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Children of Filipino Immigrants in Hawai'i: Adolescent Girls' Experiences at Home and at School

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Approximately 12% of the United States population today is foreign-born (Schmidley, 2003). Children of immigrants face greater obstacles compared to children of U.S.-born parents. They are more likely to be poor, to live in crowded housing, to feel peer pressure to engage in risky behaviors, and to experience less of the parental support that might help them resist such pressures (Yu, Huang, Schwalberg, Overpeck, & Kogan, 2003). Despite these challenges, children from immigrant families, and girls in particular, are more family-oriented and exhibit higher academic achievement than do children of U.S.-born parents (Fuligni, 1998). The Filipino population in the U.S. has increased to over 2 million, with over 170,000 (not including those of mixed race) living in Hawai'i (Okamura & Agbayani, 1991). Filipinos are one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in Hawai'i, representing the highest percentage of workers employed in the lowest status occupations in Hawai'i (Abgayani-Siewert & Jones, 1997; Okamura & Agbayani, 1991). However, the popular view of Filipino and other Asian Americans as model minorities may result in the assumption that this group is problem-free and not likely to be in need of services. Like other recent scholarship on Filipino youth in Hawai'i (Cunanan, Guerrero, & Minamoto, 2007), the current paper questions such an assumption by highlighting the challenges facing girls of Filipino immigrants in Hawai'i.

IMMIGRATION AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

For parents, immigration can be seen as an investment in their children by providing them with better schools and more opportunities (Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2004). Immigrant parents, however, may be unfamiliar with the U.S. school system, and limitations with the language

may prevent them from being very involved with their children's schooling (Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2004). Children of immigrants recognize the sacrifices their parents made by immigrating, and children often make sacrifices for their families in return (Agbayani-Siewert & Enrile, 2003; Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2004). These sacrifices, however, may require them to abandon the very things for which their parents immigrated, particularly when they are obligated to support their families rather than continue their education. The educational attainment of Filipino youth in Hawai'i provides a case in point. In Hawai'i, the Filipino population has the lowest percentage of high school graduates (51%) and the second lowest percentage of college graduates (11%), and Filipinos' university attendance has gradually decreased in recent years (Institutional Research Office, 2004; Okamura & Agbayani, 1991).

THE FAMILY IN FILIPINO CULTURE

The extended family is the basic unit of the Filipino community (Ponce, 1980), and Filipino youth place greater importance on the family (Fuligni, 2001). These youth, especially Filipina girls, are often strongly devoted to familial responsibilities, including sibling care and household chores, often undertaken as a filial duty out of obligation to repay their parents' sacrifices. This sense of family obligation also extends to school, where these children view academic success as a form of repayment for parental sacrifices. For example, indebtedness and responsibility were cited as the two main motivations for students from both Asian and Latin American backgrounds to perform well academically (Fuligni, 2001).

FILIPINO YOUTHS' EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATION

While Filipino youth express strong motivation to succeed academically, they often face unfair treatment at school. Filipino youth report high incidences of discrimination: almost three-quarters of Filipina girls and more than two-thirds of Filipino boys reported experiences of racial discrimination and unfair treatment, including verbal and physical harassment (Espiritu & Wolf, 1999). Luluquisen (2001) found that many Filipino youths were ashamed to identify themselves as Filipino, and another study found that Filipinos born in Hawai'i, in order to distinguish themselves from recently arrived Filipinos, often echo the negative messages and discriminate against newly-arrived immigrants (Revilla, 1997).

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study sought to examine the experiences of a sample of Filipina adolescents. In particular, we wanted to explore girls' interactions in two distinct contexts—their homes and their schools—in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Filipino children of immigrants. Through an exploration of these girls' lives, we hoped to illuminate the inherent limitations of the model minority stereotype for these Filipina adolescents.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 29 female adolescents, ages 13–20 years old ($M = 16$). All girls were children of immigrant parents from the Philippines, and approximately 79% were born in the Philippines. Participants were recruited from English as a Second Language classes at a local high school and from an after-school program for adolescents (one school-based and one social service agency-based program). Six focus groups were conducted, with group sizes ranging from 3 to 12. Participants received a nominal payment for their time.

Qualitative Approach

Analyses for the current study used a grounded process (i.e., inductive, qualitative analysis) to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of Filipino children of immigrants in Hawai'i, a population that has received limited attention. Focus group interviews were transcribed, and we subsequently conducted an inductive content analysis of the text for patterns and themes. Initially, two researchers coded all transcripts separately, identifying concepts, properties and dimensions as themes emerged in the interviews (Patton, 2002). Upon completion, the researchers then cross-referenced all coded segments and identified common themes observed during individual coding. Results from this consensus coding are reported below.

RESULTS

Experiences within the Family

Participants both recognized and appreciated that their parents struggled and worked tirelessly in order to achieve economic and educational advancement for them, which they identified as the main reasons why their parents immigrated to Hawai'i. Girls understood that their parents' subsequent lives in the U.S. were challenging, particularly with regard to work, as most parents worked in the service and labor arenas. Parents' earnings from these low-paying positions were usually not sufficient. For this reason, many parents worked multiple jobs and long hours to adequately support their families, allowing them little contact with their children. In addition to the general challenges of working in "blue collar" industries, difficulties achieving English proficiency meant that parents sometimes needed help from their children in order to navigate these challenges within the workplace. For example, one participant described having to accompany her mother to her work to translate for her because her mother needed a day off. The language barrier between parents and supervisors or co-workers often limited parents' ability to communicate effectively.

