

## 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

levels of mental health and higher levels of psychological distress and depression than other students (McKinney, 2005). Other studies reveal greater anxiety over making mistakes, more self-doubt (Castro & Rice, 2003), and greater psychological insecurities, such as low self esteem, anxiety and emotional disturbance (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). We conducted this study to gain a better understanding of the kinds of stress Asian American students experience, and bring more light to the other side of achievement.

## **Methodology: A Participatory Action Approach**

We used a participatory action research model to empower students to study and develop interventions in their own community. In participatory action research, a group of people identify a problem and do something to resolve it, aiming to contribute both to the practical concerns of the community, and to further the goals of social science. There is a dual commitment in participatory action research; 1) to study a system, and, 2) concurrently collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. In our study, academic researchers became consultants and guides for the student researchers.

Students interested in studying the mental health health of Asian American students were recruited and trained to assume an active role in formulating, designing, and carrying out research. Specifically, they engaged in problem definition and study implementation, and actively participated in the development of the study design, and in data gathering, analysis, and interpretation. Nine undergraduate students were recruited through a campus-wide research program that provides students with research experience. All nine student researchers were second or third generation Asian Americans—Chinese, South Asian, or Vietnamese—and there were seven females and two males. We conducted eight training sessions during which the student researchers received instruction from the consulting researchers on topics such as research ethics, recruitment strategies, and qualitative research methodology. The student researchers prepared a Human Subjects protocol, which was approved by their university's institutional review board, received intensive training to conduct focus groups by one of the consulting researchers, and developed the recruitment and data collection protocols including the focus group guide. Focus group participants were recruited from a highly competitive public university in the United States. A convenience sample was recruited from Asian American interest clubs and classes through email and verbal announcements, and campus flyers as well as word of mouth. To be eligible, participants had to be aged 18 years or older, and self-identify as Asian American.

We chose a highly selective college for our study because the media attention given to this group of students suggests that they are a model minority, while there are many indicators that this is a distorted image (Lee, et al., 2009). We do not know if there are differences between these students and those at less selective colleges. The students who chose to participate may also be different in some ways to other Asian American students.

A focus group guide was developed by the student researchers. It included the questions designed to capture participants' college and pre-college experiences that are relevant to their perceived sources of stress and methods of coping with stress. The final list of questions was reviewed by the consulting researchers and pre-tested by the student researchers among their friends. Most of the student researchers gained experience in conducting a focus group. Eight of the nine student researchers conducted one focus group each, and the ninth coordinated the data collection effort. To ensure some control over the conduct of the focus group sessions by eight different student researchers, all of the focus group sessions were attended by one of the consulting researchers.

Forty-seven Asian American students participated in the eight focus groups. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years and about 70 percent were female. They represented 20 different academic majors that covered the Biological Sciences (36.2%), the Social Sciences (21.3%), and Engineering (8.5%). Nineteen percent of the students chose to double major. The majority of the participants were second-generation (51.1%), followed by 1.5-generation (31.9%) and first-generation (17.0%). Only 17.4 percent of participants spoke only English at home. Half of the participants (50.0%) reported primarily speaking a language other than English at home; these languages were Chinese (78.3%), Korean (8.7%), Vietnamese (8.7%), and Tamil (4.4%). Another 32.6 percent of participants were from bilingual households, speaking English and Chinese, Korean, or Tagalog. The largest ethnic group represented was Chinese (59.6%), followed by Taiwanese (14.9%), Korean (10.6%), and Vietnamese (6.4%). Most participants came from two-parent households (87.2%) and had parents with high levels of education. A majority of parents had attained a graduate school degree (67.4% of fathers and 42.6% of mothers) or a college-level education (13.0% of fathers and 29.8% of mothers).

