

Gifted Asian American Adolescent Males: Portraits of Cultural Dilemmas

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Many gifted Asian American adolescent males face cultural issues that may impact their success. This article presents important cultural dilemmas faced by 2 gifted Asian American young men. Through a qualitative approach, the acculturation experiences of John and Matt, gifted Taiwanese, second generation immigrants, are described. Intergenerational cultural conflict in the families of the young men is examined. Implications for supporting Asian parents in nurturing their sons' social, emotional, and intellectual development are discussed.

Introduction

In the last two decades of the 20th century, tremendous demographic changes in America have diversified our school-age population and have brought about increased complexity in a number of ethnicity-related problems in our educational system. These problems have become even more complex following the events of September 11, 2001, and the economic recession of the early 21st century, resulting in elevated animosity toward ethnic immigrants. Therefore, schools are encountering difficult challenges as the composition of their student bodies become more diverse while the national climate is becoming more xenophobic (Bennett, 2003; McCown, Driscoll, & Roop, 1995).

According to the 2000 Census, more than 10 million Americans of Asian ancestry comprised 3.6% of the country's population (Citro,

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Cork, & Norwood, 2004). This number indicates a large increase from 3.5 million in 1980. Of all the ethnic minorities, the Asian American group is one of the fastest growing. Asian Americans are estimated to reach 6.4% of the country's population by the mid-21st century (Bennett, 2003). Consequently, the number of Asian American students will continue increasing rapidly. With changing demographics, schools in this country must be prepared to address the needs of this growing population. Unfortunately, research concerning Asian American students is limited, and there is a paucity of research concerning gifted Asian American students. The gifted education literature addresses the identification of gifted American students and does not offer suggestions for teaching or counseling gifted Asian American students (Plucker, 1996). The research described in this article attempts to add to the limited information on gifted Asian American males.

Related Literature

Success Myth of Asian Americans

Asian Americans have often been labeled the "model minority." This view has been reinforced by the popular press, which extols conspicuous qualities inherent in Asian culture, such as perseverance, diligence, frugality, and self-discipline (Sue & Sue, 2003). Some studies also present striking data that indicate the success of Asian Americans. For example, compared with other minorities, they have a higher average income and lower rates of crime, illiteracy, divorce, and psychiatric contact and hospitalization (Sue & Sue). The image of the model Asian American also applies to its youth. The success of Asian American youngsters demonstrating high motivation and high academic performance has been documented. These students are often described as diligent and well-behaved. They are overrepresented in gifted programs and as graduates of prestigious universities. Moreover, a higher percentage of Asian American young people complete high school and earn college degrees than do Caucasian youngsters (Baruth & Manning, 1999; Sue & Sue).

The conclusions drawn from the literature appear to indicate that Asian Americans are well-adjusted, academically successful, and confronted with few difficulties (Sue & Sue, 2003). A closer examination of the status and treatment of Asian Americans, however, by no means espouses this startling success story. The model minority myth has been debunked by some researchers, especially Asian American psychologists and social scientists. With insightful transcultural perspectives, they strive to eliminate the myths and stereotypes surrounding Asian Americans (Wenhao, Salomon, & Chay, 1993).

The belief that this population represents a model minority imposes not only pressure but also potential crisis upon Asian Americans. Indeed, some Asian immigrants enjoy success and realize their American dream, but they are the lucky few. Most Asian Americans still struggle economically (Sue & Sue, 2003). Moreover, reference to higher median income does not take into consideration a much higher percentage of more than one living-wage earner in the family. It also does not take into consideration an equivalent incidence of poverty in spite of higher median income and the fact that salaries do not correspond to educational levels of Asian American workers. Statistics regarding outstanding academic achievements are also misleading. Some Asian Americans reach high educational levels, whereas a large proportion remains undereducated or uneducated (Sue & Sue). In addition, although the results of research demonstrate that Asians possess remarkable mathematical skills, they also reveal deficiencies in English speaking and writing, even among family members of second, third, and fourth generations. The utopian image blurs and oversimplifies their problems in education.

Furthermore, emotional adjustment as indicated by lack of mental health service usage does not result from better mental health but from the stigma traditionally attached to mental illness. Most Asians feel ashamed and disgraced if they admit they need psychotherapy. Rather than relying on outside resources, they handle their problems within their families and deliberately prevent them from becoming public or transparent (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993). It is reported that Asian American students express greater feelings of loneliness, alienation, and anxiety than the general student pop-

ulation (Sue & Sue, 2003). On middle and high school campuses, many Asian American students experience ethnicity-related insults, whereas others face racial discrimination, resulting in isolation (Baruth & Manning, 1999).

As a result, educators and counselors need to look beyond the success myth and realize that Asian American students have as many special but different needs as other students (McCown et al., 1995). As long as the model minority myth perpetuates and defines the school experience for Asian American students, the actual facts and issues relevant to their overall educational development will be neglected (Yagi & Oh, 1995).

Cultural Conflict

In addition to issues related to the “model minority” myth, Asian youngsters in this country are impacted by conflict between their ethnic culture and the dominant American cultural system. Cultural conflict between parents and children, especially between first-generation parents and second-generation children, has a significant influence on the psychological development of Asian American students. Integrating contradictory notions of the Asian culture with the dominant Caucasian American culture into one identity is a primary challenge facing these young people (Lee, 1997).

