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A Measure of Adolescents' Attitudes toward Family Obligation

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Abstract

A self-report, multiple-item measure developed to assess adolescents' sense of obligation to support, assist, and respect the family is described. The measure was designed to be a simple, straightforward, and meaningful way to the importance of family obligation in adolescents' daily lives. The development of the measure is described along with a summary of results from a set of studies that have employed it among adolescents from different ethnic and cultural groups. Findings suggest that the measure succeeds at capturing an aspect of family processes that although differentially endorsed across different groups of adolescents, has important consequences for fundamental aspects of adolescent development in a variety of social and cultural groups.

Introduction

A primary focus of our research for over ten years has been the role of adolescents' ethnic and cultural background in their relationships with their family. We have been particularly interested in the extent to which variations in beliefs and values about authority, autonomy, and independence might shape how teenagers interact with their parents and siblings. A large body of work in the 1980s documented significant declines in closeness between European American children and parents during the teenage years (Collins & Russell, 1991; Steinberg, 1990). Intrigued by the argument that these changes were due to a normative need for families to adjust their relationships to provide autonomy for their increasingly mature and independent adolescents, we began a longitudinal study to examine whether the same declines in closeness would be evident among families with cultural traditions that place less emphasis upon individual autonomy and a stronger value on family connectedness.

To our surprise, we found that adolescents from Asian and Latin American backgrounds reported the same declines in closeness with their parents between the sixth and tenth grades as did their peers from European backgrounds (Fuligni, 1998). In fact, adolescents from all three groups reported similar levels of closeness and supportiveness through the teenage years. Given the characterization of Asian and Latin American families as being closer and more connected than those from European families, we initially did not know what to make of these findings that suggested similarity in the relationships between teenagers and their parents. But as we considered it more and examined prior research more closely, we began to think that the important distinction may be in adolescents' connection to the family as a larger social group, as opposed to the closeness of dyadic relationships between parents and adolescents. Indeed, some studies indicated that even when the emphasis on the family is strong, the dyadic relationships

between adolescents and their parents actually may be less close and supportive than in other groups (Cooper, Baker, Polichar, & Welsh, 1993).

At the same time, we began to focus our research more closely on adolescents from immigrant families. We were particularly struck by ethnographic studies of immigrant Asian and Latin American communities that highlighted adolescents' strong connection to the family as manifested in a sense of obligation to support, assist, and respect the family (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). This obligation to the family did not seem to depend upon how emotionally close adolescents felt to their individual family members. Although parent-child relationships at times appeared fairly distant and formal, the teenagers felt a keen sense of duty to help the family and consider their needs and wishes, a duty derived from their membership in the family and cultural background. As a Vietnamese adolescent told Zhou and Bankston, "To be an American, you may be able to do whatever you want. But to be a Vietnamese, you must think of your family first" (p. 166).

These ethnographies and our earlier findings suggested that there was an important difference between closeness in dyadic parent-child relationships and a sense of connection to the larger family group. Rather than dyadic relationships, this connection to the family group may be what is most distinctive about relationships with families from Asian, Latin American, and perhaps other cultural backgrounds as compared to those from European backgrounds in the United States. In addition, this connection is perhaps most clearly manifested in the importance placed upon family obligation. Therefore, we decided to create a multiple-item measure of this sense of obligation to support, assist, and respect the family that could capture this distinctiveness and yet still be relevant for adolescents from multiple backgrounds, including European American teenagers.

Process of Development

We first reviewed existing measures of related constructs, such as collectivism, filial piety, and familism. A helpful point from this literature was the emphasis made on distinguishing between collectivism toward family members, sometimes called “kin collectivism,” and collectivism towards other people more generally (Hui, 1988; Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996). This approach was in accord with our desire to assess adolescents’ sense of obligation toward their own family. Although some of these measures of kin collectivism were widely used, we believed that most of them were designed with adult populations in mind and would not be relevant for the teenagers whom we studied. We did not think that many teenagers could easily answer questions that tapped abstract values about whether people in general should help their families, and instead wanted to focus on adolescents’ beliefs about their own families on issues relevant to their daily lives.

