

Inheritance of Expectation: The impact of Parental Pressure and Cultural Dissonance on
Second-Generation Immigrants

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Abstract

This study was conducted due to my want to explore the effects of having an immigrant parent by comparing my story with other second generation Americans. Within these experiences, the purpose of this study is to explore the two main effects of having immigrant parents: the loss of heritage and the pressure to succeed. As someone who felt these struggles first hand, this study is meant to further see if there were others in a similar situation who felt the same as I did. This situation contains complexity, a high need for vulnerability, and no real right answer in creating a necessary solution. To pursue this study, I created a google survey and conducted six interviews with seven different people who all have an immigrant parent with different ethnicities. The results of this study showed a high rate of loss of heritage and a large number of interviewees feeling a large pressure to succeed, while also adding other certain complexities with their answers. Furthermore, there were even more issues that were brought up within this study showing that there will never be one pattern/standard of experiences experienced within the 2nd generation immigrant community. More extensive research can bring more important problems to light, helping us with our fight to heal the next generation.

Introduction

It's hard not to let certain struggles go on to define your entire life, especially if they take the shape of the person who raised you. My mother is a first generation immigrant, and she came all the way from Taiwan at the age of fifteen solely seeking the American dream. She was the reason the rest of her immediate family gained the opportunity to come to America and gained the confidence to succeed. She set the standard, and it hasn't wavered since. Having that kind of

figure in your life goes on to create an immense amount of pressure within yourself. This pressure can range from being self-curated or unrelentlessly forced on to you. Personally, the burden I felt was indirect due to the pressure to live up to what she accomplished.

Then, came struggle number two: my strong feeling of disconnection within my own culture. In my mother's need to succeed, she began to tamp down her cultural attributes, since it often led to her being excluded. So, from a young age she would prioritize assimilation. When it came to raising me there wasn't much embracing of my culture rather than just having fun in her own hand-selected traditions. Of course we would celebrate Chinese New Year, and I would learn a fun fact or two about my culture, but she in no way established a traditional Taiwanese household. I started to gain this huge insecurity of my lack of culture, especially since I wasn't even fully Taiwanese. I'm half white, and due to the immense amount of ignorance in children, my childhood was doomed to be full of people disregarding the little culture I had within me. An example of this was the "Guess Her Ethnicity" game, which conditioned me to believe that no one else could see or validate my Asian heritage, except me.

As I grew older, I finally started to find other people like me. Others who also had immigrant parents, who carried the same pressure and felt the same disconnection from their culture. Only then did I feel more comfortable with myself.

This is why I want to explore this world of parental complexity to see how others carrying similar baggage dealt with it. The main purpose of my research study is to examine the two main effects I have encountered pertaining to having immigrant parents: the loss of heritage and the pressure to succeed. With this purpose in mind, I want to delve into the art of recognition, healing, and change. While I will not be creating a "plan of action" of how to solve this problem, I will be highlighting the power of knowing the pain, defining it, and, then with that

knowledge, healing yourself so you can in turn pave a new path for the next generation that follows.

Methods and scholarship

In my want to create a more personable assortment of data, I held six interviews with seven second generation Americans where I asked them all five identical questions. Within all the interviewees, I distinctively chose a range of ethnicities to see if that had an effect on their experiences and answers to the questions I asked them. All of the interviewees and there ethnicities were: interviewee 1(ethiopian), interviewee 2(Iranian), interviewee 3(half filipino, half white), interviewee 4(Somalian), interviewee 5(filipino), interviewee 6(Indian), and interviewee 7(Korean). The following are all of the questions I asked them:

- Have others ever made fun/or been rude in any way toward your cultural heritage?
- Was there ever a time in your life where you felt disconnected to your culture?
- When coming to America, did your parents in a way prioritize assimilation rather than primarily embracing their culture?
- Did your parent(s) ever place stress on you to be successful either directly or indirectly?
- How much of your parents' parenting method was curated over multiple generations? If not, did they make an effort to break that generational trauma?

I also created a survey in which I had multiple people fill out to serve as another input of data.

Here is the question listen in the survey:

- On a scale from 1-10, how much stress did your parents place on you academically(directly or indirectly)?

I used the information from the interviews, online research, the survey, and my own experiences to delve into the complications of what it means to have an immigrant parent raise you.

Results

For my qualitative results, I will be listening to everyone's responses within a one sentence summary per question. For my quantitative results, or my google surveys, I will be showing them through a graph and a short description.

The first question was 'Have others ever made fun or been rude towards your cultural heritage?'. Interviewee 1 said yes, but she only expressed that it was specifically through little subtle ignorant comments rather than a large specific example. Interviewee 2 and 4 both were targeted in a way in which their peers would label them as dangerous, allowing their racist assumptions about their heritage to define them. Interviewee 3, 6, and 7 all experienced prejudice due to their secular and white predominant neighborhoods where little hurtful comments would overrule most of their interactions with others. Moreover, this affected Interviewee 6 and 7 in similar ways since they started to feel ashamed or embarrassed of their culture so they went on to hide it in order to fit in. Then, when Interviewee 5 started to describe her experiences she stated how it all surrounded the sole idea that most people truly didn't deem her ethnicity of any importance, and would go on to disregard her culture over and over again.

