

Family Life Course Development Framework Applied: Understanding the Experiences of Vietnamese Immigrant Families

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Abstract

Baumrind's (1971) conceptualization of authoritarian parenting style has been utilized to characterize the parenting practices of Vietnamese American parents, who are known to practice strict discipline and have high expectations of their children. Research has documented the success of Vietnamese parents utilizing authoritarian practices with their children, especially in academic endeavors. Yet, research has tended to generalize the success of authoritarian practices for all Vietnamese American youth. There is a gap in the literature on the success of developmental outcomes for Vietnamese American adolescents. The point of interest is to investigate whether authoritarian parenting practices are effective for Vietnamese American adolescents as they once were as children. For adolescents, forming an identity is an important developmental task. Adolescents are influenced by their peers and question the traditional values of their families, which can lead to intergenerational conflict. Therefore, it is hypothesized that Vietnamese American adolescents who are more acculturated to the dominant culture, with parents who adhere strictly to authoritarian parenting practices, may experience higher levels of family conflict. Therefore, exploration of how authoritarian parenting practices can affect Vietnamese American adolescent's developmental processes, which include but are not limited to areas of academic success, acculturation levels, and mental health, is important.

Keywords: authoritarian, parenting practices, adolescents, intergenerational, developmental

1. Statement of the Problem/Phenomenon of Interest

Across many disciplines of studies, there has been a major focus on the concept and process of acculturation and how that process contributes to intergenerational differences among immigrant families. Since acculturation is widely applicable, the concept has been studied and applied across a variety of cultures and populations.

According to Costigan and Korzyna (2011), immigrating for families can represent a positive and hopeful time. In the same respect, immigration can also represent variety of new challenges that can create stress among families. This process of change for immigrant families has been conceptualized as acculturation, which is "defined as the changes that take place when two cultures come into continuous first-hand contact" (Costigan & Korzyna, 2011; as cited in Berry, 2003). Immigrants can at times have a difficult time trying to maintain a balance between adhering to personal cultural traditions while learning and adapting to the traditions of a new culture.

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Naturally, parenting and parenting style becomes highlighted during the acculturation process for immigrant parents and their families. Because parenting is a salient factor in raising children, it is critical to continue studying the experiences of immigrant parents, parenting efficacy, and how immigrant adolescents' perceptions of their parents' efficacy affects their acculturation process.

Specifically for the purposes of this course paper and the future direction of my dissertation, the concept of acculturation and parenting efficacy will be applied to Vietnamese immigrant families their children. The problem of interest is going to focus on studying the dynamics of culture, immigration status, and parent efficacy and how Vietnamese American adolescent immigrants' perceptions of those variables have affected their acculturation experience in the United States as second generation (as operationalized in the SL-ASIA scale as being born in the United States and parent is born in a country outside of the United States; Suinn, Khoo, & Ahuna, 1995).

2. Review of Literature

"Acculturation theory argues that attitudes and behaviors related to participating in the new culture and to retaining involvement with the culture of origin have implications for long-term adaptation" (Costigan & Korzyrna, 2011, p. 183; as cited in Berry, 2003). Based off the acculturation theory, the implications of acculturation can affect long-term adaptation, which is directly related to the problem of interest presently which is - *how does immigrant Vietnamese parents' parenting efficacy affect their children's acculturation experience growing up in the United States?*

Long-term effects of acculturation can include by are not limited to psychological distress, difficulty dealing with coping with stress and demands, alter emotional well-being among immigrants (Costigan & Korzyrna, 2011). Also, parenting styles have been shown to affect children's interactions and views of life (Ferguson, Hagaman, Maurer, Mathews, & Peng, 2013; as cited in Erikson; 1959).

Bandura's self-efficacy theory plays a role in understanding the relationship between parenting efficacy and the acculturation adjustment of adolescents (Costigan & Korzyrna, 2011). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is the belief or expectation that oneself will be able to complete certain tasks to achieve certain outcomes (p. 193). Psychological measures like level of motivation, setting and achieving goals, being self-aware, and being self-critical create and increase the level a person's self-efficacy level (Bandura, 1977). In relation to parent efficacy, as parents set and achieve more, the success continues to increase their level of self-efficacy as parents. According to Costigan and Korzyrna (2011), parents who are more acculturated may be more successful, which result in parents having a stronger sense of self-efficacy compare to parents who are less acculturated.