Perhaps due to parents' work commitments and out of a sense of obligation, girls reported playing an active role in households: taking care of younger siblings, cleaning the house, and cooking dinner. These responsibilities were especially prevalent in single-parent families and in mother-absent homes. In addition to household responsibilities, some girls also worked, many in the fast food industry. The girls often used their income from work to contribute to family finances, including helping to pay bills, as well as to save money for college, since they understood that parents would not be able to afford college tuition.

In discussing relationships with their parents, the majority of girls reported better relationships with their mothers than with their fathers. They described their mothers as understanding, nice, hard-working, and easy to get along with. In contrast, girls described their fathers as hard-working but also as mean, strict, and having bad habits, such as drinking, gambling, and having a "third party" (an extramarital affair). Many were reluctant to describe their fathers negatively, and some would subsequently qualify what they said with something positive (e.g., "But I still love him"). Girls described their fathers as less involved in their lives than their mothers, as having minimal communication with them, and as talking with them only about "surface" things such as TV shows, sports, or school. Although most girls were not bothered by the lack of closeness with their fathers, several expressed a desire to have their fathers show more concern for them. This paternal distance also affected disclosure, as the girls felt less comfortable talking to their fathers about sensitive issues such as dating, in part in fear of an angry response. When girls needed to disclose sensitive information to their fathers, they often used their mothers as a go-between.

Experiences at School

Most participants, particularly those who had recently immigrated, felt discriminated against in school by classmates and school staff. They were frequently teased by peers, and commonly reported names such as “flip,” “bukbuk” (termite), and “FOB” (fresh off the boat). Girls also reported being teased about their accents and for any use of their heritage language. Many experienced situations in which they were told to “speak English, this is America” or to “go back to the Philippines if you are not going talk English.” They also reported that their peers made one of two generalizations regarding their academic skills: “They either think that you’re too smart or too stupid. You’re not ... in the middle.” Participants also reported that Filipinos were pushed around because of their small physical stature.

Experiences of discrimination at school were only exacerbated by what the girls felt was unfair treatment from teachers, counselors, and school security guards. Girls reported that teachers overlooked peers’ discriminatory comments and did nothing to deter such comments. In addition, counselors reportedly ignored participants and gave preferential treatment to other students. Moreover, participants felt that they got in trouble and were written up for minor offenses, such as dress code violations and tardiness, more often than were non-Filipino students. As a result of discrimination, participants felt hurt and embarrassed. Girls expressed a desire to be treated like everyone else but felt powerless to make a change. Interestingly, some focus group participants blamed other Filipinos for encouraging discriminatory comments because “these other Filipinos are the troublemakers” and they “form gangs and they make that stereotype even worse than it is or give us a bad rep.” The girls also noted that some Filipinos would disparage their own culture, “mak[ing] fun of the accents that their parents have ... so they can be accepted in the group that they are in, like if they hang out with the soles [a term used to refer to Samoans].”

Participants regarded education as a means to a good future, and excelling in school and furthering their education were very important goals. All students aspired to attend college and viewed education as the key to avoiding menial jobs. Their high aspirations were also attributed, in part, to indebtedness to their parents. Girls noted that their parents emphasized education, constantly telling their daughters to excel in and finish school. Parents often discouraged or even forbade their daughters from dating, telling them to “finish your education first before you get a boyfriend.” Girls described feeling obligated to fulfill parents’ academic expectations as a way of acknowledging their parents’ efforts to pursue better opportunities in the U.S. They also felt they must finish school because often their parents had not done so.

DISCUSSION

The current study highlighted the unique experiences of children of Filipino immigrants within their families and their schools. During focus groups, the adolescent girls frequently spoke of the sacrifices their parents made by leaving their “comfortable and familiar” life in the Philippines to search for opportunities for their children in Hawai’i. The girls in this study tried to reciprocate by taking on household responsibilities and obtaining jobs to assist their families financially. Girls also discussed focusing on academic achievement out of a sense of obligation to their families. This is consistent with Fuligni’s (2001) assertion that Asian children of immigrants view academic success as a primary means of assisting the family because it will help adolescents secure future employment and thus allow them to contribute more to the family in the future.

Girls reported high educational aspirations, with most expressing a desire to attend college. Whether or not these expectations are attained, however, may depend on access to information about college and upon ability to overcome family financial limitations. Research shows that immigrant families often lack information about public and private financial assistance

(Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995), which may discourage students from applying to college. Moreover, recent immigrants tend to have difficulty articulating questions regarding academics to school personnel, especially in a school environment where they feel unsafe and discriminated against (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). The establishment in schools of parent liaisons who share the same cultural background as these families would be one mechanism for addressing these challenges.

The girls in this study maintained their high educational aspirations despite experiences of discrimination at school. They reported being teased, taunted, and harassed by peers and being treated unfairly by school personnel. Although they desired to do well academically, the negative treatment at school may impact their academic outcomes. To protect these students, schools should implement no tolerance policies for discrimination and should provide training to ensure that school personnel are both culturally sensitive and equipped to handle discriminatory acts. Overall, the current study, through its examination of at-risk Filipinas and the challenges they experience, both at home and at school, demonstrates some of the limitations of the model minority stereotype and illustrates the importance of not overlooking at-risk Asian youth, who are just as much in need of social services as youth of other racial/ethnic groups.

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