Letters to the Editor

Refuting the Misconceptions about Parenting in Chinese American Families: Researchers Speak Out

In her recent essay on “tiger parenting” [Kim, 2013], Su Yeong Kim used scientific evidence from an eight-year longitudinal study, along with results from other research on Chinese and Asian American families, to refute three prevailing misconceptions about Chinese American families in the public media.

Misconception One: All Chinese American Parents Are “Tiger Parents”

One of the most powerful consequences of media coverage related to Amy Chua’s [2011] and Kim Wong Keltner’s [2013] books on tiger parenting is the spread of public stereotypes about Chinese American families. Although both Chua’s and Keltner’s books are memoirs based on the experiences of individual Chinese American families, they either stood out or were portrayed in the public media as representations of Chinese American families as a whole group. This is not surprising given that the authors’ individual stories fit nicely with the other common stereotypes of Chinese Americans or, more broadly, Asian Americans prevalent in the media – for example, being “high-achieving” and “hardworking.” In an influential scholarly review on the prevalence of mental health problems among Asian Americans, Stanley Sue et al. [1995] concluded that public portrayals of Asian Americans as a well-adjusted group do not reflect reality. In reality, the Asian American population is extremely diverse and heterogeneous both in terms of mental health status and its determinants (e.g., ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, acculturation experience). Similarly, parenting researchers have also discovered significant heterogeneity in parenting beliefs, practices, and styles among Asian American parents that are jointly influenced by a myriad of community, family, parent, and child characteristics. Indeed, using a person-centered approach to study parenting practices, Kim et al. [2013] showed that there are at least four types of parenting styles among Chinese American parents (“supportive,” “tiger,” “harsh,” and “easygoing”), and less than 30% of Chinese American parents in her sample fit into the “tiger parents” profile. Furthermore, researchers who used variable-centered approaches found significant variability in both negative and positive parenting practices in samples of Chinese American parents [e.g., Chen et al., 2013]. These findings provide powerful evidence that the one-size-fits-all approach to labeling parenting practices in Chinese American families is scientifically unfounded.
Misconception Two: “Tiger Parenting” Is Beneficial for Chinese American Children

The second common misconception in the media about Chinese American families largely originated from the observations that Chinese American children tend to have higher achievement than other groups and that Chinese American parents tend to be more authoritarian or controlling than parents of other groups. While the above two statements are themselves problematic when checked against scientific evidence on ethnic or cultural group differences in achievement and parenting, using them to argue for a causal relation between authoritarian or tiger parenting and high achievement in Chinese American children is even more questionable. In scientific research, establishing a causal relationship requires extensive experimentation, assessment, and evaluation. Although intervention research would be essential to test the causal relations between parenting and child outcomes in Chinese American families, studying the natural associations between prior parenting practices and children’s later developmental outcomes in this population is a critical first step. Kim’s longitudinal study together with a handful of other longitudinal studies on Chinese or Asian American children and adolescents [e.g., Cheah, Leung, Tahseen, & Schultz, 2009; Juang, Syed, & Cookston, 2012; Qin, 2008] have provided an important foundation for future research on this population. This line of research, which spans from focusing on preschool to school-age children and adolescents and uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, has consistently suggested that supportive, warm, and balanced parenting is associated with better mental health adjustment and higher achievement in Chinese American children. Coercive, overly controlling, and punitive parenting is associated with poorer mental health and academic outcomes in Chinese American children. Thus, the claim that tiger parenting is beneficial for Chinese American children has also not been supported by scientific evidence.

Misconception Three: Emotional Well-Being Is Unimportant for Chinese American Children