The two-hour focus group sessions were audio-taped and a fellow student researcher also took notes and later transcribed the tapes. After the eight focus groups were completed, the student researchers were further trained to examine the transcripts for themes by one of the consulting researchers. All nine student researchers independently read each transcript, and together, they discussed their analyses of the transcripts. At least one consulting researcher was present to guide these discussions and assist with the consolidation of themes that were used to structure the stories of individual focus group participants. The transcripts were analyzed using the steps of narrative structuring, in which individuals relate the information about their experiences that is most relevant to them and organize this information in a way that is representative of how they see themselves (Kvale, 1996). In particular, they were analyzed in relation to contextual factors that locate identities within social and cultural context. Eventually, three types of narratives emerged as described below, focusing on participants' reports of the stress in their lives, reasons for the stress, and how they achieved their current identity: 1) Honoring Parents; 2) Finding Individual Self; and, 3) Developing Asian American Identity.

## Findings: Stress Narratives

### Narrative of Honoring Parents

"I feel that kids are their retirement plan. Basically, when you grow up, the faster you become something, the faster you can make money, the better. Your parents are going to take care of you when you are small, and once you get a job, then you take care of them. Both of my parents work really, really, really hard . . . They earn money and give it to me. They don't buy a sports car. My dad always wanted to buy a Mercedes Benz and drive around in it, but he spends that money on me. He could have bought it, so I kind of have to do well and show him that I am as good an investment as the Mercedes and make them happy." (first-generation male)

One common narrative was of the need and desire to fulfill filial piety by honoring the wishes and actions of parents. In all focus groups, students described the traditional Asian cultural values that they thought their families adhered to. These included having respect for elders, upholding family honor, and a sense of collectivity. Many identified with these values and said that they desired to pass them on to their own children in the future. In five of the focus groups, students felt that there were cultural gender differences that distinguished the experiences of male from

those of female Asian American college students. Asian American women were perceived as having an easier time acculturating and being accepted by mainstream society, but at the same time facing more rigid expectations and restrictions growing up in a traditional Asian household.

There was awareness expressed of the great sacrifice made by parents and the psychological burden this placed on the students. This sacrifice was described with both gratitude and as incurring obligation. In two focus groups, students framed this obligation as needing to "pay off" the investment that their parents had made in them. Some students explained that they were expected to support their families after they graduated from college. This expectation was coupled with pressure to major in a discipline that would yield a financially rewarding career. For some, living up to their parents' expectations was seen as a way of expressing gratitude.

Many of the stresses that the students and their families faced reflected issues of the immigrant experience. The need to be successful, as defined by educational attainment and financial return in a career, was commonly mentioned by students. Students from several of the focus groups described their parents' tenacity in pursuing a living in America. The students perceived their own educational and career accomplishments as an extension of that work ethic. For example, a second-generation female shared,

My parents always tell me, "We came here a few years before when there were no generations of people who had settled here . . . We came here for you. We got out of poverty." There is pressure to maintain [standards of achievement] and to exceed that level, to work hard and forego other things. Yes, there is definitely a different kind of stress . . . taking into consideration [my parents'] situation, they did the best they could with what they knew. They show me they cared—maybe not the way I would like it—but primarily and mostly for my welfare . . . It's a culture clash, but I really believe deep down they want me to be happy, even though their definition of 'happy' is different than mine.

This student clearly articulates the stress associated with honoring parents. She feels pressure to achieve and honor their sacrifice by her own sacrifice. The situation is further complicated by an awareness of a cultural clash in how one shows concern and how happiness is defined. Another student, a 1.5-generation female, explained her perception of the relation between the parents' sacrifice and the students' stress, and different concepts of happiness,

It seems like the parents work so hard to give the kids a better life that they're ruining their kids. They're stressed out all the time and they look at their kids and are like, "Why aren't you working harder? I've worked so hard and sacrificed so much to get you here. You're not making my sacrifice worth it." And then the kids are like, "Well that doesn't make me happy," and the parents are like, "Well happiness doesn't mean anything because we gave up our happiness."