The second question is as stated: 'was there ever a time in your life where you felt disconnected to your culture?' Most of the Interviewees had similar answers to this question, in that they started to feel a disconnection after meeting someone more involved with their culture than they were; but there were two distinct types of people that were continuously mentioned. Interviewee 1, 2 and 3 felt their disconnections when visiting their relatives in their home countries either due mixed feelings about their families value or they never were that involved

with their culture to begin with. Interviewee 4 and 5 both never had a strong connection with their culture and until finding others who were more entrenched within their customs that they started to feel that insecurity. Interviewee 6 and 7 felt their disconnection after the presence of bullying where they resented their culture since it was pulling them away from making friends.

The third question was ‘when coming to America, did your parents in a way prioritize assimilation rather than primarily embracing their culture?’ Interviewees 1, 2, 3, and 6 all felt as though their parents didn’t have a huge need to assimilate but for all differing reasons.

Interviewees 1 and 2 parents cared very much about curating the household dynamics so it stayed pretty traditional. Interviewee 3’s mom came much later in life so she had no want to assimilate. Then Interviewee 6’s parents tried to show her the culture but she and her brother would shy away from it until highschool. Interviewees 4 and 7 both had parents who came from a young age so they had no trouble assimilating. Interviewee 5’s family cared very much about assimilating and their household being very America centric with them caring very much about its values as well.

The Fourth question was ‘Did your parent(s) ever place stress on you to be successful either directly or indirectly?’ Interviewee 1, 2, 6 all felt stress directly and indirectly, but they differed in that they felt stress within differing areas of responsibility. 1 and 6 felt specifically academic pressure but interviewee 2 felt academic and cultural pressure since she was forced to run her whole house as the eldest daughter. Interviewee 3 and 5 felt specifically direct pressure from their parents about their academic success. Interviewee 7 felt that she felt no stress from her parents and that they actually feel that she works too hard for her own good. Interviewee 4 felt the stress indirectly after seeing the trouble her father went through financially while finishing college and how he talks about how he wishes his kids end up being successful.

Finally, question five was ‘How much of your parents parenting method was curated over multiple generations? If not, did they make an effort to break the generational trauma?’

Interviewee 1 expressed how her parents never had curated generational trauma since they both experienced loss from a young age. Interviewee’s 2, 3 and 6 felt as though their parents picked and chose a lot of differing trauma’s to their parenting methods; while they were better than their parents, there was still a good amount of room for growth. Interviewee’s 4, 5 and 7 all had parents who dropped the generational spelling of physical discipline behind in wanting to give their children a more comfortable environment.

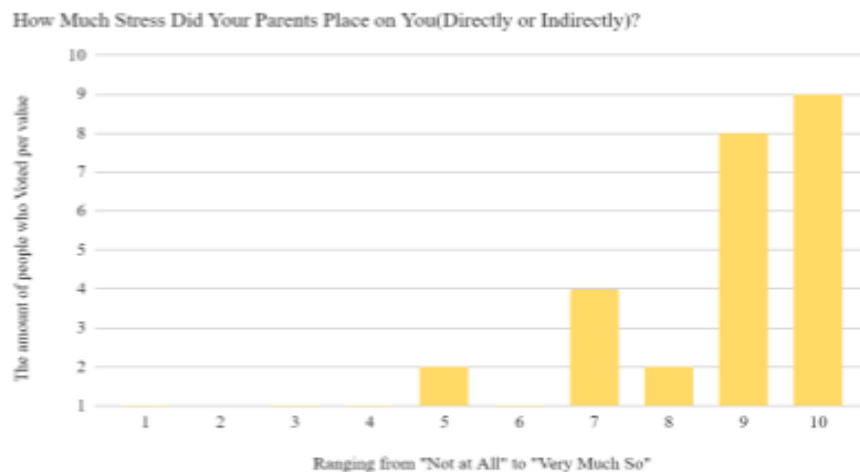


Figure 1: This chart shows a heavy trend of 2nd generation immigrants choosing values towards the “very much so” within this question of placed parental stress

The data from this chart was taken from a google form I created and had in total twenty-six responses. Figure 1 shows more votes around the “Very Much So” area of values with a min of zero votes at 2 and a max of nine votes at 10.

Discussions

In answering the first question it was clear that all of the interviewees carried a heavy multitudes of memories. A large pattern I started to see and focus on was when they started to share their experiences of subtle or heinous racism was their continued silence. The reasons for this would range from guilt, fear, or even an ongoing exhaustion for an ongoing problem they felt they had no control over. A lot of this behavior seems to sprout from childhood, where we genuinely didn't know better or even how all encompassing this issue would become within our psychological development. It wasn't just our parents' parenting methods that were indicative of our development during this time but other parents who were seemingly teaching their children that treating others like this was okay. As juveniles, these experiences would go on to dictate our mental and physical actions while they would go on to accumulate within our mind before we had the ability to define it. This is what truly started our insecurity paving a path for our disconnection towards our culture.