Salient differences exist between the two cultural systems. Asian culture is deeply affected by Confucianism and Buddhism (Lee, 1997), whereas the dominant American society is interwoven with capitalism, democracy, and Christianity. The foundations of American society are egalitarian, whereas the foundations of Asian society are hierarchical. In traditional Asian society, individuals are required to play their prescribed, clearly defined roles based on age and gender in the hierarchical system (Lee, 1996). Children must always comply with the requests and will of their parents. Expression of thoughts or feelings is viewed as defiant or recalcitrant, and the child is likely to be reproached (Yagi & Oh, 1995). Research has indicated that even second-generation Chinese high school students place more emphasis on filial piety and deference to their parents and elder family members than do Caucasian peers (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Dominant American culture is centered on the individual, whereas in Asian society, family units, rather than individuals, are highly valued. Individuals are given less priority and are looked upon as the products of previous family generations. Children are inculcated with the importance of family solidarity with family roles being interdependent. The needs of the family take precedence over those of the individual, and independent conduct that might harm the functioning of the family is discouraged (Atkinson et al., 1993; Sodowsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995).

Dominant American culture places a premium on free expression of feelings, whereas Asian culture places an emphasis upon careful expression of feelings. Being straightforward and assertive is considered improper because this behavior is likely to embarrass others. Generally speaking, Asians believe that carefully controlling one's feelings plays an important part in interpersonal relationships. They try hard to maintain self-effacing and discreet conduct (Jung, 1998); therefore, they may be considered introverted, reserved, undemonstrative, or even unfriendly. Most Asian families think it is superficial to verbalize their love for their children. Thus, a great number of Asian children grow up never hearing the words "I love you" from their parents. Asian parents express their affection by making many sacrifices to provide their children with better living conditions. Strongly affected by the American media that usually portrays close family relationships, Asian children find their parents' child-rearing practices outdated and insensitive to their psychological needs. They may even harbor resentment toward their parents because they are not perceived as caring and seldom initiate conversations other than discussions concerning schoolwork and grades (Yagi & Oh, 1995).

Parental Expectations

Asian and American parents also have different attitudes toward education. Asian American parents have far higher academic expectations than Caucasian parents (Goyette & Xie, 1999). Confucian ideology, which has exerted a profound impact on Asian culture, places much emphasis on education. Until now, Asians have been persuaded that education is the avenue to high socioeconomic status.

With this mindset, Asian American parents inculcate their children with a respect for learning as the most effective means of obtaining abundant material rewards rather than an end in itself. As a result, many Asian American students, under intense pressure, strive to attain academic excellence at all costs. Asian American mothers willingly recognize that academics demand much effort and painstaking work. At times, Asian parents set unreasonably high standards for the achievements of their children. Many Asian mothers also believe that they are expected to provide their children direct teaching, check their homework on a daily basis, and assign extra reading and math exercises, in order to strengthen their children's scholastic abilities (Baruth & Manning, 1999).

Another feature of the high parental expectations in Asian families emerges when Asian high school students select college majors and future careers. Asian parents often exhort their children to choose more "promising" majors such as medicine, engineering, the hard sciences, and business, and there appears to be little room for negotiation. These prescribed career goals are especially true for the sons for whom Asian parents hold higher expectations. In the patriarchal Asian society, sons are cherished more than daughters. They inherit the family name and legacy and are expected to bring honor to the family (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Ethnic Identity

Along with juggling high parental expectations, Asian American youngsters must maintain a healthy identity, appreciated by two cultures. Although these students struggle to fit into the dominant American culture, their parents try hard to maintain traditional culture. Many Asian American youngsters suffer from anxiety and confusion, especially when exposed to the value of individuality prevalent in the dominant American culture (Yagi & Oh, 1995). They feel torn between the desires of their parents to be loyal to traditional values and the realistic demands of becoming Americanized. However, in the pluralistic American society, it is important for Asian Americans to maintain their ethnic identity. An ethnic identity encompasses ethnic individuals' feelings about their physical features and the cul-

tural values and heritage that distinguish them as a specific ethnic group (Sodowsky et al., 1995). Identification with one's ethnic group plays an important role in the mental health of ethnic individuals. Like other youngsters, Asian American adolescents face complicated tasks of identity formation and group affiliation. However, they have more to deal with because they straddle multiple cultures: the dominant American culture, the culture of ethnic origin, and the culture peculiar to the adolescent peer group (Huang, 1997).

Along with normal adolescent development, it is a challenge for gifted Asian American youth to resolve cultural conflict, meet high parental expectations, and make significant adjustments to accommodate ethnic heritage and social acceptance. Because many Americans may internalize the model minority myth when considering Asian children, expectations for this population may be exceedingly high, and these children may feel tremendous pressure to consistently achieve academic excellence. In addition to these cultural expectations, Asian children identified as gifted may feel even greater pressure to excel in everything they pursue. Moreover, gifted Asian youngsters, owing to their superior sensitivity and advanced insight, may perceive these challenges even more acutely than other age-mates of similar cultural background (Hasegawa, 1989). Consequently, learning how to help gifted Asian American adolescents face high expectations and serious cultural conflict becomes a challenging task confronting American educators and counselors.

Research Methods

In order to understand the issues facing gifted Asian American male adolescents, we chose a qualitative research design that involved in-depth interviews and participant observation. The following research questions guided the inquiry: What are the challenges faced by gifted Asian American male adolescents regarding their social and emotional development? What impact do these challenges have on gifted Asian American young men?

