

Making the Decision to Move Out: Bicultural Young Adults and the Negotiation of Cultural Demands and Family Relationships

Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology
43(5) 663–670
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DOI: 10.1177/0022022112443414
jccp.sagepub.com


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Abstract

The present study examined the impact of culture and family on the issue of moving out among bicultural young adults with European, South Asian, and East Asian backgrounds ($N = 299$). Consistent with cross-cultural differences in autonomy ideals, South and East Asians were less motivated than Europeans to leave the family home. Cultural differences in moving out motivation were explained by East and South Asians having less parental approval for moving out before marriage and, additionally for South Asians, having a self-concept that is largely defined by the family (i.e., family allocentrism). Furthermore, the mediating effects of parental approval and family allocentrism were moderated by level of conflict within the family. Implications for understanding cultural demands and family relations with respect to the decision to move out are discussed.

Keywords

culture, autonomy, moving out, family allocentrism, family conflict

Leaving the family home represents a major life transition for many young adults. The reasons for deciding to move out, however, can vary significantly across cultural contexts (e.g., moving out when one finishes school or at the time of marriage). These variations have been linked to different conceptualizations of autonomy across cultures (e.g., Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000). Incompatible notions of autonomous life decisions such as moving out can generate distress for biculturals (i.e., individuals who identify with two different cultures; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993) who have access to multiple sets of cultural norms attached to autonomy (Giguère, Lalonde, & Lou, 2010). As migration from Eastern to Western countries and biculturalism continue to increase, it is crucial to understand the psychological processes underlying cross-cultural

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differences in order to gain insight into the types of cultural challenges faced by bicultural individuals. In this study, we examined moving out, an important life transition guided by autonomy concerns, and how this decision is guided by cultural and familial factors, which socialize culturally based perceptions among biculturals. The populations of interest were South Asian and East Asian Canadians who represent the largest recent immigrant groups in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008) as well as a large proportion of the immigrant population in the United States.

Biculturals from recent generations of immigrant families are socialized by both the heritage and mainstream cultures (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Heritage culture refers to the culture of birth or upbringing, whereas mainstream culture refers to the predominant cultural environment where immigration and settlement occurs. Although many social norms and values are shared by different cultures (e.g., politeness toward adults), autonomy of the individual is one issue where Eastern and Western norms diverge (Phinney et al., 2000). Autonomy has been described as a Western cultural ideal concerned with having an independent self-construal and striving for one's own best interests. Eastern cultures, on the other hand, are thought to promote interdependence and reliance on others (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Previous cross-cultural work has found that Western biculturals with South Asian or East Asian backgrounds feel that their heritage and mainstream norms clash when it comes to autonomy-related matters such as age expectations for going out with friends (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991) and which characteristics are important in an ideal mate (Lalonde, Hynie, Pannu, & Tatla, 2004). Our study focused on moving out of the family home. Moving out is a prototypical and important expression of independence and individualism in Western societies (Boyd, 2000). In contrast, Eastern societies place greater emphasis on family, tradition, and adherence to group norms than individual autonomy. Adult children are often expected to remain at home until they marry to reflect an obligation to their family (Mitchell, 2004).

In line with an emphasis on interdependence and familial ties, individuals from Eastern cultural backgrounds may look to their family when making important decisions, such as whether to move out or not (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1991). Stewart, Bond, Deeds, and Chung (1999) found that family had a stronger influence on autonomy expectations for Asian compared to Western participants. This familial influence may come from the parents' explicit approval or disapproval for their children moving out, or it may be conveyed implicitly in the form of cultural norms. For biculturals, heritage culture is primarily transmitted through the family, so adherence to heritage norms should vary according to the extent to which an individual's self-concept is tied to the family. Lay et al. (1998) refer to this sense of connectedness to the family as *family allocentrism*, or collectivism at the family level. Family allocentrism tends to be higher among Eastern than Western individuals and has been demonstrated to facilitate the socialization of parental views and heritage values in immigrant children (Lalonde et al., 2004). In the present study, we tested whether heritage norms conveyed by parental approval and the degree to which one's self-concept is tied to the family (i.e., family allocentrism) account for cross-cultural differences in motivation to move out.

