Negative Social Exchanges, Acculturation-Related Factors, and Mental Health among Asian Americans

Wei Zhang

University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu

weizhang@hawaii.edu

ABSTRACT

For people influenced by collectivistic cultures, the encounter of negative social exchanges may be particularly detrimental as harmonious and balanced interpersonal relationships are highly valued. Focusing on Asian Americans, this study examines the relative importance of three domains of negative versus positive social exchanges on psychological distress, and how acculturation-related factors (i.e., English proficiency and nativity) moderate the association between negative social exchanges and psychological distress. Results suggest that three domains of negative social exchanges (family cultural conflict, negative interactions with relatives, and negative interactions with friends) are related to distress but at varying degrees, with the effects of family cultural conflict being the most salient. Second, for some negative social exchanges, their effects on distress are greater than the effects of parallel positive social exchanges. Most importantly, the relationship between negative social exchanges and distress conditions on acculturation factors: The U.S.-born (compared to the foreign-born) respondents are more responsive to negative interactions with friends; individuals with poor/fair English (compared to individuals with good/excellent English) are more vulnerable towards family cultural conflict. Findings imply the importance of various dimensions of negative social exchanges, acculturation, and their interactions in understanding the mental health of Asian Americans.

Key words: Negative Social Exchanges, Acculturation, Mental Health, Asian Americans

INTRODUCTION

The salutary effect of social relationships on individual health has been well documented (Berkman et al. 2000; Cohen 2004; Krause 2006). However, not all social relationships are pleasant. Over the past two decades, a growing literature has begun to disclose the adverse effect of negative social exchanges on individual health (Finch et al. 1999; Rook 1998). According to some researchers, the deleterious effect of negative social exchanges on well-being may actually be greater in magnitude than the beneficial effect of positive social exchanges (Bertera 2005; Lincoln, Chatters, and Taylor 2003; Newsom et al. 2003; Rook 2003). These studies suggest the importance of negative social exchanges in understanding the mental health of individuals. Research along this line has been replicated in Asian countries like China (Li and Liang 2007) and Japan (Akiyama et al. 2003; Okabayashi et al. 2004), and among ethnic minorities in the United States such as African Americans (Lincoln et al. 2003).

Despite these efforts, very few studies have focused on Asian Americans in general—an under-represented but very important ethnic minority in the United States. Negative social exchanges may be particularly detrimental to Asian Americans given their unique cultural background. According to Taylor and colleagues (2004), norms, values, and expectations on interpersonal relationships tend to differ significantly across cultures. While individuals are socialized to encourage and maintain their independence in individualistic cultures,
individuals in collectivistic cultures are often socialized to emphasize interdependent relationships and work to maintain harmony within groups (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In addition, different from Western cultures, relationships tend to be less voluntary and demand more obligations (Adam and Plaut 2003; Adam 2005), and individual needs are often subordinate to group goals in collectivistic cultures (Markus and Kitayama 1991). These cultural differences may lead to two implications for Asian Americans. First, the conflict of norms, roles expectations, and obligations resulting from the tension between preserving collectivistic traditions and assimilating into the host cultures may lead to an increasing level of negative encounters. Second, violations of harmonious relationships would be particularly detrimental for Asian Americans who, more or less, still value a holistic or balanced view of interpersonal relationships.

To meet the urgent needs of studying mental health of Asian Americans, Takeuchi and colleagues (2007) are among the first to provide national estimates on the prevalence of mental disorders among Asian Americans. They revealed that, for Asian American adults, the overall life time rate of any mental disorder was approximately 17.3% and the 12-month rate was 9.2%. The major objective of the current study is to expand previous focus along this line by examining the role of negative social exchanges in understanding a dimensional measure of mental health (i.e., psychological distress) among Asian American adults (who were 18 years or older), and how acculturation factors such as English proficiency and nativity (place of birth) modify this association.

