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Tiger Moms, Dragon Dads, and Baby Pandas: Cultural Expectations of Success Among Asian-American College Students

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Tiger Moms, Dragon Dads, and Baby Pandas: Coping with Cultural Expectations of Success in Asian-American Families

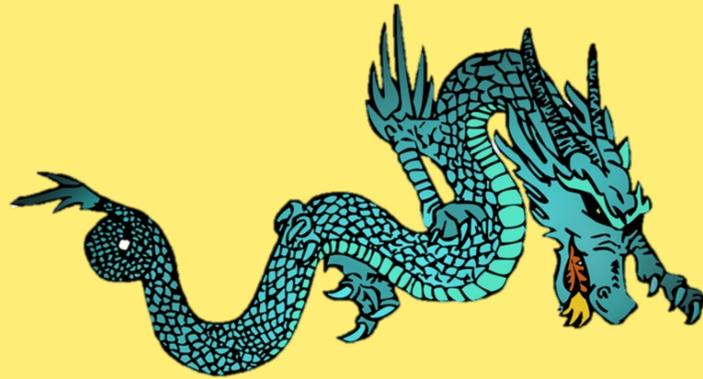
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Research Question

How do college-aged Asian-Americans deal with expectations of success in a contemporary society that presents them with pressures of having to return home due to financial instability?

Sample and Methods

- Qualitative Interviews
- Sample: 4 Female & 4 Male College Students
 - 18-24 years old
 - Second & Third Generation Asian-Americans
 - Parental Status: Professional Occupations



Review of the Literature

- **Boomerang Children:** young adults who return to live in their family homes, especially for financial reasons
- **Sandwich Families:** families that include middle-aged adults faced with the challenge of balancing the needs of their own children and the demands and needs of aging parents
- **Emerging Adulthood:** a life stage between adolescence and young adulthood, lasting roughly from ages 18 to 25. Five features make emerging adulthood distinctive: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of broad possibilities for the future
- **Familism:** a personal outlook that puts family obligations first, before individual well-being
- **Ideological Templates:** narrow and ethnocentric images of the family promulgated throughout mainstream culture compose an ideological template that can shape the desires, disappointments, and subjective realities of children of immigrant minorities
- **Success Frame:** Asian immigrants bring a specific “success frame,” which is strictly defined as earning a degree from an elite university and working in a high-status field. This success frame is reinforced in many local Asian communities
- **Model Minority Myth:** narrative of Asian American cultural traits—diligence, frugality, and willingness to sacrifice—as propelling their upward mobility and winning them public accolades
- **Double-Consciousness:** a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe a concurrent awareness one has of how they are perceived from two different cultures: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness.”

Findings

Gendered Pressure

“My dad’s a very traditional Chinese man. I think the reason I had so much **freedom** was because my dad was very much **focused on my brother** being the only boy. A lot of the time growing up, he got all the attention. **I didn’t feel loved by my dad.** As awful as it sounds, it wasn’t until my dad and my brother got into a huge fight that my dad started to care and talk to my sisters and me more.” -Jennifer

“My dad would be the one who **pushed me** into sports and extracurriculars. He **made me** play every sport. I was young. And then he just **wanted me** to find something I liked, pretty much. So he **pushed me** into like basketball, baseball, soccer, and eventually water polo, which I stuck with.” -Peter

Double-Pressure

“I felt pressure to know it all, **like I should already know it.** I shouldn’t have to be taught it twice. Learn it once and you’re good. It was that kind of pressure, but **I never felt sad about it.** I just felt like, ‘Oh my God, Mom, stop giving me so much work.’ But she just wanted me to keep up. My brother’s really good at math, so I guess it was that **comparison** too, like, ‘How come you’re not getting it but your brother is? He didn’t struggle when he was your age.’” -May

“I see the people that I grew up and went to school with as like **carbon copies** of each other; they literally **did all the same things.** Join this club to make you look good on your college applications, applying to UCSD for computer science, or going to UCLA for bio. But also, I’ve noticed that because they have this **pressure from their parents,** they don’t like to step out of their **comfort zone.** A lot of them are so comfortable in this **bubble** they’ve always been in.” -Jennifer



Clashing Pressure

“My cousin is a fifth-year student at UC San Diego right now. She was just telling me that she’s finishing up her last quarter, and she can finally be done and get a job. Initially, she really loved San Diego and wanted to stay. But then she realized, ‘How the heck am I going to keep up the rent?’ **It was tough for her to realize,** Okay, I think I do have to move back home. And I think that was hard because she’s very independent. She’s in computer science, so she always thought, ‘Oh, there are options in San Diego anyway.’ But now **she’s just twisting everything** and trying to make a better perspective for herself for when she does have to move back with her parents.” -Alice

“My mom usually works eight to eight, so sometimes my parents expect me to cook dinner. And sometimes I get tired but **I have to think back to my mom.** And I’m like, ‘Sometimes she comes home and she still cooks us dinner after a twelve hour day of work. **Let me just do this.**’ So sometimes they do expect dinner from me and I get annoyed. But then I have to think back on like, **‘My mom deserves this, it’s fine, it’s for my mom, it’s for Mom. It’s good.’**” -Vivian

Analysis

Current research presents a uniform view of the pressure Asian youth feel to succeed. This project builds upon such research by recognizing the gendered pressures exerted from parents to their children. Whereas fathers prioritize their sons’ achievements, mothers are monitoring both sons’ and daughters’ progress. Additionally, the way fathers and mothers monitor their children’s success is different. While mothers remain a consistent presence in influencing and overseeing their children’s growth, the involvement of fathers is more sporadic.

This research finds that college-aged Asian-Americans have internalized cultural pressures that spring from two sources – a success frame promulgated from their family, and model minority expectations derived from mainstream culture. Both of these cultural pressures serve as ideological templates that exert a double-pressure on these youth.

This project reveals the conflicting feelings college-aged Asian-Americans manage as they modify their own ambitions and desires in order to suit the reality presented to them. For them to accept having to return home and the obligations they feel they have to their families, these young adults reshape their own viewpoints, readjusting personal feelings and letting go of hopes to live independently.

Future Research

U.S. immigration law has ushered in a stream of highly-educated, highly skilled Asian immigrants; such **hyper-selectivity** significantly influences the educational trajectories and outcomes of 1.5 and 2nd generation Asian-Americans, permitting them to begin their quest to get ahead in United States society from more favorable starting points. My ongoing research will explore how 1.5, 2nd, and 3+ generations experience expectations of success differently. I will investigate whether or not **Americanization** throughout generations contributes to reduced reliance on the success frame, minimized expectations to match stereotypes, and a lessening of filial obligations.



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