**Intercultural Family Study**

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*Raising teenagers* can be full of challenges! Raising teenagers *after moving to a new country* is even more challenging! Chinese and Canadian cultural values are quite different and immigrant family members must work to balance these two potentially conflicting cultures while they are managing with the ordinary challenges of adolescence. The Intercultural Family Study was designed to better understand how parents and children in immigrant Chinese families deal with these challenges. We wanted to explore parent-adolescent relationships in immigrant Chinese families in their own right, rather than assuming that these families go through the adolescent period in the same way as other Canadian families. In doing so, we looked closely at how different family members juggle Chinese and Canadian cultures. Our research is beginning to identify some of the factors that encourage healthy child and parent adjustment in immigrant families. We hope that this information will be used to support future families after they move to Canada.

*We are very thankful for all of the families who took the time to answer our questions and share their experiences with us!* We also gratefully acknowledge the assistance that the InterCultural Association of Greater Victoria provided in helping us inform families about this study. A total of 100 immigrant Chinese families participated in this study. It took us several years to meet with all of the families, and we are now analyzing the information we collected. The goal of this newsletter is to share with you some of the things we have learned so far.

**Who participated in the research?**

Fathers were, on average, 45 years old. They had been in Canada for as little as 1 year to as long as 42 years. The average length of residence in Canada was 9½ years. Mothers were slightly younger than fathers (average 42 years). Some mothers had lived in Canada for less than a year and others had been here for as long as 34 years. On average, mothers had lived in Canada for 7½ years.

Fathers’ and mothers’ level of education ranged from elementary school to graduate studies. More fathers had completed a university degree (62%) than mothers (37%).

Parents had been married an average of 17 years.

The children were 12 years old on average (ranging between 9 and 14 years). A little more than half of the participating children were girls (57%) and just under half were boys (43%).

The participating child was an ‘only child’ in 37% of families, an oldest child in 34%, a youngest child in 33%, and a middle child in 6% of families.

Most of the children (74%) were born outside of Canada and the remaining 26% were born in Canada. The children who were born outside of Canada had lived here for an average of 5 years.

All of the parents were born outside of Canada, with the majority of mothers and fathers having come from China or Taiwan. The remaining families were from Hong Kong (8%) or from multiple countries (13%) (for example, one parent from Malaysia and the other from China).

**Country of Origin**

- China: 39%
- Taiwan: 21%
- Hong Kong or Mixed: 40%
DOES BECOMING MORE “CANADIAN” INVOLVE BECOMING LESS “CHINESE?”

When individuals move from one county to another, they face the challenge of adapting to a new culture’s values and practices, while at the same time deciding what to retain of their ethnic culture’s values and traditions. This process is called acculturation.

Acculturation occurs in several dimensions, including values and behaviours (for example, speaking English or Chinese).

Parents are often concerned that their children’s interest and involvement in Canadian society means that they will neglect their Chinese heritage. However, our findings suggest that becoming more “Canadian” does not necessarily mean that one is becoming less “Chinese.” The results showed that the extent to which children participated in Canadian culture (such as preferring English language TV and music) was not related to their practice of Chinese traditions.

The same was true for the fathers.

Mothers were the exception. Mothers who strongly maintained traditional Chinese practices and values were less likely to adopt practices and values that are typically associated with Canadian culture.

DO PARENTS AND CHILDREN DIFFER IN ACCULTURATION?

Members of the same family differed in the extent to which they maintained aspects of their Chinese culture and adopted features of Canadian culture.

Children reported more Canadian behaviours than parents—they were more likely than their parents to prefer speaking English, to watch English language television, and to have Canadian friends. In addition, fathers were more oriented towards Canadian society than mothers.

On average, mothers reported more Chinese behaviours than fathers and fathers reported more Chinese behaviors than children. However, this was not the case in all families. In 28% of families, parents and children were similar in how much they engaged in Chinese behaviours and in 22% of families, children actually reported more Chinese behaviours than their parents.

There were no overall differences between parents and children in the strength with which they agreed with traditional Chinese values, such as the importance of harmony and putting one’s family first. Children often agreed with Chinese values as much as, or more so, than their parents.

We also asked whether differences between parents and children in acculturation were related to how well family members got along.

We found that differences between parents and children in Chinese behaviours and values were important. For example, differences in Chinese behaviours and values were related to less satisfaction with parent-child relationships and more heated disagreements.