According to the US Census Bureau of 2002, Vietnamese Americans constitute the fastest growing Asian group in the United States. Therefore, focus on this particular ethnic group is growing increasingly important, especially concerning in the area of parenting efficacy and acculturation because research is still lacking in these areas for Vietnamese Americans (Cheung & Nguyen, 2007). Of the research available on Vietnamese families and parenting, studies have highlighted three characteristics of Vietnamese parenting style. These three characteristics include upholding tradition, explicit parental expectations, and strict obedience to parents and older generations (elders). Cheung and Nguyen (2007) referenced a study completed in 1991 by Pomerleau and colleagues, which found that Vietnamese immigrants strongly believed that their authoritarian parenting techniques would reinforce the values that meant the most, which were centrality around the family, total respect to parents, and also submissive to parents. Due to the intergenerational and cultural conflict between Vietnamese parents and children, Vietnamese children are sometimes unable to balance their bicultural identity which may alter their perception of their parents' parenting efficacy (Cheung & Nguyen, 2007).

In relation to the Vietnamese culture, the culture is heavily based on the ideology of Confucius (Vu & Rook, 2013; as cited in Matsuoka, 1990; Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Rosenthal, Ranieri, & Klimidis, 1996).

These influences are apparent in the way Vietnamese families function and carry out family relationships. Values that Vietnamese families uphold are hierarchy, stability, filial piety, patriarchy, loyalty, and respect. Maintenance of hierarchy and stability is of utmost importance within the structure of a Vietnamese family. In terms of filial piety, not only is loyalty and respect for parents and older generations expected, children are also expected to become educated, established, and secure so that they can take care of their parents when they grow old (Vu & Rook, 2013). Another predominant characteristic of the Vietnamese culture is patriarchy. Vietnamese men (fathers, brothers, etc.) are considered to be the authorities within the family – the person who makes the decisions, provides for the family, and enforces the expectations of each member. Because the men are the decision makers, the women become the caretakers of the family and are expected to complete household chores and rear the children. With the patriarchal system intact, the roles of Vietnamese men and women are influenced, which ultimately affects the parenting styles of Vietnamese parents (Vu & Rook, 2013).

How Vietnamese children perceive their parents' cultural expectations are placed at another level because they are also trying to maintain a balance between adhering to cultural values and embracing the new culture being raised in another country than their parents. This perception may or may not lead to intergenerational conflict (Vu & Rook, 2013), which sets the premise for how children of immigrants experience acculturation based on their perception of their parents' parenting style. According to Vu and Rook (2013), Vietnamese parents tend to enact authoritarian style parenting, which upholds more to the traditional values of the Vietnamese culture regardless of how long they have been living in the United States. On the other hand, Vietnamese second generation children tend to enact more of the values of the United States culture and society, which is seen "rebellious" (as cited in Nguyen & Williams, 1989). As Vietnamese children acculturate more to the dominant culture, it becomes more apparent that they are acculturating to the United States at a faster rate than their parents. Consequently, this acculturation level causes intergenerational conflict between children, parents, grandparents, etc. Basing off patriarchal values, Vietnamese girls are placed on a higher level of expectation, so when values clash, they seem to be "rebellious" more than Vietnamese boys (Vu & Rook, 2013).

The contrast between the Vietnamese culture and United States culture is mainly how each culture views each relationship. Vietnamese culture, like many Asian cultures, value harmony and collectivism whereas United States' culture value independence and individualism. Children are deemed rebellious when they enact more independent values and focus on themselves rather than remaining obedient and loyal to the family (Vu & Rook, 2013; as cited in Kwak & Berry, 2001; Nguyen & Williams, 1989).

