

Acculturation Gap Between Two Generation Immigrants: An Analysis of *Fresh Off the Boat*

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Globalization facilitates the transnational and trans-regional flow of population. As new comers, immigrants need to adapt to new culture and conventions. The way of acculturation varies from individuals even within an immigrant family, with a problematic asymmetry that children acculturate faster than their last generations, as the acculturation gap-distress model demonstrates. However, empirical studies indicate that acculturation gap does not always associate with family and youth maladjustment, and parent's attitude towards the host and origin culture rarely influences children. This paper analyses *Fresh Off the Boat*, a teleplay adapted from a Chinese American writer Eddie Huang's memoir, to revile how different generation immigrants adapt to their new life. This paper finds that parents' orientations to Chinese and American culture affect their children, which is different from the previous study. Findings suggest that maintaining heritage culture is important for young immigrants' adjustment, while accepting host culture is crucial for their parents. Therefore, adopting a strategy of integration may be the ideal way of acculturation.

Keywords: acculturation gap, acculturation strategies, immigrant families, *Fresh Off the Boat*

Introduction

Globalization facilitates transnational and trans-regional flow of population. As new comers, immigrants need to adapt to new culture and conventions. The way of acculturation varies from individuals even within an immigrant family, with a problematic asymmetry that children acculturate faster than their last generations, as the acculturation gap-distress model demonstrates (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). However, empirical studies indicate that acculturation gap does not always associate with family and youth maladjustment, and parent's attitude towards the host and origin culture rarely influences children (Telzer et al., 2016). Recently, the scale of Chinese emigration has grown steadily. Therefore, this paper intends to explore the way Chinese immigrants adapt to a new society. Data analyses by this paper are transcribed from *Fresh Off the Boat*, a teleplay adapted from a Chinese American writer Eddie Huang's memoir. Since there is an emerging trend that young people's proportion becomes larger in the emigrant population. This paper also compares acculturation strategies young immigrants and their last generation adopt.

Fresh Off the Boat vividly depicts the life of Huang's immigrant family during the mid-to-late 1990s. The Huangs left China town and moved to Orlando to embrace the "American Dream". Eddie and his family accustom to a community where a few Chinese live in different ways. Based on Berry's acculturation theory and Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, this paper analyses how and why the Huang brothers acculturate differently from each other, and their parents, with an aim to revile an ideal way of acculturation for Chinese immigrants.

Related Literature

Studies on Acculturation

Studies on acculturation are increasingly being studied by psychologists as a variable at the individual level (Lee, Sobal, & Frongillo, 2003). The central aim is to demonstrate the influence that cultural factors have on the development and display of individual human behaviour (Berry, 1997). Early acculturation theory holds that immigrants are inevitably assimilated into the mainstream culture (Yu & Zheng, 2005). And the more mainstream culture influences individuals, the less the traditional culture influences them. Although the unidimensional model was popular in the early and mid-20th century, it has been challenged by a growing number of psychologists (Yu & Zheng, 2005).

Berry believes that cultural and psychological homogenization would not be the only possible outcome of intercultural contact (1997, p. 6; 2002, p. 353). Individuals and groups hold different attitudes towards heritage and host culture, and their actual behaviours may vary correspondingly. Considering this, Berry distinguishes four acculturation strategies of ethnocultural groups and the larger society (2002, p. 354) in his refined two-dimensional acculturation model.

Another approach to revealing how culture affects individuals' behaviours is Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Hofstede (2010) distinguishes six dimensions of culture: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, time orientation, and indulgence/restraint. These dimensions can form individuals' attitudes and beliefs in different cultures.