As Eastern cultures typically encourage respect and obedience and place more importance on norms as determinants of behavior than do Western cultures, divergence from familial expectations and expression of personal goals over in-group goals are strongly discouraged (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994). In the context of moving out before marriage, bicultural young adults may strive to satisfy their personal need to be on their own but feel that they must adhere to their parents' expectations to live at home. They may feel like they are caught between their own goals and those set out for them by others, contributing to a sense of internal conflict as well as frequent conflict with their parents (Kwak, 2003). Young adults who have been raised in a Western context, and hence exposed to Western views of making one's own decisions, should be more likely to engage in culturally based disagreements with others who hold an Eastern

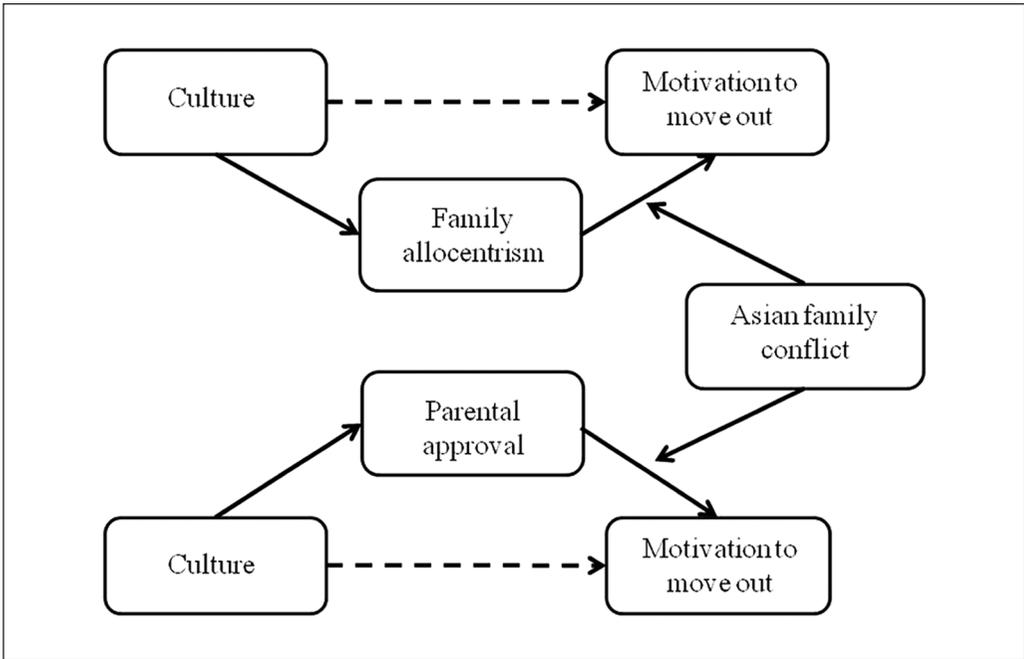


Figure 1. The Roles of Parental Approval, Family Allocentrism, and Family Conflict on the Relation Between Culture and Motivation to Move Out

perspective. Although intergenerational conflict and contradictory views on some norms are common regardless of cultural background (Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000), this conflict may be exacerbated and have unique implications for immigrant families, including how parental approval and family allocentrism impact autonomous behavior.

