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The Model Minority Student: Asian American Students and the Relationships Between Acculturation to Western Values, Family Pressures, and Mental Health Concerns

Nathan Divino Panelo

As the Asian American student population grows in United States (U.S.) higher education, so does the demand for resources on campus. One major concern facing Asian Americans today is the cultural pressure from home which often leads to mental health concerns. Many Asian American students acculturate to Western values in United States colleges, and in doing so, sacrifice part of their traditional identities. As Asian American students acculturate to Western values, it becomes difficult for them to relate to their immigrant parents or first-generation Asian American parents. In contrast, Asian American students who feel close to their traditional values can find difficulty transitioning into college due to the discrimination toward their culture and lack of social support. This article will identify how acculturation to Western values and parental pressures about academics can leave Asian American students—often referred to as “model minorities”—depressed and emotionally unstable.

During the beginning of the fall semester at the University of Vermont (UVM), I found myself studying in a relatively secluded area. As I was immersed in my reading, I noticed an Asian male staring out of a window with a concerned look on his face. I decided to flag him down and have a friendly conversation. As we talked, we started to discuss how it feels to be an Asian American at a predominantly White institution. Our experiences adjusting to the campus were quite similar even though we grew up with very different childhoods. He grew up in Boston and I grew up in Seattle, but we both had a strong connection to our culture and our family.

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We discussed how it felt to be first-generation college students growing up with American ideologies, sharing cultural values and interests. When I asked what he was majoring in, he said that he was going into medicine, mostly because it is what his parents wanted. He also said that he was taking a class in visual arts and that his true passion was drawing. When I asked him why he was not majoring in art, he responded, "Because my parents would disown me if I told them I wanted to major in drawing cartoons." He went on to say that he felt like he was not able to connect with anyone on this campus and he contemplated transferring to a school that would suit him better. I got the impression that it was not until our conversation that he felt comfortable talking about his feelings about his experiences at UVM. As we parted ways, I started to think about when I was a first-year undergraduate and how therapeutic it was for me to vent to someone who understood my frustrations and anxieties as an Asian American.

This article will discuss the concerns of Asian American first- and second-generation college students who feel fully integrated in their cultural heritage and how their acculturation to Western culture relates to mental health concerns. This article will also address how parental involvement or pressure to perform academically perpetuates the model minority myth. Finally, I outline the steps student affairs professionals must take to support Asian American students on college campuses.

The terms "Western," "American," and "United States" (U.S.) are used interchangeably in this article. Most of the literature reviewed uses these terms to represent U.S.-born Asian American students. Further, the research studies summarized here were conducted in the U.S. However, the terms "Western" and "American" encompass more than just the U.S. and findings could apply to Asian American students in other parts of North America. It is also important to note that the Asian culture is broken up into subcultures (for example, Chinese, Korean, Laotian, Hmong, Japanese, Filipino, etc.) that do not exactly follow the same cultural ideologies. What might work for one subgroup might not work for another.

Asian American Students and Acculturation

Asian American students who have lived most, if not all of their lives, in the U.S. may have mixed feelings about acculturation into American society (Kim & Omizo, 2005). Acculturation is defined as adapting to the normative process of the dominant culture (Kim & Omizo). Some examples of acculturation are: assuming English as one's primary language, adapting to Western societal values, and displaying mannerisms normative in American society (Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000). An individual's acculturation of Western culture can vary depending on the length of time lived in the U.S., regional location, socioeconomic

status, and demographics of the community (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Many first-generation students in higher education acculturate to Western culture much faster than their immigrant parents (Lee et al.). It is common for family members who immigrate to America to reject acculturation by consistently using their native language, practicing traditional lifestyles and cultural norms, and by forcing their children to abide by their native cultural values (Lee et al.).

Asian American students are typically perceived as having either traditional or Western values. Asian Americans who hold traditional values are characterized as valuing interdependence, harmony, collectivism, and hierarchy in family structure (Chang, 1996; Kim & Omizo, 2005). In contrast, Western culture is perceived to value individualism, autonomy, future-oriented thinking, and competition (Kim & Omizo). Both Western and traditional Asian values guide how Asian American students think, feel, and behave throughout their college experience (Kim & Omizo). Traditional Asian values can be enforced by parents, family, and community, but are often rejected by students who believe it is beneficial to follow Western culture (Lee et al., 2000). Studies have shown that some Asian American students who adopt these opposing sets of values may lead to conflict when attending college while living at home (Aldwin & Greenberger, 1987). Also, possessing both Western and traditional Asian values can result in a pessimistic personality, or feeling guilty, anxious, or both (Zane, Sue, Hu, & Kwon, 1991).

