

PINE STUDY II: Research Article

Family and Marital Conflict Among Chinese Older Adults in the United States: The Influence of Personal Coping Resources

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Abstract

Background: Conflict in the family is a major risk factor for the well-being of older immigrants, whose lives are centered around their families. This study examined the potential linkage between personal coping resources and family and marital conflict among U.S. Chinese older adults. **Methods:** Data were derived from the PINE study, a population-based study of Chinese elders in Chicago ($N = 3,157$). Logistic regressions were carried out to predict the likelihood of having conflict with family members and with the spouse, respectively, using indicators of personal coping resources (ie, socioeconomic status, physical health, acculturation level, perceived children's filial piety, number of friends, and sense of mastery).

Results: The results showed that older adults with higher education (odds ratio [OR] = 1.03, confidence interval [CI] = 1.01–1.06; OR = 1.09, CI = 1.06–1.11, respectively), lower perception of children being filial (OR = 0.95, CI = 0.93–0.97; OR = 0.96, CI = 0.94–0.98], respectively), and lower sense of mastery (OR = 0.95, CI = 0.94–0.96; OR = 0.98, CI = 0.97–0.99, respectively) were more likely to report both family and marital conflict. Older adults who had more friends were less likely to report marital conflict (OR = 0.61, CI = 0.43–0.86).

Conclusions: Overall, older immigrants with greater coping resources seemed to have less family and marital conflict. Particularly important are their own sense of control and available support from children and friends in the new society. Higher education could be a risk factor for these conflicts. Future studies are needed to distinguish everyday life conflict from acculturation-related conflict in this population.

Keywords: Minority aging—Resilience—Socioeconomic issues—Acculturation—Sense of mastery—Filial piety

Family conflict is a significant issue among immigrant populations. Along the stressful immigration and acculturation process, family members are linked in a much closer way than ever before, making family relationships more intense and vulnerable to disturbances (1). The process of migration has been shown to trigger both marital and parent-child conflict. Marital conflict in immigrant families often occurs as a result of the couple's different expectation, pace, and experience of acculturation, a change in power relationships, or a role reversal (2). Similarly, parents and children in immigrant families often acculturate at a different pace and have different expectations for appropriate parent-child relationships, which in turn often create conflict, feelings of distance, or even alienation (3). The above experiences are often intensified among older immigrants, who tend to have much more challenges in learning a new language, making

new friends, and adjusting to the new society (4). Older immigrants' social ties may be much confined with relationships with their spouse, children, or extended family members, and studies have documented such intense, often conflictual, or sometimes even abusive family relations among older immigrants (5,6).

As conflict in family often occurs as a result of loss of autonomy, lack of control over one's life, and dependency on family members, coping resources of the individuals may affect the experience of family conflict. The Stress and Coping Theory suggests that the experience of stressful situations is greatly affected by the appraisals of the situation, which in turn are based on resources available to individuals and the degree to which they believe they can cope with the situation (7). Older immigrants with more coping resources (eg, individual resources, or support available from family and friends)

and favorable appraisals (eg, sense of mastery) may better adapt to the stressful situations (8) and likely have less tense or conflictual relations in the family. The Life Course Theory also emphasizes the importance of human agency and role of coping skills when one faces changing environment (9). As older immigrants respond to the challenges and uncertainties in the new social environment, the locus of agency and the available coping resources could influence their adaptations, consequently shaping family dynamics.

In the immigration context, coping resources at the individual level could be socioeconomic status (SES), physical health, and acculturation level. Highly educated individuals in general have less marital conflict than those with lower education (10). Financial difficulties, in contrast, often create family conflict (11). Older immigrants with higher SES were found to be more capable of managing stress emotionally and financially, and more optimistic about solving problems (12). They were also reported to have lower expectations on children's support and take a more independent and active role in the family (12,13). Similarly, older adults with better physical health are less dependent on family members for caregiving, which is often associated with family conflict (14). A high level of acculturation may translate into greater sense of self-reliance and independence, possibly reducing family conflict (15). At the family level, adult children could be the major, if not sole, source of emotional, instrumental, or even financial support for older immigrants (4). Beyond the family, support from friends could help reduce older immigrants' dependence on their families by providing alternative support networks, sharing information, and helping maintain customs and values in the new society (16).