A majority of the participants described their parents as being major sources of influence in their lives, whether it was in choosing an academic major and future career, or in shaping their personal set of values. They acknowledged the sacrifices their parents had made for them and expressed gratitude. Students' sense of filial piety created a deep obligation to fulfill family expectations that permeated their lives, even after leaving home for college. The burden of being continually bound to their family responsibilities was an issue perceived as being distinctive to the Asian American college student experience. One second-generation male articulated the direct connection he feels between his family and his stress,

I think what distinguishes my stress from my non-Asian friends is that with every decision I make, I'm making it by taking my family into consideration. I think everything from "What's my major going to be?" to "I can't study abroad because who's going to take care of my grandma?" or "What am I going to do, who's taking care of my parents?" I make plans around my family responsibilities.

Honoring parents was expressed as an obligation but also related to a need to allow parents to control their lives. So it was not only stress from trying to fulfill their parents' academic pressure and expectations and the burden of needing to repay the sacrifice, but being burdened by what some experienced as excessive control by their parents. The students expressed these sentiments in stories of discipline, punishment, curfews, and parental control of social activities. A second-generation female described how her upbringing instilled a sense of desperation in needing to succeed, a kind of psychological control,

[My mom] tried to instill a fear in me of being on the street and starving, "In China, people eat one bowl of rice. If you don't do your homework, I'll beat you with a whip. If you don't work hard, you're not going to live that long. People don't have that much to eat. If you don't work hard, you don't maintain that level." I can see that fear wash on me all day.

However, nearly all of the students expressed a sense of appreciation for the way they were raised by their family and described their parents as having "done the best that they could." This sentiment was shared even if they disagreed with their strict upbringing. Some did mention the effects of harsh methods of discipline, as this second-generation female put it, "*I do appreciate the way my parents raised me, but their ways made me harbor a lot of resentment . . .*"

The use of physical punishment as a form of discipline was mentioned in three focus groups, specifically "being beaten" and "being hit." Two 1.5 generation females shared the extent of the physical discipline,

My mom would hit me when I was little [for lying]. I would be angry for days after because it hurt so bad. I remember I couldn't sit down for 3 days . . . When I grew older, she started throwing punches at me.

My mom still hits me. My mom slapped me for getting a B in history in sixth grade. After that point she [would] freak out and throw things at me.

The narratives of honoring parents revealed both the appreciation for sacrifice and the burden it imposes. Obligation is both imposed by parents and accepted by students. In either case it brings stress to the young Asian American.

## Narrative of Finding Self

A second stress narrative was related to finding a sense of self. This theme was expressed in various ways, such as in narratives of separating oneself from the need to fulfill the expectations of parents and finding one's own desires and interests. Other expressions were the internalization of social and cultural values and norms and how these create stress for the developing adolescent. Another style of this narrative was how individuals cope with conflict between their desires and those of their parents.

Students expressed appreciation for their parents' role in achieving academic success, some even attributing their success to parental pressure. However, there was conflict between the

parents' and students' perspectives on the purpose of a college education. Students expressed sentiments that parents did not understand that their college and educational experiences should reflect more than a means of professional attainment. This conflict was often reflected in the difference between what students defined as a "rewarding" and "successful" experience in college. One second-generation female explained,

Maybe my parents see "rewarding" related to "success." A lot of the things that we do in college like volunteering or tutoring that may not be considered success but are rewarding [to me].

Students also felt that following the cultural value of obedience hindered their ability to communicate and interact socially with others. Being "non-confrontational" and acquiescing to others also meant that they had to suppress their emotions. One student described being taught to "give in, pretend [that a problem] doesn't affect you" and "let the other person have their way" (1.5-generation female). Students felt a conflict between their cultural values and the social expectation to assert themselves as independent adults in American society; they perceived these Asian values to be stifling to their own aspirations and their innate wishes to articulate themselves. A 1.5-generation male shared how he felt like he was affected psychologically and socially in terms of his ability to individuate, often described as a major challenge of adolescence,

[You're] not supposed to be emotional . . . You can't talk bad, can't have your own mind, can't express what you want to do, who you want to date, who you want to be . . . [My] parents were taught to always obey and not to have their own say, [so] they teach us the same thing. It hurts [our] leadership skills.