In general, parent-child relationships were most positive when parents and children both highly agreed with Chinese behaviours and values.

The least positive relationships were found when parents were highly involved in Chinese culture and their children were not.

Although parents and children differed a lot in their practice of Canadian behaviours, these differences were not related to poorer family relationships.

This suggests that parents may not need to be overly worried about their children’s level of involvement in Canadian society.
In many cultures, adolescence is a time of life when children seek greater independence from parents. The families in this study were no exception. Our results showed that children wanted more say in decisions and more freedom than their parents wanted to allow. Importantly, however, these different perspectives did not lead to high levels of conflict in the family.

**Who makes the Decisions in the Family?**

We wanted to know who decides things in the family, such as how children should wear their hair, whether they should stay home sick from school, and who their friends should be. One thing we learned was that **children said their parents make most of the decisions, but parents didn’t see it the same way**. Children said that their parents alone make decisions on almost half of the issues we asked about (46%). In contrast, parents said that they only decide on roughly one third of issues (30%). Parents were more likely to say that decisions are made jointly (51% of issues). Children felt that only 27% of issues were decided jointly. Parents and children agreed that children don’t make many decisions on their own.

**Parents were most likely to have the final say in decisions such as curfew and whether children tell parents where they are when they go out.**

**Children were most likely to be the primary decision-maker when it came to issues such as what to wear, when they have to do their homework, and what kind of career or job they will have.**

**At What Age Can Children Do Things for Themselves?**

We also asked about family members’ ideas about the ages at which children should be able to do various things on their own, such as choosing what clothes to buy or how much time to spend on homework.

**Not surprisingly, children thought they should be able to do more things at an earlier age than parents did.**

**At age 14 or younger,** parents and children agreed that children should be able to choose what books to read and decide how much time to spend on homework. Children, but not parents, also thought they should be able to go to boy-girl parties with friends and choose what clothes to buy on their own.

**Between ages 15 and 17,** parents and children agreed that children can have a regular part-time job and go to music concerts with friends. Children, but not parents, also thought they should be able to go out on dates and go away with friends without an adult.

**What Types of Things Do Parents and Children Disagree About?**

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<tr>
<th>Most Common Disagreements</th>
<th>Least Common Disagreements</th>
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<td>Homework</td>
<td>Alcohol and Drugs</td>
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<td>Cleaning up bedroom</td>
<td>Smoking</td>
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<td>How to spend free time</td>
<td>Dating</td>
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As children become teenagers, the number of disagreements with parents often increases. We asked parents and children to tell us how often, in the past two weeks, they had disagreements in 21 different areas.

Children said that they disagreed about more issues with their mothers (58% of the topics we asked about) than their fathers (45% of the topics). Overall, disagreements were quite mild, averaging 1.5 on a 5-point scale.

Interestingly, fathers said that they had stronger disagreements with daughters, whereas mothers said that they had stronger disagreements with sons. Parents said that disagreements over school issues were more heated than disagreements over personal issues (such as keeping one’s room clean) or safety issues (such as going places without parents).

Overall, disagreements between parents and children were mild.
Parents' warmth was consistently one of the most important influences on children's adjustment.

**Parenting Approaches**

**How do Parents Interact with their Children?**

Both children and parents agreed that parents kept a close eye on children's activities (for example, who their friends were). In addition, parents valued obedience from children and thought that parents should be strong authority figures.

Although parents were strict, parents and children also agreed that parents provided a lot of warmth and affection, and rarely used harsh discipline. For example, showing love with hugs and praise was common, whereas spanking children was not common.

Parents also generally felt it was important to explain to their children the reasons for their decisions. Indeed, parents thought it was more important to be nurturing to children than to be an authority figure.

Parents also differed in their parenting approaches depending on how long they had lived in Canada. For example, parents who had lived in Canada for a long time (more than 6 years) valued parental authority more than parents who were newer to Canada (less than 6 years). Parents may feel their influence lessen as children become more involved in Canadian society and gain more independence from the family. They may increase their emphasis on authority in an effort to counter these changes and reassert their position of leadership in the family.