Acculturation Gap in Immigrant Family

The process of acculturation often takes place within the family context. However, not all family members experience the same acculturation process (Costigan & Dokis, 2006; Tardif-Williams & Fisher, 2009). Some immigrants resist homogenization by adhering to their original beliefs and behaviours (Bornstein & Cote, 2006, p. 4). Even siblings within the same family may not be equally acculturated (Bornstein & Cote, 2006, p. 5). Research on the acculturation gap shows that immigrant parents are usually oriented toward the heritage culture, while youth are more orientated toward settlement culture (Telzer, 2011). Some scholars attribute this gap to social strata, life circumstances, experience, and parenting style (He, 2004). Empirical studies have proved that multiple factors such as age, motivation, discrimination, stress, personality, and gender affect immigrant youths' acculturation (Berry, 1997, p. 21; Lee & Kimberlin, 2015; Kumi-Yeboah, Brobbey, & Smith, 2020). Parents' expectations, adolescents' perceptions of discrimination also influence young immigrant's adaption and life satisfaction (Cardoso, Goldbach, Cervantes, & Swank, 2016; Sellers et al., 2006; Zhang, Hong, Takeuchi, & Mossakowski, 2012; Cheung & Leung, 2009; Lee & Kimberlin, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This study used Berry's acculturation theory of two dimensions and Hofstede's cultural dimension theory as the theoretical framework.

According to Berry (1997; 2002), acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact and acculturation strategies vary with two dimensions. The first dimension is rendered as the attitude toward maintaining one's heritage, culture, and identity (issue 1), and the second dimension is the eagerness of contacting different cultures and take part in mainstream society (issue 2). By combining these two issues, acculturation strategies for ethnocultural groups fall into four patterns: assimilation,

separation, integration, and marginalization (left side of Figure 1). Among these, integration is shown to be the most adaptive strategy and related to positive psychological and social outcomes for immigrant youth (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006).

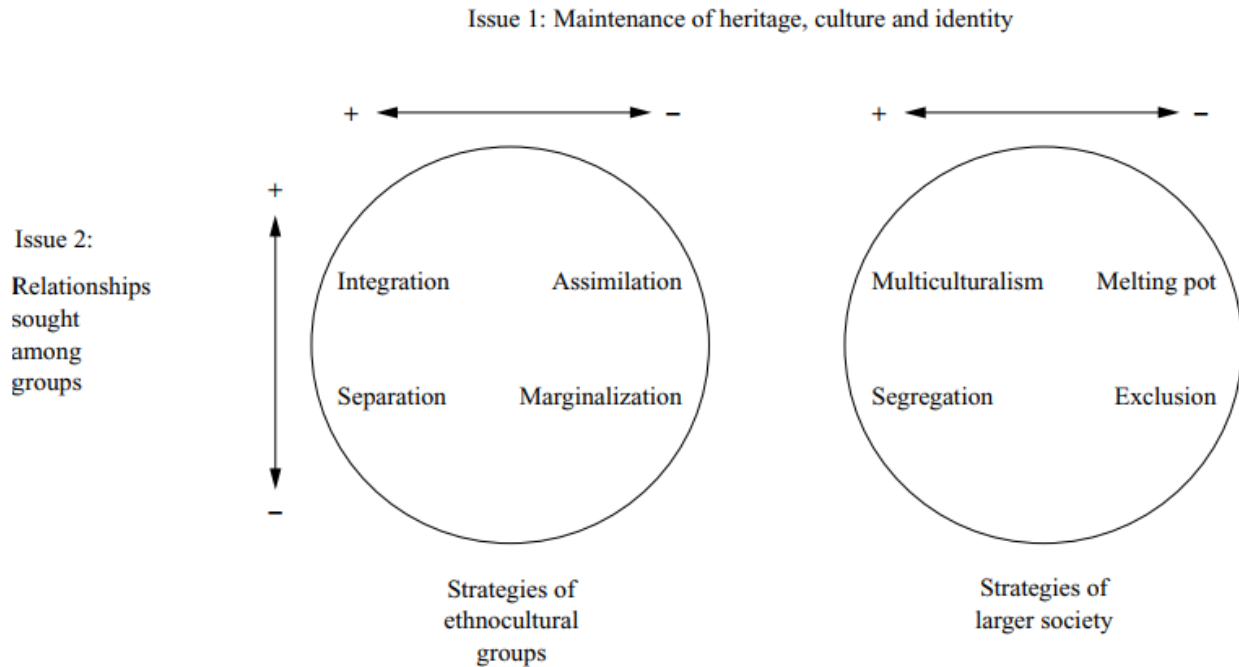


Figure 1. Acculturation strategies in ethnocultural groups and the larger society.

When individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures and try to establish new relationships, the assimilation strategy is defined. Separation is the strategy when individuals place a high value on holding on to their traditional cultures, meanwhile, avoid interacting with people from different cultures. When there is an interest in both maintaining one’s heritage culture, while having daily interactions with other groups, integration is defined. At last, marginalization is defined as individuals having little possibility or interest in maintaining their own culture and little interest in having relations with others. Accordingly, for the larger society, there are four strategies (right side of Figure 1): melting pot, segregation, exclusion, and integration, which represents the strategy of mutual accommodation and cultural diversity.

Berry (1997, p. 21) believes that individuals begin the acculturation process with several personal characteristics of both a demographic and social nature and provides a couple of factors that affect the course of acculturation (Table 1).

Table 1
Factors Influencing Individual’s Acculturation

| |
|-----------------------------|
| Age |
| Gender |
| Education |
| Place in the economic world |
| Reasons for migrating |
| Cultural distance |
| Personal factors |

Among Hofstede's six dimensions of culture, power distance is defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally". The family belongs to those institutions. In large-power-distance situations like China, Japan, and Korea, children are expected to be obedient to their parents. Parental authority continues to play a role in children's lives even after their adulthood (Hofstede, 2010, pp. 61-67).

Berry's two-dimensional model and Hofstede's power distance provide a lens through which to compare acculturation strategies adopted by the first- and second-generation immigrants in the Hang family and explore possible reasons accounting for their acculturation differences.

Analyses of Fresh Off the Boat

In *Fresh Off the Boat*, the Huangs live in a free social setting in which everyone has the freedom to choose his or her way of acculturation. As scholars have proved, acculturation gap exists in the family context. Acculturation strategies immigrants adopt vary with generation. Moreover, even within the second-generation, young immigrants adapt in different ways.

Table 2 illustrates acculturation strategies adopted by the Huangs when arriving in Orlando. The second-generation Chinese American (Eddie, Emery, and Evan) adopts assimilation and integration strategies. They are willing to accept American culture but not necessarily stick to Chinese culture. The first-generation Chinese Americans (Jessica, Grandma Huang, and Louise) retain Chinese culture and identify themselves as Chinese, but do not always embrace American culture. The following sections will present a detailed analysis and explore factors contributing to the difference.

Table 2

Acculturation Strategies Adopted by the Huangs

| | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Second-generation immigrants | Eddie | Assimilation |
| | Emery and Evan | Integration |
| First-generation immigrants | Jessica and grandma Huang | Separation |
| | Louise | Integration |

Second-Generation Chinese Americans: Orienting Toward American Culture Eddie

Eleven-year-old Eddie is the eldest child in the Huangs. He adopts assimilation strategy, which is common among immigrants, especially those from developing countries to developed countries. They are prone to follow the value of the host country and strive to establish close relationships (Berry, 2002, p. 354).

Eddie is obsessed with American popular culture and eager to assimilate into the new life in Orlando. He is obsessed with hip-pop music and culture. In the 1990s, hip-hop music was very popular among teenagers and influences their dressing and thinking. Eddie expresses his love for American culture through his rap star-like clothing and believes being a hip-pop fan helps to fit into school life. For example:

1. Jessica Huang: Why do all your shirts have black men on them?

Eddie Huang: It's notorious B.I.G.! Me and him are both dudes with mad dreams, just trying to get a little bit of respect in the game, just trying to get a nut.

As expected, Eddie acquainted other hip pop fans during lunch break. A common ground increases intimacy with his peers, however, discrepancies make Eddie suffer from ridicule. Eddie joins those boys and is about to

have his homemade lunch when all of them frown and pinched their noses. They scream that Eddie's food is stink and drove him away. Then Eddie realized that his homemade food becomes a barrier to fitting in with his peers. Then he asks for western foods:

2. Mom no! I don't want Chinese lunch! ... I want white people food! I need white people lunch. That gets me a seat at the table. And then you get to change the rules. I'm not trying to eat with the janitor for the rest of my life.

