

Making Family Work: How Korean American Teens and Parents Navigate Immigrant America

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Making Family Work: How Korean American Teens and Parents Navigate Immigrant America, is a collaborative work between an anthropologist and a psychologist on Korean American immigrant families with adolescent children. From a survey we conducted with 204 Korean American teens and 102 parents in metropolitan Chicago, we selected and followed five families for two years and beyond, exploring the subtitled question – how do Korean American teens and parents navigate immigrant America?

Psychological literature and public discourse on Asian American immigrant families have long fixated on intergenerational cultural conflict between what is “Asian” (to indicate old-fashioned, “traditional”) and what is “American” (to indicate modern, individualistic). In recent years this contrast has been enlivened in the robust discussions of Asian and American parenting. Indeed, with the popularization of the “Tiger Mother” and reports of “foreign” competition from China and India for Ivy League admissions, these culturally-charged modes of parenting—with their implied effects on children’s psychological health—have become part of public discourse throughout the world. However, even in this context of family anxiety over how to parent in, and for, a rapidly transforming global economy, we found that our families were nonetheless most worried about their children’s futures as racial minorities in America.

Both our survey and ethnographic data revealed that acculturation differences between parents and teens – long assumed in the psychological literature to account for distress – did not necessarily make for family hardship. We found instead families struggling together – although not always easily – to figure out how best to navigate an American society that they *all* understood to be racist. This is not to say that the parents did not speak about cultural distinctions or that they were unconcerned about academic achievement. But what these parents anguished over most was how to fortify their children with protective psychological health and character traits that would allow them to succeed. Ethnographic chapters on each family introduce the parenting strategies and adolescents’ responses that were at times defiantly resistant, sometimes accommodating, and at other times enormously appreciative. We examine the delicate negotiations between parents and teens in the intimacy of family life, as we follow them from homes to shopping malls, music recitals, church, workplaces, and school.

Taken together, our survey and ethnographic findings revealed that Korean American parenting is in transition. By observing each family’s struggle towards a

consensual family narrative, we seek to explain provocative disjunctures between measures of personal and family functioning from the survey results. Although family members' survey responses did reveal glimpses of parent-child acculturation gaps and individual distress, by and large they did not conform neatly to the acculturation gap-distress literature. We argue that today we find an increasingly fluid situation in which immigrant parents and adolescents think in transformed ways about how each member of the family can find career fulfillment and psychological health.

The five families reflect a diversity of family dynamics. For example, one family struggles with a son who barely graduated from high school; in another family, parents accommodate a daughter who elected for Korean American Christian social circles against the parents' considerable efforts to exit the ethnic enclave; and in a third family, a daughter eventually abandons her family's plans for her to become a professional musician, but only after years of compliance. Uniting them all, however, is the hard work of family. Even the apparently most well-functioning of the families have weathered nontrivial storms, from suicide threats and petty crime to runaway episodes.

Making Family Work – introducing parents and teens in the thick of the hard work of immigrant family – contributes a rare ethnography of family life to a literature that has largely considered the immigrant and second generation in isolation of one another. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods and focusing on both generations, we make the case for delving deeper into the ideas of immigrant parents and their teens about raising children and growing up in America – ideas that defy easy classification as “Korean” or “American.”