BACKGROUND

Different domains of negative social exchanges and their impact on psychological distress

Negative social exchange is a multi-dimensional concept, covering social actions that are directed toward the target individual displaying negative effects such as (1) being angry or upset, (2) being overly critical and demanding, (3) showing insensitivity or omission, and (4) making goal attainment difficult (Boerner et al. 2004; Rook 1984; Ruehlman and Karoly 1991). These dimensions of social negativity can be derived from different layered domains with hierarchical order—social networks with intimate family members and relatives, and social networks with friends. According to Lin, Ye, and Ensel (1999), human beings are embedded in a nested support system: Starting from the ego, social relations extend outward to the intimate binding ties such as marital relationships, then to the intermediary bonding relations such as relative or friend social networks, and finally to the outer-most layer of belongingness such as community participation. Different layers of support demands different levels of individual input and thus may have differential health impact. In their study, they found that the inner-most intimate ties have direct and the greatest effects on distress among various layers of support structure. Given that these four major dimensions of social negativity tend to be differentially attached to the nested domains of support structure, this study applies two distinct sets of measures to gauge two generic domains of negative social exchanges: negative social exchanges with (1) relatives, and (2) friends.

This study also considers the third domain of negative social exchange—family cultural conflict, which is particularly relevant to Asian Americans who share common values such as filial piety, humility, and interdependence (Tsai-Chae and Nagata 2008). Family cultural conflict is defined as cultural and intergenerational conflict between the respondents and their families (Alegria et al. 2004). Prior studies suggest that immigrant families with traditional Asian backgrounds tend to experience greater family conflict or dysfunction than other ethnic minorities (Lee 1997; Ying and Chao 1996) because of the intergenerational
discrepancies in values and lifestyles due to dissonant acculturation (Portes 1997; Tsai-Chae and Nagata 2008). For instance, values such as family harmony and respect for older adults are highly appreciated in Chinese culture and Chinese persons expect to depend on their family in old age (Jackson and Howe 2004; Yang 1965). So the encounter of negative interactions within a family setting, which violates the widely accepted social norms, often leads to psychological distress and negative evaluation of life for Chinese elders (Ying and Zhang 1995). Collectively, this study focuses on generic negative social exchanges (such as negative interactions with relatives and friends) as well as Asian culture-oriented negative social exchange (such as family cultural conflict). The following varying effects hypothesis will be tested in this study:

Varying Effects Hypothesis: Among Asian American adults, all three domains of negative social exchanges have impact on psychological distress, but their effects tend to vary according to their relative importance to individuals.

**The relative importance of negative versus positive social exchanges**

Several theories are put forth explaining why negative social exchanges have more potent effects in determining individual psychological well-being (Krause 2007; Rook 1990). First, according to the basic tenets of the expectancy theory (Olson, Roese, and Zanna 1996), interpersonal unpleasantness violates widely shared expectations that friends and family tend to be supportive. The overtly negative interaction is a counter-normative behavior, so when it arises, it often surprises the recipient and threatens an individual’s sense of meaning, predictability, and order, which may lead to severe mental health consequences. Second, unpleasant exchanges with others may also challenge fundamental notions concerning the self. As suggested by Cooley’s (1902) notion of “looking-glass self”, feelings about the self are strongly influenced by feedback from significant others. When such feedback is perceived to be negative, the recipient’s psychological well-being will be greatly undermined because of the erosion of a sense of self-worth. Accordingly, the relative importance hypothesis is presented as follows:

Relative Importance Hypothesis: The effects of negative social exchanges on psychological distress tend to be greater than the effects of positive social exchanges among Asian Americans.

**IMMIGRATION-RELATED FACTORS, NEGATIVE SOCIAL EXCHANGES, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS**

Acculturation is a multidimensional construct and its relation to mental health is complex. Some studies reported higher rates of psychological distress among immigrants compared to the host country population (Bengi-Arslan, Verhulst, and Crijnen 2002; Khavarpour and Rissel 1997; Miyasaka et al. 2002), whereas others on Hispanic immigrants reported otherwise (Ortega et al. 2000; Vega et al. 1998). These inconsistent findings suggest that some dimensions of acculturation such as language assimilation into the host country and the resulting social integration may have salutary effects on mental health (Diwan 2008); other dimensions such as gradually relinquishing one’s native cultures like strong familial and ethnic ties, may have detrimental mental health consequences (Vega et al. 2004).

Acculturation may influence the characteristics of social connections and indirectly impact mental health. While immigrants with lower levels of acculturation may primarily rely on their family for support, their counterparts may develop richer networks outside the family domain. However, having more contacts is not necessarily a blessing. Studies have started to show that the more contacts people have, the more conflicts and frustrations they tend to
experience (Akiyama et al. 2003). Meanwhile, individual’s perception, sensibility, and tolerance towards negative encounters also vary according to their experiences and expectations, all of which vary by levels of acculturation. Compared to immigrants with higher levels of acculturation, their counterparts may be less sensitive to negative interactions while experiencing other more significant stressors like discrimination and language barriers. Generalizing these arguments, the differential exposure/reporting hypothesis can be proposed:

**Differential Exposure/Reporting Hypothesis:** Compared to Asian American adults with lower levels of acculturation indicated by foreign-born and poor/fair English ability, Asian American adults with higher levels of acculturation indicated by U.S. born and good/excellent English ability tend to report more negative social exchanges.