For Eddie, an eleven-year-old teenager, nothing can be more important than quickly adapting to a new cultural environment. As a second-generation Chinese-American, he needs to grow up in the US, which requires strong relationships with the others. That is the reason why he was eager to assimilate himself to get rid of Chinese food, Chinese-like dressing, even every aspects of Chinese culture.

Emery and Evan. Emery and Evan are two younger brothers of the Eddie. They are well-behaved, empathetic, and obedient. They take integration strategy to find a balance between Chinese culture and American culture. Those who adopt this strategy want to maintain their original culture while accepting some of the values and behaviours of the new culture (Berry, 2002, p. 354). They absorb the positive aspects of the two cultures. In terms of interpersonal communication, they are prone to both maintaining relationships with their compatriots and making new friends from different cultural backgrounds.

They both get along well with their neighbours and fit in well at school. They are willing to learn traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting, hoping to get Jessica's praise. Emery believes in western religion and believes that honesty would get him to heaven. On the other hand, he believes in the Chinese zodiac and hopes the Chinese New Year will put an end to his bad luck. For example:

3. Emery: I've been waiting till Chinese New Year to ask out this girl I have a crush on, Celeste.

Louise: Why would you wait until New Year?

Emery: Because according to the Chinese zodiac, it marks the official end of my bad luck year.

Evan, although the youngest in the Huangs, enjoys getting along with his neighbours and cares about community affairs. Not long after moving into the new community, Evan became an important member of the Home Owner Association:

4. Neighbour: You look so handsome, Evan.

Evan: Got have to look sharp for today's HOA meeting. We're voting on the cow box mailbox Lise wants to put up in front of her house.

Evan is willing to know more about Chinese language and culture. As many Chinese people do, he shows his passion for the Lunar New Year. These two brothers also show interest in Chinese culture. When Jessica worried that her children could lose their Chinese identity, they began to learn traditional Chinese Art to comfort her. This scene from the drama can be a good example:

5. Emery: Look at my painting of an ancient Chinese village.

Even: I calligraphed the Chinese symbol for "Refrigerator". It's both art and a label.

First-Generation Chinese Americans: Maintaining Chinese Culture

Jessica and Louise. Jessica and Louise have been living in America for a long time. However, this couple adopts different strategies. Louise adopts integration strategy while Jessica adopts the separation strategy. Those who adopt separation strategy are likely to consider the cultural value as unmoral and impenetrable hence keeping their distance from it (Berry, 2002, p. 354).

Although Jessica has been living in America since college, she has always been critical of American culture. For instance, Jessica refuses to wear costumes for Halloween. She thinks it is merely a day to dress up as somebody else, but she likes who she is and how she looks. She also signals her discontent with Eddie's clothes and the packed lunch sold in the supermarket. She thinks those are so American, which leads to the loss of Chinese identity.

In the Huang family, clothing is a symbol of different acculturation strategies. As many immigrants do, the Huangs' clothing is a symbol to represent who they are and who they want to be. Eddie wears Americanized clothes to express himself as being culturally like American teenagers. Jessica refuses Halloween costumes because she likes who she is and how she looks. These can be interpreted as she loves her Chinese identity. Louise wears business suits, which conforms to the stereotype of a businessman. Grandma Huang also wears Chinese-style blouses during the Spring Festival.

On hearing that they are just like regular old Americans to their American friends, Louise thinks that means they were accepted by the larger society; however, Jessica feels upset because that means her family is gradually losing their Chinese identity. Therefore, she takes off her jeans and put on a cheongsam. By doing so, she expresses herself as culturally different from the American society. To prevent her sons from being completely assimilated, she makes a series of changes, including speaking more Mandarin at home, no more wearing shoes in the house and trying to get rid of everything that has to do with America. For example:

Jessica [wearing a cheongsam]: I'm making some changes around here. From now on no more wearing shoes in the house. We are also going to start speaking more Mandarin at home... I'm enrolling you in Chinese school after your regular school...

