



Looking behind

Yoonsun Choi's
new study explores
a diverse demographic
with a variety of
traditions and needs

AS A YOUNG SOCIAL WORKER ATTENDING TO IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES in the Los Angeles area and the Pacific Northwest, SSA Associate Professor Yoonsun Choi was struck by the dearth of resources devoted to addressing the particular needs of Asian American families. The stereotype of the “model minority” that is attached unilaterally to all immigrants of Asian descent is seemed so entrenched in the American psyche that little attention or scholarship was devoted to understanding Asian American life or culture. But in her fieldwork and the research she embarked upon as a budding scholar, Choi discovered that the behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes of Asian American

development and the ways in which parents can help maximize youth potential. Additionally, Choi hopes that her work will yield more concrete data about the variety of Asian American parenting styles as well as highlight and address some of the less-than-successful outcomes that can result when Western values and social mores collide with non-Western customs and family expectations.

But the study could have implications beyond helping us gain a greater understanding of Asian American families, according to Stephen Russell, director of the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth and Family at the University of Arizona and co-editor of a book focusing on Asian American families, *Asian American Parenting and Parent-*

the myths of Asian American parenting

children and families are far more complex than the stereotype might lead a casual observer to believe, particularly when you disaggregate data for the more than 17 ethnic subgroups that are lumped together under the appellation “Asian American.”

“It is a complicated picture,” says Choi. “When we put them all together, it looks like Asian American youths fare well academically and in terms of externalizing behaviors such as substance abuse and violence. But when you look at the subgroups, the notion of doing well is a lot more complex.”

Unfortunately, few studies have attempted to unpack the complexity of Asian American family dynamics. In fact, as Choi discovered throughout her clinical and academic career, precious little research has been done on what she calls the unique patterns of behaviors among Asian Americans with regard to parenting and the outcomes that those patterns produce. “There just is not a lot of data out there on Asian American families and adolescent outcomes,” she says. “There are pieces here and there—some dissertations and some anecdotal information—but we have not had a comprehensive study.”

Choi has stepped in to fill that void.

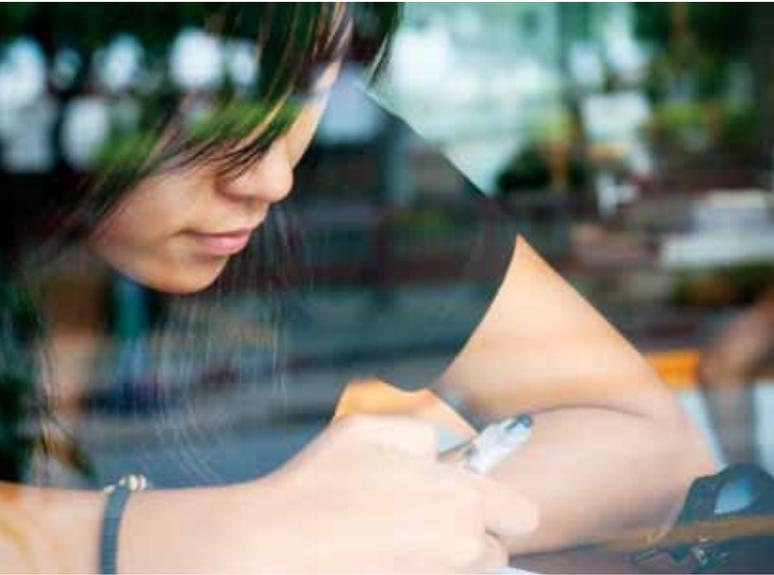
As principal investigator of the Midwest Longitudinal Study of Asian American Families (ML-SAAF), Choi is attempting to dispel the mythology and provide a more illuminating perspective on the ways in which Asian American families raise children. Funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), a federal agency that supports research on child health and development, the primary purpose of the ML-SAAF is to study adolescent

Adolescent Relationships (Springer, 2010). “What we learn about any underrepresented group tells things about all of us that we’ve never thought about before,” Russell says. “I think one of the opportunities Choi’s work presents is to help the world understand that this study isn’t just about Asian American psychology or mental health. It’s about the ways in which understanding Asian American mental health and parenting provides us with a window on processes that are universal and give us a vantage point on all people’s mental health.”

