Chinese in the United States: An Extension of Moderation in Drinking

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ABSTRACT

Our initial study compared drinking patterns among high-school students from three cultural groups (Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong, adolescents of Chinese origin living in Chicago, American adolescents in the United States). While the present study focuses on one group, Chinese-Americans, it devotes some effort to comparing this group’s drinking patterns to those of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong, and those of adolescents generally in the United States. We hypothesize that the acculturation status of Chinese-American students (indicated by an index developed in the study and by other acculturation factors defined later) is related to their drinking status. We also hypothesize that, in addition to its role in whether or not these adolescents drink, acculturation helps determine how much they drink. Specifically, the study sought to evaluate whether data support one of three acculturation hypotheses (simple acculturation, damaging culture, and acculturation stress hypotheses). An acculturation index was constructed based on the variables residence, place of birth, language used at home, language used with friends, friends’ nationality, and movie preferences. Other relevant acculturation factors included the number of years that respondents lived in the United States, the number of years that their friends lived in the United States, and the number of movies rented in a month in Chinatown. The results did not support any one of the three acculturation hypotheses. Adolescents of Chinese origin living in the United States were less likely to be drinkers than adolescents from the other two cultures (Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong and American adolescents in the United States), and they tended to conform to drinking practices found in Hong Kong. Mixed results were found between acculturation factors and drinking levels. Modification of existing acculturation ideas were needed to explain drinking patterns among Chinese-American adolescents.

Introduction and Problem Statement

Comparative studies reveal that Chinese populations, irrespective of location, have low rates of alcohol abuse and associated problems (Sue, Zane, and Ito 1979; Schwitters, Johnson, Wilson, and McClearn 1982; Klatsky, Siegelaub, Landy, and

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Friedman 1983; Sue, Kitano, Hatanaka, and Yeung 1985; Sue 1987; Wang, Liu, Zhang, Yu, Xia, Fernandez, Lung, Xu, and Qu 1992). For example, surveys of Asian Americans of different origins show that those of Chinese heritage have high rates of abstention and significantly lower rates of heavy drinking than either Japanese or Korean Americans (Sixth Special Report to U.S. Congress 1987). Light drinking, with few attendant problems, is also characteristics of Chinese-American youth (Kitano and Chi 1986/1987).

There has been, however, limited data on the specific factors and processes that promote a norm of moderation among Chinese-Americans. Apart from correlating Chinese-American cultural heritage and moderation in drinking, few studies attempt to uncover variation in drinking styles within the population (Hsu 1970). In addition, several studies present results indicating severe drinking problems among some Chinese in the United States (Wang 1966; Barnett 1955; Sue, Kitano, Hatanaka, and Yeung 1985; Chin, Lai, and Rouse 1990-1991), as well as overseas, such as in Hong Kong (Singer 1972). Studies generating explanations of differing drinking patterns among Chinese are warranted.

One factor that has been shown to differentiate alcohol use within ethnic groups is that of acculturation (Neff, Hoppe, and Perca 1987; Feldman, Mont-Reynaud, and Rosenthal 1992; Epstein, Dusenbury, Botvin, and Diaz 1996; Wong 1997). According to acculturation theory, as time passes, individuals who reside within a larger culture will take on the attitudes and behavior patterns of the larger group. Thus, Chinese youth who migrate to the United States may tend to drink like youth in the general American culture and hence more heavily as time goes by. This theory would suggest heavier drinking and attendant problems among highly acculturated Chinese youth (i.e., simple acculturation hypothesis) (Blane 1977; Sue et al. 1979; Vega, Alderete, Kolody, and Aguilar-Gaxiola 1998). On the other hand, some researchers argue that the less acculturated may exhibit more problematic alcohol use since they may experience stressful adaptive problems during the early stages of acculturation (i.e., damaging culture hypothesis) (Burial, Calzada, Vasquez 1982; Neff and Hoppe 1992; Chang, Morrissey, and Koplewicx 1995). Thus, those Chinese youth who are recent arrivals to the United States would exhibit higher rates of alcohol abuse than those who have resided in U.S. longer or were born there. Yet, it can also be argued that high acculturation will enhance alcohol abuse as it brings with it a growing awareness of racism and discrimination in the larger society (i.e., acculturation stress hypothesis) (Gilbert and Cervantes 1986; Neff et al. 1987; Neff and Hoppe 1992).

In the case of our Chinese-American sample, the ideas expressed above would suggest three hypotheses, which we have labeled as the simple acculturation, damaging culture, and acculturation stress hypotheses, respectively. According to the acculturation and acculturation stress hypotheses, we would expect heavier drinking and problems with increased acculturation while an inverse relation is