How Can Developmentalists Deepen Theory and Research on Ethnicity?

Commentary on Gjerde

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Per Gjerde's compelling essay [this issue] explores many important questions about the construct of ethnicity. Indeed, the issues he raises are certainly not limited to the field of developmental psychology, but rather are worth the consideration of any developmentalist interested in ethnicity, culture, and race. For the most part, Gjerde's essay focuses largely on ethnic self-identification. In this commentary, we extend his approach to the literature on ethnicity and family socialization. Specifically, we apply several principles highlighted by Gjerde to the study of parenting and children's development in Chinese American families, including paying attention to structure and context, examining variability within group and over time, focusing on the meaning of actions, and identifying possibilities for personal agency. Our goal is to show how these principles have (or have not) been included in past work and to illustrate how they can illuminate fruitful new directions in the family socialization domain.

Overview of Research on Chinese American Families

The study of Chinese American families came into focus for many American psychologists and educators in the 1980s, when international comparative studies drew attention to the strong academic performance of Asian students. In order to determine whether features of the family environment contributed to Asian student achievement, researchers began to study the role of parental beliefs (e.g., high expectations for academic achievement) and behaviors (e.g., structuring children's time) in

promoting the achievement of students in China and Japan. Around the same time, developmentalists also began to focus on family support for children's achievement in the Chinese American community. In subsequent decades, more researchers began to identify salient cultural models circulating among Chinese American families and attend to the meanings – and effects – these models held for children's development and wellbeing. Recent research has also attempted to widen the range of developmental outcomes under study, including the possibility that negative as well as positive effects can be associated with certain family practices.

Our analysis of this literature left us with the sense that a growing number of researchers are moving in the direction that Gjerde advocates – with or without a deep understanding of the pathbreaking work of Gjerde's fellow countryman Fredrik Barth! But joking aside, we think that future work will benefit greatly from attending to the theoretical tensions and debates that Gjerde has illuminated in his erudite and perspicacious essay.

Attention to Structural and Contextual Explanations

Developmentalists, particularly if they were primarily identified with the discipline of psychology, typically focus on the inner experience of individuals as well as individuals' behavior alone or in dyadic interactions. Not surprisingly, therefore, developmentalists with an interest in ethnic processes have not attended to structural predictors of beliefs and behaviors. And as Gjerde [2004] noted in a previous essay, cultural and developmental psychologists have particularly avoided dealing with the construct of social power in their work. In the current essay, Gjerde rightly points out that the actions, goals, and values of others (particularly of those in powerful positions) shape opportunities and choices for members of particular ethnic groups. As he indicates, "We should not over-estimate personal options; there are political and historical forces that limit ethnic choice." This advice is well taken and can be pursued in several directions in the literature on Chinese American families.

One important structural element that deserves further notice is the effect of racism and bias on the strategies that Chinese American parents and children have developed for achieving success in school and in the labor market. Given the common view of Chinese Americans as a "model minority," it may be difficult to imagine the virulent anti-Chinese sentiment that characterized a great deal of the twentieth century, or to recognize the biased treatment that continues in contemporary times. However, as psychologists Sue and Okazaki [1990] observed some 25 years ago, Asian Americans have experienced restricted upward mobility in careers or jobs that are *unrelated* to education, and so have focused on educational achievement. Accordingly, although circumstances are slowly changing, Chinese Americans have tended to opt into technical and professional fields that rely on educational credentials rather than those building on social ties and interpersonal influence such as politics and business.

In addition to highlighting the effects of racial and ethnic bias, Gjerde [this issue] also calls attention to the role of macrostructural forces in constituting particular ethnic groups, asking, "Given that ethnic groups are not natural entities, how do they emerge? In other words, who has the power to categorize, classify and monitor ethnic groups?" Our review of the literature suggests that few studies have account-

ed for the impact of immigration policies and legal processes on how Chinese American families function within the U.S. For instance, family researchers rarely acknowledge that Chinese American immigrants are not representative of the Chinese population because immigration policies of the receiving context (i.e., the U.S.) determine the educational and professional characteristics of immigrants and, hence, are responsible for “creating” the ethnic group. Indeed, throughout much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries immigration policy ensured that only relatively educated individuals were able to enter the U.S. [LeMay & Barkan, 1999]. The number of less educated immigrants has increased in past decades, although immigrants to the U.S. are still more educated on average than those who have remained in China. Additionally, as with all immigrants, Chinese immigrants to the U.S. are not representative of their home country because they were able to marshal sufficient social and financial resources to overcome the barriers to emigration [Feliciano, 2005]. In summary, an obvious but important point is that the category “Chinese American” is large and diverse, and researchers should be careful to consider how family processes are shaped by parental education, immigration history, and other structural characteristics in conjunction with cultural models of childrearing and education [e.g., Pearce, 2006].