Most importantly, domains of negative social exchanges may interact with acculturation-related factors to impact the mental health of Asian Americans. Studies have begun to document the contingency effects of age and life stressors. August, Rook, and Newsom (2007) found that negative social exchanges and stressful life events jointly affect emotional distress. Li and Liang (2007) showed that the deleterious effects of negative interactions on depression are more for the old-old Chinese than for the young-old Chinese. To explain this age difference, they argued that social exchanges may take on greater meaning as people age. This indicates that negative social exchanges are more likely to affect those who highly value the importance of particular types of social exchanges. For Asian Americans with lower levels of acculturation, family-oriented and collectivistic values are more appreciated; thus, family cultural conflict will be more detrimental. For those with higher levels of acculturation, beliefs and values from the host culture may be increasingly emphasized; thus, negative interactions with peers outside family domain may be more harmful. Summarizing this line of argument, the differential impact hypothesis can be derived:

**Differential Impact Hypothesis:** The relationship between negative social exchanges and distress varies according to acculturation-related factors: While negative interactions with friends are more harmful for the U.S.-born and individuals with good/excellent English, family cultural conflict and negative interactions with relatives tend to be more harmful for the foreign-born and individuals with poor/fair English. The above theoretical framework was summarized in Figure 1.
METHODS

Data
The 2002-2003 National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS), a nationally representative household survey of Latino and Asian Americans, was used to test the aforementioned hypotheses. This survey used a stratified area probability sample design and involves three major steps of sampling (Heeringa et al. 2004). The first step was the core sampling: city or contiguous census blocks were selected according to population density; then, housing units were sampled within each block and then one adult was sampled within each selected housing unit. The second step was the supplementary sampling: census blocks with greater than 5% of the target population such as Asian households were oversampled. In order to further enlarge the sample size, the third step was applied to recruit the secondary respondents from previously sampled households. The face to face interview was administered by bilingual lay interviewers, and respondents were allowed to choose among available languages such as English, Chinese, Vietnamese, or Tagalog.

This study focused on Asian Americans with three major national origins (Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese) and “Other Asian Americans” such as South Asians, Japanese, Koreans, and others. A total of 2,095 Asian Americans were recruited, including 1,611 primary respondents and 484 secondary respondents. The weighted response rates for both primary and secondary respondents were over 69%. In this analysis, there are no missing data for gender, age, marital status, parental status, national origin, education, household income, and employment status. Less than 1% of the data were missing for immigration-related factors. Less than 2% of the data were missing for indices of positive and negative social exchanges and psychological distress. Any valid index is computed for anyone who answered at least half of the items used for that index. After listwise deletion of missing cases, the analytical sample of this study was reduced from 2,095 to 2,076.

The weighted statistics show that more than half of the respondents were female (52.6%)
and most of them were married (68.8%) and employed (63.9%). The percentages of respondents who were not in the labor force and unemployed were 29.7% and 6.4%, respectively. Approximately 50% of the sample reported living in the U.S. for at least 11 years and more than three fourth of the sampled respondents (76.2%) were foreign-born. In terms of education and income, around 68% of the respondents reported having at least some college level of education and over 40% having an annual household income of at least $75,000. Almost 29% of the respondents were Chinese, 13% Vietnamese, 22% Filipino, and 37% other Asian Americans.

**Dependent variable**

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) was used to measure psychological distress. The K10, consisted of 10 questions, is considered a simple and valid measure of mental health (Furukawa et al. 2003) and has been used to gauge the mental health of Asian Americans in previous studies (Walton and Takeuchi 2010). Respondents were asked to indicate frequency of incidents (from 1=all of the time, 2=most of the time, 3=some of the time, 4=a little of the time, and 5=none of the time) that they had experienced feelings of depression and anxiety (e.g., tiring out, nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, depression, sadness, worthlessness, and everything being an effort). All items were reversely coded such that high scores reflect higher levels of distress. The average scale, psychological distress, ranges from 1 to 4.4 and demonstrates a strong internal consistency as the alpha reliability is .88.