Trying to live up to the high expectations of parents and others also meant difficulty in discovering one's own vocation, a major challenge of identity development. Many students also noted their parents' preference for majors and careers in the sciences and felt pressured to become physicians, lawyers or other professionals. Even the students who felt their parents did not expect them to major in certain fields of study perceived the pressure to conform to these "parentally approved" areas of studies.

While some students resisted their parents, those who chose to defy their parents' expectations felt selfish and guilty for pursuing their own aspirations. Out of fear of disapproval, some students in two focus groups still hadn't told their parents that they had picked "unacceptable" majors. One second-generation female described the disapproval she would receive from her family for failing to fulfill family expectations,

[In Chinese culture,] the family is the central unit of existence. And to take care of your parents, you sometimes have to sacrifice your own wishes. You can't have a job somewhere else because your parents are old and you have to support them. You can't put them in a nursing home . . . [It's] family versus your own independence.

The perception of unspoken or implicit expectations was another significant theme when students talked about their families and parents. Students' stress also derived from having to define these tacit expectations. No one expressed it as starkly as one 1.5-generation female student, *"Ninety percent of my stress comes from my parents. It's not as much what they say, but what's unsaid."*

Students whose academic and professional interests did not align with their parents' expectations were often conflicted about which path to pursue. Some students would mitigate the conflict by rationalizing that the major or career they picked was purely out of their own choice. A 1.5-generation male shared,

My parents always had implicit expectations on what I was supposed to be. I wanted to be a bioengineer . . . I knew they wanted me to be one so I chose it . . . What they wanted me to be or do they don't say outright, but they comment on my decisions, so it makes you change your mind.

Students described growing up with high family expectations for academic achievement as "stressful" and "full of pressure." This drive for achievement becomes internalized over time. One second-generation male compared the ingraining of values from his upbringing to the beating of a drum,

When you first hear it, when you grow up with your parents, they're beating and it's just around you. But after that's gone, you still hear it within yourself. It first got there by your parents—that outside source—and then the beating, "I have to do this. I have to do this."

Other sources of stress come from peers and immediate social environment. For instance, one 1.5-generation female described how seeing the high achievement among her Asian American peers reinforced the pressure to meet her parents' expectations. Although they knew that other college students also felt high pressure to succeed, students in half of the focus groups felt that the type of pressure they faced as Asian Americans was something their non-Asian peers could not fathom.

The chasm between personal and parental desires is often dealt with in a stoic rather than an assertive attitude in terms of problem solving. The students generally expressed unfamiliarity with the counseling services offered on campus or perceived these services to be impersonal and not relevant to their lives. They shared that their attitudes about mental health and the use of psychological counseling were largely influenced by beliefs espoused by their family and culture. Depression and other mental health problems were described as being a "weakness," "selfish," and "what white people do when they get bored." Because mental health problems were not considered true diseases, counseling services were perceived as unnecessary. While some students had utilized career counseling services, most perceived counselors as uncaring strangers who would not be able to help. Other students said that only in grave situations, if their everyday functioning was severely debilitated for example, could they overcome the stigma to use psychological counseling services.

Students' most common resources for stress relief included talking to friends, parents and family members, while others felt that talking to their parents would only exacerbate their stress. In two focus groups, a significant theme was the need for self-reliance. Students were often told by parents to "just get over it" if they were feeling sad or depressed. Some students felt they had to suppress their emotions and deal with their problems on their own.

Only two students reported having used the campus counseling services. Unfortunately, these students had ambivalent or negative perceptions of the counselors. One second-generation, female student said, "*I've gone to [counseling] services and they don't care about you, but at the same time they do let you know things that apply to your situations.*" Another second-generation, female student shared, "*I have an indirect experience. I was dating this guy, and I made him go to [the counseling center], and they didn't do anything, they just gave him addresses, and they didn't follow up at all.*"



*Some people go on a whim and if they don't follow up, they won't go back.*" Some students suggested that having counselors of the same ethnic background might be helpful. One second-generation male opined,

I think that I'd want to see diversification of the counselors that we already have. I really felt that maybe if I'd spoken to an Asian counselor, they'd be more sympathetic about what I spoke because of the shared experiences.