Media coverage of Chinese Americans so far has centered largely on their academic achievement and educational attainment with little attention paid to the emotional well-being (e.g., depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and feelings of alienation) of this rapidly growing population. An implicit message to the public is that perhaps emotional well-being is not important, does not matter, or is uniformly healthy for Chinese American children. Partly due to the culturally rooted tendency to restrict, suppress, and avoid open expression of emotion in Asian communities, studying emotional well-being and mental health in Asian American children and youth has been a challenging task for researchers. Developmental researchers did not begin to tackle this task until recently [see Juang, Qin, & Park, 2013]. Kim’s longitudinal study was among the first to track the development of mental health adjustment in Chinese American adolescents and identify the risk and protective processes associated with emotional well-being in this population. Findings from Kim’s study, together with those targeting younger Chinese or Asian American children [e.g., Han & Huang, 2010], have suggested that emotional well-being is intricately associated with Chinese or Asian American children’s educational attainment, social competence, and family coherence. Thus, contrary to the third misconception, emotional well-being is as important for Chinese American children as it is for all other children.
Finally, I would like to echo Kim’s point on how essential it is for developmental researchers to speak out to the media in order to educate the public about scientific findings on parenting. Parents, especially immigrant parents, are often searching for advice on how to best support their children’s development. The public media is an important channel through which parents receive such advice. Thus, if used properly, the media can become an effective tool for researchers to disseminate scientific findings to benefit individual families. Kim and other contributors to the special issue on “tiger parenting” in the *Asian American Journal of Psychology* [Juang et al., 2013] have certainly set a great example for the field.

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References


Supportive Parenting versus Tiger Parenting: Variation in Asian Parenting Styles

Su Yeong Kim [2013] has raised very important questions about the ways in which parenting in Asian cultures is represented in nonacademic settings and in the popular media and the unfortunate congruence at times between academic and nonacademic discussions about parenting in Asian cultures (i.e., Ruth Chao’s training parenting and Amy Chua’s tiger parenting). Kim has also described her excellent research as an antidote to the stereotypic depictions of Asian parenting which mask complexity and diversity that exist within the group. Some of the important points Kim has raised are: (1) inferring the prevalence of a practice within a given population from study samples, (2) the importance of examining variability in parenting and child outcomes within groups, (3) considering an adaptive practice because it is prevalent in a given population, and (4) the possibility of achieving culturally valued goals or aims in more than one way.

As Kim indicates, Chua suggests that the majority of Asian parents are tiger parents who have high-achieving children. However, Kim’s longitudinal research reveals that the majority of her sample of Asian parents is not supportive of tiger or training parents. Similarly, Ellen Middaugh and I found in our study of middle and late adolescents who identified themselves as Asian, Arab, Latino, and European American that the majority had directive followed by authoritative mothers as well as democratic followed by authoritative fathers [Sorkhabi & Middaugh, 2013]. Authoritarian mothers and fathers were in the minority in our sample. Our findings signify that drawing a conclusion about the prevalence of any parenting style or practice in any given population is complex and that we should be skeptical of the claims that the majority of Asian parents can be depicted as tiger, training, harsh, or authoritarian and that the majority of European American parents can be depicted as authoritative. The contradictory findings in the literature reveal the limitations of convenience sampling by developmental researchers that is almost categorically small in size, based on nonrandom selection, and is nonrepresentative of diversity that exists in a given population. Given the unsystematic nature of sampling in developmental research, it is unsurprising that different studies find that different parenting styles are prevalent. Amy Chua’s [2011] and Ruth Chao’s [1994] comparisons of Asian and European American parenting and child achievement are by no means exhaustive empirical conclusions. They represent the error of inductive logic that leads to the construction of stereotypic categories by researchers and folk theorists generalizing their own personal experiences to the majority in the group to which they belong. Somehow, the “strict” parent is seen as Asian, but the indulgent, permissive, or even unengaged parent, which may be just as frequent (which I found especially among fathers), is not
seen as Asian. It may be that the strict or harsh behavior of the parent who is authoritarian is more memorable, and what is salient in consciousness is generalized to the entire group.

Given that sampling limitations prevent us from drawing empirical conclusions about the prevalence of any parenting style within a population, it is important to emphasize variability in parenting and child outcomes within groups. Within-group diversity in parenting and child outcomes is found no matter how demographically homogeneous we may consider a group to be. Baumrind [1991] found diversity in her homogeneous sample of formally educated European Americans who lived in a purported liberal part of the United States [see also Baumrind, Lazelere, & Owens, 2010]. She found eight parenting styles which included authoritarian, directive, authoritative, democratic, good-enough, nondirective/permission, and unengaged. Kim also found a range of parenting styles among Asian parents in her sample which in addition to supportive included easygoing, tiger, and harsh. Similarly, in my own research (mentioned above) with various ethnic groups in the United States, we found diversity in parenting styles which we derived from 37 specific parenting practices that adolescents in interviews reported their parents implement in relation to 18 activities (categorized in accord with social domain theory into the moral, conventional, prudential, and personal domains). We found the authoritarian, directive, authoritative, democratic, and unengaged parenting styles. By identifying the comprehensive range of parenting styles in a given group, we not only reveal the fallacy of unidimensional views of parenting in any given group, no matter how demographically homogeneous, but they are also able to ascertain the various adolescent outcomes that are associated with different parenting styles. By uncovering variability within groups, we can then conduct more precise between-group comparisons.

