Discrimination Among Asian Americans

K. ANH DO & JANELLE WONG

Racial discrimination is defined as any broad categories of negative behavior, attitude, judgment, or unfair treatment toward a particular group of people due to their racial or ethnic background. Being denied employment due to your racial or ethnic membership is an example of discrimination. Some acts of discrimination are overt and easy to identify. But some discriminatory behaviors are subtle and difficult to detect. This form of discrimination is called microaggression, which is “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults”. For example, many second and third-generation Asian Americans, born in the United States, often hear others commenting on their ability to speak English well. These incidents are subtle because it is difficult to tell whether the treatment was intentional and attributable to racial bias.

Discrimination takes place at the objective and subjective level. The objective level is the actual negative and unfair treatment or incident, and the subjective aspect is how the person interprets or perceives the treatment. Subjective or perceived discrimination has the stronger effect on our physical health and psychological well-being. Perceived discrimination has been linked to poor health, high blood pressure, heart disease, bodily pain, and headaches. It is also associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem.

Workshop Highlights

BRIDGING GENERATIONS: STRENGTHENING BONDS BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

On April 4th, 2017, K. Anh Do, the 2016 - 2018 Calvin J. Li Postdoctoral Fellow, facilitated a workshop in collaboration with Dr. Paul Li on strengthening bonds between Asian American parents and their children. The event took place in a Chinese language school in Towson, MD, from 3:30 PM – 5:00 PM. About 20 to 25 parents (and some children) attended.

The main purpose of the workshop was to help parents understand their children’s ethnic and cultural identity development from early childhood to emerging adulthood. It also covered topics relating to the quality of strong families, communication difficulties in Asian American families, adolescent brain development, and practical tips for parents to improve their relationship with their children and youths.

Continued →
Asian Americans and Perception of Discrimination

The 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey is a unique study that sheds light on perceptions of discrimination among Asian Americans and other groups. Note that when asked how much discrimination Asians face, all groups, including Asian Americans, claimed that Asian Americans face about the same amount of discrimination as Whites. Further, just 9% of White respondents reported that there is “a lot” of discrimination against Asians, compared to 22% who reported that Whites faced “a lot” of discrimination.

Do Asian Americans face the same levels of discrimination as Whites? Respondents were asked if they have ever been treated unfairly or personally experienced discrimination. Over 40% of Asian Americans reported experiencing discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, immigrant status, religious heritage, or accent. This proportion is smaller than that of other non-White groups (63% of Blacks and 53% of Latinos/as), but larger than the proportion of Whites reporting discrimination. The majority of Asian Americans (nearly 90%) who reported experience with discrimination indicated that they were discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity. These findings show that the experiences of Asian Americans with discrimination are much different than the levels assumed by society, including those of Asian ancestry.

Perception of Discrimination against Whites and Asians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Against Whites</th>
<th></th>
<th>Against Asians</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>A Lot</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>A Lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do Asian Americans face the same levels of discrimination as Whites? Respondents were asked if they have ever been treated unfairly or personally experienced discrimination. Over 40% of Asian Americans reported experiencing discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, immigrant status, religious heritage, or accent. This proportion is smaller than that of other non-White groups (63% of Blacks and 53% of Latinos/as), but larger than the proportion of Whites reporting discrimination. The majority of Asian Americans (nearly 90%) who reported experience with discrimination indicated that they were discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity. These findings show that the experiences of Asian Americans with discrimination are much different than the levels assumed by society, including those of Asian ancestry.

Over 40% of Asian Americans reported experiencing discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, immigrant status, religious heritage, or accent.
Reported Discrimination among Asian, Black, Hispanic and White

“Have you ever been treated unfairly or personally experienced discrimination because of your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, being an immigrant, religious heritage or having an accent?”

Overall, experiences of discrimination of Asian Americans were similar across age groups, as there was no significant variation between those who are 18 to 35 and those who are 35 or older. There were, however, differences in reported experience with discrimination across Asian national-origin groups.

Reported Discrimination across Different Asian American Sub-Ethnic Groups

“Have you ever been treated unfairly or personally experienced discrimination because of your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, being an immigrant, religious heritage or having an accent?”

There were also variations in place of birth. As a group, Asian Americans who were born outside the U.S. were slightly more likely to report being discriminated against than those who were U.S.-born.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Origin</th>
<th>Foreign-born</th>
<th>U.S.-born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison between Foreign-born versus U.S.-born reporting discrimination

% Indicating Discrimination
Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience

Theme 1: Alien in own land – This is a type of microaggression that assumes all Asian Americans are foreigners or foreign-born and therefore are not considered ‘real’ Americans.

Theme 2: Ascription of intelligence – Asian Americans are assumed to be intelligent, particularly in the areas of math and science. This can be illustrated through statements such as, “If I see lots of Asian students in my class, I know it’s going to be a hard class”. On the surface this sounds positive, but many Asian Americans students feel the pressure to conform to these stereotypes and feel inadequate when they are unable to measure up. Those who strive to do well can feel that their hard work is overshadowed by their ethnicity.

Theme 3: Denial of racial reality – This is a type of microaggression that invalidates a person’s experience of racism and discrimination. For example, many Asian Americans do not feel supported when they report incidents of racial discrimination, because others view them as being successful and therefore have nothing to “complain” about.

Theme 4: Exoticization of Asian American women – This relates to the view of Asian American women as being exotic and passive.