In this study, we investigated family allocentrism and parental approval to move out as potential mediators of the relation between cultural background and bicultural young adults' motivation to move out of the family home. The degrees to which parental approval and family allocentrism account for young adults' choice to stay home and fulfill parental expectations versus moving out and asserting their independence may depend on how much they fight with their parents over other issues. Thus, we tested whether the amount of conflict within one's family moderates these effects (i.e., whether the effects of family allocentrism and parental approval would differ across various levels of family conflict). A conceptual representation of the proposed relationships between the variables is shown in Figure 1. Although it is intuitively appealing to view one's motivation to move out as related to parental factors and expectations, research has yet to empirically test this pattern of relationships among biculturals from East Asian and South Asian backgrounds. Four predictions were tested: (a) Compared to European Canadians, South Asian and East Asian Canadians would be less motivated to move out; (b) in the family context, South and East Asian Canadians would perceive less parental approval to move out and report higher levels of family allocentrism and family conflict than European Canadians; (c) family allocentrism and parental approval would mediate the relation between culture and motivation to move out; and (d) family conflict would influence the explanatory roles of family allocentrism and parental approval.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 299 undergraduates at a large university in Toronto, Canada: 108 European Canadians (83 women), 112 South Asian Canadians (92 women), and 79 East Asian Canadians (51 women) (M age = 19.8, SD = 2.1). The European subsample did not include Italian Canadians, who tend to resemble Canadians from Eastern backgrounds more than Western backgrounds when it comes to family influence and traditional autonomy views (Lalonde, 2006). Of the South Asian subsample, 59 were first-generation and 53 were second-generation. Of the East Asian subsample, 35 were first-generation and 44 were second-generation. Participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of the measures described below.

Measures

Moving out motivation. Seven items were adapted from Lai and Lalonde (2007) to assess motivation to move out (e.g., "I am eager to live independently" and "I can't wait to move out"). Responses were given on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*); higher scores indicated stronger motivation to move out. This scale showed good reliability (α = .91).

Parental approval. Participants indicated the extent to which their parents would approve of them moving out with six different targets (e.g., friend of a different gender and same cultural background) on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A factor analysis revealed that all six items loaded onto a single factor that accounted for 56.97% of the total variance. Higher scores indicated greater perceived parental approval. The scale showed acceptable reliability in this sample (α = .84).

Family allocentrism. The 21-item Family Allocentrism Scale (Lay et al., 1998) was used to measure the degree of connectedness to one's family, or collectivism at the family level (e.g., "I respect my parents' wishes even if they are not my own") on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated greater connectedness to family. The scale showed good reliability in this sample (α = .88).

Family conflict. The Asian American Conflict Scale (AACS; Lee et al., 2000) consists of 10 parent-child situations that reflect possible conflicts between Asian American children and their parents (e.g., "your parents tell you what to do with your life, but you want to make your own decisions"). Participants rated the likelihood of each situation occurring in their own family on a 5-point scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*) or indicated "does not apply." The statements tapped a range of areas for common intergenerational disagreements such as academic expectations and social life. A higher average score indicated a greater degree of family conflict. The scale showed good reliability in this sample (α = .89).

Results

The pattern of results did not change when gender or generational status were included as covariates; thus, gender and generational status are not discussed further. An item bias check revealed that all cultural groups seemed to discriminate in their ratings in a consistent and meaningful manner.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, results of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that there were cultural group differences in motivation to move out, $F(2, 296) = 7.31, p = .001, \eta^2 = .05$. Planned post hoc tests using the Games-Howell procedure for test of means showed that the European group ($M = 5.37, SD = 1.06$) reported greater motivation to move out compared to the East Asian ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.37$) and South Asian ($M = 4.84, SD = 1.32$) groups ($ps < .01$). Motivation to move out did not differ between the two Asian groups ($p = .89$).

Table 1. Indirect Effects of Culture on Moving Out Motivation Through Parental Approval and Family Allocentrism

	Sobel Test Using Normal Distribution			Bootstrapping	
				Percentile 95% CI	
	Point Estimate	SE	z	Lower Limit	Upper Limit
<i>Parental approval to move out</i>					
South Asian versus European	-.35	.09	-3.84***	-.58	-.15
East Asian versus European	-.34	.10	-3.59***	-.56	-.14
<i>Family allocentrism</i>					
South Asian versus European	-.15	.06	-2.55*	-.28	-.04
East Asian versus European	-.10	.06	-1.80 [†]	-.24	.02

