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Physical Discipline in Chinese American Immigrant Families: An Adaptive Culture Perspective

Anna S. Lau

University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

Research on ethnic minority parenting has examined heritage cultural influences and contextual stressors on parenting processes. However, rarely are adaptive cultural processes considered, whereby ethnic minority parents bring their cultural values to bear in adapting to contextual demands in the host society. A survey of 107 Chinese American immigrant parents examined whether use of physical discipline can be predicted by cultural values, contextual stressors, and their interactions. Results indicated that distinct domains of cultural values were related to physical discipline in disparate ways, with some values decreasing risk and others indirectly increasing risk. There was some evidence that cultural values interacted with contextual stress to predict physical discipline. Parent-child acculturation conflicts were only related to physical discipline when parents held strong values about the importance of firm parental control. The findings illustrate how heritage cultural influences and current ecological demands may converge to shape parenting in immigrant families.

Keywords

physical discipline; parenting; cultural values; immigrant families; Chinese Americans

Physical discipline occurs in families across racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. However, it is more common in disadvantaged contexts among families with low levels of education, exposure to poverty and stress, and a greater child-to-caregiver ratio, with younger parents and children being most vulnerable (e.g., Eamon, 2001; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Although, race has been shown to moderate some of the ill effects of physical punishment on child development, the bulk of evidence suggests it is largely ineffective and often harmful (Gershoff, 2002). The determinants of parenting in ethnic minority families are multifaceted, including the influences of heritage culture, race/ethnicity, immigrant and minority status, social position, and ecological context. Over a decade ago, Garcia-Coll et al., (1996) advanced a framework of *adaptive culture* integrating both heritage culture and social position factors in shaping ethnic minority family processes. Social stratification variables shape environments that either promote or inhibit minority family competencies. At the same time, the minority group brings its own socio-cultural history to bear in responding to local demands in the environment. “*This adaptive culture is the product of the group’s*

collective history (cultural, political, and economic) and the current contextual demands posed by the promoting and inhibiting environments.” (p. 1904). One interpretation of this viewpoint is that cultural influences may interact with ecological demands on ethnic minority families to predict behavior. Despite the growing appeal of transactional perspectives, this tenet of adaptive culture has rarely informed empirical study of ethnic minority parenting.

Studies of minority parenting often focus on heritage culture as the primary influence defining desirable endpoints for child development, attitudes about socialization strategies, communication norms, and family roles (Keller et al., 2006). A focus on the legacy of cultural values has spawned studies of how parenting evolves with acculturation (e.g., Buriel, 1993; Samaniego & Gonzales, 1999). Often informed by a unidirectional acculturation model, minority parents are thought to either retain heritage cultural practices or relinquish these in favor of American norms. Thus, studies often contrast parenting in European American versus immigrant and U.S. born descendants of the same ethnic origin (e.g., Bornstein & Cote, 2004), or examine associations between parental U.S. acculturation and parenting (e.g., Varela et al., 2004).

However, generational comparisons and acculturation approaches are limited as tests of the cultural determinants of parenting. For example, it is often tacitly assumed that parents from certain cultures are more inclined to favor punitive strategies compared to Americans. Mexican American parents have been described as endorsing physical discipline owing to values of *familismo* and *respeto* emphasizing hierarchical authority (Ferrari, 2002; Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003). With increasing acculturation, less favorable attitudes toward physical discipline may result. However, the norms toward which acculturating groups shift remain unclear. Although out of favor among most parenting experts, most American parents customarily rely on physical punishment (e.g., Larzelere, 2000; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Thus, within this unidimensional acculturation framework, problems are encountered in anticipating the characteristics of both the origin and destination cultures. As such, it is not surprising that studies variably report positive, negative, and no relationship between acculturation and use of punitive discipline (Buriel, 1993; Calzada & Eyberg, 2002; Cousins, Power, & Olvera-Ezzell, 1993; Hill et al., 2003).

Other scholars have focused not on heritage culture but rather on the current contextual conditions in which ethnic minority families reside. From a cultural-ecological perspective, minority parenting practices emerge from adaptations made by parents to cultivate the child competencies needed for success in the immediate environment (Ogbu, 1981). Attention is focused on social stratification associated with race and minority status, allocation of economic resources and opportunities, and conditions of discrimination, rather than culture of origin values. For example, in low-income urban African American families, restrictive parental control is thought to promote levels of child compliance needed to resist negative peer influence in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992). These ecological considerations are often invoked to explain reliance on physical punishment by African American parents (e.g., Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001; Wissow, 2001).

