dyads and most of conclusion is drawn based on youth interview.

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