Selection of Participants

In this study, criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was implemented, whereby the two participants had to meet some predetermined criterion of importance. The criteria for selection of the two participants were as follows: (1) Asian American, (2) male, (3) secondary students, and (4) identified as gifted during their (K–8) school experience. Information from school records was used to document the gifted label. Two male teenagers of Taiwanese origin were selected.

Data Collection

Three sources of data were used in this study: daily observations of participants documented with extensive field notes, individual interviews with the participants, and individual interviews with the participants' mothers. Participant observation and interviewing took place over a 3-month period and included observations of both participants in their neighborhoods and homes, during meals in Asian restaurants, on shopping mall excursions, family grocery shopping trips, and a weekend day trip to an outdoor entertainment park.

Three in-depth interviews were conducted with both participants, each lasting 1.5 to 2 hours. Interview guides, presented in Appendices A and B, were designed to direct the interviews. The interview guides allowed for asking open-ended questions and probing for details throughout each conversation in order to capture the participants' experiences (Patton, 2002). The purpose of these interviews was not merely to obtain information directly from the participants but also to develop insight into how they interpreted their sociocultural experience. In addition to the interviews with the gifted adolescent males, one individual interview with each of the mothers of the young men was conducted. These interviews focused on the mothers' perceptions of their sons' school experiences and acculturation processes. Objectivity was enhanced with the addition of the interviews with the participants' mothers. All interviews took place in the living rooms of the families and were conducted in English, with the exception of one with of the participant's mother who requested to be interviewed in Chinese. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interview conducted in Chinese was tran-

scribed verbatim, translated into English, and verified by another Taiwanese university researcher.

Data Coding and Analysis

Inductive analysis procedures were used to analyze and interpret the data. This process involved managing data through coding, categorizing into themes, and determining relationships among the themes (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The field notes and transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed according to the coding paradigm described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). In the first stage of analysis, we analyzed all interview transcripts and observation field notes by combing through the data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among those categories. Codes were organized with words or phrases that identified similar patterns, themes, recurring ideas or relationships, and consistencies or differences between and among segments of data. This process of coding compacted data into equivalent categories and enabled us to manage and reconstruct meaningful components (LeCompte, 2000). These codes served as analytic tools that explained or complicated the data, allowing us to examine the data from different perspectives and to hypothesize further about its meaning (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The next stage of the analysis process involved examining the data through a display of diagrams of the codes in order to examine the composition of each coded data set (Huberman & Miles). These data displays assisted us in structuring information into an accessible format to analyze the data further. In the third stage of the analysis, we determined meaningful patterns and consistency between two or more patterns or themes within the data. Through this process, we established generalizations that explained consistencies in the data. To conclude the analysis, our generalizations about the participants' experiences were contrasted with published literature on gifted Asian American students. Descriptive portraits of the participants, John and Matt, are presented below. Following the portraits, a discussion of the overall findings and implications is provided.

The Participants

John

John was a seventh grader at Sutherland Middle School. A tall, slender, sun-tanned youngster, John was seen daily on the athletic courts in the family housing area of his university community. He lived with his mother and sister in an apartment community that was the home of a majority of the university's international graduate students and their families. John's mother was a graduate student majoring in food science. His older sister was a senior high school student. John's father, a professor, was living in Taiwan.

John was born in a university community in the Midwest when his father was pursuing his doctoral degree. During those years, John's parents faced many financial hardships; his father earned a meager income on research assistantships, and his mother helped to support the family by working part-time in a Chinese restaurant. After John's father earned his doctorate, the family moved back to Taiwan when he obtained a professorial position in a Taiwanese university. John's mother decided to pursue a graduate degree and returned to the United States with her two children. Both parents also wanted to ensure that their children experienced a more flexible educational system. John's father could not accompany them because of his university responsibilities; however, his father joined his wife and children during summer and winter vacations and remained in touch with his family through daily electronic mail correspondence.

John and his mother and sister lived in a two-bedroom apartment. John's study table and the family computer were located in the apartment's small living room, where he did his homework. His study space was situated by a window that overlooked a wooded area and a community playground. The laughter or crying of young children and conversations heard in a variety of languages in this university neighborhood occasionally interrupted John's study time.

John's giftedness was noted during his preschool years. His mother explained, "He could memorize things pretty well. He learned faster than other kids." At that time, John, like many young boys, enjoyed watching cartoons and was in awe of Superman, his

early childhood hero. Because John was an active youngster, his mother prepared many activities for him. She explained, "I had him learn Chinese Kung-fu to let his energy find some way out." John also learned to play piano. To prepare him for school, his mother taught him mental arithmetic, took him to the local library every week, and provided him with plenty of reading materials. He enjoyed keeping up with his sister's books, and his mother reported that John "read everything his sister read."

John's academic performance had remained outstanding since kindergarten. From the first grade to the fourth grade, he studied in Taiwan and was consistently ranked in the top five in his class of approximately 40 students. For several years, he was ranked first in his class. Along with strong academic skills, his talents included effective interpersonal skills, leadership, oratorical skill, musical ability, and athletic prowess. According to his mother, he had no difficulty making new friends, and he was twice elected class president. He finished third in the school's speech contest, played first chair clarinet in the school orchestra, and enjoyed a variety of sports. Along with positive peer group relationships, John had positive relationships with his teachers, with the exception of a third-grade teacher who punished him often for his talkativeness in class.