Thus, the literature is replete with examples of studies invoking heritage values and the impact of contextual stressors as influences on ethnic minority parenting. However, researchers have yet to examine how ethnic minority or immigrant parents may respond to contextual stressors as a function of their heritage cultural values or traditions. The current study is inspired by an adaptive culture framework, which highlights potential synergy between culture of origin and ecological demands and stress. The study of Chinese-origin parents serves as a particularly salient example given the growing literature describing traditional child rearing values and contemporary concerns facing Chinese immigrant families.

Heritage Cultural Perspectives on Chinese American Parenting

Research on parenting in Chinese families has focused largely on heritage values with some suggestion that they promote physical discipline (Tang, 1998, 2006). For example, the Confucian ethic of filial piety emphasizes the duty of children to be obedient and attend to the needs of their parents (Ho, 1986). These socialization goals may promote strict control, intolerance of misbehavior, and reliance on physical discipline (Ima & Hohm, 1991; Tang, 1998, 2006). Indeed, Chinese and Chinese American parents appear more authoritarian (Porter et al., 2005; Wang & Phinney, 1998; Wu et al., 2002), and report greater approval and use of physical discipline than European Americans (Hong & Hong, 1991; Kelley & Tseng, 1992; Lin & Fu, 1990). These restrictive forms of parental control have been associated with maladjustment in Chinese children (Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006).

However, other cultural models of Chinese parenting have emphasized parental sacrifice, support, and close involvement (Chao, 1994; Gorman, 1998). Filial piety may be cultivated through strict discipline or by inducing a close emotional bond (Ho, 1986), and filial beliefs are associated with family harmony (Yeh & Bedford, 2004). Furthermore, many indigenous control strategies, such as shaming, criticism, frequent correction of behavior, and upward social comparison do not involve physical discipline (Fung, 1999). Research suggests that physical discipline is waning among Chinese parents (Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004) and the use and normativeness of physical punishment is now lower in China than in other European, Asian, and African nations (Lansford et al., 2005). This may be attributable to rapid social change, the one-child policy, and a resultant child-centered, indulgent orientation known popularly as the “Little Emperor” effect (Xu, Farver, & Zhang, 2009). Thus, given the dynamic and complex nature of Chinese child rearing values, it is difficult to anticipate how heritage values will predict physical discipline among immigrant families in the Diaspora.

Beyond child rearing values, other cultural values may be relevant to parental discipline, such as those governing emotional expression. Chinese culture emphasizes emotional restraint to promote harmony and healthy adjustment (Tsai & Levenson, 1997). Socialization practices reflect valuation of restraint in self-expression (Wu et al., 2002), and Chinese and Chinese American children tend to be less emotionally expressive than European American children (Camras, Chen, Bakeman, Norris, & Chen, 2006). Orientation toward Asian culture is related to moderation in emotional expression among Asian Americans (Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, Freire-Bebeau, & Przyamus, 2002). The display of anger is particularly avoided in

interdependent cultures as it is thought to be harmful to relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Although physical discipline can be delivered with a dispassionate sense of purpose, parental anger is often an affective trigger for physical discipline (Peterson, Ewigman, & Vandiver, 1994; Tang, 2006), emotional regulation values may diminish angry physical responses to child transgressions.

Thus, Chinese values may influence the use of physical discipline in diverse ways, as they are neither monolithic nor entirely deterministic of behavior. It is unclear whether valuing firm parental control necessarily relates to increased physical discipline. Moreover, values favoring restraint of intense and disruptive emotions may dampen the use of physical discipline. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that studies of parental acculturation, values, and child rearing beliefs, have yielded mixed results regarding cultural contributions to discipline in Asian American families (e.g., Chen & Luster, 2002; Lau, Takeuchi, & Alegria, 2006).

Contextual Stress and Chinese American Parenting

While most studies of Chinese parenting have been guided by a cultural premise, there is a growing understanding of contextual challenges that may impact parenting in immigrant families. Acculturative stress can stem from problems including communication barriers, discomfort with unfamiliar norms, lack of social support, or downward social mobility when immigrant parents' training and education are devalued (Williams & Berry, 1991). Newfound minority status may confer discrimination experiences that precipitate distress in parents (Liebkind, 1996; Noh & Kaspar, 2003). Because stress generally compromises parenting, these strains may increase physical discipline when coping resources are overwhelmed.

