

Adolescent-parent disagreements and life satisfaction in families from Vietnamese- and European-American backgrounds*

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The authors investigated the relationship between adolescent-parent differences in the endorsement of family obligations and adolescent life satisfaction, in families from two differing cultural backgrounds. Surveys were completed by 238 adolescents and their parents, including 135 European-American families and 103 Vietnamese-American families. We examined the relationship between discrepancies and life satisfaction and the moderating effect of cultural background on this relationship. Results showed that adolescent-parent discrepancies were a strong negative predictor of life satisfaction, across two groups that differ both culturally and demographically. The effect was not moderated by cultural background.

Adolescence is a universal period of transition from childhood to adulthood, accompanied by social, cognitive, and behavioural changes as young people mature physically and take on adult responsibilities. Research with predominantly middle-class American adolescents has indicated that disagreements between adolescents and parents are an inevitable accompaniment of this process, as adolescents begin to assert their autonomy and broaden the areas over which they claim personal jurisdiction (Smetana, 1995; Steinberg, 1990). Although disagreements with parents are seen as resulting in part from normal age-related changes that promote positive development (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Steinberg, 1990), such changes are also a source of disruption in family relationships and can lead to family conflicts (Smetana, 1996).

One source of disagreement is the differing expectations that adolescents and parents may have concerning responsibilities and obligations within the family. Across all cultures, children are expected to carry out culturally defined obligations toward their parents and other family members. These mutual interdependencies provide a basis for positive family relationships (Goodnow, 1988). Research with diverse ethnic samples has shown a link between adolescent endorsement of family obligations and positive outcomes in the family (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999).

Adolescents and parents, however, frequently disagree about the extent and nature of obligations owed to the family (Feldman & Quatman, 1988). When adolescents begin to question these parental expectations, as they move toward adulthood, the resulting differences can lead to family disagreements (Rosenthal, Ranieri, & Klimidis, 1996; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Such disagreements are frequently the basis of conflicts within the family (Rosenthal, 1984), and

these conflicts are likely to contribute to poor adjustment (Offer, Ostrow, & Howard, 1989). A direct link between adolescent-parent disagreements and negative outcomes, for example, has been demonstrated in a study of Western and Asian high school students in Hong Kong (Stewart et al., 1998). Differences in values and autonomy expectations between adolescents and their mothers predicted adolescent disciplinary problems.

Conversely, endorsement of values related to family obligations has been shown to be associated with positive relationships with other family members in a sample of adolescents from a range of Asian, Hispanic, and European backgrounds (Fuligni et al., 1999). In a study of adolescents in Hong Kong, Leung and Leung (1992) found a positive relationship with parents to be the strongest contributor to life satisfaction, accounting for more of the variance than self-concept or relationships at school.

Adolescent-parent disagreements over family obligations are likely to have different implications for families from differing cultural backgrounds. In US society, disagreements between parents and adolescents are generally seen as part of normal developmental processes (Steinberg, 1990) and are relatively likely to be tolerated. In contrast, non-Western cultures stress interdependence in the family and place emphasis on the avoidance of conflict (Markus & Lin, 1999). Within families from non-Western cultures, the norms of greater respect for elders, obedience to authority, and family harmony make differences between adolescents and parents less acceptable (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994). Thus, when they occur, adolescent-parent disagreements may be more disruptive in families from non-Western cultures (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993; Williams & Westermeyer, 1993).

Furthermore, when immigrants from cultures stressing

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family interdependence come to the United States, they are confronted with a culture in which views about family obligations differ from views in their culture of origin (Fuligni et al., 1999; Greenfield & Cocking, 1994). In situations requiring adaptation, adolescents are likely to change more rapidly than parents (Nguyen & Williams, 1989), leading to increasing differences between adolescent and parents with longer residence in the US. The resulting differences between parents and adolescents are often a source of poor family relationships (Buriel & De Ment, 1997; Rosenthal et al., 1996; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993).

