Parenting Attitudes of Asian Indian Mothers Living in the United States and in India

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This study compared the parenting attitudes of Asian Indian mothers living in the United States with those living in India. Fifty seven mothers participated in the study (Living in the United States = 23, Living in India = 34). The parenting attitudes of the mothers were measured using the Adolescent-Adult Parenting Inventory (AAPI, Bavoelk, 1984). The AAPI has four subscales: (a) Reversing Parent-Child Family Roles, (b) Lack of Empathic Awareness of Children's Needs, (c) Inappropriate Developmental Expectations of Children, and (d) Strong Parental Beliefs in the Use of Corporal Punishment. A one-way (2: country of domicile) ANOVA showed significant differences in the mothers' attitudes about inappropriate expectations for their children (F(1,55) = 10.24, p ≤ 0.002), the use of corporal punishment (F(1,55) = 6.423, p ≤ 0.007), and role reversal (F(1,55) = 4.63, p ≤ 0.03). Post hoc analysis indicated that the Asian Indian mothers living in the United States had lower inappropriate expectations and tended not to reverse roles with their children. The results also showed that the Asian Indian mothers living in India favored the use of corporal punishment more than their counterparts in the U.S.

Key words: Parenting attitudes, Ethnic parenting

The study of parenting attitudes, styles, and practices has long been an area of interest for social scientists. Past research supports the folk wisdom that parenting influences the developmental outcome of children and has specifically shown that parents develop their parenting behaviors influenced by factors such as socialization experiences, individual familial practices, individual personalities of the child, and family cultural background (Belsky, 1984). Given past practice in social science research, it is not surprising to note that most of this research has been conducted with middle socio-economic status European Americans.

As most research on parenting has been done with middle class European Americans, their parenting attitudes have been used as the “norm” in comparing the parenting of all other groups (McKenry et al., 1989; Staples and Mirande, 1980). According to Hammer and Turner (1990), middle class European American parents frequently follow an authoritative parenting style, defined as using inductive reasoning (i.e., allowing children to reason on their own prior to making choices, and encouraging them to be independent problem solvers). However, authoritative parenting has had mixed effects on Asian children (e.g., Blair and Qian, 1998; Chao, 2001; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Kim, 1996; Steinberg et al., 1992).

Therefore, to validate this research model in an increasingly diverse society, it becomes important for researchers to study the parenting patterns of other ethnic groups.

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This present study focuses on the parenting attitudes of one of those ethnic groups, Asian Indians. Asian Indians, like the members of any other immigrant population, have gone through a variety of changes to acculturate and adapt themselves to the majority population, while trying, at the same time, to retain their own cultural identity and values. The goal of this study was to examine the differences in parenting attitudes of Asian Indian mothers living in India, and immigrant Asian Indian mothers living in the United States. We were interested in finding out if Asian Indian mothers living in the United States followed a traditional Asian Indian parenting pattern or a parenting pattern which was more reflective of European American parenting attitudes as a result of living in a predominantly European American society.

Asian Indians are, simply, the people who live in the Indian sub-continent, an area of extreme diversity in terms of caste, religious groups, and languages spoken (Kakar, 1978; Ross, 1967). Traditionally, the family system has been greatly influenced by the values and norms of the culture. In addition, families follow a patriarchal, joint family residential pattern (grandparents, parents, and children living together). This joint family system has been a major influence in the socialization process of the children (Roopnarine and Hossain, 1992). While the Asian Indian mother is the primary caregiver and nurturer of children, the father (or the grandfather, if still living) is dominant, stern, and obeyed with fear (Kakar, 1978; Ross, 1967). Asian Indian parents lay a great deal of emphasis in their parenting practices on familial bonds, dependence and loyalty to the family, obedience, religious beliefs, and achievement (Kakar, 1978). More recent studies also stress that Asian Indian parents place a high value on academic achievement and family interdependence, discourage autonomy, and emphasize the importance of extended family, with respect and obedience of elders (Dasgupta, 1989; Helwig and Helwig, 1980; Wakil et al., 1981). Asian Indian parents also prepare children from their earliest years for their eventual adult roles, in which males traditionally stay with their parents and take care of the entire family, while females support their spouses, and care for the household and children (Ramu, 1977; Roland, 1988; Roopnarine and Hossain, 1992).

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of Asian Indian immigrants in the United States and these immigrants are being faced with the challenge of raising their children in a non-Asian Indian majority society. Levine (1988) has proposed a cultural evolutionary model in which ethnic parents in their childrearing methods combine their cultural standards with existent majority culture, and societal and personal factors. This helps children internalize cultural values and norms, while at the same time enabling parents to choose a method of raising children which matches their needs and resources in a new society.

