

PART VI Second Generation, Culture Conflict, and Ethnic Identity

Asian American Student Stress: The Other Side of Achievement

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"It's an insane amount [of pressure] . . . Parental expectations get ingrained into your expectations. Then you see your peers, and you just want to do as good as them."

As the young woman spoke, others nodded, and empathized with her predicament. She was a 1.5 generation female Chinese American university student participating in a focus group to discover the kinds of stress Asian American students were experiencing. Her narrative, along with those of other Asian American student participants, challenges the stereotype that Asian Americans are "problem-free." "Model minority" stereotypes have created images of highly successful, well adjusted students, and low utilization of mental health services among Asian American college students has been cited as evidence of their lack of problems (McEwen, et al., 2002; Meyer, et al., 2009). However, these images are being shattered by evidence that the population is facing what some observers describe as a mental health "crisis." (Eisenberg, et al., 2007, Shea, et al., 2008). This study examines whether Asian American college students have unmet mental health needs and provides a portrait of the particular stresses they may face. Understanding their specific mental health needs is crucial if universities want to better address the mental health issues of Asian American college students, the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2010).

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Is There a Problem?

In recent years, mental health problems among college students have increased dramatically both in frequency and type. The types of problem include anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts related to social relationships, parental expectations, and sexual assault (Benton, et al., 2003; Lee, et al., 2009). Amidst the heightened attention being given to mental health on campuses, the plight of Asian American students has come to light, partly from nationally publicized suicides and violent acts that shattered their image as model minorities. The fiery suicide of Elizabeth Shin at MIT in 2000 led to a landmark legal suit against the university (Haas, et al., 2003). The Virginia Tech massacre in 2007 by Seung-Hui Cho in 2007 was another shocking and tragic case (Shuchman, 2003) that destroyed the stereotype of the problem-free Asian American student. In response, some schools have hired counselors specifically to work with Asian American students and one university has created a task force to study their particular needs (Ramanujan, 2006).

Family pressure to fulfill a particular role as a child is often identified as related to mental health issues (Lowe, 2009). Problems with cultural adaptation, language barriers, and racism and discrimination also contribute to mental health issues (Meyer, et al., 2009). Young Asian Americans experience stress trying to live up to many standards and expectations, such as doing well in school, helping support the family, and taking care of elderly family members (Okazaki, 1997; McKewen et al., 2002; Qin, 2009).

These recent developments may be surprising to those who know that Asian Americans in general have very low utilization rates of mental health services compared to other racial and ethnic groups, regardless of gender, age, and location (Zhang et al., 1998; USDHHS, 1999; Appel et al, 2011). While this may appear to be an indication of good mental health, those who do utilize services tend to have more severe cases suggesting that Asian Americans may either avoid using mental health services or delay help-seeking until problems become serious (USDHHS, 2001; McKinney, 2005).

Asian American youth are at particular risk. Asian American females, aged 15 to 24 years old, have the highest rate of depressive symptoms of all gender and racial groups and the highest suicide mortality rates of all young women (Schoen, et al., 1997; National Center for Health Statistics, 2000). In the geographic area where we did our study, Asian American youth show the greatest increases of all ethnic groups in juvenile crime and substance abuse (Arifuku, 2004). These data depict a stark contrast to the “model minority” image of Asian American students as well behaving high achievers.

Considerable media coverage and scholarly attention have been given to the “overrepresentation” of Asian Americans in colleges, especially at highly selected ones. We therefore deliberately chose a sample from a highly competitive university to see if there is a particular kind of stress stemming from being stereotyped as model minority and expected to achieve. We are concerned that the perception of Asian Americans as “whiz kids” and “model minority” coupled with the underutilization of mental health services have masked their mental health needs, and misled university policy makers to believe that Asian Americans are “problem free” with minimal needs for mental health resources (Museus and Chang, 2009; Suzuki 2002).

Our concern is supported by research on Asian American college students in which they report commonly experiencing isolation, segregation, and being stereotyped (Suyemoto, 2009). Asian American college students have also reported higher levels of depressive symptoms (Liu, et al., 1990; Young et al, 2010), greater social anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties than their white counterparts (Okazaki, 1997). A recent study confirms that Asian American students have lower

