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Misconduct Among Chinese American Adolescents

The Role of Acculturation, Family Obligation, and Autonomy Expectations

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This study examined the relation between acculturation and misconduct among Chinese American adolescents. The sample included 309 adolescents (mean age = 14.7 years, SD = 0.71; 54% female), recruited from two high schools in an ethnically diverse, urban city on the West Coast. Findings showed that acculturation (i.e., generational status and U.S. and Chinese cultural involvements) did not predict misconduct. But specific cultural values (i.e., family obligation and autonomy expectations) did. Specifically, youth with stronger family obligation and later autonomy expectations engaged in less misconduct. Such findings suggest that examining specific and developmentally-salient cultural values may be especially helpful in explaining why some Chinese Americans engage in misconduct.

Keywords: acculturation; misconduct; Chinese American adolescents; family obligation

There is much concern about the growing percentages of Asian Americans engaging in problem behavior (Choi & Lahey, 2006; Kim & Goto, 2000; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), as such behavior indicates unsuccessful socialization (Feldman, Rosenthal, Mont-Reynaud, Leung, & Lau, 1991) and predicts later problems as adults (McCord, 1990). Problem behaviors have also predicted adolescent depression and somatic symptoms (Willgerodt & Thompson, 2006). Problem behavior is defined here, as a range of activities that include misconduct, substance use, delinquency, and risky sexual behavior (McCord, 1990).

Most studies of problem behavior have focused on Blacks, Latinos, and Whites; few have examined Asian Americans, let alone disaggregated subgroups (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipinos). This oversight may be due to the perception that Asians are model minorities, and thus, experience few psychosocial problems (Le & Stockdale, 2005; Leong, Chao, & Hardin, 2000). But such perceptions are problematic because they disregard the diversity and struggles among Asians (Goto, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2003; Nguyen, 2006).

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Indeed, studies have suggested that problem behaviors are increasingly prevalent among Asian American youth (Choi & Lahey, 2006; Kim & Goto, 2000; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Although some studies found that Asian American youth engaged in lower rates of problem behavior (e.g., alcohol use and smoking) than other ethnic groups (Chen, Unger, Cruz, & Johnson, 1999), other studies found that Asian American (i.e., Chinese American) youth engaged in similar rates of problem behavior (e.g., stole from a store, damaged school property, painted graffiti, used car without permission) than European American peers (Chen, Greenberger, Dong, Lester, & Guo, 1998; Willgerodt & Thompson, 2006). Still, other studies found that Asian American youth reported higher aggressive (e.g., physical fighting, seriously injuring someone) and nonaggressive (e.g., vandalism, theft) delinquent offenses than their White and Black peers (respectively)—and that Asian American females reported higher nonaggressive offenses than White females (Choi & Lahey, 2006). These findings challenge the notion of model minority and show that problem behavior is a struggle for some.

Overall, the literature on problem behavior has often overlooked Asian American adolescents. And, although the few studies that do include this population acknowledge the importance of culture, they have not explicitly measured culture or have measured culture (e.g., acculturation) using only single indices/proxies. We address these gaps by focusing on Chinese American adolescents, by incorporating a detailed measure of acculturation, and by including specific cultural values (i.e., family obligation and autonomy expectations) to predict problem behavior.

We draw from ecological systems theories to understand problem behaviors, as such theories highlight the importance of micro-level (such as family and peer groups) and macro-level contexts (such as culture; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 1996). Studies focusing on micro-level contexts, for example, have shown that parental monitoring buffered problem behavior (e.g., Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2006) and delinquent peers worsened such behavior (e.g., Barnes et al., 2006; Dishion, McCond, & Poulin, 1999). In this study, we examine how cultural context—as it is internalized via acculturation, family obligation, and autonomy expectations—predicts problem behavior. We examine specifically, misconduct, operationalized as antisocial (aggressive) behaviors directed towards harming others or others’ property.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons and Misconduct

Cross-cultural studies comparing groups in different countries have shown that youth in the United States and Australia engaged in more misconduct than those in Asia (Feldman et al., 1991; Greenberger, Chen, Beam, Wang, & Dong, 2000; Jessor et al., 2003; Weisz, Chaiyasit, Weiss, Eastman & Jackson, 1995). U.S. adolescents, for example, engaged in more risk-taking behaviors, substance use, physical aggression, theft, and school misconduct than those in China and Korea (Greenberger et al., 2000). And U.S. and Australian adolescents engaged in more antisocial behavior, school misconduct, and status offenses than those in Hong Kong (Feldman et al., 1991). Furthermore, cross-cultural studies comparing groups in the same country (the United States) have shown that Asian American youth sometimes engaged in lower or similar rates of problem behavior than other ethnic groups—and sometimes higher rates (Chen et al., 1999; Choi & Lahey, 2006; Willgerodt & Thompson, 2006).
Researchers have often used cultural explanations to account for the differences in rates of problem behavior. They suggest that individualistic cultures (such as American) are more conducive to acting out behaviors (i.e., expressing deviance), whereas collectivistic cultures (such as Chinese; Feldman et al., 1991; Greenberger et al., 2000) are more likely to suppress socially disruptive behaviors because of their emphasis on interdependence rather than independence of self and others. Indeed, sanctions against problem behavior may be especially strong in Chinese culture where maintaining interpersonal harmony and social order (interdependence) are the main goals of socialization (Chen, Rubin, Li & Li, 1999).