Scholars describe dissonant acculturation as a source of stress facing immigrant families when children evince more rapid acculturation than their parents leading to estrangement (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Acculturation gaps have been associated with increased conflict (Costigan & Dokis, 2006; Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002), low family cohesion (Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000), and aggression in parent-child disputes in Asian American families (Park, 2001). Dissonant acculturation is most precarious when the host and origin cultures differ on a central value such as child autonomy versus parental control. Chinese American parents who value strict authority may respond with great dismay to their more acculturated children's bids for autonomy. Tension may escalate as presses for autonomy are met by increasingly controlling parenting, with the sides becoming more polarized by repeated conflict. Thus, acculturation conflicts may be a contextual risk factor for physical discipline among Chinese Americans.

Another source of contextual stress among Chinese immigrant families concerns the importance placed on children's academic achievement. In Chinese cultures, schooling is construed as the primary responsibility of parents, and a child's success in school is the central indicator of parental effectiveness (Chao & Tseng, 2002). School failure reflects not only on the child but results in loss of face for the family (Stevenson & Lee, 1996) that can prompt harsh discipline. Education values are what often motivate immigration, leading

parents to sacrifice the security of extended family, community, and homeland to invest in children's schooling (Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2004). Poor school performance may be painful given the depth of this investment in immigration. Chinese Americans report higher expectations for educational attainment, grades, and effort, and are more concerned than other ethnic groups about the repercussions of not getting a good education (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). This pressure for achievement may be grounded in the belief that other avenues to social mobility are blocked (Sue & Okazaki, 1990), thus school problems may be risky in part because of the socioeconomic demands on immigrant Chinese.

The Current Study

In summary, factors associated with physical discipline in Chinese American families may stem from heritage cultural influences, or from contextual stress associated with the immigrant family context. In terms of heritage values, beliefs about the importance of strict parental control are hypothesized to increased risk of physical discipline, whereas values promoting emotional restraint are posited to be protective. In terms of contextual stressors, acculturative stress, parent-child acculturation conflicts and school problems are risk factors that arise from the ecological conditions faced by immigrant Chinese families.

Consistent with framework of adaptive culture, it is hypothesized that cultural values may organize responses to contextual conditions. Chinese American parents bring their own values, socialization experiences, and immigrant sensibilities to bear in adapting to stressful conditions encountered in the host culture. For example, acculturation gaps may naturally develop as youth are exposed to host societal norms favoring individual expression and autonomy. However, parents who value strict control may respond most punitively to acculturation conflicts. In contrast, values about emotional restraint may dictate a more tempered response to acculturation dissonance. As such, the association between physical discipline and the risk factors of acculturative stress, acculturation conflicts, and school problems may be stronger when parents endorse values favoring strict control. In contrast, the associations between contextual stress and physical discipline may be attenuated when parents value emotional restraint. This study examined the main effects of cultural values, contextual stressors, and potential interactions between values and stressors on Chinese American parents' use of physical discipline.

Methods

Participants

From a larger survey of 145 Chinese American immigrant parents of children between the ages 4 and 16 years the current study utilized data from 107 parents (88.6% mothers) of children (57.8% boys) from 9 to 16 years old ($M = 12.4$, $SD = 2.75$). Parents with children between the ages of 4 and 8 were excluded from the analyses because many of the risk variables of interest (e.g., school problems, acculturation conflicts) were not considered developmentally salient among young children. All parent participants were immigrants and resided in the U.S. for an average of 17.3 years ($SD = 6.81$), and 72.9% of children were born in the U.S. Parents self-identified as ethnically Chinese and were born in China

(46.1%), Taiwan (26.5%), Hong Kong (12.7%), Vietnam (8.8%), and other Asian countries (e.g., Singapore). Most parents were married in dual parent households (71.0%), with others being divorced, separated or widowed. The median annual household income was between \$20,000 to \$25,000, with 13.7% reporting income greater than \$50,000. The average number of dependents supported by this income was 3.9 people ($SD = 1.43$) and the mean number of children was 2.0 ($SD = .93$). Fifty-three percent of the sample had a high school education or less, while 32.4% had a college degree, and 10.8% had a graduate or professional degree.