Some approaches to parenting led to better child adjustment than others. High levels of the following practices were related to children's higher feelings of self-worth and well-being:

- warmth and expressing affection
- discussing reasons for parenting decisions
- keeping a close eye on children's activities
- being strict (for example, making a lot of decisions without a child's input) was not all "good" or "bad" for children.
- being strict but also warm was related to positive adjustment among children
- being strict without a lot of warmth was related to poorer adjustment

Parenting styles also influenced how much children identified as Chinese. Children whose parents were warm and who discussed decisions felt better about being Chinese in Canada than children whose parents did less of these things. Warmth and discussion create an atmosphere in the family that encourages children to feel strongly connected to their ethnic heritage.
Co-parenting Relationships

We also wanted to know how couples felt about sharing the challenges of parenting. On average, most couples were happy with their spouse's sharing of parenting responsibilities, they disagreed little about discipline, and they did not feel that their spouse was overly critical of their parenting.

Mothers said that they were more confident in their parenting abilities than fathers. This was especially true in families with girls. Mothers may feel that they are better able than fathers to relate to and guide the changing needs of girls.

On average, mothers were more likely than fathers to say that they show warmth and affection, explain the reasons for their decisions, and keep track of their children's activities. In contrast, mothers and fathers were similar in their desire to be an authority figure and their tendency to avoid harsh discipline. Mothers and fathers also did not differ in their goals for their children.

Family Responsibilities

Similar to other Canadian families, mothers did more of the housework and childcare than fathers. Despite the fact that they did more work, however, mothers were as happy with this arrangement as fathers.

Overall, parents in the same family were quite similar in their parenting approaches. Being similar in parenting may be helpful for immigrant parents because they may rely on each other a lot for parenting support. In particular, if immigrant parents feel that their parenting ideas are not fully supported by Canadian society, they may feel a greater need to present a united front to their children. For example, they may try hard to send the same messages to children about what is expected of them.

How Do Mothers and Fathers Share Family Responsibilities?

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What Factors Lead to More Happiness in Marriages?

We asked parents to tell us about their feelings about married life.

There were many differences among couples in terms of how happy they were with their marital relationship. Overall, approximately half of the couples (52.5%) said they were happy with their marriage, while the other half (47.5%) were not as happy with their marriage.

Couples were happier when:

- they were more satisfied with the way household tasks were shared
- they felt supported by their spouse as a parent
- they shared similar cultural values

We also looked at similarity between spouses in their involvement in Canadian society, such as preferences for speaking English and watching English language TV. We found that couples who were similar in these areas were not any happier in their marriages than couples who were very different from one another in their involvement in Canadian society.
HOW ARE CHILDREN DOING IN SCHOOL?

The majority of children were doing well in school. Many children (61%) were earning a grade point average (GPA) of A– or better. In addition, children said that they felt quite confident in their academic abilities (average rating of 3 out of 4 points). Children also reported generally positive attitudes towards school (average rating of 4 out of 5 points).

There were no differences between boys and girls in any of these school measures.

The majority of parents and children said that going to university was important. However, parents and children had slightly different ideas about how much education after high school was necessary. Many of the children (63%) said that they planned to go to graduate school, whereas most of the parents (58%) said they would be satisfied if their child completed a 4-year degree.

Children felt that their parents’ expectations for them to do well in school were moderate (average rating of 3 out of 5 points). Interestingly, children’s views of their parents’ expectations did not influence their actual levels of achievement. That is, children who said that their parents had very high expectations for them were not doing any better or any worse in school than children who said that their parents’ expectations were lower.

Finally, not surprisingly, we found that doing well in school was important to children’s overall well being. For example, children who reported higher GPAs and more positive attitudes towards school also reported higher levels of self-esteem.

Questions? Comments?
If you have any questions or comments about our results, or about the project in general, email us at ifs@uvic.ca or call us at (250) 472-4695

Once again, we are grateful to the families who participated in this research project. We truly appreciate each family member’s willingness to share their experiences with us. Thank you!

This is just a sampling of our findings so far; we have many more questions to address! In addition, we are currently asking Canadian families about many of the same issues in order to directly compare the experiences of the immigrant Chinese families and non-immigrant Canadian families. Watch our web site for updates: www.youth.society.uvic.ca

We have shared our findings at research conferences and in articles published in scholarly journals. The information provided by families has also been used to help several university students fulfill the requirements of their BA and MA degrees at UVic. Some of the national and international conferences where we have presented our findings are:

- Vancouver, BC, 2002: Canadian Psychological Association
- Chicago, IL, 2002: American Psychological Association
- Ottawa, ON, 2002: International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development
- Albuquerque, NM, 2003: Family Research Consortium III
- Baltimore, MD, 2003: Society for Research on Adolescence
- San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2004: Family Research Consortium IV

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