However, one limitation is that, for some of these studies, culture was not explicitly operationalized or measured (e.g., Weisz, et al., 1995). This omission makes it difficult, if not impossible, to determine what aspect of culture (or whether it was culture and not conceptual or methodological inequivalence) that led to the differences (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006). In our study, we explicitly measure culture by assessing acculturation, family obligation, and autonomy expectations.

**Acculturation and Misconduct**

In this study, we define acculturation as the changes that occur in behaviors, values, attitudes when an individual of one culture comes into prolonged contact with one or more cultures (Berry, 2003). Overall (with a few exceptions), acculturation studies have shown that youth more assimilated to the U.S. (or Western) culture, were more likely to engage in misconduct. Studies of Asian American youth, for example, found that those who were more assimilated (as measured by language use or generation status) were more likely to engage in risky (e.g., cigarette smoking, slashing tires, breaking something on purpose) and delinquent behaviors (e.g., slashing tires, breaking something on purpose) than peers who were less assimilated (Chen et al., 1999; Nagasawa, Qian, & Wong, 2001). In a national longitudinal study, Asian American youth and those from other immigrant groups who were more assimilated (i.e., of later generation) engaged in more violence, delinquency, and drug use than their foreign-born/first-generation peers (Harris, 1999). Moreover, the longer their stay in the United States, the worse their risk behaviors. In an ethnographic study of Vietnamese American youth, findings showed that youth with greater U.S. involvement (such as liking rap music) and low ethnic involvement were more likely to engage in delinquency (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In a study of Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian/Mien, and Vietnamese youth, youth who were more assimilated, (i.e., endorsed individualistic values) associated more with delinquent peers, and those who associated more with delinquent peers engaged in more antisocial behavior (Le & Stockdale, 2005). Finally, a study of Hong Kong youth found that those who were more Westernized engaged in greater misconduct (Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008). In sum, these studies suggest that greater assimilation to U.S. (or Western) culture is associated with greater misconduct and especially when youth are not involved in their traditional culture.

In contrast, in research with Chinese Canadian youth, those who were more assimilated (as measured by Suinn-Lew Acculturation scale) were not more likely to engage in delinquency (Crane, Ngai, Larson, & Hafen, 2005). And a study of Mexican and Vietnamese American youth found that greater U.S. involvement (assimilation) was negatively related
to delinquency for Mexican and Vietnamese youth (Nguyen & Dinh, 2009). Those who were more involved in the U.S. culture were less likely to report delinquent attitudes. There were also complex interactions between U.S. and ethnic involvements. For instance, U.S. involvement predicted less delinquency only when ethnic involvement was low. And ethnic involvement predicted more delinquency only when U.S. involvements were high (Nguyen & Dinh, 2009). Despite these few studies, however, most suggest that greater assimilation is linked to greater misconduct.

But one limitation, with several of these studies is that despite its multifaceted and complex nature, acculturation was measured unidimensionally (i.e., assuming that adolescents who are more assimilated to mainstream culture adhere less to their traditional culture, which may be inaccurate) and/or by using simple proxies such as generational status, language use, and years in the United States. Using a unidimensional measure of acculturation is problematic because it does not allow for the possibility/reality that as individuals become more integrated into mainstream culture, they can, at the same time, maintain their traditional culture (Berry, 2003). And using proxies are problematic because they fail to capture the complexities of acculturation (Zane & Mak, 2003). As Nguyen, Messé, and Stollak (1999) explained,

Single indices may be suspect because of their content validity. The problem with single indices lies in presuming that generational status, or language preference, or any one, single factor can fully account for the multifaceted complexities of acculturation. At best, such indices are proxy measures where acculturation is implied rather than ascertained directly. (p. 7)

To address these limitations, we operationalized acculturation using a bidimensional approach (i.e., assessing both U.S. and Chinese cultural involvement), in addition to using a proxy measure (generational status). Our bidimensional measure allows each dimension to have predictive power independent of the other (Costigan & Su, 2004; Nguyen & von Eye, 2002; Nguyen et al., 1999; Ryder et al., 2000) and to differentially predict adjustment (Costigan & Dokis, 2006a; Nguyen et al., 1999; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

Based on previous literature, we hypothesized that first-generation adolescents would report less misconduct than second- or later generation adolescents. We also hypothesized that those who are more involved in Chinese culture (in terms of their behaviors, values, and attitudes), would engage in less misconduct. And, conversely, those who are more involved in mainstream U.S. culture would engage in more misconduct. In addition to the main effects, we tested for interactions between Chinese and U.S. involvement. Based on past findings, we hypothesized that Chinese American adolescents who are high on U.S. involvement and low on ethnic involvement would report greater misconduct.