Louise, as a businessman, has more opportunities to be espoused to American people and culture, which facilitates his acceptance of the American culture. For example, he is superstitious and believes jade can drive bad luck away, thus he would never take off his jade pendant. He named his sons "Eddie", "Emery", and "Evan" in alphabetical order, which conforms to Chinese naming custom. In Chinese culture, siblings' last name usually starts with the same Chinese character.

For Louise, maintaining Chinese culture and being a Chinese is not barley equivalent to wearing ethnic clothing, eating Chinese food, and speaking mandarin. It is the way they think and the way they get along with people that distinguish them from American people. Therefore, when Jessica doubts that they are losing Chinese identities, he reassures her as "we are so Chinese" and "It is okay for us to like this [American] stuff".

Grandma Huang. Grandma Huang also adopts separation strategy, which is consistent with the previous study (He, 2004). The old immigrants see no reason to assimilate into American society. On the contrary, they wish to maintain Chinese customs and the Chinese way of life in America. Language barrier, housebound, and retirement contributed to her situation. Grandma Huang has no American friends and seldom interacts with American neighbours. She couldn't speak English very well and always sit in a wheelchair because of having difficulty in moving. Those are perhaps the hurdles for her to adapt to the new life. She decorated her room with lanterns, Buddha statues, and all kinds of Chinese-style stuffs. Like many older Chinese people, she is very superstitious and always studies fengshui and the Chinese zodiac.

Findings and Discussion

Factors Accounting for Acculturation Gap

In the Huang family, intrageneration and intergeneration discrepancies occur. In essence, education is accounting for the Huangs' intergeneration difference. This is in line with the previous study (Berry, 1997).

Jessica, Louise, and Grandma Huang did not come to America before their adulthood. Born in America, the Huang brothers are exposed to western culture and values that differ from what their parents have internalized. As time goes by, they may be prone to buying into the host culture. Nevertheless, being exposed to western culture does not always cause neglect of Chinese culture and loss of Chinese identity. Although Eddie only takes American popular culture in notwithstanding; his two brothers find a balance between Chinese and American culture. The major reasons for that may be due to the following factors.

Age and discrimination. Age and discrimination account for why Eddie adopts assimilation strategy. By doing so, he hopes to get rid of ridicule and discrimination from peers. Adolescence is a time of more interactive acculturation that occurs in several contexts, including schools, families, and peer groups (Cardoso et al., 2016). Following migration, adolescents must find a balance between retaining features of their ethnic culture and adopting features of the host culture (Costigan & Dokis, 2006). However, in a new country and culture, adaptation is challenging and stressful for them. The pressure may come from coping with discrimination, since discrimination is more likely to be perceived by adolescents (Sellers et al., 2006), and a more acculturated population (Zhang et al., 2012). Survey shows that at the beginning of acculturating, integration and assimilation are effective strategies for adolescents to avoid the negative influence of discrimination (Cheung & Leung, 2009).

Eddie is the only adolescent among the Huang brothers. Finding his way in a new school is always tough for Eddie, especially when he is the different one. He perceives and suffers more ridicule and discrimination than other family members. Seeing Emery is doing well, Jessica is full of joy. But Eddie worries his brother will be laughed at and discriminated against in the future.

Power distance and parents' expectations. Hofstede (2010, p. 61) defined the power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally." Family belongs to those institutions. In the large-power-distance situation like China, Japan, and Korea, children are expected to be obedient toward their parents (Hofstede, 2010, p. 67). In a high-power distance family context, young children usually yield to their parents and act with their parents' expectations. Thus, power distance and parents' expectations can explain the reason why they show interest in Chinese culture.

Hofstede uses the power distance index (PDI) to score power distance in different countries and regions (2010, pp. 57-59). As clarified, China belongs to the high-power-distance countries with a PDI of 80. The US is a low-power-distance country with a PDI of 40 (see Table 3). In a Chinese family, inequalities between parents and children are acceptable. On average, Chinese parents place a high emphasis on firm parental control, education, and academic achievement (Lee & Kimberlin, 2015). This control will last as long as parents are alive (Hofstede, 2010). For example, Louise greets his neighbour's daughter as "listen to your father" and "stay in school", a typical way for Chinese greeting. Although he is an adult, he still needs to obey his mother's orders. For example:

Louise: From now on, I forbid you from going out on you own.

