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Date: April 19, 2007

Asians are the fastest growing racial minority group in the United States (Reeves & Bennett, 2004) with concomitant contributions to the labor force. However, the research on the interface of work and family for Asian women is largely restricted to Asian countries. The present entry focuses on the sociological and psychological research on Asian women and work-family issues and suggests future steps in the research and policy arenas regarding this growing demographic group. While the review of the topic incorporates both international and U.S. perspectives, the implications for policy and research focus primarily on Asian American women.

Basic Concepts & Definitions

When considering the Asian demographic category, it is important to recognize the inherent heterogeneity within this group. There are as many as 43 Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups; the United States government and academic research often aggregates East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.), South East Asian (e.g., F/Pilipino, Hmong, Laotian, Malaysian, Thai, Vietnamese, etc.), South Asian (e.g., Bangladeshi, Asian Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.), and Pacific Islander groups (e.g., Hawaiians, Samoans, Guamanians/Chamorro, etc.). The Asian demographic category becomes further nuanced with the consideration of factors such as immigration status (e.g., naturalized/unnaturalized, refugee and asylee status); acculturation level (i.e., the extent to which one adopts the cultural norms of another group); and generation status (i.e., first generation: the individual herself immigrated; second generation: her parents, third generation: her grandparents, and so forth). These demographic variables prove to be salient given that 69% of Asians in the United States were born in another country (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). In the present entry, we consider Asian American to encompass individuals living in the United States of Asian/Pacific Islander heritage, given the unique experiences and implications applicable to this group.

While it is important to acknowledge these complexities, the empirical and theoretical literature purports that there are cultural values and norms common to many Asian cultures. One widely accepted distinction of Asian cultures is its collectivistic worldview. Collectivism has been defined as the
subordination of one’s own goals to that of a collective group (e.g., family, community-at-large), thus adopting a community orientation (Triandis, 1989). This is in contrast to the traditionally Western orientation towards individualism, in which the interests of the individual are placed above those of the group. A number of other traditional Asian cultural values are aligned with the collectivistic worldview, such as interpersonal harmony, the paramount importance of family, filial piety (i.e., honoring one’s parents and ancestors), and interdependent self-construal (i.e., emphasizing collective and relational aspects of the self; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Cultural values become manifest in cultural norms and behaviors. Gender roles and the implications of these expectations on Asian women are particularly relevant to the topic of Asian women and work-family studies. Traditional Asian gender roles prescribe for women to place the role of wife and mother above all others; men are expected to be the family breadwinner and spokesperson. Asian cultural values consequently encourage distinct spheres for men (e.g., work) and women (e.g., home) and a gendered household division of labor in which the burden of household duties such as housekeeping tasks and childcare rest heavily on women. For example, the Japanese Gender Equality Bureau found that husbands did little to no household duties or childcare regardless of their wives’ working status (Gender Equality Bureau, 2004). Similarly in traditional Korean culture, there is also an unequal diffusion of responsibility such that wives are expected to assume the role of caregiver and prepare family meals after returning from her job, even if her husband is unemployed (Kim, 1996). Lo, Stone, and Ng (2003) also point out that women in Hong Kong, unlike their Western counterparts, are expected to invest a great amount of time into helping their children with their homework.

Given the burden of household responsibilities and child care, Asian women face the demands of multiple roles, which often go beyond the general three roles working mothers generally take on (i.e., wife, mother, and worker) to include responsibilities such as: caretaker of aging parents, sister, aunt, cousin, et cetera. Asian women may also experience their multiple roles differently from women in individualistic cultures, given the superordinate importance of the family over the individual.