Kim and Omizo (2005) stated that Asian American students can find resolution by integrating Western and Asian cultures into their daily interactions on campus. Student integration is defined as becoming proficient in the dominant culture while simultaneously maintaining their set of indigenous cultural values. Psychologically, integration for Asian American students, as well as many other racial identities, can allow cultural values to be expressed in both Western and Asian American systems, particularly when cultural values are in opposition. Many Asian Americans have settled and integrated into Western culture, giving an outward perception of “content conformity.” This conformity may reinforce the assumption that Asian Americans do not need the support and resources afforded to other diverse groups. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The Model Minority Student

In a study conducted by McCarron and Inkelas (2006), Asian students had the highest graduation rate compared to other underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. A reason for this could be due to a solid work ethic and the drive for success valued in Asian cultures, also known in the Asian/Asian American community as the “American Dream” (Cheng & Espiritu, 1989). This leads to the perception of Asian Americans as a “model minority.” The term model minority is a label for Asian Americans because they are seen as the most culturally adap-

tive minority group (Mallinchrodt, Shigeoka, & Suzuki, 2005; Solberg, Ritsma, Davis, Tata, & Jolly, 1994). Though the idea of being a model minority seems like a positive perception of Asian Americans and their community, this designation has negative effects.

As model minority students in college, Asian Americans are expected to academically outperform and work more than students from all other minority groups in classes, co-curricular activities, and part-time jobs (Cress & Ikeda, 2003). This idea of being the model minority student can be reinforced at home by family and parents' high expectations. Unfortunately, many parents do not understand the social and psychological problems that come with being labeled as the model minority.

In Cress and Ikeda's study (2003), 508 Asian American college students were surveyed over two years. The survey's intent was to compare their feelings of depression to those of other college students. The study found that more Asian American students reported feeling depressed than their peers, both White students and other students of color. The study also found that the majority of Asian American students who feel depressed see their campus as having a negative climate where they experience hostility and discrimination (Cress & Ikeda).

The model minority label also discourages Asian American students from seeking support services on campus, which leads to further academic pressure in the classroom. Many Asian American students, especially first-generation Asian American students, have trouble transitioning from high school to college because of parental expectations that they be capable of surviving stressful situations without support (Solberg et al., 1994). These students who are striving to perform as model minority students and at the same time reject academic and social support from the college can find themselves struggling throughout their college experience. Student affairs offices, such as multi-ethnic centers, can offer immigrant parents on-campus programs and workshops during family weekends, orientation, or move-in days. These workshops can help Asian American parents understand the complexities of college life and the overall experiences for Asian American students in higher education.

Family and Parents

Family pressure can be a factor leading to mental health concerns in Asian American students. Lee et al. (2000) stated, "Numerous scholars have also noted that Asian immigrant families tend to have closed communication patterns, rigid hierarchical relationships, and limited quality time between parents and children" (p. 220). The more students acculturate to Western values, the more difficult it can be to openly communicate about personal college struggles to parents who

still embrace their Asian cultural values. For Asian American students, the need to be perceived as independent and autonomous makes it hard to communicate about stress, depression, anxiety, and frustrations about college life to their parents. This concept is contradictory to the Asian American traditional values of interdependence and support (Chang, 1996; Kim & Omizo, 2005).

Asian American students with immigrant parents have frequent intergenerational arguments concerning language usage and cultural relations. Lee et al. (2000) stated, “family acculturation conflicts are more likely to occur among recent immigrants where the gap between parents and children is greatest” (p. 212). Because of the differences between the rate of acculturation with U.S.-born Asian Americans and immigrant parents, known as the “acculturation gap,” consistent conflicts and miscommunication can take place at home.

Family conflict and miscommunication can also be due to parents’ lack of knowledge about U.S. higher education. “Evidence suggests that first-generation students encounter a lower perceived level of family support, a lower level of importance placed on college by parents, and less knowledge of the college environment and campus values among parents” (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006, p. 536). For example, parents may lack knowledge of available financial resources, institutional terminology and language, academic support, and the role of a college advisor, mentor, or both (McCarron & Inkelas). Parents’ lack of knowledge of higher education can lead Asian American students to experience “culture shock” (Inman & Mayes, 1999). This can lead to negative outcomes for the student, such as depression resulting from environmental discomforts, the misinterpretation of financial awards and assistance, and eventual withdrawal from classes (McCarron & Inkelas).