Families were recruited with the help of various community partners to obtain a strategic sample with elevated frequency of reliance on physical discipline and exposure to contextual stress than might be expected in a general community sample. Recruitment was facilitated by staff at referring agencies and school sites, and thus we interviewed families referred from local child protective services (CPS, $n = 37$), community mental health centers and public social service agencies ($n = 33$), and from community schools ($n = 37$). As such, the findings may not be generalizable to Chinese American immigrant families at large.

The objective of this purposive sampling was to yield a greater proportion of participants endorsing past year use of physical discipline than might be observed in a general community sample. Surveys of physical discipline are generally positively skewed, with most responses piled on the left side of the distribution (nonendorsement). While regression modeling is robust to violations of normality (Bohrnstedt & Carter, 1971), it is best to minimize positive skew in dependent variables to increase power to detect associations (Mirowski, 1999). Thus, while there were surprisingly no mean differences in parent-reported physical discipline across the subgroups (see Table 1), responses appeared more positively skewed among school referrals ($z_{\text{skewness}} = 10.44$) compared to mental health/social services and child protective service referrals ($z_{\text{skewness}} = 6.27, 6.09$, respectively). School-referred parents reported less acculturative stress and stronger agreement with firm parental control values compared to service-involved parents. There were no group mean differences in emotion restraint values or other contextual stressors.

Flyers were distributed to clients receiving services at agencies and parents in schools serving the same neighborhoods. The flyers instructed the parents to provide agency or school staff with their contact information if they were interested in being contacted by research staff to learn about the project. In this manner, 203 parents provided consent to be contacted by research staff for this study. Research assistants then telephoned prospective participants to provide them with more detailed information about the study and to arrange for their interview. Of the parents who provided consent to be contacted: 71.4% ($n = 145$) completed the interview, 15.3% ($n = 31$) refused to participate, 6.9% ($n = 14$) were ineligible, and 6.4% ($n = 13$) couldn't be reached.

Procedure

The survey included several measures with previously established reliability and validity. All instruments underwent translation, backtranslation, and consensus reconciliation for conceptual equivalence. All but one parent chose to be surveyed in Chinese. On average, the survey took 2 hr to complete, but some parents took up to 4 hrs to complete the measures. After written informed consent was obtained and parents were surveyed via audio-computer

assisted structured interview (ACASI). Using headphones, participants heard the prerecorded questions spoken in Cantonese or Mandarin by a female native speaker, while the written item was displayed on the monitor. Parents were instructed on how to respond to items using the keyboard interface. The use of ACASI in the current study was indicated for two reasons. First, many of the participating parents had limited literacy skills in both Chinese and English so hearing the spoken items was helpful. Second, interviewers did not have extended time to establish trust and rapport with parents. ACASI avoids the need to discuss sensitive topics face-to-face, and has been shown to elicit more frequent reporting of “stigmatized behaviors” than face-to-face interviews (Newman et al., 2002). As such, ACASI can be appropriate for asking questions with low social desirability, such as physical discipline which often underreported (Lau, Liu, Yu, & Wong, 1999). Study procedures were approved and overseen by the Institutional Review Board at the author’s academic institution, the County Department of Mental Health, the County Department of Child and Family Services, the County dependency court, and the County Department of Public Social Services.

Measures

Sociodemographics—Parents reported family demographic characteristics including parental education (number of years of schooling), child and parent sex and age, and number of children in the household, which were examined as potential control variables.

Firm parental control values—Values pertinent to firm parental control were examined using items from two scales. Twelve items related to Strict Discipline from a measure by Chao, Sue, and Wu (1993) assessed beliefs that parental authority and restrictive discipline promote child competence (e.g., “Parents need to show children who is boss” “Parents will spoil their child if they refrain from disciplining him/her,” $\alpha = .75$). The 8-item Shaming scale of the Chinese Child-Rearing Beliefs measure (Lieber, Fung, Leung, & Leung, 2006) assessed similar attitudes about the need for discipline and authority (e.g., “A child will be grateful later in life for having been harshly disciplined when he or she was young,” “Children by the age of three should be able to restrain their own desires and respect other’s needs,” $\alpha = .76$). Both measures used a 5-point response scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”). Given the correlation between these scales ($r = .68$, $p < .001$) and their collective internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$), we used the 20-item composite.