Lastly, sense of mastery, which is the extent to which individuals think that they have personal power and control over their life and environment, may work as a predisposing factor that mitigate major stress by increasing the individual's available coping strategies (17). Older adults who have a stronger sense of mastery may feel more capable of tackling various challenges in the acculturation process, including the ones relating to family relations, and thus may have less conflict in the family.

This study aims to examine the potential linkage between older immigrants' coping resources and family conflict among Chinese older immigrants in the United States. As a largest and fastest growing population in the United States, Chinese populations are characterized by strong family norms of collectiveness and relatedness (18). Despite being resourceful and resilient, these norms could also make family relations particularly sensitive to disturbances for older immigrants. We hypothesized that Chinese older immigrants who have greater coping resources, manifested in higher levels of SES, health status, acculturation, support from children and friends, and sense of mastery, are less likely to report family and marital conflict.

Methods

Sample

Data were derived from the Population Study of Chinese Elderly in Chicago (PINE), a population-based study of community-living Chinese older adults (60+) in the Chicago area (19). A total of 3,159 older adults were recruited and interviewed from more than 20 social service agencies, community centers, faith-based organizations, and senior apartments in the Greater Chicago area between 2011 and 2013.

Measures

Family conflicts were assessed by questions adopted from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP) to indicate the presence of conflict with family members in general (ie,

family conflict) and with the spouse (ie, marital conflict), respectively. Respondents rated how often their family members (i) made too many demands on him/her and (ii) criticized him/her (1 = hardly ever, 2 = some of the time, 3 = often). If the answer to either question was some of the time or often, family conflict was coded as 1 [any conflict] otherwise 0 [no conflict]. Two similar questions were asked regarding marital relationships among married respondents. The answers were coded similarly (1 = any, 0 = hardly ever/some of the time).

Personal coping resources. Education was measured in years. Income was indicated by respondents' annual household income, which included all sources of income such as earnings, pensions, and wealth (1 = \$0–\$4,999; 2 = \$5,000–\$9,999; 3 = \$10,000 or above). Physical health was measured by self-rated health (0 = fair/poor, 1 = good/very good). Level of acculturation was measured by 12 questions from the Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (20). Respondents rated their preference for speaking a given language in a number of settings, in their media use, and preferred ethnicity of those they interact, ranging from 1 = only Chinese/all Chinese to 5 = only English/all Americans. Sum scores were calculated, ranging from 12 to 60, with a higher score indicating a higher level of acculturation ($\alpha = .91$).

Support from children was assessed by perceived children's filial piety, that is, children's obligations to respect and care for aging parents. Filial piety is a central family norm for Chinese and an important coping resource for Chinese older immigrants. It was assessed by six questions asking how much respect, care, greeting, happiness, obedience, and financial support that the participants have received from their adult children (1 = very little, 2 = rather little, 3 = average, 4 = rather a lot, 5 = very much). Sum scores were calculated, ranging from 6 to 30, with a higher score indicating a greater perception of children being filial ($\alpha = .86$).

Support from friends was measured by the number of friends that the respondents had (0 = none, 1 = 1–9, 2 = 10–20, 3 = more than 20).

Sense of mastery was assessed by Pearlin Mastery Scale (8). Respondents reported their level of agreement, ranging from 1 [strongly disagree] to 7 [strongly agree] with seven statements regarding their current life situations. A sum score was created, ranging from 7 to 49, with a higher score indicating a greater sense of mastery ($\alpha = .80$).