Specific Cultural Values and Misconduct

In addition to examining acculturation measured broadly, it is also important to examine specific cultural domains (e.g., cultural values such as family obligation; Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2004; Costigan & Dokis, 2006a, 2006b; Zane & Mak, 2003). Specific domains help to pinpoint what element explains the outcome of interest. Moreover, such specificity acknowledges the fact that acculturative change does not occur universally across an individual’s life, but to a greater degree in some areas than others (Arends-Tóth
& van de Vijver, 2004). In this study, we examine two cultural values that are developmentally relevant during adolescence: family obligation and autonomy expectations.

**Family obligation.** Family obligation is defined as a set of values and behaviors involving the support, assistance and respect that children provide to their family (Fuligni, 1998; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). For many immigrants and ethnic minorities, family obligations are central and especially so during adolescence as children become more able to contribute to the family (Fuligni, 1998; Fuligni et al., 1999; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). Findings have shown that youths’ sense of family obligation is inversely linked with problem behavior. For example, youth high in *filial piety*¹ (a concept akin to family obligation) were less likely to use alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes (Unger et al., 2002). Furthermore, Latino youth high in *familism*² (an aspect of Latino culture that is akin to family obligation) reported less alcohol use (Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000). These findings suggest that adolescents with a strong sense of family obligation tend to avoid behaviors that bring shame to their families (Ho, 1994). Thus, we hypothesize that adolescents who endorse greater family obligation would report less misconduct.

**Autonomy expectations.** A central feature of adolescence is the development of autonomy or individuation from parents (e.g., becoming more self-reliant, making own decisions; Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Autonomy expectations is defined here as youth’s expectations about the appropriate age at which they should be allowed to engage in certain behaviors, such as decide who to spend their time with, how late they stay out at night, or whether they tell their parents their whereabouts (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1990). Given the U.S.’s emphasis on individualism (Chen et al., 1999; Feldman et al., 1991), youth who are more involved in U.S. culture may be more likely to expect autonomy at an earlier age than peers who are less involved. These earlier autonomy expectations may be linked to greater problem behavior. One study in Hong Kong, for example, found that Asian and Western (from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe) youth who endorsed early expectations were more likely to engage in misconduct, ranging from minor behavior problems (e.g., tardiness in school, being in the wrong place) to potentially serious ones (e.g., vandalism, fighting, stealing; Stewart et al., 1998). This finding may be because youth’s expectations for early autonomy indicate an orientation towards participating in youth culture and a premature dismissal of parental control (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991), which, in turn, could set the stage for problem behavior. Thus, we hypothesize that youth with earlier expectations of autonomy would engage in greater misconduct than those with later expectations. To mirror our analyses of acculturation, we also tested for an interaction between family obligation and autonomy expectations in predicting misconduct.

**Method**

**Setting**

We sampled from San Francisco, an ethnically diverse city with 43.3% European Americans, 33% Asian and Pacific Islanders, 14% Latino Americans, 6% African
Americans, 2.5% mixed race, 0.2% Native Americans, and 0.6% other (U.S. Census of the Bureau, 2003). Among the Asian and Pacific Islander group, the Chinese are the largest group (65.8%) followed by 16.5% Filipino, 4.2% Japanese, 3.3% Korean, 3.3% Vietnamese, 1.3% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 3.3% other Asian (U.S. Census of the Bureau, 2003). San Francisco has a rich history of Chinese immigration, starting in the mid 1800s. In the 1960s, there was a large wave of Chinese immigrants to the United States, and in particular to San Francisco. Most of these immigrants were from Hong Kong. Today, San Francisco is a culturally vibrant city with a very strong Chinese community. The Chinese community enjoys institutional support in the form of Chinese churches, language schools, and community youth centers. Furthermore, a vibrant Chinatown (the oldest Chinatown in the United States) provides a focal point for community members (Wong, 1998). In terms of the larger, national context, Asian Americans constitute about five percent of the U.S. population, of which the Chinese are the largest (24%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Sample

We recruited adolescents from two high schools with a large Chinese population (where more than half of the student bodies were from Chinese immigrant backgrounds, \( n = 1,366 \)). The participation rate was 23% of the Chinese student population. Overall, the school contexts reflected a diversity of ethnic groups, as did the broader community, but the schools included an overrepresentation of Asians, and in particular, students of Chinese backgrounds. To achieve an adequate sample size with sufficient power for multivariate analyses, we targeted these two schools precisely because they had a higher proportion of Chinese students. Thus, these two schools do not represent the ethnic distribution of the broader San Francisco community. These unique school and community contexts must be kept in mind when interpreting the results of the study and considering its generalizability.