Currently, however, in the absence of much empirical data about Asian American families and the outcomes of their children, are a lot of stereotypes and myths, particularly the notion that the Asian American parenting style is authoritarian—devoid of warmth, controlling, unfeeling, and undemocratic—versus Western parenting, which is viewed as the more positive authoritative style—firm, but warm, highlighted by intimate parent-child relations. It is a topic Choi explored as the lead author of a 2013 article for the *Asian American Journal of Psychology* entitled “Is Asian American Parenting Controlling and Harsh? Empirical Testing of Relationships between Korean American and Western Parenting Measures.”

In the article, Choi and her co-authors examined the parenting styles of Korean Americans and found a more nuanced parental picture, one that blended the Western concept of authoritative and authoritarian styles. Choi cautions that our perceptions of parental warmth are culturally concocted and notes that what is often perceived as “strict parenting” in non-Western or non-Caucasian families is often misunderstood.

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Western context, research by Choi and others suggests that it does not compromise the parent-child relationship as long as both parents and children accept the parenting concepts. “Western parents may do a lot of kissing and hugging and outward displays of affection to show warmth,” Choi says. “Asian American parents may express warmth through other ways. It may be through providing instrumental support. They may tend to sacrifice more for their children, working two or three jobs. That’s their way of expressing warmth. And if the children understand that, it’s fine.”

Emily, a Korean American sophomore at the University of Chicago, says that appreciation of her parents’ sacrifice is what helped her weather their stern discipline and “ridiculously high expectations,” when she was growing up just outside of Los Angeles. Her parents, both medical researchers, emigrated from Korea as young adults for graduate school in the area. They raised Emily (who asked not to use her real name) and her sister to be academic over-achievers. “It was like, ‘Why didn’t you get an A on this test? You must not be studying hard enough. You must be spending too much time talking to your friends,’” Emily recalls. “It was very stressful.”

But she says that her parents were, in their way, very

loving. Performing well in school was her way of showing them how much she appreciated all that they did for her and her sister.

Still, conflicts do arise between Asian American parents and their children. Rachel, a Filipino graduate student at the University of Chicago who also asked that her real name not be used, says that she and her parents battled incessantly throughout her adolescence and young adulthood. “They were very strict,” Rachel recalls. “I couldn’t have sleepovers. I couldn’t date. I couldn’t do anything, so there was just a lot of tension.”

Even today, at 25, Rachel says she still has a somewhat tense relationship with her parents.

But having an opportunity to openly discuss and explore the fissures simmering beneath the surface of some Asian American families is what excites many people about the findings that the ML-SAAF might reveal. “Our culture is quite stoic,” says Monica Lee Hughson, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization strategist. “This will provide us with an opportunity to start dialoguing about issues that no one really discusses or understands.”

Hughson grew up in a very traditional Korean-American family in New York. Hughson says she still wrestles with the internal conflict surrounding her part Western, part Korean upbringing. “My parents were harsh,” she recalls. “They told me what their expectations were, what I had to do, and I had to do it: Piano, ballet—I had to do those things because I was a girl. I wanted to do Tae Kwan Do, but they wouldn’t allow that. The gender roles in my father’s house were strictly enforced.”

The ML-SAAF is a big and ambitious project. Choi’s goal is to recruit 900 families in the Chicagoland area (450 Filipino American families and 450 Korean American families) with children who fall in the age range of 12-18 years old. Over the next four years, Choi and her team, including six graduate students, seven undergraduate research assistants, over 20 field staff and bilingual interviewers and a project manager, will fan out across the Chicago area to interview and observe each of the members of these families (which could wind up being close to 1,800 individuals) with an eye toward gaining a better understanding of how adolescents develop in these settings and how parents can maximize their children’s potential. It is the largest study of its kind in this area of research, and will include both English and non-English-speaking participants who will be interviewed by highly trained bilingual interviewers.

The longitudinal nature of the study will enable the

research team to capture nuances in adolescent development that are often missed in studies based on large data sets like the census. “One of the very important features of this study is that it is being conducted over time, so that we can follow the youth in transition,” says David Takeuchi, Professor, Associate Dean for Research and Dorothy Book Scholar at Boston College School of Social Work, and a co-investigator on the study. Takeuchi, whose own research focuses on, among other things, racial and social inequalities in health, helped Choi with the study design. “A lot of studies are a snapshot,” Takeuchi says, “so you only get a brief glimpse of the kids and their emotional and educational development. This will be a look at this transition over time.”

In order to get beyond a snapshot view, ML-SAAF is exploring these research questions:

- Why are Asian American youth doing better in some areas but not others?
- Do positive external behaviors come at the price of mental health?
- Why are positive behaviors not sustained over time?
- Why does emotional vulnerability become much worse during the transition to adulthood?
- Why do Asian subgroups, even with a common overarching Asian culture, have disparate youth outcomes?