Soon after he arrived in the United States, his fifth-grade teacher looked beyond his limited English vocabulary, recognized his intellectual abilities, and nominated him for involvement in the school's gifted program. The fifth-grade teacher provided John with emotional support, and his English improved tremendously. He enjoyed his involvement in the enrichment program and claimed that the hands-on science experiments were the highlight of his school day. When he reached middle school, his gifted education program became a sequence of advanced content classes, and he claimed he missed his time in the elementary resource room program.

John was an emotionally empathic young man. Sensitive to the feelings of others and injustices he experienced within his peer group, he insisted that "you cannot treat people differently just because of the way they look and how they speak." In tune with conflicts of his peers, he became saddened at the hurtful words or racial slurs expressed by his middle school classmates, which at times

caused him to feel uncomfortable about his Asian origin and physical appearance. His mother reported that shortly after his arrival in this country, John was the recipient of a racial slur, which resulted in an altercation with another youngster. Despite this experience, John remained open to friendships with young men from different cultural backgrounds as evidenced in observations of John involved in basketball games with neighboring friends of different ethnic origins.

John's mother expressed concern for John's achievement orientation in school. She thought that he did not always work as hard as he could, and she insisted that he should study more. John explained, "I don't study the night before a test," and "if it's daily homework, I'll put in less than an hour." He admitted, "I'll say that I kind of underachieve. I know that if I spend more time studying, I will get better achievement." John's mother pointed out to him that he was good at everything if he really put forth effort, often noting "you have talents, if you don't use them, it is a waste." She especially hoped that he would place more emphasis on his reading and writing because she was disappointed with the standardized test results in language arts.

At home, John was the dutiful son who completed his weekly household chores with some nagging from his mother. According to John's mother, doing dishes, vacuuming the apartment, and washing the family car were "something boys should do." She explained, "Because it is a tradition in our family, he has to follow it." He regularly assisted his mother at important Chinese festivals in the university community; he ran a stall, selling traditional Chinese snacks of cookies and "almond curd." At the conclusion of the study, John's mother was moving the family across the state because her graduate internship required her to work in another setting. Shortly before moving day arrived, John's grandparents had arrived from Taiwan for a visit. The entire family was observed loading a moving van on a sweltering summer day. John followed his father's orders and helped move heavy boxes and furniture. He insisted that his elderly grandparents not carry heavy luggage. Although he was exposed to the dominant American culture that places emphasis on adolescent autonomy and independence, John displayed obedience to his parents and great respect to his grandparents.

Matt

Matt was a high school senior who was evidently concerned about his outward appearance. Dressed in an Armani T-shirt and a fashionable pair of slacks, with an electronic beeper on his belt, Matt explained that he had “gradually gotten tired of stuff from Old Navy and preferred styles from Armani and Versace.” When interviewed, the fashion conscious young man commented on the condition of his hair and the high standard with which he maintained his trendy hairstyle using the finest of styling gels.

Matt’s family was living in a two-story home in a bedroom community of a large metropolitan city in the Southeast. An only child, Matt lived with his parents and a long-term employee in his parents’ business, a young man from mainland China. Although Matt’s parents incorporated some traditional Chinese decorations in their home, their household was more typical of an American home. Matt’s bedroom, often seen in disarray, included his computer and a large tropical fish tank that Matt had designed and built.

Matt’s family initially moved from Taiwan to Lima, Peru, where Matt was born and where his family had owned a business. They then moved to Los Angeles and later the Southeast, where his father owned and operated a sign shop that was developing into a large-scale company. An industrious man with a military high school education, Matt’s father spent most of his time at the family business. Matt’s father adopted a *laissez-faire* policy toward Matt’s education and supported his son saying, “If you are not the type of person that can [do well in school] and study hard, you can do something else, as long as you make something of your life.” Matt’s mother had earned a college degree in business from a Taiwanese college and helped her husband daily with their company. Following the Chinese tradition, she handled all the household chores and took charge of Matt’s education.

Recognizing the importance of nurturing a love of education, Matt’s mother contacted his teachers often. After teachers had explained the significance of a literacy-rich home environment, she took Matt on weekly trips to the library. Matt’s mother indicated that her son displayed precocity during his preschool years, describing how impressed she was with his manual dexterity and his focused

concentration. She explained that when he was very young she found that his concentration was impressive as she observed him solving challenging jigsaw puzzles involving 200 or 300 pieces. She proudly reported that when he finished one, he requested more to play with. When Matt entered elementary school, his mother purchased math workbooks and provided him with extra assignments to strengthen his math skills. She also purchased a piano and enrolled him in piano lessons.

Matt, reflecting on his earlier years in Los Angeles, described how a neighborhood peer group involved in “violence, games, and all kinds of distracters” led him to underachieve in school as he admitted that “academically, I did not do as well as I could have. I had no motivation.” Matt noted a fourth-grade teacher intervened to “bring out the best in me” and encouraged his love of science. Since his family’s move to the Southeast, Matt explained that his situation changed. Matt’s new environment was more sedate than urban Los Angeles. He commented, “My grades went up. There were a lot of A’s in middle school, and they put me in the gifted program. The reason I was in the gifted program after moving here was the environment.” Matt was enrolled in the gifted program in the seventh grade, in which he was involved in advanced science and language arts classes. In high school, Matt has been enrolled in Advanced Placement classes and has maintained a grade point of 3.5 along with strong involvement in extracurricular activities.