**Independent variables**

Negative social exchanges, the independent variable of major interest, was measured by three average indices—family cultural conflict, negative social exchanges with relatives, and negative social exchanges with friends, with high scores reflecting high levels of negative social exchanges. To facilitate comparisons, the parallel indices of positive social exchanges were included: family cohesion, social support from relatives, and social support from friends. All three pairs of indices were standardized so that their relative effects on psychological distress can be compared.

Family cultural conflict is a five-item-index measuring cultural and intergenerational conflict between respondents and their families. Respondents were asked to indicate frequency of incidents (1=hardly ever or never, 2=sometimes, 3=often) of cultural conflict with their families such as interference with personal goals, arguments with family members due to different belief systems, and the breakdown of family unity, etc. These individual items were drawn from a subscale of the Hispanic Stress Inventory (HSI) (Cervantes, Padilla, and Salgado de Snyder 1991). In the NLAAS, five items from the Family/Culture Stress subscale of the HSI were selected to develop the family cultural conflict scale for Latinos and Asian Americans. Among 2,076 valid Asian American respondents, all items making up family cultural conflict loaded on a single factor above .66 and the alpha reliability is .76.

Family cohesion is defined as affective involvement or emotional bonding among family members (Olson 2000). It measures respondents’ sense of family and emphasizes the importance of family togetherness. According to Olson (2000), family cohesion is a continuum and it ranges from “disengaged” to “emmeshed.” At one of the extreme ends—disengagement, “family members do their own thing, with limited attachment or commitment to their family members” (Olson 2000:145). Given that family cultural conflict is an index composing measures gauging disengagement and lower levels of commitment among family members, it can be considered as an approximate index that parallels to family cohesion. In this study, family cohesion is obtained through the sum of a three-item subscale from the
family cohesion scale developed by Olson (1986). Respondents indicate how strongly (from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4)) they agree with a variety of statements regarding their family: (1) family members like to spend free time with each other, (2) family members feel very close to each other, and (3) family togetherness is very important. Response categories were reversely coded such that higher scores reflect greater levels of family cohesion. All items loaded on a single factor above .84 and the alpha reliability is .84.

Negative social exchange with relatives is a two-item-index, which is consistent with some of the previous studies (Ellison et al. 2009). It measures how often (1= never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4= often) relatives made too many demands on and argued with the respondents. All items loaded on a single factor above .83 and the alpha reliability is .56. The index of negative social exchanges with friends consists of two parallel items in which the word “relatives” was replaced with “friends.” These two items loaded on a single factor above .83 and the alpha reliability is .54.

Relative and friend support were measured by three items, which assessed respondents’ ability to rely on extended family or friends for emotional support (Mulvaney-Day, Alegria, and Sribney 2007). To measure relative support, respondents were asked: (1) how often they talk on the phone or get together with relatives, (2) how much they can rely on relatives for help with serious problems, and (3) how much they can open up to relatives and talk about their worries. All items loaded on a single factor above .62 and the alpha reliability is .68. The index of friend support consists of three parallel items in which the word “relatives” was replaced with “friends.” The items loaded on a single factor above .66 and the alpha reliability is .75.

Besides positive and negative social exchanges, this study also examined the moderating effects of two acculturation factors: nativity and duration of residence (U.S.-born; immigrant, duration 0-4 years; immigrant, duration 5-10 years; and immigrant, duration 11 years or more), and English proficiency. English proficiency was measured using a mean index (mean=2.80, SD=1.03, range=1-4) and measured how well (from poor (1), fair (2), good (3), to excellent (4)) respondents spoke, read, and wrote English. This index was dichotomized to contrast respondents with good/excellent English (scored 3 and above) to respondents with poor/fair English skills (scored below 3). In this sample, approximately 76% reported being foreign-born and 63% having good/excellent English skills.

This study controls for education (less than high school, high school, some college, and college and more), annual household income (in dollars), employment status (employed, unemployed, and not in the labor force), age (in years), gender (female: 0=male, 1=female), marital status (married/cohabiting, divorced/separated/widowed, and never married), parental status (Children under 17 years at home: 0=no children at home, 1=children at home) and national origin (Vietnamese, Chinese, Filipino, and Other Asian Americans).