Control variables included age (in years), gender (1 = female), marital status (1 = married), years of residence in the United States, number of children, and living arrangement (ie, coresidence with children and spouse, respectively [1 = yes]).

Data Analysis

We first presented sample characteristics and correlations among the key study variables. To test the hypothesis, we carried out two sets of logistic regressions to predict family and marital conflict, respectively, with variables representing individual (demographic, SES, physical health, acculturation), family (number of children, living arrangement, filial piety), and community (number of friends) coping resources which were entered sequentially and sense of mastery added last as an indicator of overall coping appraisal.

Results

Table 1 summarizes sample characteristics. The mean age of the respondents was 73 years. The majority were women (58%) and married (71%). The respondents had an average 9 years of

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of the PINE Study by Two Types of Family Conflict ($N = 3,157$)

	Total ($N = 3,157$)	No Family Conflict ($n = 2,704$)	Any Family Conflict ($n = 438$)	No Marital Conflict ($n = 1,500$)	Any Marital Conflict ($n = 755$)
Characteristics	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Age (60–105)	72.81 (8.30)	72.86 (8.33)	72.30 (8.01)	70.85 (7.54)	71.26 (7.30)
60–69	41.94%				
70–79	36.71%				
80 and older	21.35%				
Women ^b	57.97%	58.25%	56.85%	50.73%	40.13%
Married	71.32%	70.96%	71.92%	—	—
Years of education ^{a,b}	8.72 (5.05)	8.62 (5.06)	9.31 (4.90)	8.81 (4.64)	10.70 (4.93)
Personal annual income					
\$0–\$4,999	33.32%	33.05%	34.87%	37.76%	38.80%
\$5,000–\$9,999	51.78%	52.41%	47.58%	47.02%	43.20%
\$10,000 or above	14.90%	14.55%	17.55%	15.22%	18.00%
Good/very good self-rated health ^{a,b}	39.15%	39.85%	34.70%	41.67%	36.95%
Years in the United States (0.1–90)	20.02 (13.18)	20.06 (13.36)	19.82 (13.14)	18.26 (12.67)	18.64 (12.97)
0–5	12.35%				
6–10	14.51%				
11–20	30.68%				
21 or above	42.46%				
Level of acculturation (12–60) ^b	15.25 (5.12)	15.17 (4.99)	15.75 (5.77)	14.99 (4.89)	15.72 (4.64)
Number of children ^{a,b}	2.87(1.51)	2.90 (1.51)	2.73 (1.48)	2.83 (1.37)	2.58 (1.46)
Living with children ^a	35.02%	33.99%	42.24%	36.59%	35.49%
Living with spouse	81.86%	82.35%	79.28%	94.24%	96.58%
Children's filial piety (6–30) ^{a,b}	22.18 (4.96)	22.45 (4.81)	20.56 (5.45)	22.57 (4.74)	21.21 (4.96)
Number of friends ^b					
0	14.34%	13.85%	17.20%	12.78%	15.25%
1–9	50.80%	50.89%	50.23%	49.76%	51.69%
10–20	15.27%	15.70%	12.84%	15.91%	16.19%
More than 20	19.59%	19.56%	19.72%	21.55%	16.87%
Sense of mastery (7–49) ^{a,b}	34.56 (7.66)	35.03 (7.56)	31.78 (7.57)	35.36 (7.36)	34.20 (7.73)
Family conflict	13.94%				
Marital conflict ^c	33.48%				

Notes: PINE = Population Study of Chinese Elderly in Chicago.

^aSignificant differences between those who had family conflict and those who didn't.

^bSignificant difference between those who had marital conflict and those who didn't.

^cMarital conflict was assessed among married respondents only.

education, and more than 85% had annual income lower than \$10,000. Despite the average length of 20 years of stay in the United States, the respondents had relatively low levels of acculturation (Mean = 15.25 on a scale from 12 to 60). The respondents reported relatively high levels of perceived filial piety (Mean = 22.18 out of a possible 30) and moderate levels of sense of mastery (Mean = 34.56 out of a possible 49). About half of the respondents had 1–9 friends, and about a third had more than 10 friends. Lastly, about 14% of all respondents reported family conflict and 33.48% of married respondents reported marital conflict.

