

Childhood maltreatment and exhibition of mental and sexual health problems among young adult Asian-American women

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What We Learned

Young Asian-American women with histories of *suicidal and/or parasuicidal (i.e., self-harm) behaviors* described having experienced aspects of disempowering parenting styles, which we named “ABCDG parenting”. We characterized five aspects of disempowering parenting:

- Abusive parenting:** Harsh discipline methods, including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or a combination of at least two of these forms of abuse.
- Burdening parenting:** Demands and expectations perceived by children to one sided and serve parental needs, including financial burden to repay parents for their investments in their daughter, academic achievement either by the daughters themselves or through an appropriate marriage, and the obligation to care for parents.
- Culturally disjointed parenting:** An acculturation gap between parents and children as an ongoing frustration contributing to parent/child emotional disconnect. This includes differing cultural expectations relating to the externalization and expression of feelings and emotions, as well as language barriers playing a major role in disjointment.
- Disengaged parenting:** Lack of parental validation of children’s emotions and feelings; their feelings were repeatedly dismissed, belittled, or ignored by the disengaged parents.
- Gender prescribed parenting:** Originating from the cultural prescriptive role of gender, these parents hold very rigid and strict views on how the boys and girls should behave. Feeling “less valued than their brother,” participants perceive differential treatment from their parents, citing “unfair treatment” that made them feel “powerless.”

Background

- Young Asian-American women exhibit consistently high rates of completed suicide (especially among those aged 15-24).
- The poor family dynamic factor (e.g. poor family communication, negative parent-child interactions) was one of the most powerful and consistent correlates of suicide among Asian-Americans in general. However, there has been relatively little investigation of the specific mechanisms by which parenting styles are linked, either directly or indirectly, to self-harm and suicidal behaviors.

Objectives

- To qualitatively analyze the experiences of young 1.5 and 2nd generation Asian-American women who described histories of mental illness along with suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and/or self-harm.
- To explore the process and context in which these women developed depression and concurrent patterns of risk behaviors.

Methods

- We conducted 16 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews on Asian-American women aged 18-35, who were part of a larger mixed methods study conducted under the **Asian-American Women’s Health Initiative Project (AWSHIP)**.
- Participants were interviewed on their parents’ immigration story, their own ethnic and racial identity, their family life, and their dating experiences and sexual history.
- The PI and members of the research team listened to digital recordings and read the interview transcripts for the entire sample, analyzing them based on in-depth content analysis coding for self harm and suicidality.

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AWSHIP is funded by the Mentored Career Development Award (K01), National Institute of Mental Health (Primary Investigator: H.C.H., 1K01 MH086366-01 A1).

Major Themes

Abusive parenting

- “Like, even though I was a virgin, my mother was convinced that I was a slut. And she would constantly ask me these questions and be like, ‘I know you’re a whore.’ I felt abandoned by my parents... I thought, ‘Oh my God, if your own parents don’t want you, what’s wrong with you?’”

Burdening parenting

- “He had like my whole life planned, like what college I was going to go to, what I was going to do everything... because my dad’s career isn’t so stable, he expected me to just take care of all my school, tuition, and everything... I am trying to live his dream and go to an expensive school, and pay myself.”

Culturally disjointed parents

- “My parents don’t speak English or it’s very limited. Even though I do speak Chinese, there are always like subtleties like emotional words that, you know, you may not be able to express in the language.”

Disengaged parents

- “I never felt like they really praised me or that they were proud of me. That definitely affected my sense of worth.”

Gender prescribed parenting

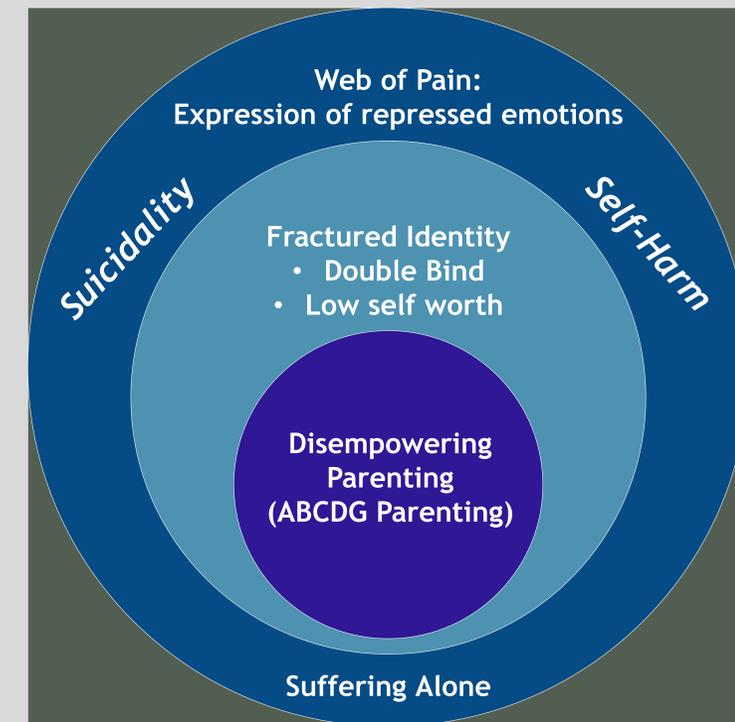
- “My parents are a lot stricter with me than my older brother. And I always thought that was like, such utter crap...my parents were a lot more protective of me than of my brother...I was definitely treated differently.”

Self-Harm

- “There’s a Chinese saying for ‘hit your own mouth’—my mom would make me punish myself; or else, she’d threatened to hit me herself...When I got older, I turned to cutting as self-inflicted punishment. I thought I wasn’t good enough.”

Suicidal Ideation & Suicide Attempt

- “I tried to hang myself once after a big fight with my parents about the guy I was dating...but my father came home and found me tied to a rafter, already passed out...The next day I got the lecture about ‘you’re going to hell’....”



Conclusion

Asian-American women who experience “disempowering parenting” (ABCDG parenting) are at risk of developing a “fractured identity,” a phenomenon that may promote self-harm and suicidal behaviors. Targeted interventions should aim to help women develop a sense of empowerment within the family, and for policy makers to create resources for Asian-American families to better deal with acculturative stress.