We conducted a series of focus groups and personal interviews with teenagers from a variety of backgrounds to discuss the ways in which they did or did not feel a sense of obligation to help and respect the authority of their families. These were fairly open-ended discussions in which we attempted to probe for specific acts of assistance and more general ideas about respecting parental authority, obligations to siblings, fulfilling family wishes and goals, and making sacrifices for the family. We talked with adolescents’ about family obligations in their current lives and what they expected in the future. Our goals were to get a sense of whether this was an important aspect of the adolescents’ relationships with their families, and to elicit specific, concrete aspects of family obligation that could be used in the construction of items. These focus groups and interviews were not necessarily done in accord with state-of-the-art principles and guidelines for qualitative data collection. Rather, these were informal, guided

discussions that provided us with an important glimpse into the ways in which family obligation may be manifested in adolescents' daily lives.

After conducting the focus groups, we began designing our measures while keeping multiple goals in mind. First and foremost, we wished the scales to be meaningful for adolescents. Many of the existing scales tapping collectivism or similar attitudes tended to be inventories of abstract values and attitudes that were relevant for adults and had little basis in the everyday lives of teenagers. We also wished to keep the focus on the adolescents' own family, as opposed to attitudes or values in regards to a larger, depersonalized and abstract other group (e.g., "people" or "elders"). Therefore, we focused on specific types of assistance and respect toward specific family members, such as "taking care of your bothers and sisters" or "spending time with your grandparents." We believed that such an approach would be the most effective way to construct questions that would be meaningful for the teenagers to answer because they took into account activities typical to their daily lives.

When constructing items, we kept in mind an additional goal of minimizing any positive or negative valance attached to obligations. Prior work on parentification suggested that when youth take on family obligations in distressed families there are negative ramifications, and scales of parentification typically make reference to family assistance and burden within the same item (Godsall, Jurkovic, Emshoff, Anderson, & Stanwyck, 2004). Given our interests, we wanted a measure with the flexibility to test whether family obligations had negative or positive implications for youth. Therefore, none of the items in our family obligation measure address whether adolescents feel that their family obligations are difficult, stressful, or burdensome (nor whether they are rewarding, satisfying, or enjoyable). Rather, we simply asked teenagers whether they felt that they should provide assistance or respect the authority of the family. We believed

that including a reference to burden or difficulty would almost guarantee a negative association with psychological well being. Our goal was to create a more generic measure that could be used in conjunction with other measures of burden or resentment to empirically study whether obligations are viewed as burdens or resentment, when and for whom they are viewed as such, and how those beliefs collectively or individually affect adolescent outcomes.

When constructing items, we also wanted to keep the items focused solely on family obligation. We did not make reference to adolescents' ethnic or cultural background in any of the items. Instead, we wanted to create a measure appropriate for adolescents from multiple groups so that we could use it to examine whether there are differences across ethnic groups and how family obligation correlates with adolescents' cultural and ethnic identity.

Finally, it was important to create a measure that was not biased in favor of females by focusing exclusively on gender-typed activities such as cooking and childcare. Instead, we aimed for an inventory of items that allowed for the expression of family obligation by both male and female adolescents. Our goal was not to create a measure that would artificially create gender equality when it did not exist in the real world, but we did attempt to include items that assess the ways that male adolescents may express family obligation in their everyday lives (e.g., providing financial assistance to the family).

The Measure

The measure consists of three subscales that are intended to tap three distinct, yet overlapping aspects of adolescents' sense of obligation to support, assist, and respect the authority of the family (see Table 1). The first is called *current assistance* and measures adolescents' beliefs about how often they should help and spend time with the family on a daily basis. The goal with this subscale is to assess attitudes towards the types of activities in which