## Narrative of Asian American Identity Development

A third stress narrative was the Asian American identity development, which involved dealing with internal and external stereotypes. Some students felt stereotyped by others in ways that limited their freedom. For example, when peers at school assumed that they were smart or did well in particular subjects just because they were Asian American, some students felt they had to live up to this stereotype. A second-generation male noted, *"I feel that there is a lot of pressure to be smart because the Asian stereotype is a nerd studying at home . . . I guess I'm trying to fulfill the stereotype and that pressures me."* Others felt respect by their peers, while at the same time troubled when confronted with stereotypes. A second-generation female explained,

I feel annoyed by the stereotypes [of Asian Americans] and I'm annoyed because I tend to fall into them . . . I'm [a biology major], play piano, and am pre-med. I'm interested in these things, but I still feel pressure to change things because people expect that if I have any personality whatsoever I'd be different from the stereotype, but I'm not. I don't want to change anything just to prove that I'm unique, but people think I'm an unthinking robot and it bothers me a little bit.

A heightened awareness of cultural differences between Asians and other groups was another common theme among students. Some students perceived the Asian community to be insular and described their families as only socializing and interacting with people from their own ethnic group. For some, college life also reflected a limited social circle; although they acknowledged the need to mix with different kinds of people, it was difficult for them to change. A second-generation female shared,

It's more like I can identify with Asian Americans and second-generation ones especially. It's weird because I'm American and I grew up here, but when I talk to people I sometimes feel like a foreigner . . . I still feel different among them . . . I think it's really difficult to form long-lasting relations with non-Asians.

The expectations of Asian American college students from their peers and social environment represented a microcosm of expectations that were perceived to stem from society at large. Students in three of the focus groups pointed to images of Asian Americans in the media as sources of social expectations of them to be perpetual foreigners who are nerdy and passive: *"A lot has to do with media stereotypes, such as being short and not speaking good English, no leadership skills . . . preconceptions and stereotypes play big roles."* (second-generation male). Some students believed in these limited representations of Asian Americans until they came to college. A 1.5-generation male who was raised in a predominantly white community remembered, *"I grew up thinking that Asians wear thick glasses, are good at math, do not do sports, and were*

*not good at sports. When I moved to California, I was more exposed to more Asians and saw many different types that don't fit the stereotypes."*

The internalization of these societal expectations also made students feel negative towards themselves as Asian Americans. Males in the focus groups, in particular, expressed how they were affected by portrayals of Asian American males as undesirable and emasculated. For example, a second-generation male noted, *"I always saw images of Asians in the media as being dorky, being nerds with no lives, [wearing] thick glasses . . . and at one point I was actually ashamed of being Asian, because of that stereotype and the fear of fulfilling it."* In addition, students also felt affected by the lack of visible Asian American role models in society. One 1.5-generation male explained, *"When I was a young child growing up, I think maybe [the media creates an] inferiority complex between Asian Americans and people of other ethnicities . . . [the images on TV are] a representation of what you'll be like in the future."*

In three of the focus groups, students shared how they struggled with their ethnic identities. Students expressed not knowing what it meant to be "Asian American" in relation to their bicultural backgrounds; they also described a yearning to connect with others going through the same identity search. Some students established a sense of belonging through Asian American student organizations. For example, a 1.5-generation male described his experiences joining a Vietnamese American student association,

*For me, I think my experiences in [the club] made it easier to belong . . . my freshman year, I had a diverse group of friends but for some reason I couldn't identify with them. I mean, you try to be friends but they couldn't understand me. Like when I'm talking on the phone in Vietnamese and they feel weird . . . I mean mostly it's just little things but they all add up to them not really understanding what you're going through, so it's hard to get close to them. So as I joined [the club] I met more people who had the same problems and were going through the same things . . . it made my college experience better in that I feel like I belong more.*