A vast amount of research in work-family studies has documented the conflict that arises from these multiple roles and the intersection of work and family. Issues in both work and family spheres influence each other; work-to-family conflict involves work issues influencing family and family-to-work conflict entails family issues influencing work (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000; Casper, Martin, Buffardi, & Erdwins, 2002; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). For example, work-to-family conflict could include not being able to pick up a child from daycare or attend parent-teacher conferences because of conflicting work hours, whereas family-to-work conflict might entail not being able to go to work because one’s children are sick. Work-family conflict and ways of coping with it form the crux of the literature and will be discussed further below.
Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Recently, there has been an increase of participation of Asian women in the work force (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2003), with a projected labor participation rate in the United States of 61.3% by the year 2012. Internationally, Asian women contribute roughly half in other industrialized Asian societies such as Japan (49.3%; Foundation of Women’s Rights Promotion and Development, 2004), South Korea (48.3%; Foundation of Women’s Rights Promotion and Development, 2004), Taiwan (46.02%; Foundation of Women’s Rights Promotion and Development, 2004), and Hong Kong (50.7%; Hong Kong Government, 2002). Interestingly, Asian women have also shown more progress than other women of color in attaining higher-level positions in the workforce, with a 135% increase in the number of female Asian officers and managers (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2003). However, in other societies, there may be less gender equality within higher levels of management. For example, in Hong Kong, only 25.5% of managers and administrators are women (Hong Kong Government, 2002).

In addition to the demographic basis for studying Asian women, work, and family is the inextricable nature of family in Asian culture. As women continue to make labor contributions, there is a great need to examine how the work and family spheres coexist. However, there is a dearth of culturally-specific literature on Asian-American women and work-family issues in the United States. It is important to consider the present research from international samples but to also expand the literature to American settings. Asian American women must negotiate competing cultural competing norms and values in the face of growing prominence in the workforce. Only through a better understanding of the work-family phenomena can future research and policy address the true needs of this population.

State of the Body of Knowledge

In considering the state of the body of knowledge on Asian women in work-family studies, it is worthy to note several trends in its study and major topics of conceptualizations. First, we will consider the most frequently studied populations in the literature. Then we will provide an overview of how the work-family is uniquely defined for Asian women, the conflict that results from this intersection, and ways that Asian women cope with occupying this milieu.

Study populations. The study of work-family issues for Asian women has been largely restricted to East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Additionally, this scholarship predominantly focuses on the experiences of professional women. The result is a large gap in the knowledge to represent the experiences of South East Asian and South Asian women in both native countries and heterogeneous settings such as the United States, as well as the experiences of poor and working-class Asian (often immigrant status) women. Research set in the United States studies Asian
women only incidentally, rarely as the primary focus of study. Such limitations in the scope of the literature must be taken into consideration in order to acknowledge the complex diversity of experiences of Asian working women.

The blurred line between work and family. Traditionally, work-family studies have portrayed work and family as distinct, competing spheres. In Western cultures, work is closely related to the concept of career (i.e., a path to personal self-fulfillment, as evidenced by the emphasis in the match between the individual’s vocational skills, interests, and values with that of a given occupation). This manifestation of the individual’s interest often comes in direct conflict with a woman’s capacity to fulfill her family role. Asian women, in contrast, may see work as a natural extension of familial expectations and roles (Espiritu, 1999; Grahame, 2003). This collectivistic orientation creates a situation where work is a means for the woman to contribute to her family’s economic survival rather than for the purpose of individual self-actualization (Grahame, 2003; Park, 2000). This is especially true for poor, working-class women (Espiritu, 1999).

Work-family conflict. The vast majority of work in this area revolves around the conflict stemming from the intersection of work and family. The first type of research that is done on work-family conflict attempts to describe the nature of work-family conflict in Asian samples. Studying married Hong Kong Chinese employees, Aryee, Fields, and Luk (1999) were the first to assess the cross-cultural generalizability of Frone et al. (1992)’s reciprocal model of work-family conflict. The literature suggests that in Asian societies, life satisfaction is most influenced by work-to-family conflict, whereas family-to-work conflict has a greater impact in the United States (Aryee, Fields et al., 1999). In other words, for Asian societies, work issues affecting family life (e.g., working long hours prevent parents from spending time with children) are more salient than family issues affecting work life (e.g., day care issues affecting availability to come to work in the morning). Employed parents were also found in another study to allow work responsibilities to interfere with family responsibilities than vice versa (Ayree, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999).