adolescents would engage to help and be with family members on a daily basis. We learned from the focus groups and interviews with adolescents that simply spending time with other family members was considered to be an obligation, and that being with the family also could be considered a type of assistance. In addition, we included typical tasks that would be a part of adolescents' daily lives, such as running errands, cooking, and sibling care. An item on helping siblings with homework was added because it emerged from our discussions with adolescents as an important part of their family obligation. Another item deals with translation for parents, which can be a common activity among adolescents from immigrant families, but this item can be dropped or not included in the final scoring in order to provide a more appropriate comparison with those from non-immigrant families. Finally, the items refer to both "your family" and specific members such as grandparents, siblings, and cousins. Respondents without siblings, cousins, or grandparents are allowed to skip these items. Adolescents use a scale where 1 = "Almost Never," 2 = "Once in a While," 3 = "Sometimes," 4 = "Frequently," and 5 = "Almost Always" to indicate how often they believe they should engage in these behaviors.

In addition to providing daily assistance, the idea that adolescents should respect the authority of the family and make sacrifices for them was one that emerged from both previous discussions of familism and filial piety in these families (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Zhou & Bankston, 1998) and our discussions with teenagers. Therefore, we wished to create a subscale that assessed a more global sense of obligation that went beyond the discrete tasks of daily life. *Respect for family* includes seven items that assess adolescents' views about respecting the authority of elders in their family, including parents, grandparents, and older siblings. We also wished to tap the extent to which adolescents believe they should consider the needs and wishes of the family when making important decisions about their lives—this lead to the items

assessing adolescents' views about making sacrifices and doing well for the sake of the family. This subscale is the closest of the three subscales to measures of "kin collectivism" in terms of its themes and generality (Rhee et al., 1996), but the items were designed to be more simple, direct, and meaningful to teenagers. Respondents use a five-point scale where 1 = "Not At All Important," 3 = "Somewhat Important," and 5 = "Very Important" to rate the importance of each of the behaviors to themselves.

Finally, we wished to assess the extent to which adolescents believe that their obligation to support and assist their family was a lifelong obligation that extended into and through adulthood. This is particularly relevant for the teenage years because one of the goals of creating the measure was to examine how a sense of obligation shaped motivation, behavior, and decision making during the adolescent years. Making plans about schooling, work, and family formation are significant developmental tasks of the teenage years and we wished to assess the extent to which anticipated future family obligations played a role in these processes. The subscale of *future support* includes six items that refer to the ways in which family assistance may be manifested during adulthood, including providing financial assistance, living with or near family members, and going to college near family. Respondents use the same scale as that used for the subscale of *respect for family*.

Psychometrics, Predictors, and Correlates

Prior Studies Using the Measure

To date, we have used the measure across five studies that collectively included over 3100 adolescents from different ethnic and immigrant backgrounds in New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the People's Republic of China (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Fuligni, Yip, & Tseng, 2002; Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Hardway & Fuligni,

2006; Tseng, 2004). The adolescent samples varied in age from fifteen to twenty one years and came from predominantly Latin American, Asian, and European backgrounds, although the older sample used by (Tseng, 2004) was eighteen to twenty-five years old and also included those from African/Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. The particular ethnic composition of the samples varied across studies. The New York European American sample differed from the California samples with its larger numbers of Russian and Eastern European immigrant families. All the Asian American samples included large numbers of Chinese, but the San Francisco sample included a large number of Filipinos whereas the New York sample included a large number of Asian Indians. The Latino samples in California included more Mexicans whereas the New York sample included more Puerto Ricans and Dominicans.

The measure was administered as part of a larger questionnaire in small to large group settings in classrooms among high school samples and through either self-administration via mail or a telephone interview for the samples of young adults.

Factors, Internal Consistency, and Validity

Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted with data from a sample of approximately 750 tenth and twelfth grade students that participated in the original study reported by (Fulgini et al., 1999). The analyses indicated that, as intended, the three subscales of *current assistance*, *respect for family*, and *future support* tapped overlapping, yet distinct aspects of family obligations. A three-factor model fit the data better than a single-factor model, with slight improvements in fit after allowing for additional unique variance attributable to items regarding siblings and grandparents and splitting the *current assistance* items into those that measure helping versus spending time with the family. A three factor model also fit equally well across adolescents from Asian, Latin American, and European backgrounds (Tseng, 1998).