Emotional restraint values—Values emphasizing regulation of emotional expression were measured with the Emotional Self-Control items of the Asian Values Survey (AVS, Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999). This 3-item scale assessed valuing the restraint of outward expression of emotions and resolving emotional problems internally (e.g., “The ability to control one’s emotions is a sign of strength”). Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). Given the number of items, internal consistency was adequate ($\alpha = .59$).

Parental acculturative stress—The 24-item Societal Attitudinal Familial Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE; Mena et al., 1987) was measured perceptions of challenges related to acculturation using a 5-point scale (1 = “not stressful” to

5 = “extremely stressful”). Items included feelings of exclusion or discrimination (e.g., “Because of my ethnic background, people often exclude me from their activities”), communication barriers (e.g., “I have trouble understanding others when they speak”), and strained relations with friends and family (e.g., “It bothers me that family members do not understand my values”). The total score on the SAFE was used as an indicator of contextual stress facing immigrant parents. The measure showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$).

Parent-child acculturation conflict—The Asian American Family Conflict Scale (FCS; Lee et al., 2000) assessed parent perceptions of parent–child conflicts related to acculturation. This 10-item scale assesses the likelihood of typical conflict situations that reflect generational differences in Asian American families (e.g., “Your child wants to state her/his opinion, but you consider it to be disrespectful to talk back”). Parents rated the frequency of each conflict situation where 1 = “almost never” and 5 = “almost always.” The FCS has adequate 3-week test–retest stability ($r = .80, .84$) for youth and parent informants, respectively (Lee et al., 2000; Park, 2001). In terms of convergent validity, scores on the FCS correlate with the familial stress subscale of the SAFE ($r = .52$), and perceptions of parent–child acculturation gaps (Lee et al., 2000). In the current sample, internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .87$).

Child academic problems—The School Adjustment Parent Report (SAPR; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1997) is an 18-item instrument that assesses parent’s perceptions of their child’s past school year. In the current study, we used parent reports on the 14 item academic scale which taps concerns about academic performance and disciplinary problems and feeling burdened by school problems (e.g., “My child did not do as well as he or she should have in academics this past year”). The items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”). Internal consistency of the SAPR was adequate ($\alpha = .80$).

Physical discipline—The Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS-PC; Straus et al., 1998) measures parents’ use of specific acts of physical and psychological aggression in response to child transgressions. The 5-item Minor Assault scale of the Physical Assault scale was used as an indicator of physical discipline, (e.g., “Spanked him/her on the bottom with your bare hand”). Parents indicated the frequency of each tactic in the last year from never (“0”) to greater than 20 times (“6”) when the child did something wrong or made the parent upset. The reliability and validity of the CTS-PC has been established with parents in Hong Kong and China, with expected patterns of association with risk factors such early parenthood, low family income, parent unemployment (Kim et al., 2000; Tang, 1996, 1998). In a national sample of Asian American parents, items from the minor assault scale covaried with discrimination stress and low perceived social standing (Lau, Takeuchi, & Alegria, 2006). The internal consistency of the Minor Assault scale was adequate in the current sample ($\alpha = .67$).

Results

The correlations between the study variables in Table 2. Results revealed significant associations in the expected directions between physical discipline and parent report of child

school problems ($r = .28, p < .01$) and cultural values regarding emotional restraint ($r = -.21, p < .05$). Parents who reported more child school problems and lower valuation of emotional restraint were more likely to report using physical discipline. A variety of sociodemographic variables were explored as potentially important control variables, including parent and child age and sex, the number of children in the home, parental education (highest grade completed), and family income. Child age was the only demographic variable significantly associated with physical discipline ($r = -.22, p < .05$) and as such was used as a control variable in the multivariate analyses below. However, significant correlations did not emerge between physical discipline and acculturative stress, firm control values, or acculturation conflict. The two cultural value orientations of firm parental control and emotional restraint were positively associated ($r = .21, p < .05$). Significant associations were also found among the other risk variables; child school problems were related to parental acculturative stress ($r = .23, p < .05$), acculturation conflicts were related to both parental acculturative stress ($r = .29, p < .01$) and parental firm control values ($r = .20, p < .05$).

Main Effects Regression Model

The relative contributions of heritage cultural influences (i.e., firm control values and emotion restraint values) and contextual stressors related to immigrant family context (i.e., acculturative stress, acculturation conflicts, child school problems) were examined in a hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting physical discipline. Table 3 displays the results of the model. Child age was entered as a control variable in the first step. In the second step, after controlling for the effect of child age, the results indicated that emotional restraint values were negatively related to physical discipline ($\beta = -.23, p = .03$) but firm control values did not significantly predict physical discipline. In the third step, child school problems were positively associated with physical discipline ($\beta = .23, p = .01$). The final model explained 17.0% of the variance in physical discipline.