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000.
[†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

To test the second hypothesis, three one-way ANOVAs tested the effects of culture on parental approval, family allocentrism, and family conflict and were followed by post hoc tests of means. As predicted, the cultural groups differed in their level of perceived parental approval for moving out, $F(2, 296) = 34.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$. East Asians ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.14$) and South Asians ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.20$) thought their parents would be less approving of moving out than did Europeans ($M = 4.70, SD = 1.50$) ($ps < .001$). There was also an overall effect of culture on family allocentrism, $F(2, 296) = 7.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$, such that South Asian ($M = 4.60, SD = .87$) and East Asian ($M = 4.64, SD = .68$) participants felt a stronger sense of connectedness to their family than did the European participants ($M = 4.24, SD = .80$). In addition, South Asians ($M = 2.87, SD = .97$) and East Asians ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.05$) reported more family conflict than did Europeans ($M = 2.02, SD = .97$), $F(2, 295) = 21.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$. The two Asian groups did not differ in parental approval, family allocentrism, and family conflict ($ps > .70$).

Hypothesis 3 was that high family allocentrism and low parental approval for moving out would account for South and East Asians' relatively low motivation to move out. We conducted an estimation of the indirect effect using the bootstrapping method (with 5,000 samples) as well as the Sobel test (see MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). Dummy variables were created to account for cultural group membership, setting European Canadians as the comparison group. Results of the Sobel test and bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals (CIs) that did not contain zero revealed an indirect effect of cultural background on motivation to move out through parental approval for the two Asian groups (see Table 1). Being South Asian or East Asian (as opposed to European) was associated with less parental approval to move out, which was associated with less motivation to move out. Family allocentrism was also a mediator of the relation between culture and moving out for the South Asian and the East Asian groups relative to the European group—although the test did not reach statistical significance in the case of East Asians. Being South Asian was associated with higher family allocentrism, which was associated with less motivation to move out. For East Asian participants, the indirect effect of culture on moving out motivation through family allocentrism was marginally significant; in fact, using a one-tailed test, the mediation effect would be significant.

Table 2. Conditional Indirect Effects Through Parental Approval and Family Allocentrism at Different Levels of Family Conflict

Level of Family Conflict	Parental Approval			Family Allocentrism		
	Indirect Effect	SE	z	Indirect Effect	SE	z
<i>South Asian versus European</i>						
1.37 (-1 SD)	-.53	.11	-4.66***	-.12	.06	-2.05*
2.46 (M)	-.36	.09	-3.98***	-.13	.05	-2.31*
3.55 (+1 SD)	-.19	.11	-1.68	-.13	.07	-1.82
<i>East Asian versus European</i>						
1.27 (-1 SD)	-.61	.14	-4.44***	-.12	.08	-1.42
2.33 (M)	-.38	.10	-3.73***	-.05	.06	-.96
3.44 (+1 SD)	-.14	.11	-1.30	.01	.08	.13

Note. -1 SD represents one standard deviation below the mean; +1 SD represents one standard deviation above the mean.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Whereas Hypothesis 3 was concerned with *how*, or the processes through which, the effect of culture operates on motivation to move out (i.e., mediation), Hypothesis 4 had to do with *when* the mediation is present (i.e., moderated mediation). It was predicted that family conflict would moderate the mediating roles of family allocentrism and family approval such that the strength of the indirect effects in the third hypothesis would be conditional on the degree of conflict in the family. Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes's (2007) SPSS macro for moderated mediation was used to test for the significance of indirect effects at three levels of family conflict: the mean, one standard deviation above the mean (+1 SD), and one standard deviation below the mean (-1 SD). As seen in Table 2, our hypothesis was supported such that for both South Asians and East Asians relative to Europeans, the conditional indirect effect through parental approval was significantly different from zero when the level of family conflict was at -1 SD or at the mean, but not at +1 SD. This finding suggests that degree of parental approval accounted for South Asians and East Asians' low motivation to move out when levels of family conflict were low to moderate, but not when conflict was high. Family conflict also moderated the conditional indirect effect of culture on moving out motivation through family allocentrism for the South Asian group, such that family allocentrism was a significant mediator at low and moderate but not high levels of conflict. For the East Asians, however, family allocentrism did not mediate the relation between culture and moving out motivation at any level of conflict.