Like the earlier question, all of the interviewees answered yes to the second question. The two main reasons the interviewees began feeling disconnected from their culture was when they visited relatives or others more in tune with their culture and after being bullied. These issues went on to lead to a certain disconnection since it makes 2nd gen immigrants start to curate two differing personas in want to please our friends or peers and our family; This goes on to place us in a constant identity crises so we have no ability to find a combination of these two opposing personalities(Lo, 2023). There was one interviewee who I felt expressed this perfectly within her area of experiences. She felt as though she “wanted to protect [her] culture [...] but [she] was also frustrated that [she] wasn't seen as Iranian to Iranians and when I[she] would talk to Americans there was this idea that [she] was a terrorist, or that [she] was dangerous, or that [she] was this poor little girl being preyed on by all these middle eastern men"(Interviewee 2. Interview.

Conducted by Madison Sipes. 4/9/24). It's hard to not constantly compare yourself to others. The insecurity and jealousy we can gain from bullying or even others who are in our own family are entrenched more in their culture can make it easy to blame our parents for not giving us more cultural depth or not preparing us for those who would make fun of us for the little culture we carried.

The third question showed the most varied amount of responses within all of the interviewees. A large correlation I started to see within if or if not their parents prioritized assimilation was the age in which they immigrated. Those who had immigrant parents at a younger age felt more of a need to assimilate due to them being placed in a situation at such an impressionable age. For them, they had more of a need to assimilate since if they didn't there was a smaller chance of them being able to find friends or be considered normal in their community. Moreover, others whose parents immigrated later carried more of a sense of who they were within their cultural heritage since they grew up with no fear of not being excluded due to their ethnicity. Also, most of the people who had parents that didn't prioritize assimilation carried great importance in curating a home environment that fully encompassed all of their cultural values which further affected most of their actions. Those who immigrated earlier on showed more evidence of a parenting style that cherry picks part of their culture they wished to share, and other areas in which they learned from differing American values. In this topic, it can be seen that the difference in your childhood environment can fully shape who you are and the values you choose to bring for the next generation.

Within the fourth question, there was a large number of the participants answering yes. In consideration within this question, this was also the question that I transformed as a google form so in all there were thirty three responses. The difference between the google survey and the

interviews was that for the interviews I asked them in a more open-ended way so their answers wouldn't only be limited to academic stress. Still, the idea of academic stress was a heavy trend within both areas of participation. Statistically, children of immigrant families are more likely to excel in school due to the pressure parents place on them usually stems from the expectation of their children to amount to the same work ethic they curated for themselves during their immigration to America (*Children of Immigrant Families: Analysis and Recommendations on JSTOR*, n.d.). Moreover, I did favor the answers of the interviews since it brought about a new type of stress that their immigrant parents would go on to place on them. A lot of the interviewees would go on to describe that within their academic stress, there also was the pressure of living up to their parents' success in coming to America and with upholding their parents constricting cultural rules. An example of this can be shown through Interviewee 2's experience of the standard of the perfect persian woman, or otherwise the "silent but strong woman" she is otherwise described as "subordinate enough but she does not cry, she is not weak, she can take care of a kid by herself, a house by herself, and her husband by herself" (Interviewee 2. Interview. Conducted by Madison Sipes. 4/9/24). A lot of immigrant parents like hers would set up this dooming expectation for their children, without knowing the power it held over their collapsing sanity.

Finally, the last question all of their answers were pointed within the same direction. From the data I was given, there is a strong percentage of recent immigrant parents who chose to end their generational trauma in order to give their children a better life. This doesn't mean that everything they were taught was fully rebranded, but there was one specific aspect that most of their parents' generation chose to leave behind them. Almost all of their parents chose to not discipline their children physically, since they personally had very painful memories concerning

that in the past. Furthermore, there are still certain aspects of generations of trauma that lived on within their families. An example of this lies within Interviewee 5's family, where her parents passed down the difficulty of emotionally talking out and solving their issues. Seemingly similar to a lot of 2nd generation immigrants "the only way to get over an issue [within her home was] time and silence"(Interviewee 5. Interview. Conducted by Madison Sipes. 4/10/24). This shows how each generation learns to withhold their most painful memories for their children, and little by little those memories will differ to cause more and more growth within each generation.

Conclusion

The main pattern this research project has shown me is that there is truly no limit to the amount of research that can be done surrounding this topic. There are millions of causes, effects and further complications that are affected by many differing factors. This project showed that while there are main experiences that are shared within a lot of families like parental pressure, or disconnecting with their culture, and the exclusion we go through by being different; but there were many questions that truly didn't have one common answer between each participant. Within this impending investigation, the more understanding we can gain, then the more reconciliation can occur, and in all the more change we can ensure.

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