Research has also focused on identifying specific sources of work-family conflict for Asian women, such as insufficient time, multiple roles, and lack of support from husbands (Lo et al., 2003). Much of the work on Asian women’s work-family conflict focuses on their multiple roles (i.e., wife, mother, and worker) and the consequences of these roles. As aforementioned, Asian cultural values influence the gendered roles that women take on, despite the increased labor participation of women in industrialized societies. Attitudes consigning the woman to the home and men to the world of work have a direct impact on women’s participation in the workforce. For example, a study by the Korea Institute of Health and Society reported that 62.3% of women surveyed stopped working just before or after marriage and roughly half of women quit their jobs after delivering their first child (Jin, 2006).
The general division of labor is also another area commonly researched. One study of urban Chinese married couples found that more recently married couples shared more equitable division of labor (Pimentel, 2006). However, men who had greater household responsibility were more dissatisfied, perhaps reflecting a resistance to changing gender role behaviors. In addition to history effects and trends, gender role expectations and behaviors may be amenable to change based on context. Park (2000) found that Asian women who had extensive exposure to Western culture (e.g., studying in the United States for college) adopted less traditional gender role expectations. This finding highlights the potential influence of variables such as acculturation, immigration, and generation statuses.

The psychosocial outcomes associated with work-family conflict have been another line of inquiry in this area. Greater work-family conflict is associated with negative outcomes such as stress (Lee et al., 2004; Matsui, Oshawa, & Onglato, 1995), depression (Lee et al., 2004), and lowered life satisfaction (Ahmad, 1996). There are also a few empirical studies on married couples looking at the effect of conflicts in gender role expectation and changing roles (see Root, 1998). Espiritu’s (1999) analysis of the literature on Asian immigrants found that the intersection of Asian gender dynamics with patterns of employment (i.e., the greater labor participation of women) can have negative consequences such as marital stress, abuse, and divorce.

Work-family conflict, and consequently, these outcomes can be buffered by various coping behaviors. Some researchers have looked into how Asian women cope with these stressors, and Hall’s (1972) typology of coping provides a useful way to categorize these coping behaviors. Lo, Stone, and Ng (2003) found that the most popular strategy for coping in their sample was personal role redefinition (i.e., changing one’s own role expectation and not the expectations themselves, such as prioritizing time with children over grocery shopping), followed by reactive role behavior (i.e., assuming a rigidity of role expectations such that the person has no choice but to find ways to meet them), and finally structural role redefinition (i.e., changing the expectations imposed by an external source, such as flexible work scheduling or spousal negotiation of household roles). Other studies have found Asian women to employ similar coping strategies. For example, Lee, Um, and Kim (2004) found that married Korean women often coped by “working harder” in reaction to their role conflicts (a reactive role behavior), which was associated with higher rates of depression compared to those who coped through other strategies such as negotiation with their spouse and prioritizing household tasks. Asian professional women may also cope reactively by lowering their career ambitions (Lo et al., 2003), as evidenced by an absence of women from the top levels (Ng et al., 2002). Ayree, Luk, Leung, and Lo (1999) framed coping behaviors in terms of emotion-focused coping (i.e., regulating distress created by the appraisal of stressors) and problem-focused coping (i.e., removing the negative impact of a stressor) and found that these efforts, in concert, positively influenced job and family satisfaction.
Several studies have also cited greater help from extended family or domestic workers in some Asian cultures, which can alleviate some of the burdens of work-family conflict (Lo et al., 2003; Ng, et al., 2002; Park, 2000). Enlisting the social support of husbands in domestic roles also helps to redefine structural roles, thus reducing work-family stress (Matsui et al., 1995). Some studies have sought the extent that workplaces are accommodating structural role redefinition. Unfortunately, in Asian societies, there is little dialogue between women and their employers with respect to work-family issues (Ng, Fosh, & Naylor, 2002; Lo et al., 2003). This may be less true in societies with longer histories of egalitarian policies around gender and work. The following section will elaborate upon the implications for research and practice that extend what is currently known about Asian women’s experiences with work and family.

Implications for Research and Practice

The call to understand the lifestyle of Asian American working women with families in the United States grows with this population’s increasing demographic presence. Although the psychological and sociological literature on Asian American families continues to expand, it has yet to adequately address the work-family phenomenon for Asian women. Previous research shows that Asian women experience work-family conflict and experience the physical and psychological consequences of juggling the roles of worker, wife, mother, and others. At the same time, Asian women may not experience work-family conflict in the same ways that their Western counterparts do as a result of cultural values and expectations. Thus, future directions in service, research, and policy should explore paradigms congruent with this group’s cultural values and experiences (e.g., investigating the functioning of the family unit, rather than the woman as isolated individual).