However, among the Asian American peer community, students acknowledged tensions related to generational status. The second-generation students referred to the first-generation Asian Americans as "FOBs" (an acronym for "Fresh Off the Boat" in reference to recent immigration status). The first-generation students were also perceived to be more studious and socially isolated, which made them the subject of ridicule with second-generation Asian Americans. One second-generation female shared her attitudes toward first-generation Asian Americans,

*From my point of view, the FOBs that we make fun of are the ones that just hang out with themselves and speak their own language to each other. And we're like, "Why are they doing that? They live in America now, they should try to assimilate."*

On the other hand, first-generation students felt their social isolation was forced upon them because the second-generation students did not accept them. A first-generation male described his understanding of the generational dichotomy,

*Most likely, FOBs are going to be smarter than ABCs [American-born Chinese]. ABCs tend to be more socialized and have a more diverse group of friends, while FOBs will stick with themselves. But that's kind of like [something] you can't do anything [about] because other people don't like them. If ABCs don't accept them, and if your 'own kind' doesn't accept you, how can you expect other diverse races to accept you?*

The first-generation students resented these stereotypes. For instance, one first-generation female shared how she thought antagonism towards first-generation students was a reflection of second-generation Asian Americans' struggle with their ethnic identity,

It really frustrates me when [second-generation Asian Americans] talk about themselves as being 'Asians' [and] say they have Asian pride; but I don't think they can really say they identify themselves as being 'Chinese' or 'Korean'. . . I think they always say they're 'Chinese-American', or 'Korean-American.' It just shows it's a higher standard to grow up; it's a social status. It's better, more prestigious to be 'American.'

Adolescent identity development alone is complicated. Factored with generational and ethnic differences, these statements uncover the tremendous struggle one experiences in Asian American identity development, making it difficult for youth to find a nurturing place to grow.

## **Discussion: "The Stress of Achievement"**

The three stress narratives expressed by these Asian American college students provided an important view into their perceived sources of social and emotional stress and mental health needs. As previous research has shown, high-achieving Asian American students are stressed by academic demands and unclear career direction (Ying, et al., 2004), and their high academic achievement may come with significant social and psychological costs (Lew, et al., 1998). Maintaining the high academic standards placed upon them may lead to greater socioemotional difficulties, anxiety, and social isolation (Sue & Zane, 1985). Asian American students have significantly fewer cross-racial social interactions and a lower sense of coherence, which may put them at risk of meeting social and interpersonal challenges outside the academic arena (Ying, et al., 2001). They may be subjected to microaggressions, harassments, peer discrimination and other subtle racism that adversely affects their health (Sue, et al. 2007).

Certainly, these sources of stress are not unique to Asian American students. However, the students in this study clearly see their stress as related to their immigrant status, Asian culture, and being Asian in American society. Furthermore, the traditional cultural value of honoring parents (Hwang, 1999; Park, 2007) was perceived as a major source of stress. Parental sacrifice was both appreciated and viewed as a burden. Students felt that the cultural norm of obeying parents was an issue that particularly distinguished them from their non-Asian peers. They viewed their academic performance as a measure of personal achievement as well as of upholding their family's honor. None of the focus group participants was past the second generation and the "immigrant mentality" of working hard to survive was still a major theme that was reflected in the students' family experiences. Studying hard and achieving academically were seen as ways of honoring parents.