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between adolescent-parent disagreements over family obligations and adolescents' wellbeing in families from two differing cultural backgrounds. Although the putative links between family disagreements and adolescent wellbeing have been established, few studies have directly assessed family obligations from both adolescents and parents and no evidence has been adduced to support a hypothesis of cultural differences among these relations. This study was designed to provide evidence bearing on these lacunae of evidence. In particular, the study was designed to examine both the direct effect of family disagreements on adolescent life satisfaction and the moderating effect of culture in families from European and Vietnamese backgrounds.

We chose to study Vietnamese adolescents because family interdependence and family obligations are of particular importance in the Vietnamese culture (Nguyen & Williams, 1989). In contrast to American culture, Vietnamese culture, based in Confucian and Buddhist roots, is strongly collectivist; the family structure is typically patriarchal, with children expected to obey their parents and fulfil their obligations within the family (Matsuoka, 1990; Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Rosenthal et al., 1996). Adult children are expected to remain at home until marriage, and to follow the advice of their elders in matters of dating, marriage, and career choice; individual autonomy is subordinated to the needs of the family (Zhou & Bankston, 1994). In a study of Vietnamese adolescents in Australia, Rosenthal and colleagues (1996) found that, for girls, the perceived discrepancy in values between themselves and their parents was significantly correlated with the frequency of disagreements and conflicts with parents over family, school, and social activities.

Life satisfaction was selected as an outcome variable. As a component of subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction is a psychological variable that has received attention as an outcome of universal interest that may be particularly useful for studying cultural variation (Diener & Suh, 2000). Much of the research on cultural factors in subjective wellbeing has been carried out at the societal level, examining factors such as per capita income, education, and environmental quality (Diener & Oishi, 2000). Developmental psychologists are likely to be more interested in individual-level factors that contribute to, or detract from, wellbeing. Of particular interest in the present study was examining the relationship between adolescent-parent disagreements over family obligation and adolescent life satisfaction, and determining whether this relationship is common across ethnic or cultural groups (Suh, 2000).

In summary, based on the extant evidence, we propose that adolescent-parent disagreements in the endorsement of family obligations will influence life satisfaction through its impact on relationships within the family. When adolescents reject values regarding family obligations that are important to their parents

the resulting differences can lead to family disagreements that can, in turn, detract from life satisfaction. We therefore hypothesised that family disagreements will make a direct, negative contribution to life satisfaction. Furthermore, because the emphasis on family obligations differs across the two cultural groups studied, we expected that the negative impact of adolescent-parent disagreements on life satisfaction would be stronger in Vietnamese families, which emphasise interdependence and family harmony, than in families from European-American backgrounds, where there is a greater acceptance of adolescent autonomy. We tested this moderating effect of cultural background on life satisfaction among adolescents and their parents from Vietnamese- and European-American families.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 238 families, including 135 European-American families and 103 Vietnamese-American families. In each family, an adolescent and one or both parents participated. All the European-American adolescents were born in the United States. Of the Vietnamese adolescents, 56% were foreign-born; the remainder were US-born children of immigrants. Because differences in value discrepancies by place of birth were found in earlier research (Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000), we included birthplace in all subsequent analyses.

The mean ages for the European-American and Vietnamese adolescents, respectively, were 14.6 and 14.9. Female adolescents predominated in both the Vietnamese families (61%) and in the European-American families (65%); the proportion of females did not differ significantly between the two groups. Participants were from middle- and working-class communities in the Los Angeles area. Socioeconomic status (SES) was calculated from each parent's report of his or her occupation and level of education. Reports of occupational and educational status were averaged to yield a continuous score from 1 (unskilled work and little or no secondary education) to 4 (professional occupation or college educated). Occupation or education alone was used if either information was missing. Parental reports were missing for occupation in 14.5% of cases and education in 14.7% of cases. When both were missing (2.7% of cases), adolescents' report of parental occupation was used. SES differed significantly between the two groups, $t(235) = 13.01, p < .001$; the European-American parents were more highly educated and were employed in higher-status work than the Vietnamese. SES was therefore included in subsequent analyses as a control variable.

Procedures

Participants were part of a larger study of families from diverse ethnic groups in the Los Angeles area. The adolescents were recruited from ethnically diverse middle schools and high schools in middle- and lower-middle class neighbourhoods and were paid \$5.00 for their participation. (See Phinney et al., 2000, for a complete description of recruitment procedures.)

