

Stereotype Threat on Asian American College Students

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Abstract. The concept of *stereotype threat* has been routinely applied to the study of African American students to measure their academic performance when faced with the potential of confirming negative stereotype of their population (Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007). However, it can also be used effectively when applied to the study of Asian American population. For a number of Asian Americans living in the United States, the “model minority” myth has resulted in empirically unsubstantiated opinions and misconceptions about the population (Orsuwan, 2011). Therefore, there is a current lack of literature on the struggles that many Asian American students face due to a pervasive belief that they are the excelling group in American higher education. This study aims to identify some of the perceived stereotypes about Asian American college students and examine their influence on students’ college experience.

Keywords: Stereotype threat. Asian American. College students. Model minority. American higher education.

1 Introduction

1.1 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI)

The 2010 U.S. Census classifies Asian Americans as those who have origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent including Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand and Vietnam [1]. Pacific Islanders, on the other hand, are defined as people whose origins are from Polynesia, Micronesia or Melanesia and are grouped with Asian Americans [2]. According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, out of the total U.S. population, 308.7 million, Asian population accounted for 14.7 million, or 4.8 percent [1]. Also, with the total U.S. population increased by 9.7 percent, Asian Americans experienced 43 percent growth between 2000 and 2010, which amounts to

17.3 million, 5.6 percent when Asian in combination with one or more other races (e.g. Asian and White; Asian and White and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander) are included [1][3]. This Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population grew more than any other major race group and the growth is expected to continue at a considerable rate based on projections to 2050 [2][3]. Therefore, AAPI as significant contributors to the growth of the U.S. as a whole [2] need special recognition as constituents in U.S. higher education.

1.2 AAPIs in U.S. Higher Education

AAPI college enrollment has shown considerable growth in American higher education as well. Care (2011) report indicates that between 1979 and 2009, the AAPI college enrollment increased five-fold from 235,000 to 1.3 million. With this current trend, a thirty percent additional increase in AAPI college enrollment is anticipated between 2009 and 2019 while college enrollment is projected to increase for all racial groups [2][4]. Regarding college completion rate, AAPIs reached 52.4 percent in 2010, which is higher than other races; Whites, 30.3 percent, Blacks, 19.8 percent and Hispanics, 13.9 percent [5]. It is thus commonly believed from the aggregated statistics that AAPIs are a well-adjusted and high-achieving group in American higher education [6].

1.3 Educational Risk Factors on Campus

As mentioned earlier, AAPI students have been perceived as a population achieving educational success in American higher education. Thus, the concept of educational risk has been something not associated with the AAPI student population, rather with African American and Latino students [7]. However, studies found that AAPI students suffer from a variety of issues on campus including a lack of English proficiency, cultural barriers, prejudice and discrimination [6][7][8][9][10][11]. Lagdameo et al. (2002) suggests that AAPI students often feel marginalized, misunderstood and disconnected from their college campus. It is important to note the challenges AAPI students experience in that they can negatively affect college persistence and completion [4].

The most prominent challenge AAPI students confront is the language issue. Yeh [6] argues that English proficiency is a critical factor that is neglected when examining the success of AAPI students. She indicates that “since most Southeast Asians and some Pacific Islanders do not speak English as a primary language, they struggle with language issues when they arrive in the mainland U.S.,” [6] (p. 87) thus placed at a disadvantage as second language users [7]. Students with limited English skill or speaking with an accent experience language bias and discrimination as well as academic impairment [8]. In addition, racism and discrimination against AAPI students are common issues AAPIs experience on their college campuses [6][9][10]. Iwamoto & Liu (2010) and Kawaguchi (2003) report that a majority of participants in their studies encountered prejudice and discrimination related to racism which affected their college experiences to a varying degree. This race-related stress is

salient in the experiences of the lives of AAPI students especially in historically white organizations [10][11]. Finally, AAPI students are exposed to cultural barriers. The cultural differences AAPI students feel between their cultures of origin and American mainstream culture can create barriers which hinder their integration into the culture of predominantly white colleges [6][7]. This cultural barrier is reported as a negative impact on the academic performance and psychosocial adjustment of AAPI students [6].

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Model Minority Stereotype

A model minority stereotype constitutes the dominant narrative about AAPIs in higher education – “a racial group with disproportionately high enrollment in highly selective, four-year institutions and such academic fields as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)” [8] (p. 3). This conventional wisdom that AAPI students are conscientious, brainy and successful is reinforced by the aggregated statistics demonstrating high enrollment and completion rates in American higher education [12]. However, these positive images of AAPI students provide a misleading impression that they are not experiencing great difficulties, thus overlooking the challenges that at-risk students confront [7][9][13]. Thus, “the myth of AAPI success has camouflaged the institutional disadvantages and inequities experienced by AAPIs in need and has resulted in a lack of care and attention they deserve” [13] (p. 22). As an example, services and resources available for African American and Latino students are not reachable for AAPI students in their colleges [7].