Matt was proud of his ability “to get along with everybody,” and his parents appreciated how comfortable he was with adults, often interacting with the clients in his family’s sign shop. Viewed as a caring, introspective teenager, Matt noted that what he liked most about himself was how much he cared for his family and other people and his involvement in philanthropic activities. He spent much of his time engaged in charitable activities to help the elderly and impoverished families in his community. He explained, “There is nothing I won’t help with. I don’t discard things. I try to make things better.” Although inwardly philosophical, Matt could be outwardly playful. Talking with him, adults could easily become disarmed by his natural humor.

Like many gifted adolescents, Matt was confronted with pressure. He explained that he suffered from high expectations placed on him by his mother. He commented, "It's scary," and admitted that he was "afraid [he] would fail her." Other pressures came from his family's tradition of high achievement. His grandfather was a well-respected physician and his uncle was a very wealthy businessman. Matt indicated this was "a tradition he had to keep up."

Findings

The gifted Asian American adolescent males in this study experienced intergenerational cultural conflict within their families. This conflict involved two concerns: parental expectations for academic performance and differing views regarding acculturation. The conflict centered on academic issues including differing views of academic rigor, the value of standardized tests, time spent on the home computer, comparisons with classmates, and parents' misperceptions of gifted education. The conflict focused on acculturation issues included values differences, parental expectations regarding obedience and respect, differing views of adolescent autonomy, and the importance of learning the ethnic language. An examination of these themes uncovered in the data helps to explain the cultural dilemmas faced by these young men.

Conflict Over Academic Issues

Like most Asian American parents, John's mother placed a heavy emphasis on her children's education because she believed education was a stepping stone to advancement in society. With high expectations for her son, she was strict in her supervision of his studies and laid down several regulations for him to follow. John complained, "She is very strict. I cannot watch TV during weekdays. I [can only] watch TV or play computer games on weekends and holidays. I have to study in the morning even though it's a weekend or a holiday. I can't enjoy a break until the afternoon."

In discussing her expectations for her son, John's mother provided her view of the American schools. Although John was a straight A student, she was not satisfied, as she noted, "Frankly speaking, the students in America do not work very hard compared with students in Taiwan. The schoolwork is not very hard either. . . . It is not very difficult to be the best in school." She thought John did not study hard enough, and there was much room for improvement. She hoped John would study more earnestly and fulfill his potential, so she played the role of study monitor explaining, "Sometimes you just have to push him to work hard. [He's] a teenager, and you have to push him."

In addition to her high expectations for her son's performance in school, she also wanted him to perform well on standardized tests. Concerned that language arts was his weak area, she provided John with extra assignments in vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure to help him prepare for the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT). Much to her chagrin, John's scores in math were much higher than the verbal section of the test. While his mother noted emotionally that she had saved her money to pay for John to take the PSAT, John, who viewed taking the test in middle school as simply an academic exercise to meet someone else's expectations and not his own said, "I don't need to worry about that. It's too early."

John noted that Asian American parents were inclined to look upon their children's strong academic performance and good conduct in school as one part of their own personal achievement. He mentioned that children resented comparisons made by parents, and he complained that his mother compared him to other youngsters often. When asked about what his mother compared with others, he responded with emotion, "My grades, the things I should do, the responsibilities I should have."

Although not culturally specific, another conflict between John and his mother centered on John's favorite pastime—the use of computer games. His mother saw no intellectual value to her son's involvement in the games. Although he pointed out that his future career would be dependent on computers, his mother set up rules to regulate his computer time, lest he overindulge in computer games and suffer a decline in grades. She pointed out that computer games

had become the culprit in much of the conflict between mother and son.

Although Matt is several years older than John, their problems were similar. Matt and his mother also faced conflict over his education. Although Matt's father had a more liberal attitude towards schooling, his mother placed a high value on academic achievement and became involved in his studies. Matt described his mother as a "pushy" woman who was "very picky about my education" and "nagged" him about his studying. Conflict occurred over what Matt viewed as his mother's overemphasis on grades. He described experiences in the past saying, "If I got a 99 on a test, she would ask, 'What happened to the one point you lost? What happened to that point?'" When asked about conflict with her son, Matt's mother concurred that their disagreements revolved around his grades:

Asians put more emphasis on children's grades. If I told him, "Your grades are so poor," he would respond angrily at once. He complained, "Mom, why do you care only about my grades? Why don't you ask about my health? Why are your eyes always fixed on that report card?"

Concern over comparisons with his classmates and his mother's high expectations for standardized achievement testing were also issues plaguing Matt. He and his mother argued about his mother's comparison of his academic progress with others. She described, "He hated comparisons. [He explained to me] 'I try my best, and I do what I like. That's enough. Don't compare me with other classmates.' After he talked to me about this issue, then I never mentioned [it again]." Matt's mother thought his abilities were stronger than what was reflected in his Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score of 1300 and was troubled about her son's relaxed attitude concerning his test results. She saw her son not striving to reach for the best possible score he could earn but rather "the lowest score required by the state university." Exasperated, she added, "I think he should try his best, regardless of the scores required by colleges. If you don't try your best, that's wrong. I told him I could not accept that at all." He responded with, "Standardized tests only say that you're a good test-taker or a bad test-taker. They're not about who you are. I don't see

those as important.” Along with concern over achievement scores, mother and son differed in their thinking on what might be the best career path for Matt, with his mother encouraging him to consider medicine and Matt strongly considering international business. Matt’s father remained silent on the issue.