In further depth, Chao and Tseng (2002) highlighted several themes that characterize Asian parenting. The first theme the researchers highlighted was the theme of the family as center. Family as center involves family relying on one another and making decisions for the best of the family. The second that was highlighted was the theme of control and strictness. A part of control and strictness, Asians parents can be described as being extremely harsh and critical. The third and final theme of Asian parenting is the focus and importance of education (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Cheung & Nguyen, 2007). With more and more generations of Vietnamese Americans being born and raised in the United States, the attitudes of traditional Vietnamese parents are beginning to change. With these changes, values about how to raise children, being more accepting of divorce, being more comfortable with having women become the main provider for the family (Cheung & Nguyen, 2007; as cited in Tran 1998). With these changes, further exploration needs to be continued about how Vietnamese parents' parenting styles are changing from authoritarian to what kind of style and how this parenting change is affecting their children's acculturation level.

3. Application of Theoretical Framework & Clinical Implications

Through the lens of the family life course development framework that states that "... the family is composed of social roles and relationships that change with each stage of the family", the topic of Vietnamese immigrant families and parenting styles continues to be of interest (White & Klein, 2002, p. 125). Briefly, the family life course development framework is as follows:

According to White and Klein (2002), family life course development focuses more on the stage of family, rather than the numerical age of each family member as they move through their life course.

As this applies to Vietnamese immigrant families, these families like other families move through the fluid stages of the family life course. What is unique to these families though is that a part of their family stage involved moving to a foreign country and starting an entire new life and having to maintain a balance between two cultures.

What is unique to this framework is that it incorporates certain elements – history, time, changes of family roles as social changes occurs, and how time affects change. Within the life course framework, there are three theoretical approaches that emphasize life course in their respective ways. These three approaches are: individual life span theory (which focuses on the physical and cognitive development of an individual as it interacts with the development of the family), family development theory (which focuses on the timing and sequence of developmental events of the family), and life course theory (which focuses on the concepts of time and change and how these variables interact with individual and family development). Although these three approaches are different in their respective ways, they do all honor three things, which are: how do family factors affect the physical development of individual members, how does time affect change within families and its individual members, and how individual change is affected by factors like birth era, historical era, etc. (White & Klein, 2002).

Vietnamese immigrant families encompass all of these aspects. As these families move through their life course, individual members, like the children, growing up being affected by the experiences of their family – which is identified as acculturation. Their acculturation experiences can manifest in different ways and when they are in college, many for the first time are faced with how to uphold their family values while trying to interact with a new environment, new friends, and making new identities. Time is also an important factor within Vietnamese families. There is always a sense of pressure within the families to contribute and remain loyal to the family – whether that's through education, contributing to the family, rearing children, or taking care of the elders. Birth era is an extremely important factor with Vietnamese immigrant families. The parents are a part of the Vietnam War refugee era and their children are considered to be a part of the new first generation born in the United States era whom are having to live bi-culturally. How that dynamic plays out is the interest of my research.

In addition to highlighting the changes that occur within a family, family life course framework also acknowledges that social norms and expectations influence the timing of individual development. Norms and expectations develop and exist, which end up dictating what events are considered on time or off time (White & Klein, 2002). For example, if an adult marries for the first time in their late fifties, it would be considered off time according to U.S. norms because there is an expectation that most single adults marry and began rearing families in their twenties. With Vietnamese immigrant families, the balance between what is expected of them within the Vietnamese culture and what is expected of them in the United States culture can cause a lot stress within individual members as well as cause intergenerational conflict.

In addition to the family life cycle itself, another concept that is applicable within this framework is *family career*.

A family's career usually consists of several careers – the marital career, the parental career, the sibling career, the educational career, the job career, etc. This framework can be conceptualized on a different level than life course approach due to that it focuses on analysis of the family and how the careers of the family not only affect the individuals but also how they affect the system and change over a family's life course. Despite the culture differences, the family career and sub-careers are applicable to the Vietnamese immigrant families. What the framework does not address that Vietnamese culture is more collectivistic, so in terms of analysis of these families' careers, culture has to be taken into context.