Table 1 also compares sample characteristics between those who had conflict and those who didn't. As shown, those who reported family or marital conflict were better educated, had poorer physical health, perceived children as less filial, and had lower sense of mastery than those who didn't report any conflict. Those who reported marital conflict were also more likely to be less acculturated and had fewer friends than those who didn't report marital conflict.

Table 2 presents correlation coefficients of the key study variables. These coefficients ranged from .00 to .30, indicating weak correlations among these variables. The results largely echoed the findings in the Table 1, showing that higher levels of education,

poorer physical health, lower levels of perceived filial piety, and lower sense of mastery were associated with a higher chance of reporting both family and marital conflict.

Tables 3 and 4 summarize the results of logistic regressions. Consistent with the correlation results, older adults with higher education, lower perceptions of filial piety, and lower sense of mastery were significantly more likely to report both family and marital conflict. Good physical health was associated with a lower likelihood of having family conflict until perceived filial piety was controlled for, and a lower likelihood of having marital conflict until sense of mastery was controlled for. These findings suggest that children's filial actions and older immigrants' own sense of mastery may mitigate the possible negative influence of poorer physical health on family and marital conflict. Similarly, lower level of acculturation was related to a higher chance of having marital conflict, until the sense of mastery was controlled for, suggesting that the possible influence of lower levels of acculturation on marital conflict was also mitigated by older immigrants' sense of mastery. Lastly, older adults with more than 20 friends were significantly less likely to report marital conflict than those who had no friends.

Table 2. Correlation Among Key Study Variables in the PINE Study (N = 3,157)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Family conflict	1.00	.30***	.05**	.00	-.04*	.01	-.12***	-.03	-.15***
2. Marital conflict		1.00	.22***	.01	-.05*	-.02	-.12***	-.05*	-.08***
3. Education			1.00	.01	.03	.11***	-.09***	.15***	.16***
4. Income				1.00	.07***	.12***	-.07***	.08**	.07***
5. Good health					1.00	.06***	.08***	.12***	.28***
6. Level of acculturation						1.00	-.05**	.04*	.05**
7. Children's filial piety							1.00	.06*	.25***
8. Number of friends								1.00	.12***
9. Sense of mastery									1.00

PINE = Population Study of Chinese Elderly in Chicago.

Table 3. Results of Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Having Family Conflict Among U.S. Chinese Older Adults (N = 3,141)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Age	1.00	0.98–1.01	1.00	0.99–1.02	1.01	0.99–1.02	1.00	0.99–1.02
Women	0.99	0.79–1.23	1.08	0.86–1.36	1.12	0.89–1.40	1.02	0.80–1.28
Married	0.93	0.71–1.20	1.02	0.78–1.33	1.03	0.79–1.35	1.03	0.78–1.36
Years of education	1.03*	1.00–1.05	1.02*	1.00–1.04	1.02*	1.00–1.05	1.03*	1.01–1.06
Income ^a								
\$5,000–\$9,999	0.90	0.71–1.15	0.93	0.73–1.19	0.94	0.73–1.20	1.00	0.78–1.29
\$10,000 or above	1.14	0.82–1.58	1.14	0.82–1.59	1.14	0.82–1.60	1.25	0.89–1.76
Good/very good health	0.77*	0.62–0.96	0.84	0.68–1.05	0.85	0.70–1.06	1.05	0.83–1.32
Years in the United States	1.00	0.99–1.01	1.00	0.99–1.01	1.00	0.99–1.01	1.00	0.99–1.01
Level of acculturation	1.07	0.45–2.56	1.01	0.39–2.61	1.01	0.39–2.58	1.20	0.46–3.18
Number of children			0.98	0.99–1.01	0.98	0.90–1.06	0.97	0.90–1.01
Living with children			1.53***	1.23–1.91	1.51***	1.21–1.88	1.49***	1.19–1.87
Children's filial piety			0.93***	0.91–0.95	0.93***	0.91–0.95	0.95***	0.93–0.97
Number of friends ^b								
1–9					0.84	0.62–1.13	0.97	0.71–1.33
10–20					0.65*	0.44–0.85	0.77	0.51–1.51
More than 20					0.87	0.61–1.25	1.00	0.69–1.45
Sense of mastery							0.95***	0.94–0.96