There are numerous reasons why the model minority stereotype is an inaccurate, misleading and damaging myth rather than a reality for the AAPI population [8]. Primarily, the positive characteristics of the general AAPIs demonstrated in the statistics are not shared by all AAPI students [13]. For example, 55 to 65 percent of Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander adults have never enrolled in higher education let alone having very little formal education [4][14]. Furthermore, whereas more than four out of five East Asians (Chinese, Japanese and Korean) and South Asians (Asian Indian and Pakistani) who enrolled in college acquired a bachelor’s degree with a likelihood to achieve an advanced degree, large proportions of other AAPI subgroups attending college did not earn a degree [2]. In addition, AAPI students themselves feel pressured by the model minority stereotype and develop unfavorable sentiment against it. Kawaguchi (2003) for instance reported that AAPI students feel that their struggles are overlooked and dismissed because of the stereotype, which assumes that AAPIs are able to cope with a new society or new culture while still being successful [9]. The stereotype also prohibits AAPI students “from admitting their emotional and academic problems, thus preventing them from seeking assistance” [6] (p. 90). In short, the model minority stereotype does not portray a true picture of AAPI students

in U.S. higher education nor does it properly address the challenges of AAPI students on campus.

2.1.1 Positive and Negative Stereotypes

In addition to a pervasive model minority stereotype, there are also other stereotypes and biases toward the group that may also harm AAPI students on campus. A study by Lin, Kwan, Cheung, and Fiske (2005) identified some anti-Asian American stereotypes held by undergraduate students of other racial groups which viewed AAPIs as being excessively competent and having deficient sociability. AAPI students also discussed their own experiences of such stereotypes and expressed discomfort. They stated that when they heard certain stereotypical or discriminating statements, they felt belittled, angry, frustrated, alienated and unrecognized [16]. Negative stereotypes are harmful in that they are often used as the rationale for rejecting or attacking the stereotyped group [15]. For example, AAPIs' inability to gain social approval, which is one of the negative stereotypes held by others, is used as an excuse to discriminate against AAPI students and to express one's dislike of the group as a whole [15]. Moreover, Asian cultural values and communication styles of reservation and silence are often considered as less desirable than the mainstream values of individualism and assertiveness [16]. A stereotype of AAPIs as thriving in professions that require limited communication and language skills (e.g., engineering and sciences) also shows that there is a common belief that Asians are not skilled communicators, but rather are silent "nerds" [20]. Such stereotypical images of AAPI students in the classroom may also pose pressure upon them to violate their cultural upbringing and conform to the Western norms in the classroom, where grades are often based upon students' verbal participation [16].

While negative stereotypes limit AAPI students' ability as students and individuals, seemingly positive stereotypes like model minority stereotype could also be harmful. In a focus group conducted by Sue et al. (2007), students expressed that whenever they heard any comments about their English skills being good and lack of any exotic accents, they felt like they were viewed as not belonging. Although such comments may have been made with intentions of compliments, students rather saw them as disturbing and uncomfortable [16]. They also argued that their experiences of racism and discrimination as a minority were often dismissed, as some people outside the group believed that "Asians are the new Whites" [16] (p. 76). This is related to the model minority stereotype, which views AAPIs as privileged and accomplished. A stereotype of Asians' math skills also posed great pressure on AAPIs, rather than generating positive outcomes [16][17]. Students in the focus group expressed that they felt "pressured to conform to a stereotype they did not endorse," and AAPI women exhibited impaired math skills and concentration when the stereotype was salient. [16] (p. 76) [17]. Such findings show that not only do negative stereotypes threaten one's ability and psychological well-being, but seemingly positive stereotypes also can be burdening to members of the stereotyped group.

2.2 Stereotype Threat on Asian American Students

As briefly explained earlier, a phenomenon in which people underperform as a result of the fear of confirming stereotypes about their groups as self-characteristics is called stereotype threat. Found by Steele and Aronson (1995), the concept was used to explain African American college students' underperformance on the standardized test when they faced salient racial stereotypes about their intellectual ability. When African American students became aware of the existing stereotype about their group, they performed poorly compared to when there was no salient stereotype; even mere salience of the stereotype influenced these students' academic performance [18]. Students felt pressured when they were at risk of confirming their racial stereotype as their personal characteristics, which eventually led to underperformance influenced by their vulnerability in the context [18]. This prominent experiment shows that social context and group identity together hold great influence on one's behavior and that a group's underachievement is not rooted in the group itself or societal conditions [18]. It is an important finding in that African American and Blacks are often stereotyped to have lower intellectual ability than other groups; by understanding how negative stereotypes impair one's actual ability, it can be proved as false.

The concept of stereotype threat has been routinely applied to the study of African American students to measure their academic performance when faced with the potential of confirming negative stereotypes of their population [19]. On the other hand, because AAPIs are commonly believed to be well-performing and high-achieving, especially in terms of their access to higher education and further in their professions, there is a current lack of research regarding the relationship between stereotype and AAPI students' college experience and academic performance. However, a study by Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) found that when Asian American women's identity as Asian female and expectations of high performance on math skills were salient at the time of testing, their concentration was hindered and thus the test results were lower. While this experiment is slightly different from Steele and Aronson's experiment of the stereotype threat on African American students, it is quite similar in that both groups of participants showed impaired ability when the stereotype (i.e., Asians' exceptional math skills) was salient. Asian Americans' stereotyped identity as "math experts" put a burden on them and eventually affected their stereotyped domain (i.e., math skills) adversely.

3 Future Direction of Research

Understanding the influence of stereotype and its risk on AAPI students, we aim to examine Asian American students' college experiences and the impact of stereotype threat on them. This study will recruit two AAPI students enrolled at the research universities. The students will individually participate in an interview to talk about their experiences on campus. The interview protocol adopted for this study is a modified version of Mosley and Rosenberg's (2007) used in their study of stereotype threat on African American female students at a predominantly white southern university. This conversation will be recorded and coded in order to identify common

themes in their conversations and analyzed to examine how perceived stereotype influences their college experience. Analysis of the results will suggest possible interventions and future research directions to improve AAPI students' experience on campus.

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