Discussion

We investigated the impact of culture and family on the decision to move out of the family home among young adults with European, South Asian, and East Asian backgrounds. Consistent with cross-cultural differences in autonomy ideals and the importance of self relative to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), South Asian and East Asian Canadian bicultural participants were less motivated than European Canadians and perceived less approval from their parents to move away from their family before marriage. Consistent with past research (e.g., Lalonde et al., 2004), the participants in the Asian groups were also higher than Europeans on family allocentrism, suggesting that these young Asian adults felt strongly connected to their families and thus

were likely to have internalized the cultural values of their parents. As they have also been socialized by Western culture, Asian participants also reported having more conflict with their parents over a variety of issues on which Eastern and Western cultures differ, including social life, academic achievement, and gender roles (see Lee et al., 2000).

Our prediction that Eastern cultural ideals of autonomy, expressed explicitly through approval or disapproval from the parents or implicitly through cultural norms transmitted by being part of the family collective (i.e., being family allocentric), would underlie cultural differences in moving out motivation was largely supported. Being South Asian or East Asian (as opposed to European) was associated with receiving less parental approval to move out, which then reduced motivation to move out. South Asians' high family allocentrism, and by association, stronger internalization of sociocultural norms, also accounted for their weaker motivation to move out. Whether or not these factors played a part in biculturals' motivation to leave home, however, depended on the extent to which participants had conflict with their family over issues that are imbued with cultural norms and values and often related to autonomy. High but not low and moderate levels of family conflict diminished the impact of approval and family allocentrism on South and East Asians' desire and goal to be independent from one's family.

When socially constructed norms (e.g., those prescribed by the family) are incompatible with one's personal desires, intrapersonal (e.g., "feeling torn") or interpersonal conflict may occur (Giguère et al., 2010). The high level of family conflict described by South and East Asians and how it changed the way parental approval and family allocentrism influence motivation to move out is an example of the bicultural conflict sometimes faced by individuals who have internalized two different cultures. The relation between intrapersonal conflict that occurs within the self and the interpersonal conflict that occurs between parents is worth examining, particularly when the repercussions can involve negative psychological consequences such as stress, depression, and maladjustment among bicultural youth (Kwak, 2003).

Future research should also consider additional motivational and societal factors that may undergird immigrant children's decision to move out. Whether moving out is seen as culturally normative or acceptable may depend on the reason (e.g., to seek an employment opportunity) or circumstances (e.g., moving in with romantic partner versus friends) related to the decision. Another important conditional factor that can diminish or enhance the likelihood of young adults moving out is socioeconomic status (e.g., Boyd, 2000). Finally, the present study was conducted in an urban, multicultural city. Results may look different in a more rural setting where the pressure for immigrant children to assimilate to the mainstream culture may be stronger and the influence of family and heritage norms less relevant.

The present study explored the issues surrounding autonomy in bicultural young adults in terms of the family's role in shaping decisions like moving out of the family home. It is important to focus on immigrant youth during the process of establishing their identity and developing their autonomy while being exposed to different cultural influences. Furthermore, the relative importance placed on autonomy and patterns of family dynamics observed across different ethnic groups lead to a more complex picture of the transition to adulthood. Enhanced theoretical understanding provided by this kind of research can greatly contribute to the development of intervention or prevention programs aimed at addressing problems commonly faced by immigrant families. As rates of immigration and multiculturalism continue to soar, it is comforting to know that heritage cultural norms and an emphasis on family influences help to explain changing trends as a function of our dynamic cultural mosaic.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) CGS doctoral scholarship [752-2010-1653] to the first author and a Standard Research Grant [410-2006-1662] to the second author.

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