Notes: CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio.

^aReference group is \$0–\$4,999.

^bReference group is no friend.

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

Discussion

In contrary to our hypothesis, better educated older immigrants in this study were more likely to report both types of conflict. This suggests that, instead of being a coping resource, a higher level of education may make older immigrants feel especially deprived and powerless, entailing a stronger sense of loss of control, status, and authority, which in turn, may make them more sensitive to relationships with family members, and thus more likely to report conflict in the family. In contrast, older adults with a lower level of education may be less critical about their life situations and family relations. We also found that income of the participants was not related to their family conflict. This finding suggests that higher income may not be as effective as other potential coping sources in mitigating family conflict.

As expected, good physical health was associated with a lower chance of having family and marital conflict. But such relationships were confounded by sense of mastery and children's filial performance—when their effects were controlled for, poorer physical

health was no longer predictive of family or marital conflict. In other words, with a stronger sense of mastery or filial commitment from children, older adults with poorer physical health were not more likely to report family conflict than those with good physical health. A previous study has similarly documented that strong sense of mastery moderated the relationship between later life hardship and individual well-being (21).

We didn't find a significant relationship between acculturation and family conflict, which is likely attributive to strong family norms of this study population. Previous studies have showed that length of residence was not related to immigrant families' adherence to traditional norms (13,22). A higher acculturation level, however, was initially related to lower chance of having marital conflict (Models 1–3). It indicates that higher levels of acculturation may be associated with greater social network and social participations in the receiving society, thereby reducing the dependence on the spouse and preventing enmeshed relationships and consequently marital conflict. This speculation was supported by the finding on the negative relationship between number of friends and likelihood of

Table 4. Results of Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Having Marital Conflict Among U.S. Chinese Older Adults ($N = 2,237$)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Age	1.00	0.99–1.01	1.00	0.99–1.01	1.00	0.99–1.02	1.00	0.99–1.02
Women	0.71***	0.59–0.86	0.76**	0.62–0.92	0.76**	0.62–0.92	0.74**	0.60–0.90
Years of education	1.08***	1.06–1.11	1.08***	1.05–1.10	1.08***	1.06–1.10	1.09***	1.06–1.11
Income ^a								
\$5,000–\$9,999	0.90	0.73–1.11	0.91	0.73–1.13	0.93	0.74–1.14	0.96	0.77–1.19
\$10,000 or above	1.13	0.86–1.49	1.08	0.81–1.45	1.11	0.83–1.48	1.14	0.85–1.53
Good/very good health	0.78**	0.65–0.94	0.82*	0.67–0.99	0.85*	0.70–1.03	0.92	0.75–1.13
Years in the United States	1.01	1.00–1.01	1.00	1.00–1.01	1.00	1.00–1.02	1.00	1.00–1.01
Level of acculturation	0.28*	0.10–0.81	0.29*	0.10–0.85	0.31*	0.11–0.92	0.36	0.13–1.09
Number of children			0.97	0.90–1.05	0.97	0.90–1.05	0.97	0.89–1.05
Living with children			1.00	0.81–1.22	0.97	0.79–1.20	0.99	0.80–1.21
Living with spouse			1.68*	0.93–0.97	1.70*	1.05–2.75	1.67*	1.03–2.71
Children's filial piety			0.95***	1.04–2.72	0.95***	0.93–0.97	0.96***	0.94–0.98
Number of friends ^b								
1–9					0.85	0.64–1.13	0.87	0.65–1.17
10–20					0.78	0.55–1.11	0.83	0.58–1.19
More than 20					0.59**	0.42–0.83	0.61**	0.43–0.86
Sense of mastery							0.98**	0.97–0.99

Notes: CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio.