Additional factor analyses using data from an urban and rural sample in the People's Republic of China also supported the existence of multiple factors (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). In that case, results of the factor analyses indicated that two of the subscales (*current assistance* and *respect for family*) were further divided into different components reflecting slightly different aspects of the construct, but these different components accounted for little additional variance and thus were kept together for analyses (see original paper for more details).

Despite evidence supporting the existence of three distinct aspects of family obligation, the three different subscales of the measure tend to be highly related to one another. Reported intercorrelations range from .51 to .68. Decisions about whether to analyze the subscales independently or as a summary score should be made for conceptual and theoretical reasons. For example, when the focus is primarily on daily acts of assistance, it makes sense to use only the measure of *current assistance*, as was done by (Fuligni et al., 2002). Explorations of whether the impact of potentially important predictors (e.g., gender or generational status) varies across different aspects of family obligation should analyze the subscales separately (Fuligni et al., 1999). At other times, the different subscales have been collapsed in studies that focused primarily on the more general sense of obligation to the family rather than differences between the three subscales (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Tseng, 2004). Even when the focus of a study is on the more general sense of obligation, we recommend conducting analyses of the three subscales independently in order to confirm that the results are consistent across subscales, and not driven by one or two subscales.

The internal consistency of the subscales has generally been very good. Across our previous studies, the alpha coefficients for the three scales have generally ranged from the high .70s to the high .80s. The only instance of somewhat lower alpha coefficients (e.g., .69 and .70)

was in the study in the People's Republic of China. In that study, the items referring to siblings had been removed because they were irrelevant to the vast majority of urban adolescents who are only children due to the country's one-child family policy, and fewer items can result in lower alpha coefficients for a multiple-item scale (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004).

The scale was explicitly designed to tap adolescents' attitudes toward family support and assistance rather than their behavior. This allowed us to examine when and under what conditions attitudes translate into behavior. Of course scores on the attitude measure should predict greater family assistance behaviors on average, and our studies have suggested that this is indeed the case. Adolescents with a stronger sense of obligation reported helping the family significantly more often on a daily basis during the high school years and being more likely to live with and provide financial support to their families during young adulthood (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Fuligni et al., 2002; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006).

Demographic Predictors

As described earlier, the measure was designed to tap obligation attitudes that are likely to be more strongly held among adolescents from Latin American and Asian backgrounds as compared to those from European backgrounds. Results across our different studies generally have found this to be the case. In the original study, tenth and twelfth grade students from Mexican, Central and South American, Filipino, and East Asian backgrounds in the San Francisco area placed a greater emphasis on the three aspects of family obligation than did their peers from European backgrounds (Fuligni et al., 1999). Differences were quite large, sometimes reaching a magnitude of more than one standard deviation. Ethnic variations were replicated in a more recent study conducted in Los Angeles, with ninth grade students from Chinese and Mexican immigrant families endorsing all three aspects of family obligation more strongly than

those from European backgrounds (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). Finally, in a study of college students in the northeast, Tseng (Tseng, 2004) found that students from Asian backgrounds more strongly endorse family obligation than did those from European backgrounds. In this study, however, there was no difference between students from Latino, African/Afro-Caribbean, and European backgrounds on the combined score, but on individual subscales students from African/Afro-Caribbean endorsed respect for family and future support more so than students from European backgrounds.

Generational differences have sometimes emerged in adolescents' sense of obligation. In the original multi-ethnic study conducted by (Fuligni et al., 1999), there were no generational differences in adolescents' attitudes toward *current assistance* or *respect for family*, but there were generational differences in adolescents' attitudes toward *future support*—first generation adolescents held stronger expectations that their obligations should last into adulthood than did third generation adolescents. Differences between those from immigrant and non-immigrant families were evident in the multi-ethnic study of college students in New York City, such that family obligations were endorsed more strongly by young adults from immigrant families (Tseng, 2004). In both multi-ethnic studies, the generational differences were generally the same across ethnic and panethnic groups. In the Los Angeles study of Mexican families, however, there were no differences between those from immigrant and non-immigrant families (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006).