Matt realized that as first-generation immigrants his parents “grew up differently.” Understanding they were educated in a traditional Chinese educational system he noted, “The way they learned is sort of a gap [between us]. They learned by memorizing books and what’s in them. I learn through reading books and discussing why that happens, instead of ‘That’s what happens. Remember it.’”

When Matt was involved in the gifted program in middle school, he struggled to get his mother to understand the academic rigor involved in his advanced classes. He described a scenario in which he lamented to his mother, “Mom, how much you care about my grades! Do you realize the lessons in the gifted program are much more difficult than the average lessons?” He pointed out to his mother that he could quit the gifted program and easily make straight A’s in the academic classes to make her happy. Following that discussion, Matt noticed that his mother’s attitude changed somewhat. She told him to enjoy his classes, listen closely to his teachers, and not to idle away his time.

Conflict Over Acculturation Issues

John and his mother grew up in different cultural contexts and some intergenerational conflict arose because their value systems were molded by different cultural systems. John was a confident teenager able to defend the positions he took on debates in school or on family issues such as whether he had been responsible for a problem with the family computer. According to his mother, his confidence in his intellectual acuity sometimes was carried too far and turned into overconfidence and arrogance. John’s mother noted that in American schools, education placed a high premium on the development of self-assuredness and thought John’s overconfidence was fostered unconsciously. However, John wanted his ideas to be valued or appreciated at all times. He had difficulty with his parents’ atti-

tudes concerning his opinions. He complained, "In my home, my ideas are gibberish."

Although John's mother had been in America for several years, she did not want to abandon her deeply rooted view that parents were authority figures, and the children ought to be obedient to them. According to her, teenagers were "still wet behind the ears," so they had better "use their ears, rather than their mouths." She realized that her middle school son now had strong opinions of his own; however, she pointed out, "He's just a kid. He doesn't know everything!" In a traditional Asian household, youngsters are expected to follow the "silence is golden" rule and to humbly, courteously, and carefully listen to their elders. Being argumentative was not acceptable to John's mother as she explained, "When I was his age, I didn't dare argue with my mother, or talk back to her." Overhearing his mother's comment, John retorted with "Times are always changing!" Sometimes John's self-confidence led to behavior his mother viewed as presumptuous. This was evidenced during a family shopping excursion, during which they enjoyed lunch in a Chinese restaurant. John's mother became infuriated with him for taking control of the credit card payment, filling in an insufficient amount for the waiter's gratuity.

Acculturation issues were also evident in John's mother's concerns. She explained that she wanted her son to begin dating in college, and she worried that he might not marry a woman of Asian origin. She admonished, "Remember, you are Chinese. Don't learn American bad habits." John's mother explained:

We still live in the Chinese way at home. I always tell my children to be proud of their Chinese origin. . . . I think these years in America [John and his sister] have been deeply influenced by American culture. They show less and less respect for [their] parents.

John's mother reflected on the family's difficult times in Taiwan, explaining to her children that they should be grateful to be living in America and emphasized, "You should cherish what you have now." John's mother tried to strike a balance between American and Chinese culture; however, this goal seemed difficult for her to reach.

Although she claimed she was working to open channels of communication with her son, John disagreed.

Ethnic language learning plays an influential role in the acceptance of one's ethnic culture. In Matt's case, cultural conflicts between mother and son occurred when his mother insisted that he learn Chinese. She had taught him to write Chinese characters, but in vain. She enrolled him in a weekend Chinese program in the first grade; however, her son resisted. She explained, "Matt is very clever. He knew there were baseball games every weekend. He thought if he [joined Little League] he could escape those tedious Chinese classes. So he took part in baseball on purpose."

Through his adolescence, Matt's mother has learned several ways of lessening the likelihood of conflict with her son. Matt had candid conversations with her about problems he faced in school. Through open communication, she gradually realized that academic achievement was not the focal point of her son's life, and it was destructive, as well as meaningless, to make comparisons between her son and his peers. When Matt behaved impulsively, his mother learned to use words that touched his heart. She presented a poignant example of one evening when Matt was supposed to return home from a party at 11 p.m. and had called saying that he would be staying overnight at his friend's house. His mother told him, "If you won't come home, I will suffer a sleepless night." She explained she shared her worries with words that "touched him" and concluded by saying, "So I will wait until you come home, no matter how late it will be." After I told him that, he came home in half an hour." Matt's mother admitted that she eventually learned to provide him more autonomy. Matt agreed that his parents learned to trust him, and he had not "done much to damage this trust." Matt's mother eventually learned to appreciate his need for independence as evidenced in her final comments:

Maybe we've lived here for a long time, so we've experienced more American culture. We think that sooner or later, kids need to cut the umbilical cord. If you don't let them be independent at this time, they [will] miss a lot of opportunities to grow up. You must let them learn from their experiences. You can't protect them too much.

Discussion and Implications

In reviewing the experiences of John and Matt, intergenerational cultural conflict was the core category that emerged in the study. This conflict centered on parental expectations for academic performance and differences in the cultural value systems of the parents and their sons. The findings of the study provide support for research on specific issues facing gifted Asian American youngsters. Important implications for educators and Asian parents of gifted young men are readily apparent from the study. By closely examining the experiences of John and Matt, educators and parents may gain new insight on how to support gifted Asian American young men.