Many Asian American parents immigrate to the U.S. seeking a better life for their family. In addition, many immigrate for the sake of providing better educational opportunities for their children and therefore higher likelihood of success in their futures (Cress & Ikeda, 2003). It is common for Asian American parents to choose their children’s major, career, and social activities (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). For Asian American students who are raised with traditional values where parents dictate your major and your extracurricular activities, high grade achievement is expected. This can result in added stress in college, which can lead to depression and other mental health concerns (Cress & Ikeda).

On campus, student affairs professionals should learn to recognize Asian American students’ patterns of difficulty and the causal cultural factors at work. Staff and administrators in student support services need to be cognizant that the pressures from home on Asian American students can add a deeper burden to their academic and social lives, which can contribute to mental health concerns.

Depression and Mental Health Concerns

Acculturation to Western values can also contribute to the Asian American students' struggles with depression and mental health (Atkinson, Whiteley, & Gim, 1990; Liao, Rounds, & Andrews, 2005; Mallinchrout et al., 2005; Solberg et al., 1994). Solberg et al. attempted to identify the resources Asian American students use to seek help in academics, personal identity development, and substance abuse. Solberg et al. found that Asian American students who use counseling centers develop ongoing relationships with the services as needed. Atkinson et al. also stated that Asian American students who are more acculturated to Western culture would regard campus-based psychologists and counselors as a common and acceptable resource.

Asian American students who feel attached to their traditional values often reach out to older members of the community, such as community elders and religious leaders, or to social groups, like student organizations (Mallinchrout et al., 2005; Yeh & Wang, 2000). This leads students to develop a strong ethnic identity, which can result in inclusion in a larger community, a positive approach to mental health, and confidence in transitioning to a college setting (Yoo & Lee, 2005). In a study conducted by Yeh and Wang, 470 Asian American students were surveyed about their support system when faced with a problem or concern; 94.7% would cope with a friend, 59.7% would cope with parents, and 7.7% would cope with a counselor. The students in the study also saw social and family activities which emphasize the Asian culture as interdependent and harmonious as a means for psychological coping.

One of the leading causes of mental health struggles among Asian American students is the pressure to adhere to the traditional values that prevent them from expressing their social and psychological difficulties (Cress & Ikeda, 2003). In particular, many first-generation college students and individuals who identify closely with Asian values feel embarrassed to go to counseling because having any psychological problems is believed to bring shame and humiliation to their family and community (Kim & Omizo, 2005; Atkinson et al., 1990). Asian Americans who primarily embrace Asian traditional values seek social accord, which leads them to hide their emotional expression and internalize their depression (Cress & Ikeda).

Within higher education, there are some resources in place for Asian and Asian American students to further explore their own racial identity. Yeh and Wang (2000) suggested that student affairs professionals should implement support programs for Asian American students, such as research initiatives, student mentoring, and Asian American clubs.

Discussion and Conclusion

Asian American college students coming from Asian immigrant families have a high instance of depression or mental health concerns on campus due to several causes: acculturation to Western culture, pressure from parents to succeed, and pressure to embrace the model minority myth. For example, the Asian American first-year student that I mentioned at the beginning of this article struggled with his transition into UVM clearly due to pressure to acculturate to college campus norms, the inability to choose his own major, and the lack of a supportive community.

Student affairs professionals can help with transition and support for Asian American students on campus by being cognizant of the developmental hardships associated with the process of acculturation. Student affairs professionals should provide outlets for social interactions with others who hold the same traditional values. Campuses can also support Asian American parents by setting up programs specifically catering to understanding the resources in higher education. Student affairs professionals also need to ask themselves if acculturation to Western values is helpful or hindering to Asian American students. Being acculturated can lead to more comfort when utilizing services like campus-based counseling and an overall easier transition into college life, but it can also conflict with cultural values and traditional practices, such as discrepancies within the family and community relations.

Asian American students are continually changing their cultural values to fit into college climate. It is time for our higher education system to expand and deepen their knowledge of Asian culture to best serve the Asian American student population. Student affairs can begin to accommodate these students by supporting social groups and clubs that cater to Asian American culture. Not only do these clubs provide a service to the university, they also create a safe space for students to cope with their mental health concerns and provide a social community. As the Asian American student population grows in higher education, so does the demand for social support. The studies and literature have already been created; it is time for student affairs professionals to start taking action.

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