Similarly, Harrison et al. (1990) have proposed three adaptive strategies that most immigrant families use to fit into the majority society: family “extendedness” and role flexibility, biculturalism, and instruction in ancestral worldviews. Family extendedness and role flexibility are defined as the support system network that serves to help families solve problems in times of stress. Biculturalism is the capability of a person to function effectively in two or more culturally different situations. Ancestral worldviews are the traditional values of culture and family taught by parents to their children. Parents incorporate varying degrees of these adaptive strategies in their parenting practices.

While several studies have been conducted with Asian Indians living in India, few have looked at parenting practices of Asian Indians living in the United States. The present study provides us with information on attitudinal changes and the acculturation process that influences those parenting attitudes. This information can be used by child development professionals, teachers, and parent educators to better understand the parenting process of Asian Indians, and help those professionals better meet the needs of this group.
METHOD

Fifty seven mothers participated in the study (Living in the U.S. = 23, Living in India = 34). The mothers were 19 years of age or older and had children who were three to five years of age attending preschools either in the United States or in India. Families were from the middle and upper middle classes and lived in urban areas in both countries. The Asian Indian mothers living in the United States had been in the United States between four and five years. The parenting attitudes of the mothers were measured using the Adolescent-Adult Parenting Inventory (AAPI, Bavolek, 1984), a 32-item assessment of parenting and child rearing practices. The AAPI has four subscales: (a) Reversing Parent-Child Family Roles, (Role reversal), (b) Lack of Empathic Awareness of Children’s Needs (Empathy), (c) Inappropriate Developmental Expectations of Children (Developmental expectations), and (d) Strong Parental Beliefs in the Use of Corporal Punishment (Corporal punishment).

The first subscale (reversing parent-child family roles – 8 items) measures the parents’ desire to use children to satisfy their own needs (e.g., “Young children should be expected to comfort the mother when she is feeling blue”). The second subscale (lack of empathic awareness of children’s needs – 8 items) measures the ability of the parents in identifying and empathizing with the needs of their children (e.g., “Parents who are sensitive to their children’s feelings and moods often spoil their children”). The developmental expectations subscale (6 items) measures whether the parents are realistic in their developmental expectations of their children (e.g., “Children should be expected to verbally express themselves before the age of one”). Finally, the corporal punishment subscale (10 items) measures parental belief in the use of corporal punishment in promoting the development of stronger character and moral values in their children (e.g., “Children learn good behavior through the use of physical punishment”). The items were scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from −2 to +2. Low scores indicate more appropriate parenting attitudes and high scores indicate less appropriate parenting attitudes, as defined by the cultural norms of the scale. Bavolek (1990) in his research with the AAPI, found it to have an internal reliability of 0.70–0.86. He also found the internal consistencies of the subscales to be sufficiently reliable (Developmental expectations = 0.70, empathy = 0.75, corporal punishment = 0.81, role reversal = 0.82), and the test retest reliability of the inventory indicated an appropriate level of stability over a week’s period (0.76) (Bavolek, 1990).

Consent forms and letters explaining the research were sent to the directors of the participating preschools, who distributed them to the mothers of all Asian Indian preschool children attending participating preschools in India and the United States. Sixty letters were sent to the Asian Indian mothers living in the United States and twenty three consent forms were returned. Forty were sent to the Asian Indian mothers living in India and thirty four consent forms were returned. The AAPI was disseminated to consenting mothers and returns were collected by the preschool directors.

RESULTS

The mean and standard deviations for the variables used in the study are presented in Table I. A one-way (2: country of domicile) ANOVA was performed on each of the 4 subscale scores of the AAPI to determine differences in parental attitudes. Results showed significant differences in the mothers’ attitudes about inappropriate expectations for their children \( F(1,55) = 10.24, p \leq 0.002 \), the use of corporal punishment \( F(1,55) = 6.423, p \leq 0.007 \), and role reversal \( F(1,55) = 4.63, p \leq 0.03 \). Further post hoc analysis indicated that the Asian
TABLE I  Mean and Standard of Asian Indian Mothers’ Parental Attitudes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Inappropriate expectations</th>
<th></th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th></th>
<th>Corporal punishment</th>
<th></th>
<th>Role reversal</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-Indians living in India</td>
<td>-1.40</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>-5.62</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>-4.49</td>
<td>9.85</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
<td>5.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-Indians living in the U.S.</td>
<td>-5.20</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>-5.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>-7.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>-4.6</td>
<td>6.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indian mothers living in the United States had lower inappropriate expectations of their children and tended not to reverse roles with their children compared to their counterparts living in India. The results also showed that the Asian Indian mothers living in India favored the use of corporal punishment more than their counterparts in the U.S.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study are particularly interesting in light of recent discussions about the influence of culture on children’s development and the importance of interpreting development within a cultural context. These results indicate that the mothers living in the U.S. seem to have more authoritative parenting attitudes, while those living in India had ones which were more authoritarian.