Like any other framework or theory, the family life course development functions on several different assumptions. The first assumption states that development processes are going to happen regardless of what is going on in life so it is important to understand these processes within families (White & Klein, 2002). Essentially, this assumption emphasizes that the family and individual roles will change with time just as the norms and expectations of society will change with time. Understanding that change is going to happen helps to understand how families traverse through stages in life. With Vietnamese immigrant families, this assumption can be delicate because it depends on the level of acculturation of the parents and their children, which affects how they deal with the norms and expectations of the United States culture. For parents who are more strict and traditional, then they are raising their children based more on Vietnamese norms and expectations rather than the dominant culture. The second assumption states that the family has to be analyzed at all levels.

That is, societal norms, community norms, class norms, etc. are all going to affect the family through their life (White & Klein, 2002). Levels build upon levels to make an entire system. First, you start with individual members and together they constitute a family. A group of families together constitute a neighborhood. A group of neighborhoods constitute a community. A group of communities constitute a city... And the levels keep on going. In context, families cannot be analyzed out of the context and levels they are integrated in. Vietnamese immigrant families are unique in that not only do they have to be analyzed within the levels and structures of American society, they are also judged and analyzed within the levels and structures of Vietnamese communities in America. Again, the role of acculturation plays a critical part in how these families can be analyzed and deemed what norms are important to them. A third assumption is that "time is multidimensional" (White & Klein, 2002, p. 127). This assumption translates that time is not only measured by clocks, calendars, days, etc. Time can be measured by events like anniversaries, graduation, having your first child, etc. People remember these events more by their significance or transition rather than the actual time of the event. For example, people may associate their wedding as a fond memory and the last time they had together before life changed when kids came into the picture. Like any other families, Vietnamese immigrant families value family as being the center so events like weddings, graduations, having children, etc. are all events that stand the test of time.

Within these assumptions are major concepts that are highlighted. According to White and Klein (2002), the first concept is family change and development. Change and development are not only dictated by the individuals and families, but also dictated by age and social expectations. Within the expectations of families, there are a set of positions, norms, and roles that form help delineate a structure for a family. Positions in families include mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, and son. Beyond those roles are cousins, aunt, uncles, grandfathers, etc. Norms are the expectations attached to the positions of the. Furthermore, roles are dictated by the norms and expectations of society – like a mother is supposed to be nurturing while a father is supposed to be the provider. The second concept is the concept of family stage, which is defined as a period of time that is distinctly different than another stage in a family's development (White & Klein, 2002). Transitions are shifts that occur from one family stage to another.

Developmental tasks are actions or events that link one stage of life to the next (White & Klein, 2002). For example, when a baby starts walking and begins speaking, it is transitioning from infancy to toddlerhood.

Again, all these concepts are applicable to Vietnamese immigrant families, but the culture component of analysis is missing. Since Vietnamese families are mostly patriarchal, it will be predominantly seen that the fathers are the head of the households, mothers are the nurturing ones, and children will be the utmost respectful and obedient to their parents. Even with time, these roles do not change for family members. Children always remain respectful and obedient to their parents no matter how old they are.

The term family life cycle was used predominantly when the framework was first utilized, but eventually the term was transitioned into family life course (White & Klein, 2002). The reason being that when the term cycle is used there seems to be a progressive end, but with families the cycle of life never ends. Variations across the life course are subtle changes in the norms and expectations of society that change from time to time, culture to culture, etc. When families choose to enact different values and behaviors from what is considered the norm, they are considered deviant. For example, society is becoming more accepting of GLBT population, but those couples who have chosen to get married, some people are still not accepting of because it is still not the "norm" within the United States culture. Though, as more and more gay couples are marrying and more states making it legal for them to do so, the deviant behaviors are becoming more of the norm; which makes sense that when families are considered deviant, it could represent a time of change and variation. As more and more families choose to do what is not considered norm, what their behaviors they are choosing to enact will eventually become the norm and the cycle will continue to occur between variations and set norms (White & Klein, 2002). As the second and further generations of Vietnamese Americans continue to become immersed in the American culture, the deviant ones will become more and more, to eventually become what is normal in Vietnamese American Culture. For example, as more Vietnamese American college students are dating outside the Vietnamese culture, the more that do it, eventually in some years this will become the norm.