After we obtained parental consent and adolescent assent, we gave adolescents the study questionnaires. Adolescents completed these self-report questionnaires in a classroom after school and were compensated $15 for their participation. All study materials and procedures were approved by the first author’s university institutional review board.

The sample included 309 9th and 10th grade Chinese American adolescents ranging in age from 13 to 17 years (\( M = 14.7 \) years, \( SD = 0.71 \); 54% female) who self-identified as having a Chinese background. The number of adolescents by age and grade was the following: 13 years (\( n = 6 \)), 14 years (\( n = 102 \)), 15 years (\( n = 165 \)), 16 years (\( n = 32 \)), 17 years (\( n = 4 \)), 9th grade (\( n = 119 \)), 10th grade (\( n = 183 \)). Seven adolescents did not report their grade. Of the adolescents, 29% were first generation, born in China (\( n = 54 \)), Hong Kong (\( n = 19 \)), Taiwan (\( n = 3 \)), Macaw (\( n = 4 \)), Vietnam (\( n = 2 \)), Thailand (\( n = 1 \)), Germany (\( n = 1 \)), South America (\( n = 1 \)), and Myanmar (Burma; \( n = 1 \)). A total of 64% were second generation (\( n = 216 \)), born in the United States, with parents born outside of the United States. The remaining 8% were third generation or later (\( n = 24 \)), born in the United States with parents who were also born in the United States. One adolescent did not report his/her generational status or where he/she was born. On average, the first generation lived in the United States for 5.67 years (\( SD = 4.08 \)) and the second and later generation for 14.6 years (\( SD = 0.84 \)). Most of the adolescents (91%) grew up with both parents and most had at least one sibling (89%). There was variation in parental education attainment: elementary school
or less (2% of parents), middle school (10%), some high school (12%), high school graduate (29%), some college or university (22%), and college or university graduate (26%).

Measures

The acculturation scale (Nguyen et al., 1999). The original scale measured the level of involvement in U.S. culture and in the Vietnamese culture separately. We adapted this measure to our Chinese sample by substituting the word “Vietnamese” with “Chinese.” This 50-item scale is based on a bidimensional view of acculturation and is operationalized in terms of attitudes, behaviors, and values along two dimensions—involvement in (mainstream) U.S. culture and involvement in Chinese culture. Sample items were “It is important for me to preserve my Chinese heritage” and “It is important for me to preserve my American heritage.” For each item, respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agree with the attitude or behavior in question (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). This measure assessed four areas: everyday practices, group interaction, family orientation, and global involvement.

Everyday practices measures one’s cultural preferences and participation in different aspects of daily life (e.g., food, music). Group interaction measures the extent of one’s participation in gatherings and comfort level with other Chinese or Anglo American people. Family orientation measures one’s sense of collectivistic values and gender roles common in traditional Chinese families and one’s sense of individualistic values and gender roles in mainstream, U.S. families. And Global involvement measures one’s overall identification with the Chinese and/or American culture. There are eight components altogether—four pertaining to the Chinese subscale and four to the U.S. subscale (see Nguyen & von Eye, 2002 for a more detailed description of these four areas). For our analyses, mean overall scores were calculated so that higher scores indicated greater involvement in U.S. and Chinese culture. The reliabilities for the present sample were as follows: \( \alpha = .86 \) and .81 for the U.S. and Chinese cultural involvement subscales, respectively.

Both the U.S. and Chinese subscales correlated with years lived in the United States and generational status in the expected directions. They also related to language used with parents in the expected directions. Adolescents who reported higher U.S. involvement were more likely to speak mainly English with their parents (rather than Chinese or a mixture of Chinese and English) and those who reported higher Chinese involvement were more likely to speak mainly Chinese with their parents (rather than English or a mixture of Chinese and English). These checks demonstrated convergent validity for the acculturation scale.