Adolescent measures

The measures for this study were developed as part of an international study of immigrant adolescents (Berry et al. 1995).¹ Adolescents completed the questionnaire in English.

Family obligations. The measure consists of eight items assessing obligations to parents and to the family. Typical items were: "Girls should share in the work at home without payment"; "Children should not talk back to their parents"; and "It is a child's responsibility to look after the parents when they need help". (See Phinney et al., 2000, for the complete scale.) Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). In this study, the internal consistency, assessed by Cronbach's alpha, was .74 for the European-American adolescents and .73 for the Vietnamese-American adolescents.

Life satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), based on Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985), consists of five items such as "I am satisfied with my life", and "If I could live my life over, I would not change anything". Responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The reliability of the SWLS has been established across different cultures (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995). The internal consistency, assessed by Cronbach's alpha, was .82 for the European-Americans and .80 for the Vietnamese-Americans.

Demographic variables. The adolescents reported their gender, age, and place of birth (whether United States or foreign-born), and age of arrival in the United States if foreign-born.

Parent measures

The Vietnamese parents were given questionnaires in both English and Vietnamese and had the option of answering in either language. Vietnamese versions were back-translated into English, checked against the original, and revised as necessary. Because of ethnic differences in both family structure and parental roles between the ethnic groups, parents were given the choice of having either mother or father (or both) complete the questionnaire. Overall, questionnaires were completed by the mother (51%), by the father (15%), by both (30%), or by another relative (e.g., grandparent, guardian; 3%); data were missing in 1% of the cases. Analyses of variance carried out separately for the European-American and Vietnamese parents showed no significant differences in the variables of interest based on who completed the questionnaire (mother, father, or both).

Family obligations. Parents completed the same eight items as the adolescents. The internal consistency, assessed by Cronbach's alpha, was .77 for the European-American parents and .64 for the Vietnamese parents.

Demographic variables. Ethnicity, age, country of birth, education, and occupation were reported for both mother and father.

Adolescent-parent discrepancy

A composite discrepancy variable was created by subtracting adolescent scores on the family obligation measure from parent scores on this variable, as had been done in previous research (e.g., Stewart et al., 1998).

Results

Before testing the hypotheses, we examined ethnic group differences in life-satisfaction and adolescent-parent discrepancies. For each variable, we carried out a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (ethnic group \times gender \times adolescent birthplace) analysis of variance with SES as a covariate. Means and standard deviations by ethnicity and birth are shown in Table 1. There was a significant ethnic group difference in reported adolescent-parent discrepancies, $F(1, 229) = 7.203, p < .01$. Mean levels of adolescent-parent discrepancies were significantly higher in Vietnamese families than in European-American families. There was also a significant birthplace effect, $F(1, 229) = 4.119, p < .05$. Because all the European-American adolescents were US-born, this result applied only to the Vietnamese. Mean levels of adolescent-parent discrepancies were significantly higher in Vietnamese families with a US-born adolescent than in those with a foreign-born adolescent.

There were nonsignificant trends in life satisfaction for ethnicity, $F(1, 230) = 3.082, p = .08$, and birthplace, $F(1, 230) = 3.147, p = .07$. Reports of life satisfaction were very similar for the European-American and foreign-born Vietnamese adolescents, but substantially lower for the US-born Vietnamese.

There were no main effects for either gender or SES, and no interaction effects of these variables on the adolescent-parent discrepancy or on symptoms.

For descriptive purposes, we also carried out bivariate correlations between value discrepancies and life-satisfaction for each ethnic group, and for each birth cohort within the Vietnamese group (see Table 1). All the correlations were negative, as expected, but only the correlation for the US-born Vietnamese was significant.