Because some ethnic groups in the U.S. are more likely to be immigrants than others, generation and ethnicity are confounded in most studies, and the multi-ethnic studies allowed us to examine whether ethnic differences remained after accounting for generational differences. In the New York study, students from Asian backgrounds had a stronger sense of family obligation

overall, even after controlling for generation. Similarly, ethnic differences remained in the San Francisco study even after accounting for generational variations (Fuligni et al., 1999). It appears that both generational status and ethnicity are important predictors of adolescents' sense of obligation to the family. Although some might expect that adolescents' attitudes become the same after several generations in the U.S., our findings suggest that adolescents' status as ethnic minorities remains important, perhaps due to the continued need to support and assist the family even into the third generation (Fuligni & Flook, 2005).

Our findings have not painted a consistent picture of the role of socioeconomic background and family composition in adolescents' attitudes toward supporting and assisting the family. Adolescents' attitudes were unassociated with parental education, number of siblings or grandparents in the home, and parents' marital status in the original San Francisco study and the study of college students in New York City (Fuligni et al., 1999; Tseng, 2004). The minimal role of socioeconomic factors in the original study was evident in the finding that Filipino adolescents reported the strongest sense of obligation despite coming from homes with the highest levels of parental education. However, a greater number of siblings in the home did account for the higher levels of family obligation among adolescents from Mexican families in the study of high school students in Los Angeles (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). Lower levels of family income were associated with a greater value of *family respect* and *future support* during young adulthood, but the associations were fairly small ($r_s = -.11, -.16$; (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). We have some evidence to suggest that socioeconomic status may play a more significant role in family obligation behaviors and the amount of time spent assisting the family, than it does in family obligation beliefs (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Tseng, 2004). Although female adolescents are commonly considered to place a greater emphasis on family obligation, we have found limited

evidence in our prior studies that this is the case in high school but gender differences may emerge later on. In the original study in San Francisco, female and male adolescents' ratings across the three subscales were similar in high school but by young adulthood the young women had higher expectations for *current assistance* and *future support* than did the young men (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Fuligni et al., 1999). No gender differences were evident among the high school students in Los Angeles (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006).

In the China study, gender was relevant for adolescents' sense of family obligation, but in a rather complex way (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). Students were sampled from both urban and rural areas in order to examine the possibility that the market reforms taking place in cities were affecting adolescents' beliefs about supporting, assisting, and respecting the authority of the family. Results suggested that an urban versus rural effect is evident among boys but not girls. Boys in urban areas had the lowest levels of family obligation across all three subscales, lower than boys in the rural area and girls in urban and rural areas.

Finally, age differences in family obligation were examined only in the study that took place in San Francisco. Cross sectional comparisons suggested a fair amount of stability during the high school years with no difference across the three subscales between tenth and twelfth graders (Fuligni et al., 1999). Longitudinal analyses of the transition to adulthood, however, suggested a fairly large increase in adolescents' sense of obligation to support, assist, and respect the family as they moved out of high school (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002), but there were no differences between youth approximately 19 and 21 years of age. Together, these results suggest that the transition out of high school is a significant time of change in family obligation that is book-ended by periods of relative stability.

Correlates

We have used the measure in order to examine whether adolescents' sense of obligation to the family has significance for other aspects of their lives. Much of this work has concentrated on the area of academic motivation and achievement, and we have consistently found that adolescents with a stronger endorsement of family assistance, support, and respect tend to also have higher levels of academic motivation (Fuligni, 2001). The measure appears to be particularly associated with adolescents' belief in the importance and usefulness of education and it explains a significant portion of the higher levels of academic motivation among students from Latin American and Asian background as compared to their peers from European backgrounds (Fuligni, 2001; Fuligni & Tseng, 1999). Interestingly, however, adolescents' attitudes toward family obligation tend to be unassociated with actual school achievement by itself (Fuligni et al., 1999; Tseng, 2004). This is likely because it confers a higher level of motivation that is conducive to achievement, but it also translates into spending more time and exerting greater effort to provide assistance, which can in turn have a negative impact upon educational achievement particularly during the college years (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Tseng, 2004).