Autonomy expectations–teen timetable (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991). This 19-item scale assessed the adolescent’s expectations about behavioral autonomy. Adolescents indicated the age they desired to engage in behaviors such as “be able to do things with friends rather than family when you prefer” and “come home as late as you want.” The 5-point Likert-type response scale ranged from 1 = before the age of 14, 2 = 14–15 years,” 3 = 16–17 years, 4 = 18 years or older, and 5 = never. This scale has been found to be reliable and valid for Chinese and Chinese American adolescents (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991). For ease of interpretation, item responses were recoded and mean scores were calculated so that a higher score indicated an earlier timetable of autonomy expectations (i.e., youth desired autonomy in these behaviors at an earlier age). Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was .86.
Family obligation (Fuligni, et al., 1999). This 24-item scale assessed the adolescent’s sense of obligation to assist, respect, and support the family. It consisted of three subscales (a) current assistance to the family, 11 items; (b) respect for the family, 7 items; and (c) future support to the family as adults, 6 items. These subscales measured family obligation behaviors and value orientations. For the behavioral items (Subscale 1), youth were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), how often they engaged in various behaviors, such as run errands that the family needs done. For the value orientation items (Subscales 2 and 3), youth were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important), how important certain values were to them. Such values included Treat your parents with great respect and Have your parents live with you when they are older. Mean scores for the overall scale were calculated so that a higher score indicated a stronger sense of family obligation. The alpha coefficients for the overall scale ranged from .69 to .85 in studies with adolescents of immigrant families, including Chinese Americans (Fuligni et al., 1999). For the present study, Cronbach’s alpha for the overall scale was .88.

Misconduct scale (based on Feldman et al., 1991). The present study used a 4-item antisocial subscale to measure engagement in misconduct behaviors. The items asked how often adolescents damaged school property, hurt a classmate on purpose, threatened a teacher, and stole from a store. The response scale ranged from 0 = never to 3 = often. Because the mean score calculation using this response scale resulted in a very skewed distribution (skewness = 2.27, SE = 0.14), responses were recoded where 0 = never have engaged in the behavior and 1 = engaged in the behavior once or more. These binary responses were then summed so that a higher score indicated greater misconduct. Recoding in this manner resulted in a less skewed distribution (skewness = 1.03, SE = 0.14). Other studies have also used this approach (see Choi & Lahey, 2006). This scale demonstrated validity by correlating negatively with parent monitoring among Hong Kong, U.S., and Australian adolescents (Feldman et al., 1991). In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .71.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

For the four antisocial items, the percentages of students who reported engaging in these behaviors at least once were as follows: 34% damaged school property, 31% hurt a classmate, 19% stole from a store, and 7% threatened a teacher. For girls, these percentages were: 31% damaged school property, 22% hurt a classmate, 13% stole from a store, and 5% threatened a teacher. For boys these percentages were: 38% damaged school property, 40% hurt a classmate, 27% stole from a store, and 9% threatened a teacher. See Table 1 for the frequencies and means based on the original response scale.

We tested whether several demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, number of siblings, parent education, and year in high school) were related to the main study variables (U.S. cultural involvement, Chinese cultural involvement, family obligation, autonomy expectations, and misconduct). Year in school was not related to any of the study variables, but the other demographic variables were. Age was negatively related to U.S. cultural involvement ($r = -0.19, p = .001$) and positively related to Chinese cultural involvement ($r = 0.18, p = .001$). Boys were more likely to engage in misconduct than girls, $t(307) = 3.58, p = .001$. 
Number of siblings was positively related to family obligation \( (r = .13, p = .032) \) and negatively related to misconduct \( (r = -.16, p = .005) \). Parent education was negatively related to Chinese cultural involvement \( (r = -.28, p = .001) \), but positively related to U.S. cultural involvement \( (r = .21, p = .001) \) and to autonomy expectations \( (r = .16, p = .006) \). In light of these significant findings, age, gender, number of siblings, and parent education were entered as controls when testing our models.

Bivariate correlations among the study variables were conducted to test whether multicollinearity would be an issue for regression analyses. The results (see Table 2) showed that all correlations were within the small to moderate range. Generational status was uncorrelated with family obligation but positively correlated with autonomy expectations. Specifically, the second/later generation expected earlier autonomy than their first generation peers. Furthermore, U.S. cultural involvement and Chinese cultural involvement were only modestly, negatively related, suggesting these two dimensions were relatively independent from each other. In other words, adolescents who were involved in U.S. culture tended to be less involved in Chinese culture, however, this association was small \( (r = -.19, p = .001) \). In addition, U.S. cultural involvement was not linked to family obligation. But it was positively linked to autonomy expectations, such that adolescents who were more involved in U.S. culture reported earlier autonomy expectations. In contrast, Chinese cultural involvement was not linked to autonomy expectations. But it was positively linked to family obligation, such that adolescents who were more involved in Chinese culture reported