Table 1

Means and standard errors of discrepancies and life satisfaction, by ethnicity and birthplace, and correlations between these variables

| | European-American <i>n</i> = 135 | Vietnamese-American | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | | US-born <i>n</i> = 44 | Foreign-born <i>n</i> = 59 |
| Discrepancies | 0.27 (0.09) | 0.76 (0.15) | 0.40 (0.12) |
| Life satisfaction | 3.50 (0.09) | 3.15 (0.16) | 3.49 (0.13) |
| Correlation | -.13 | -.31* | -.24 |

¹ This study is part of the project "International Comparative Study of Ethnocultural Youth" being carried out in a number of immigrant-receiving countries. Current countries represented and members of the project group are: Australia (C. Fan, R. Pe-Pua, R. Rooney, D. Sang), Canada (J. Berry & K. Kwak), Finland (K. Liebkind), France (C. Sabatier), Germany (P. Schmitz), Israel (G. Horenczyk), Netherlands (P. Vedder & F. van de Vijver), Norway (David L. Sam), Portugal (F. Neto), Sweden (E. Virta & C. Westin), UK (L. Robinson), USA (J. Phinney).

Main and interactive effects in predicting life satisfaction

We hypothesised that discrepancies between adolescents and parents would make a negative contribution to life satisfaction. We also hypothesised that the effect of the adolescent-parent discrepancy on life satisfaction would be stronger in Vietnamese families. Adolescent-parent discrepancies were therefore treated as a predictor, with ethnic group considered the moderator variable and life satisfaction as the outcome variable. The main and interactive effects of the moderator and predictor variables were assessed using hierarchical multiple regression procedures outlined by Cohen and Cohen (1983) and Lubinski and Humphreys (1990). Scales were standardised before forming cross-product terms and before running the regression, to reduce possible multicollinearity (Dunlap & Kemery, 1987; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990).

The specific order of the a priori component in the regression in our study was as follows. First, SES, gender, and adolescent birthplace were entered as control variables. Next, the two main effects were entered, in order of ethnic group and the adolescent-parent discrepancy. After the entry of this entire set of effects, quadratic terms of the discrepancy variable was entered to control for spurious moderator effects (Lubinski & Humphreys, 1990). Finally, two-way interactions of the moderator and predictor variables were entered. Using this analytic scheme, the hypothesised moderation effect was defined as a significant interaction between the moderator and predictor variables.

Table 2 provides the results of the multiple regression analyses. This table shows that after controlling for SES, gender, and cohort, the main effect of adolescent-parent discrepancy on life satisfaction was significant ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .05$). There were no other significant effects in the models. Thus, ethnic group did not moderate the relationship between discrepancies and life satisfaction.

Discussion

The results of this study provide evidence concerning family

processes that underlie life satisfaction among adolescents across two widely differing ethnic groups. Our first goal was to examine the effect of adolescent-parent discrepancies on life satisfaction. We hypothesised that larger adolescent-parent discrepancies would be related to lower life satisfaction among adolescents. This hypothesis was supported. Larger discrepancies were associated with lower adolescent life satisfaction; gender and SES had no impact on this relationship.

This result is consistent with prior research indicating that differences between adolescents and their parents are negatively correlated with adolescent wellbeing. Much prior research showing this relationship, however, has relied on adolescents' reports of discrepancies (e.g., Rosenthal et al., 1996). In contrast, in the current research parental attitudes were directly assessed and examined in relationship to adolescent attitudes. Direct assessment of parental attitudes was used in one other study of the effect of adolescent-parent discrepancies (Stewart et al., 1998). Stewart et al. showed that discrepancies over openness to change predicted disciplinary violations in both Asian and Western high school students in Hong Kong. The current study extends their finding by showing that discrepancies are related to lower levels of life satisfaction, an outcome of greater generality than a low occurring event such as disciplinary violations, and shows this relationship in an American sample of adolescents from different cultural backgrounds.

Our second goal was to determine whether culture moderates the relationship between discrepancies and life satisfaction; that is, whether the negative impact of value discrepancies is greater in Vietnamese families. The expectation of a moderating effect was based on the idea that disagreements between adolescents and parents would be more disruptive in cultures such as Vietnamese, where children are expected to defer to parents. In accord with our expectation, there was a significant negative correlation between discrepancies and life satisfaction for the US-born Vietnamese adolescents (but not the foreign-born), and not for the European-Americans. However, the regression analyses did not reveal the moderating effect of culture.