RESULTS

Associations of acculturation-related variables with positive and negative social exchanges and distress

Table 1 documents the mean values of positive and negative social exchanges and distress by acculturation-related factors. Results showed that nativity and duration of residence are significantly related to social exchanges and distress. The U.S.-born reported the lowest mean value of family cohesion, the highest mean values of relative and friend support, and the highest mean values of negative interactions with relatives and friends. Interestingly, they reported relatively lower level of distress. In the multivariate analysis (Tables 2 and 3),
nativity and duration of residence was dichotomized to contrast the U.S.-born with the foreign-born only. English proficiency is also significantly associated with most indices of social exchanges and index of psychological distress. Respondents with good/excellent English ability were more likely to report higher mean levels of negative social exchanges with relatives and friends, higher levels of relative and friend support, but lower levels of family cohesion and distress. Collectively, the U.S.-born and individuals with better English abilities tend to report (1) less family cohesion and family conflict, (2) more social support from relatives and friends as well as more negative exchanges with relatives and friends; and (3) lower levels of psychological distress. In this sense, the differential exposure/reporting hypothesis is partially supported. This finding suggests that Asian Americans with higher levels of acculturation may form relationships that lead to more support and more conflict, which might be an interesting and unique Western form of social bonding.

Table 1. Mean Levels of Social Exchanges and Psychological Distress by Age and Acculturation Factors among Asian Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Family cohesion</th>
<th>Family cultural conflict</th>
<th>Support from relatives</th>
<th>Conflict with relatives</th>
<th>Support from friends</th>
<th>Conflict with friends</th>
<th>Psychological distress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Migration</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.-born</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.06 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4 years</td>
<td>.12 (.05)</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.01 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>.25 (.04)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.17 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;11 years</td>
<td>.06 (.03)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.01 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor/fair</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.07 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.11 (.03)</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>-.46</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>.12 (.04)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N=2,076; Two-tailed tests: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, for significance of association of each variable with the normalized social exchange indices and normalized index of psychological distress; Indicators of negative social exchanges are family cultural conflict, conflict with relatives, and conflict with friends; Indicators of positive social exchanges are family cohesion, support from relatives, and support from friends; Standard errors are shown in parentheses.

Effects of positive and negative social exchanges, and acculturation factors on distress

Table 2 presents the regression coefficients for four ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. The first univariate model only included different dimensions of social exchange. Models 2-4 adjusted for demographics, socioeconomic characteristics, and acculturation factors in a sequential manner to see if the focal relationships in model 1 remain significant and determine the extent of the coefficients (associated with social exchanges) modifications induced by the adjustment.

Positive and negative social exchanges, the focal variables of this study, were added into Model 1 of Table 2. As expected, indices of negative social exchanges were positively associated with distress, whereas indices of positive social exchanges were negatively associated with distress. Besides, the effect of family cultural conflict (b=.144, p<.001) on distress is almost four times greater in magnitude than the effect of family cohesion (b=-.039, p<.001). Moreover, among three domains of negative social exchanges, the effect of family cultural conflict (b=.144) on distress is the most salient, followed by the effects of
negative interactions with relatives (b=.019), and negative interactions with friends (b=.014). When an individual pair of social exchanges is put in the model, all of them are significant at the .001 levels and all the effects of negative interactions are greater than the effects of positive social exchanges.

Including demographics into Model 2 led to several coefficient changes associated with social exchanges. For instance, both the magnitude and significance level of family cohesion coefficient dropped (from $b=-.039$, $p<.001$ to $b=-.025$, $p<.05$), suggesting that its effect on distress could be partially mediated by demographic factors such as gender and marital status. Conversely, the effect of friend support became more significant and pronounced in Model 2. This finding suggests that when keeping all demographics as constant, individuals with more friend support tend to report significantly lower levels of distress. In other words, the positive effect of friend support on mental health was suppressed, to some extent, due to the demographic disparities among respondents. Despite these changes, all the coefficients associated with social exchange remain or become more significant in Model 4 after adjusting for socioeconomic and acculturation-related factors. Except for the pair of social exchanges with friends, the effects of negative social exchanges on distress are all greater in magnitude than the effects of positive social exchanges in Model 4. Findings also suggest that females (compared to males), the never married (compared to the married), and the Chinese (compared to the Vietnamese) reported higher levels of distress, whereas individuals with good/excellent English skills reported significantly lower levels of distress.