Theme 5: Invalidation of interethnic differences – Asian Americans often hear that they “all look alike”. For example, a Chinese American being confused as a Korean American.

Theme 6: Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles – This relates to the view that Asian cultural values and communication styles are seen as less desirable or awkward. For example, the cultural value of silence is seen by many Americans as lacking interest or being disengaged.

Theme 7: Second class citizenship – Asian Americans are treated as ‘lesser’ people or are given poor services in public places because of their race/ethnicity.

Theme 8: Invisibility – Asian Americans are not being seen by others. For example, an Asian American man may be standing next in line, but when it is his turn to order, the cashier skips on to the next person (who is not Asian) as if he is not there. This relates to the idea at the beginning of the article, in which the researchers pointed out that public discussions and even research on racism and discrimination often do not include Asian Americans. That is why this study is crucial in helping others see the actual types of experiences that Asian Americans face.

"What country are you from?"

"So do you speak Chinese?"

"I wouldn’t date an Asian guy."

"I thought Asians were supposed to be good at math."
Racial Microaggressions and Daily Well-Being among Asian Americans

Professor Anthony Ong at Cornell University and his colleagues conducted a study to understand the frequency of racial microaggressions in the daily lives of Asian Americans and how these experiences affect their well-being. The researchers asked 152 Asian American college students in New York to log their experiences for 14 consecutive days. Each day, they received an email reminder to go online and fill out a survey to see how frequently they encountered incidents of racial microaggressions. The students were given a checklist with items such as: a) I heard it suggested that Asians do not experience as much discrimination as other minorities, or b) I overheard or was told an offensive joke or comment concerning how Asians talk. The survey also asked students how many different physical symptoms they experienced (e.g. headaches, backaches, poor appetite) and how they felt during the day (e.g. sad, hostile, enthusiastic).

The study found that over 78% of Asian Americans reported encountering some form of racial microaggression over the two-week period. The most frequent type of incidents that they encountered were those that made them feel invalidated as a person. For example, participants were told that they spoke “good English” or overheard it suggested that many women find Asian men unattractive. The researchers found that participants reported experiencing more negative emotions and physical symptoms on the days that they encountered incidents of microaggression. These negative effects also continued over time. The team concluded that although facing overt types of racism, such as being called an insulting name, negatively affect a person’s well-being, microaggressions that invalidate their experiences have a much deeper impact, because more mental energy is spent trying to figure out if the incident was motivated by race. Not being able to pinpoint the source of distress can prevent it from getting resolved.


Racial Discrimination Stress, Coping, and Depressive Symptoms among Asian Americans: A Moderation Analysis

Dr. Meifen Wei at Iowa State University and her colleagues carried out a study to explore how stress relating to racial discrimination affect depression in Asian Americans. Dr. Wei asked 201 Asian American university students to fill out an online survey that measures general life stress, perceived discrimination, stress related to discrimination, depressive symptoms, and coping strategies.

First, the researchers found that those who reported experiencing higher levels of stress relating to racial discrimination also reported higher levels of depression. This effect was stronger and more severe than the effect of general life stress.

Second, the results showed that the type of coping strategies Asian Americans used influence their well-being. Those who used more reactive coping strategies when they experienced racial discrimination, such as having strong emotional reaction or being preoccupied with thinking about the problem, were more vulnerable to depression. Additionally, those who reported that their family was helpful and supportive in responding to racial discrimination reported lower levels of depression. The researchers concluded that stress relating to perceived discrimination is an important factor that affects the well-being of Asian Americans, but that positive and culturally-relevant coping strategies can be used to offset these negative effects.

Tips for Parents

• Avoid dismissing children’s and youths’ experiences of being discriminated against by telling them to ignore it.

• Listen, acknowledge what they are feeling, ask questions, and allow children and youths to describe their experiences without jumping in to offer advice and helping them ‘fix the problem’.

• Recognize and address your own bias about different groups of people.

• Help your children feel proud of their cultural heritage and develop a positive ethnic identity. A strong sense of racial or ethnic identification helps to offset the negative effects of discrimination by lowering depression.¹

• Help your children build a healthy support system of friends and other caring adults that they can draw on in times of distress.

• To learn about age-appropriate tips on how to talk to kids about racism, you can check out web resources below. You can also use this list of children’s books to help start the conversation.

Children’s Books

• Let’s talk about race by Julius Lester (2008)
• We All Sing with the Same Voice by Philip Miller and Sheppard M. Greene (2005)
• The Skin You Live In by Michael Tyler (2005)
• Whoever You Are by Mem Fox (2006)
• Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson (2012)
• Same, Same But Different by Jenny Sue Kostecki-shaw (2011)

¹ Mossakowski, 2003

Web Resources


Website: https://www.todaysparent.com/family/parenting/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-racism-an-age-by-age-guide/

Dr. Cixin Wang is an Assistant Professor of the School of Psychology in the College of Education at the University of Maryland. She received her PhD in School Psychology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2011. Her research interests include bullying and bullying prevention, school-based mental health services, mental health literacy, help-seeking among culturally and linguistically diverse students, parenting practice, and family involvement.

Dr. K. Anh Do is the 2016-2018 Calvin J. Li Fellow in Asian American Studies. She is a Post-Doctoral Associate at the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Maryland and has a PhD in Child, Youth and Family Studies from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2016.

Dr. Cixin Wang
Dr. Janelle Wong

Selected References