Exploring Interactions Between Cultural Values and Contextual Stressors

To explore interactions between cultural value orientations and contextual stressors, a series of six hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. In each model one of the two value orientations (firm control, emotional restraint) were crossed with one of the three contextual risk factors (acculturative stress, acculturation conflicts, school problems), resulting in six potential interactions. In the first step of each model, child age was entered as a control variable. The individual centered predictor variables were entered in the second step, and then the interaction term (product of the centered variables) was entered in the third step of each model. The findings summarized in Table 4 indicated no significant interactions between values and acculturative stress in predicting physical discipline. While there was no interaction between emotion restraint values and acculturation conflicts, there was a significant interaction of firm control values by acculturation conflicts ($\beta = .33, p < .01$), which accounted for 11% of the variance in physical discipline. When parents score 1 *SD* above the mean on firm control there is a significant positive association between acculturation conflict and physical discipline ($b = 1.21, p = .02$). However, among parents scoring 1 *SD* below the mean on firm control, there is no significant association between acculturation conflict and physical discipline ($b = 0.33, p = .56$). Figure 1 displays the

interaction effect. There was a similar but marginally significant interaction between firm control values and school problems, but no interaction between emotional restraint values and school problems.

Discussion

The results of the study suggested that the immigrant Chinese American parents' use of physical discipline could be predicted in part by heritage cultural values and by contextual challenges related to the adaptive culture. The role of cultural values in predicting physical discipline was multifaceted. While some scholars have speculated that Chinese parenting ideology that promotes parental authority and restrictive control may place children at greater risk of physical discipline (Tang, 1998, 2006), there is as yet no empirical evidence of this link. Contrary to these expectations, Chinese American parents in the current study who held strong beliefs concerning firm parental control were not more likely to use physical discipline overall. This implies that cultural values that promote restrictive control are not explicitly maladaptive in Chinese-origin families. Beliefs in the importance of firm parental control were related to increased physical discipline in families only when levels of acculturation conflict were high.

In contrast, our results indicated that some cultural values were protective against physical discipline among Chinese immigrant families. Parents who valued restraint over the expression of emotional impulses were less likely to report physically disciplining their children. Interestingly, beliefs in firm parental control were positively associated with beliefs in the importance of personal emotional restraint. This association might indicate that adherence to these values are indicators of a general traditional Chinese value orientation (Kim et al., 2001), or this may reflect an overarching cultural priority on managing behavioral impulses, either in terms of the conduct of one's children or the open display of one's own potentially disruptive emotions. Nonetheless, these correlated value dimensions predicted risk in different ways.

These findings illustrate one reason why it is misleading to treat cultural values as having a singular influence on immigrant family functioning. It is naïve to predict that the diverse set of mores and norms that may be attributed to any cultural group will collectively relate to family adjustment in a uniform manner. Likewise, it may be simplistic to examine global relationships between immigrant parents' behaviors and their acculturation toward mainstream cultural values or enculturation toward ethnic cultural values. Distinct domains of values associated with a heritage culture can predict behaviors in disparate ways, with some values conferring protection while others are related to risk. An appreciation of a broader range of cultural influences can move the study of ethnic minority parenting away from a deficit-oriented approach.

The notion of adaptive culture reflects the idea that ethnic minority families dynamically construct a new cultural environment as they bring the legacy of their group's cultural heritage to navigate the current environmental demands facing them in the host society. The results provided some suggestion that heritage culture and current contextual strains were interrelated and also interacted to predict risk of physical discipline. Acculturation conflicts

about responsibility for decision-making and appropriate ways of showing parental care and child respect were more frequent when Chinese American parents favored strict control. But these disagreements were not inevitably related to physical discipline. These conflicts were only related to use of physical discipline in families where parents strongly valued maintaining authority by enforcing strict control. Thus, heritage cultural child rearing values were associated with the experience of contextual stressors in immigrant Chinese families and also interacted with these strains to predict physical discipline. Together these findings suggest that cultural values do not play a deterministic role in the adaptation and adjustment of immigrant families. Instead, these values may potentiate certain responses under certain ecological conditions.