Collectively, these results suggest that all three domains of negative social exchanges have effects on psychological distress, but their effects vary. Therefore, the varying effects hypothesis is largely supported by the data. Findings also indicate that the effects of negative social exchanges on distress tend to be greater than the effects of positive social exchanges. This is especially true when individual pair of social exchange was added into the full model separately. Hence, the relative importance hypothesis is partially supported by the data.
Table 2. Estimated Regression Coefficients for Dimensions of Social Exchange (Model 1), Demographics (Model 2), Socioeconomic Characteristics (Model 3), and Acculturation Factors (Model 4) on Psychological Distress among Asian Americans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dimensions of Social</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Exchanges</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>-.039 (.011)**</td>
<td>-.025 (.011)**</td>
<td>-.024 (.011)**</td>
<td>-.027 (.011)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cultural conflict</td>
<td>.144 (.011)</td>
<td>.143 (.011)</td>
<td>.143 (.011)</td>
<td>.140 (.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive support from relatives</td>
<td>-.028 (.011)**</td>
<td>-.025 (.011)**</td>
<td>-.022 (.011)</td>
<td>-.020 (.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative interaction with relatives</td>
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<td>.023 (.011)</td>
<td>.025 (.011)</td>
<td>.026 (.011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive support from friends</td>
<td>-.025 (.011)**</td>
<td>-.040 (.012)**</td>
<td>-.037 (.012)**</td>
<td>-.032 (.012)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative interaction with friends</td>
<td>.014 (.011)</td>
<td>.014 (.011)</td>
<td>.017 (.011)</td>
<td>.018 (.011)</td>
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<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>.000 (.001)</td>
<td>.000 (.001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (Male *)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.050 (.020)**</td>
<td>.047 (.020)**</td>
<td>.043 (.020)**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced/separated</td>
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<td>-.011 (.037)</td>
<td>-.005 (.037)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>.094 (.029)**</td>
<td>.073 (.031)</td>
<td>.078 (.031)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental status (no children at home *)</td>
<td>-.026 (.023)</td>
<td>-.029 (.023)</td>
<td>-.028 (.023)</td>
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<tr>
<td>National origin (Vietnamese *)</td>
<td>-.001 (.035)</td>
<td>.013 (.036)</td>
<td>.042 (.037)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>.084 (.033)</td>
<td>.097 (.033)</td>
<td>.102 (.033)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>.019 (.032)</td>
<td>.034 (.033)</td>
<td>.056 (.034)</td>
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<td>Other Asian Americans</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Socioeconomic Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Education levels</td>
<td>-.012 (.010)</td>
<td>-.003 (.010)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Household income ($)</td>
<td>-.024 (.010)</td>
<td>-.022 (.010)</td>
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<td>Employment status (Employed *)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
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<td>.018 (.040)</td>
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<td>Not in labor force</td>
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<td><strong>Acculturation Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nativity (U.S.-born *)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-born</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.005 (.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English proficiency (Poor/fair *)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.079 (.025)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/excellent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.364</td>
<td>1.291</td>
<td>1.402</td>
<td>1.420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.160</td>
<td>.160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N=2,076; Two-tailed tests: *p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001; Indices of social exchanges are normalized to have a zero mean and standard deviation of one; a reference group.

The joint effects of negative social exchanges and acculturation-related factors

After the relative importance of negative social exchanges over positive ones was identified, whether acculturation-related factors moderate the association between the negative social exchange and psychological distress was tested by adding multiplicative interaction terms into the full model (Model 4) of Table 2. The interaction between nativity and language proficiency was also tested.

Results suggest that (1) the interaction between good/excellent English and family conflict (b= -.068) is significant at the .001 levels, (2) the interaction between foreign-born and good/excellent English (b= -.228) is significant at the .01 levels, and (3) the interaction between good/excellent English and negative interactions with friends (b= -.043) and the interaction between foreign-born and negative interactions with friends (b= -.030) are marginally significant at the .1 levels. Therefore, both nativity and language appear to be important moderators.

To achieve a better understanding of the important interactions identified above, the whole sample was divided by nativity and English proficiency. For each subsample, only the adjusted main effects of the negative social exchange on distress were documented. Several
interesting patterns were summarized in Table 3. Although the effects of family cultural conflict were found to be consistently significant at the .001 levels throughout subsamples, its effects vary. The detrimental effect of family cultural conflict on distress was significantly more for individuals with poor/fair English ability (compared to individuals with good/excellent English ability). And the detrimental effect of negative social interactions with friends was only significant or greater for the U.S.-born (compared to the foreign-born). As a result, the differential impact hypothesis is partially supported by the data. The significant interaction between English proficiency and nativity suggests that the effect of English proficiency on distress is related to lower levels of distress only for the foreign-born individuals.