If researchers are aware of the special characteristics of immigrants as well as the material and psychological changes that occur once they have arrived in the U.S., then parents’ goals and actions cannot be attributed simply to their “Chineseness.” As Gjerde warns us, ethnicity is not an *explanation* of why people act in a certain way; rather, it is an *outcome* of the ways that they have interacted with others in the past. In short, family researchers should be more aware that the child-rearing goals and actions of Chinese American parents emerge from a unique constellation of experiences anchored in time and geography and do not spring entirely from immutable cultural beliefs common to all members of the group.

Stability and Change in Identity, Beliefs, and Practices

Gjerde [this issue] is strongly critical of the primordialistic assumption that ethnic identity is stable over an individual’s lifetime and that the cultural “content” of ethnicity is passed along from parent to child: “Primordialism ... represents the opposite of the view that ethnicity is fluid, relational, and socially constructed; it argues that there are bounded natural ethnicities, stable, and unique in their own right, that maintain a fixed nature over time and generations.” Along these lines, one of the more problematic assumptions in the family socialization literature is that contemporary parental actions are a product of exposure to Confucianism. Few studies invoking Confucianism as an explanatory principle acknowledge the possibility that Confucianism can be interpreted in various ways or that it can be misinterpreted, rejected, or adapted by individual parents. All too often, researchers make the implicit assumption that all Chinese people are uniformly exposed to its tenets and act in invariable accordance with them.

It is of course difficult empirically to verify the causal role of a diffuse and complex philosophical belief system on individual actions. Moreover, we think it is important to note that scholars of modern Chinese history strongly question whether Confucianism is at all influential in contemporary Chinese life:

The abolition of examinations in the Classics in 1905, the collapse of the empire a few years later, and the subsequent rejection of Confucianism as the state ideology made its study seem less useful as a conceptual tool for understanding contemporary Chinese politics, society, and ways of thinking. Also, the belief that the single most important key to another culture lay in the texts of its “sacred books” began to be abandoned in the twentieth century ... [Wilkinson, 2012, p. 376]

If the effect of Confucianism within China is being debated, then it is even more important to question its effect on immigrants in the U.S., where political, legal, and economic institutions have developed independently of Confucian ideals.

We have noticed that researchers attribute the strong academic pressure exerted by Chinese Americans to the purported Confucian notion that the goal of self-betterment must be attained through study and learning. However, this representation is contested by Confucian scholars who argue that self-betterment derives from engaging in sincere and productive *interpersonal roles and relationships* rather than intellectual activities [see Holloway & Kunesh, in press, for a review of this issue]. The Confucian concepts of parental guidance and filial piety are also invoked by some developmentalists to explain the achievement orientation of Chinese American students [Chao, 1994, 2000; Chen & Luster, 2010; Zhou & Kim, 2006]. But the definition of complex constructs like “filial piety” differs across scholars, and it is difficult to ascertain the evidentiary basis underlying assumptions about their meaning. For instance, developmentalists often describe filial piety as an absolute mandate requiring complete surrender to the will of the parent, as in this statement by Zhou [2009]: “[T]he child’s filial responsibility is the debt owed to parents for a life time; a child is expected to suppress his or her own self-interest to satisfy parental needs whether these needs are appropriate and rational or not” (p. 194). However, some Confucian specialists contest this interpretation of filial piety, arguing that it should not be understood as simple obedience to coercive control but rather as an orientation that flows from a harmonious, loving family environment and, as such, is freely chosen and willingly expressed by children [Rosemont & Ames, 2009].