In addition to the major concepts that form the basis of the life course framework, there are several propositions that are taken into consideration to analyze the family as a unit across time. These propositions are:

"(1) Family development is a group process regulated by societal timing and sequencing norms; (2) if a family or individual is "out of sequence" with the normative ordering of family events, the probability of later life disruptions is increased; (3) within the family group, family members create internal family norms; (4) interactions within the family group are regulated by the social norms constructing family roles; (5) transitions from one family stage to another are predicted by the current stage and the duration of time spent in that stage; and (6) individuals and families systematically deviate from institutional family norms to adjust their behavior to other institutional norms, such as work and education" (White & Klein, 2002, pp. 134-138).

Essentially, these propositions reiterate what the concepts and assumptions of the life course framework already state. These propositions are just taken into consideration when analyzing the family as a unit in context of their systems.

Concerning epistemology, I chose this specific framework to reflect on my research focus with Vietnamese immigrant families because I believe the philosophy of post-positivism can be applied to both the families as well as the life course framework itself. The family life course development framework has several big "T's" to it, but it seems to provide enough room for it to be fluid and applicable across different populations. In that sense, with the framework providing room for little "t's" and different interpretation, I would place the framework within the philosophical continuum of a post-positivist approach.

Ironically, just as I would place the framework itself as post-positive, I would also place Vietnamese immigrant families, especially the children of these families, on a continuum of post-positive approach.

There are a lot of respectable traditions and values that Vietnamese culture still upholds and practices – these are considered the big “T’s.” With the second born generation and the generations following, depending on their acculturation experiences and the perceptions of the parents’ parenting style, there seems to be a potential for change in culture and tradition. Possibly, these newer generations are questioning both the big and little “t’s” of the culture in order to experience the best of both worlds being Vietnamese American.

4. Pragmatics of Social Justice

In terms of social justice, there are several concepts that the life course framework can be applicable to (Bengtson & Allen, 1993).

These concepts include: marriage, birth, death, the social leader, and migration). These concepts are fluid in that they are specific to the period of time and birth cohort. For example, with the current Generation Y, our expected life spans are longer due to better medicine and healthier food options, whereas young adult generations a hundred years ago were expected to live to their forties or fifties. In relation to the life course framework, these concepts are important because they are related not only to the period of time and birth cohort, but they are also indicators of social change; with social change comes changes in social justice.

With Vietnamese immigrant families, the life course development framework is applicable as well as the pragmatics of social justice that the framework covers. With Vietnamese immigrant parents and their children who are born in the United States, birth cohort is an important factor. Vietnamese immigrants parents (who born and raised their college children in the United States) are considered to be a part of the cohort known as survivors and refugees of the Vietnam War. They were raised in a traditional Vietnamese household and values. Whereas, their children who are born in the United States as considered to be a part of the second generation Vietnamese Americans who are raised trying to balance a bicultural life. The social issues that can applied to these families are the unique aspects of honoring both of the birth cohorts and their experiences. How as a society can we honor the survivors of such a traumatic, deathly war? How as a society can we honor their children as they grow up in the United States trying to honor their parents while trying to fit in as most American college students try to do.

5. Limitations and Critiques

One of the major critiques of the life course framework is its emphasis on the term development (White & Klein, 2002). When interpreting the term development, most associate it with child development, which is progressive and can be measured in stages like teething, to growing teeth, to crawling, to walking, etc. With the family unit, the term development becomes vague because the family’s development over the life course cannot be measured in stages. There are norms and expectations for families to experience certain events and things, but at that it still cannot be measured by biological stages or a specific time. Another major critique of this framework is the misconception of behaviors being used to frame what are the existing norms and expectations are in society (White & Klein, 2002).

This statement is two-fold because it is hard to delineate where the beginning occurs – do the behaviors infer the norms or do the norms infer the behaviors? A third critique is that the life course framework is not culturally sensitive. The propositions and assumptions are stated as if it each culture honors the same norms, expectations, and stages for families, but it does not clarify that these concepts can change from culture to culture (White & Klein, 2002). A fourth critique of the framework is how it measures family development. It is written so that family development seems to be measureable by time, when in reality family development is continuous and gradual.

Lastly, this framework is criticized with its range in scope – it not only lacks in culturally sensitive time but has not changed with time as people have changed over the last fifty years (White & Klein, 2002).

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