### Table 1

| Descriptives for Misconduct Items (Frequency in Number and Percentage and Mean Scores) |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                                | All \( (N = 309) \) | Girls \( (n = 168) \) | Boys \( (n = 141) \) |
|                                | \( n \) | Never | Once or Twice | Several Times | Often | \( M (SD) \) | \( n \) | Never | Once or Twice | Several Times | Often | \( M (SD) \) | \( n \) | Never | Once or Twice | Several Times | Often | \( M (SD) \) |
| **Damaged school property**    | 204 (66) | 88 (28) | 14 (5) | 5 (2) | 0.42 (0.66) | 116 (60) | 45 (27) | 6 (4) | 1 (0.6) | 0.50 (0.73) | 87 (62) | 42 (30) | 8 (6) | 4 (3) | 0.36 (0.58) |
| **Hurt a classmate**           | 215 (69) | 67 (22) | 19 (6) | 9 (3) | 0.08 (0.34) | 132 (79) | 28 (17) | 5 (3) | 3 (2) | 0.11 (0.39) | 83 (59) | 37 (26) | 14 (19) | 6 (4) | 0.06 (0.28) |
| **Stolen from a store**        | 251 (81) | 34 (11) | 17 (6) | 8 (3) | 0.42 (0.74) | 147 (88) | 15 (9) | 6 (4) | 0 (0) | 0.59 (0.84) | 102 (72) | 19 (14) | 11 (8) | 8 (6) | 0.28 (0.61) |
| **Threatened a teacher**       | 289 (93) | 17 (6) | 3 (1) | 1 (0.3) | 0.30 (0.69) | 289 (93) | 17 (6) | 3 (1) | 1 (0.3) | 0.30 (0.69) | 128 (91) | 10 (7) | 1 (0.7) | 1 (0.7) | 0.16 (0.46) |

a. Mean score based on original response scale of 0 = never, 1 = once or twice, 2 = several times, 3 = often.
Testing the Hypotheses

To test our hypotheses, we used hierarchical multiple regressions. Because we tested for interactions, all variables included in interactions were first centered to reduce multicollinearity. In Step 1, the covariates: adolescent’s age, gender, number of siblings, and parent education, were entered as a block. This block of covariates was significant ($R^2 = .073$, $p = .001$); it was driven by the significant relations between gender and misconduct ($\beta = -.19$, $p = .001$) and number of siblings and misconduct ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .01$). In Step 2, the acculturation variables: generational status, Chinese cultural involvement, and U.S. cultural involvement were entered as a block. This block of variables was not significant ($\Delta R^2 = .004$, $p = .76$), as none of the acculturation variables predicted misconduct. In Step 3, the specific cultural values, family obligation and autonomy expectations, were entered as a block. This block of variables was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .08$, $p = .001$), showing that greater family obligation ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .042$) and later autonomy expectations ($\beta = .24$, $p = .001$) predicted less misconduct. Because there are well-establishing differences between males and females concerning misconduct, we also included gender as a possible moderator for the predictors of misconduct. These interactions included: (a) U.S. cultural involvement by Chinese cultural involvement, (b) family obligation by autonomy expectations, (c) gender by generational status, (d) gender by U.S. cultural involvement, (e) gender by Chinese cultural involvement, (f) gender by family obligation, and (g) gender by autonomy expectations. This block of variables was not significant ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p = .117$; see Table 3).

There was, however, one interaction that emerged. There was a significant gender by family obligation interaction ($\beta = .14$, $p = .02$). To clarify this interaction, we followed the
suggestions of Holmbeck (2002) for post hoc probing of significant moderation effects. The post hoc analyses showed that family obligation was unrelated to misconduct for girls ($b = .04, p = .77$) but negatively related for boys, such that boys with greater family obligation engaged in less misconduct ($b = −.45, p = .001$; see Figure 1).

Further post hoc analyses. As our acculturation scale consisted of eight different components/subscales (i.e., U.S. and Chinese everyday lifestyle, ethnic group interaction, family orientation and global involvement), we also examined how each component predicted misconduct. We did this to examine whether the overall acculturation scale did not predict misconduct because of its aggregated nature (i.e., because combining the different components may have cancelled out its effects). For these analyses, we entered the control variables (age, gender, number of siblings, and parental education) in Step 1, and the eight subscales (U.S. and Chinese everyday lifestyles, ethnic group interaction, family orientation, and global involvement) in Step 2. The results showed that only one subscale, namely, U.S. family orientation, reached marginal significance in predicting misconduct. Such orientation (which reflected a more individualistic, rather than collectivistic values) predicted more misconduct ($β = .12, p = .051$).