^aReference group is \$0–\$4,999.

^bReference group is no friend.

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

having marital conflict. However, when sense of mastery was taken into consideration (Model 4), acculturation was no longer predictive of marital conflict. It suggests that lower acculturation does not necessarily lead to more conflictual spousal relationships if the older immigrant had higher sense of control of his/her life.

Another interesting finding of this study is that older adults who perceived children as more filial were less likely to report both family and marital conflict. A sense of children being filial may be reflective of close intergenerational relations, possibly reducing disagreement, argument, and criticism between the parent and the children (23). Such satisfying and supportive parent–child relationships may have the spillover effect, transferring to positive mood, affect, or behavior in spousal interactions. In contrast, the problematic or disappointing parent–child relationships may add additional stress to the lives of older immigrants, possibly creating disagreement among the couple and compromising marital quality. From a practical perspective, children's lack of filial obligations may mean less financial and instrumental support to the parents, which in turn may create their financial strains or caregiving gaps, triggering stress, conflict, or even abuse in the family (24). Overall, this finding demonstrates the importance of offspring adhering to traditional family norms in maintaining harmonious family relations among older immigrants.

Beyond the influences of all the factors discussed earlier, a higher sense of mastery was associated with a lower chance of reporting both family and marital conflict. Immigration and acculturation could be a debilitating process for older adults, along with other losses they may experience in the aging process. A strong sense of control may be a predisposing factor of these older adults, helping them to better adjust changes in family relations upon such a major change and to better master demands and conflict within the family.

Several limitations of the study are worth mentioning. First, the conflict measure used in this study assessed criticism and demand-iness of family members only. It did not identify the specific

relationships in which family conflict existed (eg, children or grand-children), either. Future studies shall use more comprehensive and dyad-specific measures of conflict to better capture family dynamics of immigrant populations. In addition, the acculturation scale was adopted from a Hispanic version, with a focus on language utilization. Although this scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability among the current sample, other aspects of acculturation such as social integration and holding onto traditional norms were not investigated in this study and should be considered in future studies. Another limitation of this study is lack of information on immigrant generational status (eg, 1st or 2nd generation immigrants). Future studies shall include this variable to capture the diversity in immigrants' family processes associated with generational status. Lastly, all the information was obtained by using close-ended questions. Future studies should use qualitative approach to enrich the findings of this study.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations discussed earlier, this study is the first one that used a large-scale population-based sample to examine the sources of family and marital conflict in older immigrant/ethnic minority populations. Overall, the findings support our hypothesis, showing that older adults with greater coping resources were less likely to have family and marital conflict. Particularly important were their perceptions of children being filial and their own strong sense of mastery.

Future research shall further examine the sources of family conflict along the different stages of acculturation and distinguish acculturation-related conflict from everyday conflict. More qualitative studies are also needed to provide insights to this topic. Future studies shall also differentiate older adults who arrived at different life stages (eg, young adulthood, middle age, later life) in their family dynamics and individual well-being.

The findings of this study have important practical implications. First, programs aiming to enhance family cohesions among immigrants shall focus on the better educated, which are believed to have more resources but are also more vulnerable to family disturbances. Second, educational programs may be designed to help both younger and older immigrants to have conversations about expectations, challenges, and adaptations of cultural norms of filial piety, which has been shown to be of particular importance for preventing conflict in immigrant families. Lastly, given the importance of sense of mastery, programs shall create opportunities for older immigrants to be active and productive in the receiving communities. Developing ways of enhancing the independence of older adults while preserving their close relations with families will be the key for such planning.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest

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