There are implications for policy and practice in regards to the Asian American women work-family phenomenon that have yet to be explored. Past literature has focused primarily on Asian women in Asian countries, thereby limiting a understanding of the experiences of Asian American women. The majority of recent cross-cultural work-family research focuses on studying Asians as an aggregate group rather than exploring the impact of other factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, immigrant status, generational status, and acculturation status. Especially due to the continued influx of Asian immigrant and refugee women from around the world to the U.S. (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2006), it is imperative not to over generalize the experiences of Asian Americans. When considering the needs of the Asian American community, researchers and policy makers need to take into consideration the group’s heterogeneity in addition to the similarities that exist between and within these groups.

The American Psychological Association’s Multicultural Guidelines provide a useful model for individual and systemic work with diverse populations (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Effective multicultural competence is demonstrated through the provider’s awareness of attitudes, beliefs, and biases in relation
to ethnic, racial, and cultural groups and also personal awareness of one’s own cultural group membership; knowledge of diverse group orientation of particular groups her or she is working with; and skills to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate interventions strategies in working with culturally diverse populations. These guidelines and recommendations may help to address the unique concerns of this population, leading to greater efficacy in interventions and policies across cultures. For example, the “model minority stereotype” of Asians as a hardworking, successful group in the U.S. obscures the complex problems that Asian Americans face both at the individual level (e.g., depression, marital abuse, divorce, etc.) and the systemic level (e.g., a lack of funding for mental health resources, the exacerbated “glass ceiling” - known popularly as the “bamboo ceiling” (Hyun, 2005) - for Asian women in the workplace).

Regardless of cultural background, the pressure of assuming multiple roles as a working mother is oftentimes challenging. As an effort to promote a better working environment, several studies suggest that flexible work schedules may ameliorate work-family conflict (Cinamon, 2006; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, and Weitzman, 2001; Hill, Martinson, & Ferris, 2004; Hill, Yang, Hawkins, & Ferris, 2004; Pleck, Staines, & Lang, 1980). A new movement for flexibility may be one attempt for organizations to provide their female employees a better way to balance their responsibilities and demands at work and home. As a result, this may help minimize their levels of stress and achieve a more balanced life (Matsui, Ohsawa, & Onglatco, 1995).

Furthermore, when working with ethnic/racial women, one must consider cultural nuances such as traditional values, gender roles, lifestyle, and experiences which influence the cultural dynamic of the work-family phenomena. The result of such cultural competence may be more positive outcomes for employees, which may lead to concomitant benefits to the employer such as greater productivity and more positive morale.

Given the paucity of research in this area, there are many potential directions for future research. Researchers can begin by ascertaining the phenomenological experiences of working Asian American women, focusing on both their resources (e.g., sources of social support, coping strategies) and barriers (e.g., institutional discrimination, stereotypes). For example, it may be useful to examine the consequences of stereotypes (e.g., stereotype threat; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999) and the implications of negotiating multiple roles and identities (Shih, Pittinsky, & Trahan, 2006). Future work-family studies must also incorporate additional variables (e.g., acculturation, work and family roles, cultural values) into theoretical frameworks to better represent the complexity of the Asian American experience. Due to the lack of between and within group variability in the current research, we may be left with an incomplete - and potentially inaccurate - understanding of the experiences of various groups of Asian women.
The culmination of the issues presented warrants continued research on Asian women, both internationally and within the United States and considering both between and within-group differences across cultures. Practitioners, policymakers, and researchers must respond to the reality of a rapidly diversifying workforce, taking steps to consider the implications of cultural characteristics and experiences. Applying multicultural competence to the work-family phenomena will inform the development of more relevant, culturally-specific research, practice, and policies for Asian women and other groups in the nondominant culture (i.e., groups historically oppressed due to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and disability). Understanding the complexity and uniqueness of the intersections of gender, work, and family across and within cultures can help to bridge the gap that exists in our current literature and the implementation of our findings into culturally-appropriate strategies at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

References


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