Even if a prevalent parenting type were identified in a given group, the behavior of the majority is not evidence of efficacy, validity, or adaptiveness. We would still need to verify the developmental outcomes that are associated with such parenting. We cannot assume adaptiveness or beneficial effects of a parenting style or practice simply because it is valued culturally or because the majority employs it. For developmentalists, empirically verifying the connection between parenting and child outcomes would be the measure of adaptiveness, not the acceptance of folk theories and practices regarding what is best for children. Folk theories and practices may in fact be adaptive; they cannot be assumed to be adaptive without empirical verification.

The diversity in parenting within groups means that multiple means are available toward obtaining the same culturally valued goals and ends. For example, there has been a good deal of speculation that Asian parents value education. However, studies by Kim, Sorkhabi and Middaugh, as well as by Lei Chang and Xinyin Chen, reveal that parents use different means to obtain the same end of educational success for their children. Therefore, even when there is agreement about the value of a particular goal within a cultural group, it does not mean that all members will take the same kind of action to obtain the culturally valued end. There are Asian parents who are indulgent or even unengaged, those who are harsh and authoritarian, and those who enforce necessary
rules and standards without resorting to coercive and harsh parenting practices whom Kim calls supportive. All may have the same end goal of academic excellence for their children, but they may have different levels of success in attaining their goals. Kim and her colleagues have found that supportive parents, compared to harsher parents, achieve the most success with their children in a wide array of developmental domains. Therefore, tiger and training parenting that Chua and Chao attribute to the majority of Asian parents are the types that are least effective, which can only be discovered when diversity of parenting and child outcomes are carefully assessed, as has been done by Kim and her colleagues.

Similarly, with respect to specific practices, like shaming, used to induce child conformity, which Heidi Fung [1999] imputes to the majority of Chinese parents, is tantamount to abuse. According to Fung, shaming includes such practices as threats of abandonment, which constitute psychological abuse if employed in relation to adolescents, save young children who are acutely aware of their vulnerable status and the necessity of parental support. Fung also includes as part of shaming a mother ridiculing her preschool child and saying that the physical punishment deserved today will be delayed until the child’s skin is no longer itchy due to previous episodes of physical punishment. The reader is asked to accept these shaming practices as culturally relative practices that are harmless and simply different from what European American parents would do. Based on Fung’s description, the reader once again is supposed to believe that Asian parents routinely rely on shaming to obtain conformity with little variation among Asian parents. However, Kim and her colleagues found that such abusive shaming practices are employed at equally high levels by tiger and harsh parents whereas supportive and easygoing parents do so to a lesser extent. Similarly, I found that coercive practices like shaming are primarily employed by authoritarian parents and very infrequently by directive, authoritative, democratic, and unengaged parents. Shame and embarrassment may be universal and not intrinsic to Asian parenting because they may be an inevitable consequence of drawing the child’s attention to unfavorable evaluation by others that usually comes with violating societal conventions and norms. Therefore, not only do parents vary in the extent to which they use shaming, they also vary qualitatively in the ways they use shaming, as Kim’s study and my own reveal.

Furthermore, if the effectiveness of shaming practices described by Fung is questioned, the inquirer is deemed an outsider who does not understand Asian culture. Fung does not account for the direct psychological harm the parent causes by humiliating the child and treating the child as an object that the parent can manipulate and the anxiety the parent induces in such a young child who must wait in anticipation of physical punishment to come later. For a developmental researcher, whose occupation is to understand the conditions that promote the well-being of children, it is necessary to question all cultural practices (i.e., empirically evaluate outcomes), especially those involving the parent-child relationship because of the unequal distribution of power that typically exists between parents and children.
Within-group variations in parenting styles and practices must be more systematically studied in different cultures not only to distinguish effective, ineffective, and harmful parenting but also to recognize that human beings think about cultural practices and differ in the extent that they agree with cultural goals [Turiel, 2006] and in what they implement in action as evident in the variations we find in study samples.

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References