In our view, the more successful studies taking a cultural point of view on family interactions identify specific cultural models related to Confucianism and ascertain whether or not the research participants actually endorse those models. This constructive approach is exemplified by the work of Fuligni and colleagues, who operationalize the construct of family obligation and examine its role in the interactions within families from a variety of ethnic categories [e.g., Hardway and Fuligni, 2006]. Other examples include studies by Costigan and colleagues [Costigan & Dokis, 2006; Costigan & Su, 2008] as well as Fung and Lau [2009]. By seeking to document the extent to which parents endorse certain cultural models, these authors also fulfill another of Gjerde’s principles, namely that their work is not about an “ethnic aggregate” but rather focuses on “diversity within diversity” [this issue].

Attention to the Cultural Meaning of Behaviors

One challenge for family socialization research is to understand the meaning of parenting practices at the group and individual level. A glance at the literature on race and corporal punishment, for instance, prompts reflection on how something as simple as a spanking can take on different meanings – and hence have dif-

ferent effects – depending on why it is used by a particular parent, how it is combined with other parenting behaviors, and how it is viewed by others in the family’s ethnic or racial community. Similar issues have arisen with respect to the use of psychological control in Chinese American families, including manipulating a child’s emotions, making a child worry or feel isolated, alternately showing affection and hostility, nagging and criticizing, and signaling that acceptance of the child is contingent on a certain behavior. An example of research on psychological control can be found in the work of Chen, Miller, Fung, and Boldt [2012] on shaming of young children. In the popular literature, a salient example is the work of Chua [2011] on Chinese “tiger mothers,” who demand excellence in academic work, restrict children’s personal choices regarding peer interactions, and exert total control over children’s extracurricular activities. According to research generated in the U.S. on White, middle-class participants, parents who use these forms of psychological control are preoccupied with achieving their own goals rather than considering those of the child, and the developmental outcomes of such treatment are not positive [Barber, 1996].

However, the findings regarding its prevalence and its effects on children within Chinese American families are inconsistent and puzzling. For instance, longitudinal work by Kim [2013] has revealed that “tiger parenting” is not a particularly common profile among Chinese American families nor is it related to the best developmental outcomes [see also Kim, Wang, Orozco-Lapray, Shen, & Murtuza, 2013]. And while some scholars are critical of Chinese American parents who make the expression of their love and acceptance of the child contingent on good performance, particularly in the academic arena [Qin, Way, & Mukherjee, 2008], others call attention to the positive function of some aspects of psychological control in Chinese society [Rosemont & Ames, 2009].

In our view, the complexities of this literature will be better understood as more researchers take into account parental socioeconomic status, the length of time the family members have resided in the U.S., and the conditions under which they arrived. These aspects of the family context are likely to affect why parents use certain forms of psychological control as well as how these behaviors are interpreted by children. For example, parental use of psychological control and pressure to achieve may be interpreted as relatively benign by children of immigrants because they are aware of the hardships their parents endured. In contrast, second- or third-generation Chinese American students may attribute psychological control to lack of caring on the part of their parents to the detriment of their self-perceptions and motivations to achieve. In short, researchers should be more careful about documenting the positionality of the participants and consider the interpretive lens through which they make meaning of parental actions.

Attention to Individual Reflexiveness and Personal Agency

Gjerde concludes his essay with a call for research that acknowledges “a person’s consciousness, intentionality, and subjectivity.” He asserts that “we must take account of individuals’ active and creative engagement with their social surroundings and of how they accept, partially accept, or totally resist hegemonic structures in specific historical, social, and political contexts.” This assertion forms the basis for his

call for a narrative approach that builds from the individual and searches for (but does not assume) possible collective experiences and values within the group. In this final section, he brings together the elements of culture, structure, social interaction, and personal agency to a nuanced and intellectually rich conclusion.

We can identify a growing number of scholarly works that take the agency of individual parents and children seriously while situating them within the context of ethnicity, class, and history of immigration. For example, in Qin's [2006] ethnographic account of two families, a variety of developmental, immigration-related, and cultural factors are implicated over time in explaining the growing alienation between the parents and their children. Similarly, Louie [2004] also examines family dynamics through the "lived experience" of individuals of varying social-class and immigration backgrounds, focusing on ways that the youth themselves understand their variable academic trajectories. The nuanced portraits of scholars like Qin and Louie illustrate the promise that a narrative approach holds for future work on Chinese American parenting inasmuch as narratives are well suited to situate family dynamics within context and to account for historical change, heterogeneity, and contestation.

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