Grandma Huang: You can't forbid me, I'm the mother. I forbid you. Go to your room.

Louise: [keep silent]

Jessica has absolute authority and the three kids, no matter willing or not, need to obey her instructions. The adolescent Eddie tries to revolt, but only shows his rebellion by secretly throwing away his lunch. And the younger boys, Emery and Evan, voluntarily follow every request she made. For example:

Evan: Okay, teacher mommy.

Eddie: You're loving this. Teacher's pet and mama's boy. This sucks, right, Emery?

Emery: You play the cards you're dealt. Choose life, you know?

The current study presents that Chinese-immigrant children and native Chinese children perceive similar stress levels from their parents' expectations (Lee, 2015). In the Huang family, children are also expected to insist on Chinese culture and values, which may not comply with aspects of Western culture. When Jessica expects her sons to know more about Chinese culture, Emery and Evan make efforts to master Chinese art and speak Mandarin.

Table 3

Power Distance Index (PDI) for China and the United States

| Countries and regions | Power distance index | Rank |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-------|
| China | 80 | 12-14 |
| United States | 40 | 59-61 |

Acculturation in a Dynamic Way

Acculturation strategies have been shown to have substantial relationships with positive adaptation: integration is usually the most successful; marginalization is the least, and assimilation and separation strategies are intermediate (Berry, 1997, p. 24). Therefore, Emery and Evan adopt the ideal strategy, whereas, not all immigrant youth adapts as smoothly as they do. Parents' expectation is likely to result in a cultural dilemma for them. Out of filial piety, they try to be Chinese at home; in order to be accepted, they are American at school. The binary opposition between either being a Chinese or being an American let pressure accumulated as age increases (Lee, 2015). Therefore, a timely shift of acculturation strategy is necessary for immigrant parents and their children. In the first few years, the Huangs adopt different acculturation strategies. However, their acculturation strategies are not static, but vary with situations and their emotions. After a long period of time, the Huangs find that integration is the best way to adapt to the new life.

At first, Eddie hopes to be accepted again by eating western food. But it does not stop him from being discriminated against. He brings western food to the cafeteria and waits in line to use the microwave when a queue jumper pushes him aside and insults him with an extremely offensive word. This causes him to reconsider how to fit in. Latter at school, some friends sneer that China is boring, Eddie stands up in defence of his homeland. Now Eddie identifies himself as a Chinese and decides never to pretend to be someone else in order to belong.

Jessica gradually accepts the positive aspects of American culture and attempts to make friends and find a job in Orlando. She stops asking her sons to stay away from American culture and even keeps a poster of the American-Chinese restaurant she criticized. Accepting American-Chinese food represents Jessica accepting American culture while being a Chinese. Grandma Huang signs up for an English course and gives herself an English name, Jane. She makes American friends, and takes part in the neighbour activities on her motorized wheelchair.

Conclusion

Based on Berry's acculturation theory and Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, this paper analyses cases from a Chinese immigrant family in *Fresh Off the Boat*. Moving to a community of a completely different cultural context, the Huangs need to work out how to choose acculturation strategies that will allow them to achieve a successful adaptation. This paper compares acculturation strategies adopted by two generations of Chinese Americans and finds that young immigrants and their older family members hold different attitudes

toward American culture which causes the intergeneration acculturation discrepancies.

Education can give rise to this discrepancy. Besides, second-generation immigrants hold different attitudes toward American culture which causes the intrageneration acculturation discrepancies. Two pairs of factors (age and discrimination; power distance and parents' expectation) can cause such differences.

The Huang's experience suggests that integration can be an optimal strategy of acculturation for second-generation Chinese Americans and their families. Once integration strategies are adopted, they can attain better psychological and socio-cultural results. Hence, for other oversea Chinese parents and their children, keeping a balance between Chinese culture and the host culture helps for their adjustment.

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