Table 3. Estimated Regression Coefficients for Negative Social Exchanges and English Proficiency on Psychological Distress for Selected Subgroups among Asian Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Foreign-born (N=1,583)</th>
<th>U.S.-born (N=493)</th>
<th>Poor/fair English (N=770)</th>
<th>Good/excellent English (N=1,306)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Model 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family conflict</td>
<td>.154 (.012)***</td>
<td>.165 (.019)***</td>
<td>.189 (.018)***</td>
<td>.128 (.012)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative interactions with relatives</td>
<td>.014 (.013)</td>
<td>.042 (.019)</td>
<td>.002 (.021)</td>
<td>.031 (.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative interactions with friends</td>
<td>.009 (.013)</td>
<td>.041 (.019)</td>
<td>.028 (.021)</td>
<td>.005 (.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English proficiency (Poor/fair)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/excellent</td>
<td>—.102 (.027)**</td>
<td>.084 (.070)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N=2,076; Two-tailed tests: "p<.05; "p<.01; "p<.001; Family conflict, negative interactions with relatives, and negative interactions with friends, are normalized to have a zero mean and a standard deviation of one; "All models are adjusted for gender, age, marital status, parental status, national origin, and socioeconomic status.

DISCUSSION

Focusing on Asian Americans, this study examines the relative importance of three domains of negative versus positive social exchanges on psychological distress, and how acculturation-related factors modify the association between the negative social exchange and distress. First, it was found that three domains of negative social exchange have differential impact on distress. Despite the inclusion of a wide range of confounders, the effects of family cultural conflict are consistently significant and substantial for the whole sample as well as for the subsamples. This finding suggests that family harmony might be highly valued in Asian culture, and the violation of this widely accepted norm could be particularly frustrating. Prior research has demonstrated that, for Asian Americans, family cultural conflict could be much more than daily hassles; it is often compounded by cultural differences in values and lifestyles among family members. In terms of parent-child relationship, for instance, immigrant parents tend to adopt the host culture at slower rate in comparison with their children (Portes 1997), and this dissonant acculturation might cause intergenerational cultural conflict that is hard to be resolved quickly, thus leading to family dysfunction and substantial psychological consequences for family members. In addition, the intergenerational co-residence living arrangement, which is popular among Asian families, not only increases the frequency of negative encounters, but also makes the exposure to the harmful effects caused by negative encounters long-lasting.

Second, findings of this study also add to a limited but increasing body of evidence that underscores the disproportionate effects of negative social exchanges on individual psychological status (Finch et al. 1999; Rook 1998; Newsom et al. 2003). By measuring positive and negative social exchanges simultaneously and focusing on the long neglected
population—Asian American adults, this study further confirm the possibility that the negative social exchange may be more important than the corresponding positive social exchange in understanding individual psychological distress.

This study also goes beyond the rudimentary question of the relative importance of negative social exchanges by putting this line of argument into a cultural context and examining whether and how acculturation-related factors condition the impact of negative social exchange on distress. Findings suggest that while individuals with poor/fair English skills are more vulnerable towards family cultural conflict, the U.S.-born individuals are more responsive to negative interactions with friends. A couple of speculative thoughts can be offered to explain these findings. First, both negative social exchanges and their detrimental health consequences might be a function of frequency of contacts suggested by prior research (Akiyama et al. 2003): While individuals with more social contacts such as the U.S.-born are likely to develop more psycho-social resources, they may also have increased odds of negative encounters. Sometimes, the detrimental effects of the latter are more potent and longer-lasting than the salutary effects of the former. Second, varying levels of acculturation partially explain the type of networks that individuals have access to and the degree that their networks might affect them. Acculturation can be perceived as a dynamic process involving multiple aspects or stages in which individuals adjust to the host culture (Berry 1990). At earlier stage, immigrants (especially those with poor/fair English skills) are more vulnerable to the unpleasant interactions within family, which might be the only network they have access to and care about; at later stage, they might become increasingly responsive to the negative interactions from other social networks, which they deem increasingly valuable. Nevertheless, it might also be possible that the contingency effect may be less about differential values related to the importance of family and more about what the conflict measure signifies. Among people with poor/fair English, the conflict could be more about poor communications or unable to engage with another family member's social network; whereas among those with good/excellent English, the conflict could be over more “minor” issues of acculturation or preference. In this case, the amount of conflict might be the same, but the experiences are emotionally different. Therefore, it could be possible that the interaction suggests differences in what the support/conflict variables actually measure, rather than the differential value placed on social harmony.