Other correlates that have been examined include adolescents' relationships and psychological well being. Not surprisingly, adolescents' with a stronger sense of obligation tend to have closer relationships with their parents that involve more discussion and exchange (Fuligni et al., 1999). This association exists despite the fact that adolescents from Asian and Latin American backgrounds do not report closer relationships with their parents, indicating that the greater sense of obligation among these groups is independent of the quality of relationships between parents and adolescents. There is also little evidence that believing in the importance of supporting and assisting the family leads adolescents to place less value on peer relationships,

although the time spent helping the family does appear to compete with time spent socializing with peers (Fuligni et al., 2002). Finally, young adults who score higher on all three family obligation subscales also tend to report greater levels of psychological well being (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002).

All of the associations reported above tend to exist and be similar among adolescents from different ethnic and generational backgrounds, even those from European backgrounds. Regardless of how strongly the group as a whole endorses the importance of family assistance, support, and respect, a sense of family obligation as measured by our scale appears to be important for other aspects of development among most adolescents.

Conclusion

Our measure of family obligation was designed to be a straightforward, flexible, and meaningful measure of a relatively understudied aspect of family processes during adolescence and young adulthood. The measure may be useful for addressing an array of research questions pertinent to family processes among culturally diverse and immigrant families. The measure quantifies beliefs about family obligation that are described in various literatures including cross-cultural studies of development, parenting, immigrant families, and counseling; and the measure may provide a useful tool for future studies in those areas. Developmental researchers working in the same vein as our initial interests may find the measure useful for examining cultural variation in adolescent development, particularly the cross-cultural validity of theories emphasizing adolescents' autonomy, independence, and separation from parents. Researchers interested in the burgeoning area of emerging adulthood may find the measure useful for examining cultural variation in youths' beliefs about their families as they transition into the worlds of college, work, marriage, and child rearing. The measure also can be adapted for use in

parenting or family studies to examine how parents' beliefs about family obligation influence parenting goals, family routines, and the organization of family life. Immigration researchers might find the measure useful for examining the acculturation of parents' and adolescents' beliefs about family and how any differences between them may affect their relationships with one another. Clinical, counseling, and social work research has often argued that mental health workers should have a stronger understanding of ethnic minority families, and this measure may be useful for empirical investigations of how family processes affect the well-being and treatment of ethnic minority adolescents and young adults.

It is our hope that the simplicity and flexibility of the measure will allow for the use of parts or all of it among a greater variety of populations in North America and the rest of the world. The simple wording and focus on typical aspects of family assistance and respect should make it relatively easy to translate to different languages and adapt to varying local conditions. We believe that the findings we have obtained up to this point suggests that the measure succeeds at capturing an aspect of family processes that although differentially endorsed across different groups of adolescents, has important consequences for fundamental aspects of adolescent development in a variety of social and cultural groups.

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Table 1

Items Comprising the Measure of Adolescents' Attitudes toward Family Obligation

Subscale

Item

Current Assistance

“How often do you think you should do the following things?”

Translate for your parents

Spend time with your grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles.

Spend time at home with your family.

Run errands that the family needs done.

Help your brothers or sisters with their homework.

Spend holidays with your family.

Help out around the house.

Spend time with your family on weekends.

Help take care of your brothers and sisters.

Eat meals with your family.

Help take care of your grandparents.

Do things together with your brothers and sisters.

(table continues)

Table 1 (cont.)

Items Comprising the Measure of Adolescents' Attitudes toward Family Obligation

Subscale

Item

Respect for Family

“In general, how important is it to you that you:”

Treat your parents with great respect.

Follow your parents' advice about choosing friends.

Do well for the sake of your family.

Follow your parents' advice about choosing a job or major in college.

Treat your grandparents with great respect.

Respect your older brothers and sisters.

Make sacrifices for your family.

Future Support

“How important is it to you that in the future you:”

Help your parents financially in the future.

Live at home with your parents until you are married.

Help take care of your brothers and sisters in the future.

Spend time with your parents even after you no longer live with them.

Live or go to college near your parents.

Have your parents live with you when they get older.