### Table 3
Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Adolescent Misconduct on General Acculturation, Family Obligation, and Autonomy Expectations ($N = 309$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step and Variable</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$SE\ B$</th>
<th>$β$</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Step 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender$^a$</td>
<td>−.42</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>−.19*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of siblings</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>−.14*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.05</td>
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<td>Step 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generational status$^b$</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>−.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement Chinese (ICH)</td>
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<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>−.12*</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy expectations$^c$</td>
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<td>.09</td>
<td>.24***</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Gender $\times$ family obligation</td>
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<td>.14*</td>
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<td>Gender $\times$ autonomy expectations</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>−.01</td>
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</table>

a. Gender coded 1 = male, 2 = female.
b. Generational status coded 1 = first generation (foreign born), 2 = second generation or later (U.S. born).
c. Higher score indicates earlier autonomy expectations.

$^*$p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Studies comparing problem behavior between countries (e.g., youth in China vs. youth in the United States) and within countries (e.g., Asian American vs. European American youth in the United States) suggest that cultural variables are key to understanding problem behavior (Chen et al., 1999; Feldman et al., 1991; Greenberger et al., 2000; Harris, 1999; Jessor et al., 2003; Le & Stockdale, 2005; Weisz et al., 1995; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). As such, this study examined how acculturation, family obligation, and autonomy expectations predicted misconduct among Chinese American adolescents. Findings showed that acculturation, as measured by generational status and U.S. and Chinese cultural involvement, did not predict misconduct. But specific cultural values, namely family obligation and autonomy expectations, did. Adolescents who reported higher levels of family obligation and later autonomy expectations engaged in less misconduct. Such findings suggest that targeting specific and developmentally-salient cultural values may be especially helpful in explaining why some adolescents engage in misconduct whereas others do not.

**Misconduct behaviors.** With regard to specific behaviors, findings showed that many students engaged in one or more forms of misconduct at least once. Overall, about 1 in 3 damaged school property and hurt a classmate, about 2 in 5 stole from a store, and about 1 in 13 threatened a teacher. Also, our sample reported higher item means on the four misconduct items compared with a U.S. (European American) and Hong Kong sample and higher means for two items (hurt a classmate, stole from a store) compared with an Australian sample (in the Feldman et al., 1991 study, which used the same misconduct items). These comparisons are notable, especially because our sample was recruited from high achieving schools where, on average, students consistently scored well above the state average.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1**

Regression Lines for Relations Between Family Obligation and Misconduct as Moderated by Gender (a Two-Way Interaction)

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**Note:** $b$ = unstandardized regression coefficient (i.e., simple slope); $SD$ = standard deviation.

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**Discussion**

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and district on academic achievement tests and where most go on to college. Thus, it is concerning that even with their high achieving backgrounds, our select sample showed higher rates of misconduct than other adolescent samples. These findings, along with others’ (Chen et al., 1998; Choi & Lahey, 2006; Willgerodt & Thompson, 2006) challenge the notion of model minority.

Family obligation and misconduct. Findings showed that that those with higher obligations engaged in less misconduct. Our findings support previous research (Gil et al., 2000; Unger et al., 2002), which showed that adolescents who endorse notions of *filial piety* and *familism* (concepts akin to family obligation) engaged in fewer risky behaviors. Taken together, these findings suggest that adolescents with greater family orientation may avoid behaviors that bring shame to their families (Ho, 1994). Thus, Chinese American adolescents who value family cohesiveness, responsibility, and well-being, may be less likely to engage in behaviors that potentially damage important family ties.

It is not clear, however, why this finding emerged for boys but not for girls. It could be because boys engaged in greater misconduct than girls, or because girls did not vary enough in misconduct for this link to emerge. Future research should replicate these findings to further examine whether family obligation has a more positive effect on misconduct, for boys than girls.

Autonomy expectations and misconduct. Findings also showed that adolescents who desired earlier autonomy reported greater misconduct. These findings are consistent with those of international students in Hong Kong (Stewart et al., 1998). It could be that autonomy signals an increasing separation from parents and parental monitoring (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991), and thereby, more freedom to engage in misconduct. Adolescents with low parental monitoring may have more autonomy to do things on their own; or, adolescents who strive for early autonomy may actively try to avoid parental monitoring. In either case, there is evidence that early autonomy expectations are linked to low parental monitoring and that low parental monitoring is linked to greater problem behavior (e.g., Barnes et al., 2006).

Acculturation and misconduct. Our findings also showed that acculturation (i.e., generational status, U.S. cultural involvement, and Chinese cultural involvement) was not linked to misconduct. Past research with this acculturation scale showed that it predicted misconduct among Hong Kong youth (Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008); and furthermore, that it predicted an array of psychological, social, and academic indices, including delinquency among Vietnamese and Mexican American youth (Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen et al., 1999; Nguyen & Dinh, 2009).