Consistent with definitions of culture that emphasize its dynamic and evolving nature, a cultural orientation toward parental control can take on new meanings and behavioral manifestations across time and contexts. In the current example, valuing parental authority may stir more conflict in the face of normative second-generation acculturation and thus more parental aggression in the wake of these conflicts. As another example, it has been argued that the institution of the one-couple one-child policy has resulted in a different pattern of parental control in mainland China compared to other Chinese societies. Mothers in Beijing show more close involvement, monitoring, and intensive school support compared to Hong Kong mothers who report more harsh control such as criticism (Lai, Zhang, & Wang, 2000). The authors suggest that the prospect of raising a single child evokes a tenderness that produces different control strategies. While Chinese parents in both contexts share a heritage culture that values parental governance and moral education of the child, the social-political context shapes the evolution of specific child rearing patterns.

Consistent with this framework of cultural values intersecting with contextual conditions, the role of children's school problems as a risk factor for physical discipline may be understood as rooted in both ancestral culture and as a contextual stressor owing to social stratification. The emphasis on academic achievement among Chinese immigrant parents is likely a product of both longstanding cultural values as well as pressures in the American economy. In the minds of Chinese Americans, upward social mobility may be linked more closely to academic achievement because of the perception that other avenues to economic security are blocked to them (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Immigrant parents may perceive limited opportunities for their own advancement, so they invest heavily in schooling their children who presumably face fewer cultural and language barriers (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Kim, 1993). In the current study, a significant association between children's problems in school and use of physical discipline was evident. School problems might trigger physical disciplinary encounters when parental reactions involve shame and loss of face stemming from failure to live up to the cultural imperative on education. Alternately, parents may respond with force because they have invested so heavily in their children's education and school problems represent a threat to the family's future security.

Many immigrant parents face considerable stress in their own adaptation to the host culture. Daily strains may include feelings of marginalization, perceived discrimination, and struggles with language barriers. However, in the current study there was no direct association between acculturative stress and reported use of physical discipline. Parents'

personal experiences of contextual stress may be more distal to the outcome of physically punitive parenting, while specific dyadic strains in the family were more proximal. Acculturative stress was associated with other risk factors for physical discipline. Immigrant parents who perceived more acculturative stress also reported that their child had more school problems and engaged in more acculturation-related conflict. It is possible that feelings of personal distress and alienation among immigrant parents rendered them more vulnerable to conflict with their children and limited ability to support their children in their schooling. Alternately, parent–child conflicts and children’s school problems may exacerbate feelings of acculturative stress among parents.

Limitations of the Study

As indicated by these multiple interpretations, this cross-sectional survey cannot inform the direction of the relationships among these contextual risk factors. Likewise, the direction of causation in the main analyses cannot be inferred. For example, one cannot rule out the possibility that parental reliance on physical discipline contributes to child school problems. Another limitation of the study is its reliance on parent self-reports which may have inflated observed relations because of shared method variance. Furthermore, self-report of physical discipline is subject to social desirability biases and parents are generally thought to underreport these behaviors. Parents were informed that disclosure of child abuse could result in a CPS report. This may have particularly suppressed reporting in families with previous CPS contact who may be especially guarded, and this may explain why reported physical discipline was no higher among parents referred from CPS. Although ACASI has been shown to increase reporting of stigmatized behaviors, it may have been better to invest more time establishing rapport and trust with the participants in a face-to-face interview. Finally, the sample was not randomly but strategically selected and the generalizability of findings to the Chinese American community is unknown. In this small sample there was a restricted range in socioeconomic status, with most families being low income. This may explain why established correlates of physical discipline were not supported here (e.g., parental education, number of children, parent age).

The main effects model and the significant interaction together could explain 28% of the variance in physical discipline. Clearly, this was not an exhaustive examination of factors related to physical discipline. Rather the aim was to examine a set of risk factors related to heritage cultural values, contextual stress, and adaptive culture. We did not, for example, examine how adopting mainstream American values may have related to immigrant parents’ discipline. Generally speaking, a focus on risk for poor parenting outcomes in vulnerable families does not help generate an understanding of how immigrant parents succeed in reconciling values that demand firm control while coping with adjustment stress to foster the positive outcomes so often noted among youth in immigrant families. The study of positive adaptation remains an important direction for research in immigrant and ethnic minority family process.