Both participants had parents who had high expectations for their sons. In addition to being identified as gifted, both young men displayed a multitude of talents; hence their giftedness may have only heightened the expectations of their parents and increased the pressure for high performance in school. In John's case, although his father was absent from the home, both parents held high achievement expectations for their son. Matt's case was atypical in that his father did not hold a traditional Asian view of career success in a high-powered profession. Instead, he held a more liberal view of education and suggested that his son be happy in life and make a contribution to society in whatever way he saw as appropriate. On the other hand, Matt's mother's message concerning academic achievement and later success in life was traditional and focused, which resulted in pressured expectations. These mixed messages from Matt's two parents may have accounted for what he described as his underachievement in school. This finding is consistent with what several researchers (Baker, Bridger & Evans, 1998; Rimm, 1995) have noted. Not only are these parental mixed messages problematic for achievement, they also contribute to additional acculturation issues. With mother reinforcing an Asian perspective on education while father reinforces the American perspective prevailing within Matt's peer group, this issue only exacerbates the strain between mother and son.

In both cases, the mothers of the participants took a strong interest in developing the talents of their sons in early childhood. Both mothers provided the young boys with educational enrichment after

school or on weekends. These experiences included Saturday sessions during which both boys were enrolled in language classes conducted in didactic fashion, and they both disliked attending Chinese classes on weekends. This finding should lead parents and educators to reconsider appropriate bilingual training for young children. Research has indicated that bilingual children exhibit a greater sensitivity to the nuances of language and may be more flexible in their thinking than monolingual students (Shin, 2005). Additive bilingualism is one in which academic achievement is enhanced due to the complete literacy of the students in both languages (Shin; McCown et al., 1995), and therefore is a gift that both Asian parents and teachers of gifted Asian students would want to nurture. As researchers (Frasier & Passow, 1994; Jackson & Lu, 1992) have indicated, bilingualism is valued in a diverse society; however, young, second-generation Asian youth frequently resist learning their native language, which is often upsetting to first-generation Asian parents. To encourage their children to learn the language, Asian parents may have to consider looking for educational programs in their native language that are delivered through instructional strategies and procedures that gifted Asian youngsters may be exposed to in American schools. Rather than repetitive drill in language mechanics, gifted Asian students may benefit from language instruction delivered through more engaging pedagogical methods that they have become familiar with through gifted programs. In addition, effective instructors may be Asian American young adults or university students who serve as cultural role models and highlight how their command of two languages benefits them in many ways.

The intergenerational conflict between the two participants and their parents call attention to a number of issues that educators and counselors must become sensitive to in order to better support gifted Asian youngsters and their parents. The value systems of two generations within an immigrant group of people may be different, with the younger generation identifying more with the value system of the dominant culture. Moreover, the channels of communication between Asian parents and their children may be influenced by the dominant culture. As seen in the families of both John and Matt, communication problems may exist between adolescents and their

parents, and immigrant families may face even greater challenges as their children become more acculturated to the dominant culture. Getting both sides to understand each other's world view and style of communicating may be a challenge requiring a great deal of patience and sensitivity to both family heritage and the acculturation needs of the children. Both teachers and counselors need to be aware of the communication issues and the value systems that interact in inter-generational conflicts of Asian families if they are to work effectively with gifted Asian American students and their families. For example, much of the conflict evidenced in both John's and Matt's experiences centered on a need for independence. Both young men appeared to identify more closely with the American mentality regarding the development of independence within adolescents. This need for independence may have been exacerbated by the acculturation issue, as well as the giftedness of the young men. Because both young men wanted to become more "Americanized," the need for independence from their parents may have been stronger.

Ethnic identity issues were evident with both John and Matt. As Huang (1997) noted, achieving a coherent identity is difficult for many adolescents; however, ethnic adolescents shoulder an additional burden of integrating the discrepant values from two co-existing cultures, the dominant culture and their own ethnic culture. It was evident that John's ethnic identity was being molded while Matt's was in place as a more acculturated Asian American teenager. Through assimilation, Matt had been successful in building bridges between the two cultures in his life and felt comfortable with his multilayered identity of being Asian, American, and gifted. Both John and Matt offer educators and counselors insights into the importance of developing an ethnic identity and the lengthy developmental process of building such a strong ethnic identity. Teachers and counselors who work with gifted Asian American young men need to be aware of this process and appreciate the individual differences within this special population (Liu & Pope-Davis, 2003; Plucker, 1996). Counselors might want to consider helping Asian parents understand that they are likely to turn their children away from their ethnic culture if too much criticism is directed toward the acculturated behaviors of their children, and excessive pressure is

placed on them to follow family beliefs and traditions (Sodowsky et al., 1995).

Both John and Matt struggled at times to get their mothers to understand that a high grade point average and strong SAT scores were not necessarily an accurate measure of whether they were actually benefiting from their American education. In each portrait of the young men in the study, the parents needed to understand the value of enriched learning experiences, as well as an accelerated program of study. Educators and counselors working with parents of gifted Asian American youngsters need to educate parents on issues of academic assessment, curriculum differentiation, and enrichment as appropriate experiences of gifted students. Assisting Asian parents in understanding how school experiences may be simultaneously accelerated and horizontally enriched would help alleviate troublesome worries for parents coming from more traditional school experiences in their native culture.