Even though data collection for ML-SAAF is in its early stages (a pretest was conducted in the summer of 2013; recruitment of the families began in earnest in late 2014), early findings indicate that young people who endorse or appreciate their parents’ culture, see strong parental control as a positive force in their lives. Conversely, parent-child relationships can become frayed when the children’s values are more aligned with the dominant culture than with their parents. “So if the children are extremely assimilated, they tend to see parental control the way Westerners do—as harsh,” says Choi. “That is when we can start to see outcomes that are not so positive.”

It is Choi’s hope that the ML-SAAF will help illuminate and address some of these not-so-positive outcomes for Asian American students, many of which have not been well documented. Among the statistics that raise a warning flag is a 2007 report from the American Psychological Association indicating that Asian Americans account for the most suicides among all U.S. women aged 15 to 24. These less-positive outcomes are often masked by high academic performance.



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AT THE CRUX OF CHOI’S INTEREST IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES is her long-held commitment to addressing the societal factors that promote injustice and inequality, issues that she has been passionate about combating since childhood. The youngest of four children, she was born in Dongducheon, South Korea, a small, impoverished city north of Seoul. Money was tight for her family. Choi says that class consciousness was the prevailing socio-cultural issue that circumscribed the dreams of Dongducheon’s families and children. As an adolescent, Choi initially thought of becoming an artist, but art supplies and lessons were too expensive for her parents to afford. Having first-hand experience with the ways in which structural inequality could confine ambitions helped change her focus. “I was drawn to social work because of its interdisciplinary and applied nature with an emphasis and commitment to social justice and equality,” she says.

She earned a BA in English and Education from Ewha University in Seoul before immigrating to the United States in 1991 to pursue graduate studies in social work at the University of Texas, Austin. While her ultimate goal was to earn a doc-



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torate, the importance of clinical experience became quite evident while she was working on her MSW. So she paused her studies for four years to work as a clinical social worker in the Los Angeles area at places such as the Korean Youth and Community Center, the Asian Pacific Counseling and Treatment Center, and the Costal Asian Pacific Psychiatric Treatment Center. She also worked in Everett, Washington at Catholic Community Services, a foster care program. It was her work in Los Angeles with immigrants that led to the line of research that would occupy much of her scholarly life. "I was especially challenged by the lack of practice guidelines to work with adolescents of immigrant families," she says.

When she resumed her studies in the doctoral program at the University of Washington-Seattle, her new focus was on Asian American immigrant groups and multiracial youths, as well as on the array of social issues and gaps in the service network that policy makers must address to ensure the well-being of this expanding group of Americans. It is the line of inquiry that has formed the backbone of her research, which she has pursued after completing her PhD in 2001 and joining the SSA faculty the same year.

Much of her previous research has helped shape the direction of the ML-SAAF. Her 2008 paper, "Diversity within: Subgroup differences of youth problem behaviors among Asian Pacific Islander American adolescents" (*Journal of Community Psychology*), for example, attempted to pick apart the myth

of the "model minority" that is attached to all Asian Americans. Choi points out that the stereotype fails to acknowledge the diversity in what is often loosely termed the Asian "community." "When we talk about Asian Americans, we are talking about a combination of more than 17 different subgroups," she says. Although some groups have high academic achievement, others do not. In fact, she notes that the high school dropout rates of Hmong (40 percent), Laotian (38 percent), and Cambodian (35 percent) students are among the highest of any eth-

nic groups in the country, according to a 2013 report issued by the Obama Administration's Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

The diversity in outcomes is one of the reasons why Choi chose Filipino and Korean families to focus on in the ML-SAAF. Not only do they represent two of the five largest Asian American subgroups, their socio-economic standing in the American melting pot and their academic achievement tend to be quite different, with Koreans, by and large, faring better than Filipinos. "The comparisons, I think, will provide for very rich data," Choi says.

Choi's work has also been influenced by her personal perspective and experience as an immigrant parent. She and her husband Jin Kim have two sons – ages 18 and 7. And while she describes her parenting style as not quite Korean/not quite American, she wrestles with some of the same issues as the immigrant families she studies, though she also acknowledges that "I am much more privileged than many other immigrant parents in terms of resources and knowledge."

Besides shedding light on Asian American parenting styles, the study will provide an important foundation for future scholarship. "This study is not just research that will be used by Choi and her research team," Takeuchi says. "This will be a springboard for the next generation of researchers who will be able to use data for their own papers and dissertations as they advance through the academic ranks." ■