Finally, English-language proficiency, an important indicator of acculturation (Mouw and Xie 1999), suggests an interesting pattern in this study. Compared to Asian American adults with poor/fair English skills, their counterparts reported significantly higher levels of negative interactions with relatives and friends in the bivariate analysis, yet significantly lower levels of distress in the multiple regressions. Several explanations for this finding can be briefly discussed. Asian immigrants with different levels of English ability may have different expectations of interpersonal relationships. Those with poor/fair English, who rely heavily on their family and ethnic community for social interactions, may be more satisfied with their networks (Diwan 2008) and more tolerant for the unpleasant interactions due to lack of alternative networks. For those with good/excellent English, even trivial unpleasant interactions might be unsettling because they may feel more frustrated as a function of being less socially integrated or feel more left out of social activities (an act of omission—a specific type of negative social exchanges). In addition, language barriers may also “prevent recognition of discrimination when it occurs” (Gee and Ponce 2010:888). However, despite that individuals with good/excellent English reported more negative encounters, they enjoyed better mental health, because, for them, the deleterious effects of negative interactions on distress may be offset by the salutary effects of the enlarged interpersonal relationships and the enhanced psycho-social resources. The significant interaction between English-language
proficiency and nativity suggests that the beneficial effects of better language skills are not universal. Only the foreign-born who spoke English well are less likely to be distressed.

Findings of this study are intriguing, but several limitations need to be addressed. First, although this study identified the significant effects as well as the relative importance of negative social exchanges on psychological distress, the underlying mechanisms linking them are still unclear. One study by Schnittker (2002) reveals that Chinese immigrants who primarily use English have higher levels of self-esteem than those who primarily use Chinese. His findings suggest that psychological resources such as self-esteem could be measured and considered as potential mediators linking social exchanges, acculturation, and psychological distress. Another study by Newsom and colleagues (2005) conceptualized social exchanges as interpersonal events or stressors and examined how the appraisal process might underlie the association between social exchanges and psychological health. Their findings disclose the mediating effect of the appraisal process, which helps to explain the asymmetrical effects of negative social exchanges on psychological health. All these potential mediators should be included in future surveys to disentangle the relationship between social exchanges and psychological well-being among Asian Americans.

Second, this study only focuses on Asian American adults. It should be noted that findings may differ in younger population such as adolescents. With less age and socioeconomic variations, the relationships between negative social exchange, acculturation, and distress may be even more pronounced among adolescents. In addition, some other key aspects such as experience of adverse events in life, contextual factors such as ethnic density of the neighborhood, cultural identity, religious involvement, racism experience, and immigration history should also be considered in future surveys to further disentangle the effects of social exchange and acculturation on mental health of Asian Americans.

Finally, given that acculturation is increasingly believed to be a complex, interactive, multifaceted, and bi-dimensional process (Cabassa 2003), future studies need to move beyond the use of indirect or rudimentary indicators of acculturation such as language proficiency and place of birth by including more indicators of behavioral, value, and identity-based acculturation (Schwartz et al. 2010). Meanwhile, in order to gauge respondents’ extent of socialization within or outside their ethnic community, it will be essential for future studies to identify the ethnicity of the friends with whom individuals have experienced negative encounters. Moreover, the findings are largely based on the cross-sectional data, thus limiting our ability to address causal relationships. A mixed-method approach is also needed to disentangle various types of family conflict such as marital conflict and intergenerational conflict and examine how they interact differently with acculturation factors to affect psychological distress.

Despite these limitations, the present work is significant in at least two aspects. First, it examined three pairs of social exchange and compared the relative importance of negative social exchanges over positive ones on psychological distress. Second, it explored two acculturation factors and evaluated their differential impact on the focal relationship. Findings of this study imply the significance of the negative social exchange and the acculturation process in understanding the mental health of Asian American adults. For instance, future policy makers may consider helping younger generations of Asian Americans develop bicultural appraisal and coping strategies by efficiently integrating their ethnic (through family and community socialization) as well as non-ethnic (through school education and peer relationships) sources of social support to enhance their self-esteem and promote their psychological well-being. In a culturally diverse setting like United States, a successful
Acculturation can be achieved by maintaining the state of biculturalism - the healthy balancing between culture of origin and the dominant culture of the host country.
REFERENCES