In examining these results, it becomes particularly important to address the concepts of authoritative and authoritarian styles and the appropriateness of using these terms in different cultural contexts, particularly as these terms have such value-laden connotations in the United States. As described by Baumrind (1967), authoritarian parenting leads to dependent, unhappy, and socially withdrawn children. This outcome is determined by a desire on the part of the parent for respectful, obedient children who have little input into personal or family decisions. On the other hand, authoritative parents, while exercising firm control with high expectations, show equally high levels of respect for their children, treating them as independent individuals capable of making their own decisions.

Many social psychologists obviously see the authoritative style as preferable to the authoritarian in terms of the outcomes for children (Baumrind, 1967; Baumrind and Black, 1967; Coopersmith, 1967; Loeb et al., 1980; Maccoby and Martin, 1983). This research, however, can be questioned in terms of its relevance for non-European American cultural groups abroad. What are defined as “authoritarian” (and, consequently, inferior) parenting styles might be highly appropriate in certain cultural and geographical contexts. Authoritative parenting might, in fact, lead to social and cultural isolation for children being raised in contexts based on traditional economic and religious structures, as is the case in India. Consequently, while it is the intent of this paper to help professionals in this country work in a culturally appropriate fashion with Asian Indian families living in the United States, it is equally not our intent to criticize the parenting attitudes and practices of those living in other areas, specifically in India.

These results, however, show that parenting styles between similar groups in the United States and India are different. Given the influence of the majority culture in the United States, Asian Indian immigrant parents who maintain an authoritarian parenting style in the United States may find that their children suffer under those social disabilities
found in European American families who use similar parenting styles. Thus, many of them may have adopted authoritative parenting styles which balance their traditional cultural expectations and values with the demands of the new, majority culture. Hence it becomes important for researchers to investigate these acculturation changes that immigrants go through and study their influence on parenting attitudes.

At least three areas can be identified where those working with families might be helped by carefully looking at this and similar research findings:

1. These findings may help professionals to look at their own assumptions about optimal parenting modes. While it has been seen that authoritarian modes have been found to be most successful in raising children from mainstream cultural traditions in the United States, it is obvious that the maxim of treating each child as an individual needs to be particularly carefully applied in some specific circumstances. In other words, not all children, even those raised in the United States, will respond effectively to authoritarian parenting styles (Cooper, 1991, 1992; Khemmani et al., 1995). If these styles are contrary to those which are seen as being natural and honorable in a given traditional culture, it will behoove the family worker to support alternate patterns of parenting which are valued by those traditions. Children are quite capable of becoming bi-cultural, but this process will be impeded if their parents feel forced to act defensively in justifying what they feel are parenting styles which have been successful through millenia of cultural practice (Mimms, 1990; Penfield, 1989).

2. As children have a basic bi-cultural or multicultural ability, this research should also help professionals treat children with renewed respect in admiration of their powers of being able to maintain in their daily behavior two different sets of cultural expectations and demands simultaneously. Children are much more active players in cultural adaptation than we sometimes suspect, and this recognition of their abilities will enable practitioners to enlist the child's aid in working to achieve his/her satisfactory integration into a foreign life and culture.

3. Finally, this research should help family life educators in explaining to both teachers and administrators the subtleties of cultural transitions in school settings and also in removing the blame that is often leveled on parents by those who assume that all parenting styles are the same and that there is only one good way of raising a child (Cooper, 1991, 1992). This assumption may actively interfere in efforts to establish successful home-school partnerships (King, 1992).

Sensitivity to the conflicting cultural pressures confronting these parents (and their children) is essential in achieving successful outcomes in both child and adult professional intervention of any sort. We also need to recognize that there are many other non-cultural factors influencing parental styles and attitudes, and these influences will be equally important to study in the future. Among these avenues of further research will be an examination of how parenting styles and attitudes vary with the gender of the child and years of residence in the United States. While any attempt at constructing a model which will totally explain the development of parenting styles after immigration may be unrealistic, we hope that this one study will assist in helping professionals understand the differing cultural contexts of their clients.

References