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Figure 1.
The effect of acculturation conflict on physical discipline as moderated by firm control values.

Table 1

Means (and SDs) of Study Measures by Referral Source Subsample

Variable	School (<i>n</i> = 37)	Mental health/social services (<i>n</i> = 33)	Child protective services (<i>n</i> = 37)	Total (<i>N</i> = 107)	<i>F</i> (2, 105)
Physical discipline	3.3 (8.2)	2.3 (4.5)	3.7 (8.0)	3.1 (7.1)	.30
Firm control values	184.4 ^a (33.9)	152.0 ^b (50.1)	157.6 ^b (54.0)	166.4 (47.4)	4.63 [*]
Emotional restraint	10.6 (2.2)	9.7 (1.7)	10.6 (2.4)	10.3 (2.2)	1.95
Acculturative stress	43.3 ^a (14.4)	52.6 ^b (14.8)	51.0 ^b (16.6)	48.7 (15.7)	3.61 [*]
Acculturation conflicts	22.6 (7.5)	23.7 (7.4)	24.1 (8.2)	23.4 (7.7)	.32
Child school problems	29.0 (7.8)	32.0 (7.7)	32.4 (9.4)	31.0 (8.4)	1.67

Note.

^{a,b} Superscripts denote groups that are significantly different in pairwise contrasts.

^{*} $p < .05$.

Table 2

Correlations Among Study Measures

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Physical discipline	—					
2. Acculturative stress	-.03	—				
3. Child school problems	.28**	.23*	—			
4. Firm control values	.08	.00	-.02	—		
5. Emotional restraint values	-.21*	.07	-.11	.21*	—	
6. Acculturation conflict	.04	.29**	.10	.20*	-.02	—
7. Child age	-.22*	.08	-.08	.09	.08	.13

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Physical Discipline From the Main Effects of Cultural Values and Contextual Stressors

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	R^2
Step 1: Control variable				.04 [†]
Child age	-.09	.04	-.21 [*]	
Step 2: Cultural values				.07 [*]
Firm control	.12	.06	.20	
Emotional restraint	-.39	.18	-.23 [*]	
Step 3: Contextual stressors				.06 [*]
Acculturative stress	.08	.23	.04	
Acculturation conflict	-.11	.18	-.06	
Child school problems	.51	.23	.23 [*]	
Total Adj $R^2 = .17^*$				

[†]
 $p < .10$.

^{*}
 $p < .05$.

^{**}
 $p < .01$.

Table 4

Summary of Regression Analyses Exploring Interactions Between Cultural Values and Contextual Stressors in Predicting Physical Discipline

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²
Step 2: Main effects				
Firm control	.06	.06	.11	
Acculturative stress	.09	.22	.05	.01
Step 3: Interaction				
Firm control $\times$ acculturative stress	.10	.10	.11	.01
Total Adj <i>R</i> ² = .07				
Step 2: Main effects				
Emotional restraint	-.39	.19	-.20 [*]	
Acculturative stress	.13	.22	.06	.04 [†]
Step 3: Interaction				
Emotional restraint $\times$ acculturative stress	.14	.30	.05	.00
Total Adj <i>R</i> ² = .09 [†]				
Step 2: Main effects				
Firm control	.08	.06	.13	
Acculturation conflict	-.11	.18	-.06	.02
Step 3: Interaction				
Firm control $\times$ acculturation conflict	.12	.04	.33 ^{**}	.12 ^{**}
Total Adj <i>R</i> ² = .18 [*]				
Step 2: Main effects				
Emotional restraint	-.41	.21	-.21 [*]	
Acculturation conflict	.06	.19	.03	.05 [†]
Step 3: Interaction				
Emotional restraint $\times$ acculturation conflict	.27	.19	.16	.02
Total Adj <i>R</i> ² = .08				
Step 2: Main effects				
Firm control	.07	.23	.12	

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Variable	B	SE	β	R^2
School problems	.62	.18	.29**	.10**
Step 3: Interaction				
Firm control $\times$ school problems	.13	.08	.36 [†]	.03 [†]
			Total Adj $R^2 = .09$ [†]	
Step 2: Main effects				
Emotional restraint	-.37	.19	-.19*	
School problems	.61	.24	.25**	.11*
Step 3: Interaction				
Emotional restraint $\times$ school problems	-.10	.28	-.04	.00
			Total Adj $R^2 = .08$	

[†] $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.