Helping Asian parents understand the value of standardized tests such as the SAT and consider broader career possibilities for their sons should be an important goal for gifted education teachers and high school counselors. Counselors also may assist Asian families by first acknowledging parental efforts in choosing promising careers for their children and then providing parents current information regarding a variety of occupational choices. As noted in Matt's experiences, his mother discussed her career selection dreams that differed from her son's, a finding consistent with the research of Yagi and Oh (1995). In Matt's case, as well as others, support from the school system might prevent conflicts between Asian parents and their sons who may hold different notions of what will constitute a successful life for them in the future.

Both participants in the study displayed empathic qualities in dealing with issues in their lives as evidenced in John's experiences with racial slurs and his appreciation for a multicultural peer group and Matt's social action work in his community. This finding highlights how gifted youngsters from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds may display a heightened sensitivity as noted by Piechowski (1997) and appreciate having adults in their lives who respect their empathic qualities and celebrate the sensitivities within these gifted

youngsters. In addition, the appreciation of a multicultural peer group within both participants is consistent with what Hébert (2000) found within gifted urban African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic males and reinforces the significance of experiences with diversity helping to shape the self-identities of gifted young men and preparing them to be well-equipped for success in a diverse society.

With the variety of salient issues facing families of gifted Asian American youngsters, the stories of John and Matt call attention to the need for developing parent support groups for Asian parents raising their gifted sons in this country. Many Asian parents of gifted young men may be perplexed by the American educational system and need help to better understand how they can support their gifted sons. As Hébert (1998) noted, parents of culturally diverse gifted young men would benefit greatly from parent-to-parent support systems that are established by both communities and schools. Asian parents who have successfully resolved intergenerational conflicts can serve as discussion group leaders. School counselors may initially arrange for Asian parents of gifted youngsters to come together for regularly scheduled evening discussion sessions in which they discuss issues highlighted in the experiences of John and Matt. Once the sessions are arranged and discussion leaders are chosen, school counselors may step aside, allowing the successful parents to share their stories and helpful insights regarding everything from school expectations and bilingual training programs, to career expectations for their children. Many Asian parents may appreciate having “a shoulder to cry on,” other supportive adults who have struggled to understand the acculturation dilemmas faced by their gifted sons. For example, Matt and his mother reached an understanding regarding his need for independence. Perhaps as a parent discussion group leader, Matt’s mother would provide other Asian parents the lessons she learned regarding this adolescent need and further understanding on resolving other cultural conflicts between Asian parents and their gifted sons.

There are limitations to this study that should be noted. It is important to recognize the variety and heterogeneity within Asian Americans. They differ in customs, history, religion, degree of acculturation, immigration experience, and ethnic identity. The two

participants with Taiwanese ancestry may not represent the wide diversity of Asian Americans; therefore the findings of this study are not generalizable. Moreover, a small sample size did not account for differences in socioeconomic status. In addition, this study acknowledged the Asian tradition of the mother's major role in children's education, so interviews with the participants' fathers were not included. Such interviews might have offered additional insights.

Summary

In American society, gifted Asian American young men may be viewed as a "double minority." Compared with other gifted adolescents, they may be more vulnerable to conflict with parents because of the different expectations, values, and ethnic identities of the two generations involved. However, as with gifted young men from all cultural backgrounds, gifted Asian American males have the potential to make significant contributions to our world. These young men deserve appropriate education and guidance to address their educational and emotional needs. This article contributes to the literature on cultural conflict faced by gifted Asian American males. Educators may use the information from the portraits of the two young men in this article to gain a better understanding of the cultural dilemmas facing other gifted Asian American young men. This knowledge and understanding will enhance their work with gifted Asian American males in our nation's schools.

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Appendix A

Sample Interview Questions Used With Participants John and Matt

Explain when your giftedness was first noticed. Describe how your parents nurtured your gifts and talents.

Describe the important friendships during your early childhood.

Describe your elementary school experiences.

Who were the most influential adults throughout your K–6 school experience? Explain how they influenced you.

How have your middle/high school years been different from your elementary school experiences?

Describe your experiences in gifted education programs.

Describe your friends. How do you like to spend time with friends?

Describe your parents' personalities.

Describe how your parents are involved with your schooling.

Describe your parents' expectations for you at home and at school.

What do you see as differences between Taiwanese culture and the dominant American culture? Which culture do you feel closer to? Why?

Describe your parents' feelings concerning American culture.

Describe your experience in adjusting to American culture when you arrived in this country.

Describe your dreams and goals for the future.

Appendix B

Sample Interview Questions Used With the Participants' Mothers

Please describe your son's most memorable preschool experiences.

When was your son's giftedness first recognized? Describe what you did to nurture his giftedness.

What do you think your son's strengths are? Why?

What do you think your son likes most/least about himself? Why?

Describe your son's elementary, middle, and high school experiences.

Describe your perceptions of your son's gifted education program experience.

How are you involved in your son's schooling?

Please describe your expectations for your son at home and in school.

Describe your son's study habits.

Please compare the educational system in Taiwan to your son's educational experiences in America.

Did your son face difficulties in adjusting to American culture when you arrived in this country? Please describe.

Please describe your son's attitude toward education.

How do you feel about your son's involvement in extracurricular activities?

What do you want for your son's future?