The effect of culture may be real, as suggested by the correlation, but too small to be significant in the current

Table 2
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for family obligations and ethnic group as predictors of adolescent life satisfaction ($N = 604$)

| Variable | Adj ΔR^2 | R^2 change | B | SE B | β |
|---|------------------|--------------|------|------|---------|
| Step 1 = Control effects | .009 | | | | |
| Gender | | | -.07 | .12 | -.04 |
| SES | | | .04 | .06 | .01 |
| Birthplace | | | .20 | .15 | .10 |
| Step 2 = Main effects | .070** | .061** | | | |
| Ethnic group | | | .16 | .09 | .18 |
| Adolescent-parent discrepancy | | | -.18 | .06 | -.21* |
| Step 3 = Quadratic effects | .070 | .000 | | | |
| Adolescent-parent discrepancy | | | .00 | .04 | .01 |
| Step 4 = Interaction effects | .075 | .005 | | | |
| Adolescent-parent discrepancy \times Ethnic group | | | .06 | .06 | .07 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.
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relatively small sample. Alternatively, it is possible that the disagreements between Vietnamese adolescents and parents are resolved in these families in ways that avoid conflicts and thus do not detract from life satisfaction. Stewart et al. (1998), for example, reported no cultural differences in the relationships between discrepancies and negative outcomes.

The failure to find a significant moderating effect of culture may also suggest that more general processes are operating in the judgement of life satisfaction, and that the Vietnamese adolescents in our sample are more similar to than different from their European counterparts. Life satisfaction did not differ significantly between the two groups, and factors other than adolescent-parent discrepancies clearly contribute to judgments of life satisfaction. This result parallels findings from studies demonstrating the malleability of life satisfaction judgements (Schwarz & Strack, 1991).

In this study, we did not directly assess family conflicts, so we have no evidence whether discrepancies in fact led to conflicts. Interviews that we carried out in earlier research with adolescents from collectivist cultures suggest that family disagreements do not necessarily lead to conflict (Phinney, 1999). Some Vietnamese adolescents stated that although they did not agree with their parents, they would do what was expected to avoid open conflicts. For example, some said that they recognised the difficulties that their parents had encountered as immigrants or as refugees. In spite of disagreeing with their parents, they expressed a feeling of obligation to meet their parents' expectations in return for what their parents had done for them. Mexican-American adolescents talked about alternating between home and school: being "traditional" at home while being "American" when with friends or at school (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). They were able to compartmentalise their lives and thus avoid conflicts at home while expressing their own views when away from home. Because of these ways of handling differences, the discrepancies may not be as problematic as was hypothesised.

Several limitations qualify our findings. Because we did not directly assess conflict, we have no evidence regarding the mechanism by which discrepancies impact life satisfaction. Although conflict seems like a possible source of lowered satisfaction, it is also possible that the discrepancy reflects a lack of understanding on the part of parents regarding adolescents' need to question their parents and broaden the areas over which they claim personal control (Smetana, 1995; Steinberg, 1990). Thus, it may be the feeling of lack of understanding from their parents, rather than conflict, that leads to lowered life satisfaction. Further research is needed to clarify the basis for the relationship between discrepancies and negative outcomes.

Sampling is also an issue that may affect the results of this study. Obtaining parental consent and parental participation is particularly difficult when dealing with families from non-Western backgrounds (Cauce, Ryan, & Grove, 1998). About one quarter of the families given the opportunity to participate did not complete the questionnaires. Adolescents and parents who agree to participate in research are likely to be in families that are functioning well, and the results may be most applicable to such families. This limitation, however, is likely to apply to most research, especially that with ethnically diverse samples. Additionally, this study was carried out in Southern California, a region that is perhaps the most ethnically diverse in the country. Results may be different in other regions with less diversity.

Despite these limitations, our results demonstrate the relationship of value discrepancies to adolescent outcomes and show that this relationship is consistent across two groups that differ both culturally and demographically. Thus, one explanation of these data is that adolescent-parent disagreements are a fundamental aspect of the family experience (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Although they may be important for adolescent development (Steinberg, 1990), they can detract from adolescent wellbeing. Extending these findings with other non-European participants is a promising area for future cross-cultural investigation.

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