



Attachment, sense of coherence, and mental health among Chinese American college students: Variation by migration status[☆]

Yu-Wen Ying^{a,*}, Peter Allen Lee^b, Jeanne L. Tsai^c

^a*School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, 120 Haviland Hall, CA 94720-7400, USA*

^b*San Jose State University, USA*

^c*Stanford University, USA*

Abstract

Informed by Antonovsky's salutogenic model, the current study examined sense of coherence as a mediator in the relationship of parent and peer attachment and college challenges with depressive symptom level in three groups of Chinese American college students. Due to differential acculturation, we hypothesized that peer relationship would be more salient for the most acculturated American-born Chinese, parent relationship would be more salient for the least acculturated, late arriving immigrants, and both parent and peer attachment would contribute to the well-being of early arriving immigrants who have been significantly exposed to both cultures. A sample of 112 American-born Chinese, 121 early immigrants, and 110 late immigrants completed paper–pencil surveys. Sense of coherence mediated the effect of attachment and college challenges on depressive symptoms in all three groups. Furthermore, our hypotheses regarding American-born Chinese and early immigrants were supported. For late immigrants, both parent and peer attachment predicted sense of coherence, but only parent attachment contributed to depressive symptom level. Implications for mental health interventions are discussed.

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*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ywying10@berkeley.edu (Y.-W. Ying).

1. Introduction

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the American population is highly diverse with regard to ethnicity and migration status. Today, one out of three Americans is non-white (US Census Bureau, 2000) and one out of nine Americans is an immigrant (US Bureau of Census, 2003). Although Asians comprise only 4% of the American population, they are the fastest growing group, having increased in size by 72% between 1990 and 2000 (US Census Bureau, 2002). A major contributor to their growth is migration, as more than one-quarter of immigrants coming to the United States originate from Asia (US Bureau of Census, 2003), and two-thirds of Asian Americans are immigrants (US Bureau of Census, 2002). Consequently, an astounding 88% of Asian American youth are growing up in immigrant-headed households today (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). More research is needed to understand predictors of mental health in this diverse group. The current study contributes to the literature by assessing intra-group variation among Chinese Americans who comprise the largest Asian group. In particular, due to variation in migration status, Chinese Americans differ in acculturation level which may impact how they utilize social relationships to bolster their well-being. Specifically, the study assesses whether parent and/or peer attachment differentially contributes to the depressive symptom level in early immigrants (those who arrived by age 12), late immigrants (those who arrived after age 12), and American-born Chinese.

1.1. Significance

The study is significant for several reasons. First, as parent and peer attachment varies in importance in Chinese and American cultures (to be discussed below), it is important to empirically examine whether Chinese American college students with varying degrees of acculturation utilize these relationships differentially to sustain their well-being. Second, assessing variation in the predictors of depressive symptom level across three groups of Chinese Americans allows for the development of subgroup-specific, culturally competent interventions. Finally, this study also makes a contribution to the literature on sense of coherence (to be discussed below) which has been shown to mediate the effect of parent and peer attachment on depressive symptom level in Chinese American college students (Ying, Lee, & Tsai, *in press*). However, no research has examined whether the relative role of parent and peer attachment on sense of coherence and depressive symptoms varies among early immigrant, late immigrant, and American-born Chinese.

1.2. Sense of coherence

The study is informed by Antonovsky's salutogenic model (1979, 1987) which proposes that physical and mental health are primarily determined by sense of coherence, defined as "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that 1. stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable (comprehensibility); 2. the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli (manageability); and 3. these demands are challenges worthy of investment and engagement (meaningfulness)" (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 19). As such, sense of coherence is an internal resource that bolsters physical and mental health. Antonovsky (1987) also

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