To clarify whether our lack of findings was due to the scale’s aggregated nature, we also examined (post hoc) the extent to which each component/subscale of acculturation predicted misconduct. Findings showed that only U.S. family orientation predicted misconduct (those who were more individualistic/independent in their orientation engaged in more misconduct); the other components did not. Such findings suggest that the other components captured in this measure (e.g., youths’ ease in interacting with other Chinese people [ethnic group interactions] or their preference in eating Chinese foods or speaking Chinese [everyday lifestyles]) may be less critical to the development of misconduct, at least for our sample.
In sum, our findings suggest that it may not be broad measures of acculturation, but rather, specific and developmentally salient cultural values (such as family obligation and autonomy expectations) that predict misconduct. Acculturation and specific cultural values may represent, respectively, more distal and proximal influences to adjustment. Distal influences may shape the strength of proximal influences. It will be important in future research to further examine both acculturation and specific cultural values (and their relations to one another), to understand more precisely what aspects lead to misconduct. Doing so would provide a stronger explanatory model (Nguyen, 2006; Zane & Mak, 2003).

Our findings have implications for prevention and intervention programs designed to reduce misconduct. Although these programs have focused on strategies that are certainly important (such as learning alternative coping strategies, conflict resolution skills, and providing youth with opportunities for belongingness), such strategies are absent of cultural considerations. Programs that reinforce youth’s collective identity, that strengthen their ties to their family and culture, and that remind youth of their family obligation may be particularly effective for Chinese Americans.

Also effective may be programs that go beyond the individual level, to highlight the value of one’s family and (ethnic) community. Community-based ethnic institutions should provide opportunities for families to connect with one another; such opportunities would facilitate supportive networks that reinforce cultural traditions and in turn, promote youth development (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). As Zhou and Bankston explain,

These networks connect families and parents to like-minded friends and neighbors, lending legitimacy to parental expectations as well as providing a microcosm within which parental values and wishes are not alien or outlandish . . . Thus, being enmeshed in these dense, overlapping networks of social relations based on shared ethnicity creates a high degree of consensus over community-prescribed values and norms and an effective mechanism of social control, which can serve as a special form of social capital. (p. 222)

This type of social capital, created by reinforcing cultural traditions at a community level, can discourage adolescents from engaging in problem behavior and encourage them to pursue more adaptive goals, such as academic success (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Limitations and Future Research

There were three main limitations in this study. The first limitation was that our sample included only high school students from high achieving schools. Those who dropped out of high school and those who may be more likely to engage in misconduct were not adequately represented in our study. This limits our generalizability to a relatively well-functioning population. The second limitation was that all measures were self-report. Thus, misconduct may be underreported and the correlations between variables may be partially due to common method variance. Nonetheless, self-reports have been shown to be reliable for problem behaviors (O'Malley, Bachman, Johnson, 1983). And, our findings were generally consistent with those from previous research (e.g., Stewart et al., 1998; Unger et al., 2002). The third limitation was that our misconduct measure included only four items. Obviously, these items do not cover the different forms and range of possible misconduct behaviors. Future research should include a more extensive, multidimensional measure of
misconduct. Nonetheless, the items we did include were from a misconduct scale that has demonstrated adequate validity and reliability (e.g., Chen et al., 1998; Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991; Feldman et al., 1991).

Future research should include longitudinal data to examine the direction of effects. In this study, we have argued that less family obligation and earlier autonomy expectations contribute to the development of misconduct. However, it could also be that adolescents who engage in more misconduct subsequently endorse less family obligation and expect autonomy at an earlier age. Most likely the effects are reciprocal. Still, it could also be that a “third variable” accounts for the relations observed. For instance, conflictual family relationships could account for both lower family obligation and greater misconduct. Future studies should include such relevant “third variables” to test this possibility.

Finally, future research should continue to examine both the challenges (e.g., engaging in misconduct) and strengths (e.g., strong family obligation, filial piety) of Chinese Americans. This population is often viewed from two extremes—either as model minorities who experience few problems, or, as immigrants who experience many stresses (e.g., acculturative stresses such as intergenerational conflict). It is important to move beyond this dichotomy, to incorporate the wide range of experiences of Chinese Americans. Especially for prevention and intervention purposes, and especially in contexts that encourage assimilation, we need to recognize that maintaining certain Chinese values may protect against adolescent misconduct.

**Notes**

1. As a an overarching ideology that encompasses family obligation, filial piety is the notion that family interests take precedence over personal concerns and that one’s primary duty is to the family (Nguyen, et al., 1999). It stresses reverence and submission to elders (e.g., parents) and frowns upon behavior that dishonors the family.

2. **Familism** refers to being strongly connected to and identified with the family, both nuclear and extended (Marín & Marín, 1991). It includes a strong reliance on the family for both emotional and instrumental support (Gil et al., 2000).

3. Parent education was the highest education attained by either the mother or father, where 1 = elementary school or less, 2 = middle school, 3 = some high school, 4 = high school graduate, 5 = some college or university, 6 = college or university graduate or higher.

**References**


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