The narrative of honoring parents directly related to the second stress narrative of individuation and finding a sense of self (Kroger, 2007). Parental relationships created a web of interdependency in which the need to honor parents influenced the students' emerging developmental needs for individuation and identity in adolescence and early adulthood. Students expressed appreciation for their parents' role in achieving academic success, but they also expressed the difficulty of separating oneself from the need to fulfill parental expectations. Some expressed recognition of how parental norms and expectations were internalized, creating little room for the developing self, and a struggle with the sense of obligation that left no room for personal desire. In college, some students developed new self understanding, new interests, and new

vocational desires. However, their parents' wishes continued to influence majors and career fields deemed acceptable. The academic expectations from their parents were not only to do well, but to do well in certain restricted fields determined by parents, sometimes from childhood.

Some stress experienced by Asian American college students certainly comes from the normal developmental challenges of adolescence and young adulthood. In addition, Asian American students may face further stresses specific to their ethnic minority status and cultural heritage (Smedley, et al., 1993; Liu and Goto, 2007). These challenges could partially pertain to their need for establishing their ethnic identities within a larger society (Yoo & Lee, 2005; Kiang et al, 2010). On a personal level, they may experience this as a struggle between being "good" and being "popular" (Qin, 2009). Asian American college students may internalize the model minority myth by selecting inapt majors. Consequently, the incongruence among their interests, strengths, and chosen field of study may create barriers to competence in college (Toupin and Son, 1991) and later in life.

Students also attributed a source of stress to having to negotiate their bicultural identities among various environments (e.g. family, school, and peer relations). Many felt they were in a double-bind, being compelled culturally to stay integrated with their families while they were expected to be independent young adults by Western norms. The difficulty in finding self also related to the narrative of Asian American identity development. The results showed that students found it problematic to define themselves as Asian American because whether they met their peers' social expectations or not, they felt that stereotypes limited their ability to be recognized for their own individuality. Many first-generation students experienced prejudice from their Asian American peers, reinforcing the findings of a previous study showing inter-generational conflict (Kim, et al., 2003). This intra-group hostility may be representative of second-generation students' projection of their insecurities with their Asian American identity. Perhaps, ridiculing the first-generation students allowed the second-generation students to create an "us versus them" dichotomy and to assert themselves as being different from the stereotypes.

Asian American students may struggle to straddle two competing and often conflicting value systems. American society dictates that they must demonstrate independence, assertiveness, and individuality, but these values conflict with traditional Asian cultural values of filial piety, interdependency, modesty, and collectivism (Wu, 1992). Studies show a high degree of alienation between parents and children as adolescents struggle with their identity development (Qin, 2006). The importance of a strong sense of ethnic identity is indicated in studies correlating it with high self-esteem, social connectedness, and sense of community (Lee, 2003; Lee & Yoo, 2004; Tsai, Ying & Lee, 2001, Yoo & Lee, 2005).

## Policy Implications and Future Directions

Our study raised the question of why Asian Americans do not seek help to the same degree as others. Shame and stigma regarding mental illness; internalization of the 'trouble-free and academically successful' stereotype; and the paucity of culturally competent university counseling staff may be some reasons (Uba, 1994; Yang et al., 2002; McKinney, 2005). Most studies trying to answer this question have focused on understanding students' use of mental health or psychological counseling services (Ting, 2009), while there are few published reports of efforts to develop preventive programs that aim to promote mental health and well-being.

Our findings, together with those of other studies (e.g. Lee, 2009; Suyemoto, 2009), indicate a need for understanding the mental health of Asian American college students from a

multidimensional framework. Low utilization rates of mental health services on college campuses by Asian American students should not be viewed as an indication of wellness. In our study, few students had utilized mental health services and those who did, perceived the services as inadequate and insensitive to their needs as Asian Americans. In contrast, career counseling services were perceived as useful and accessible. The general dissatisfaction among focus group participants who had used counseling services at the university is important to investigate. We suspect that it may be a reflection of poor understanding or unrealistic expectations of mental health counseling. It should also be noted that others have reported a generation difference in the utilization of mental health services by Asian Americans (Miller et al, 2011).

Our findings indicate the need to develop culturally appropriate mental health services for Asian American college students. Universities can make psychological counseling seem more relevant to Asian American students, perhaps by integrating mental health interventions with career counseling services, which are perceived as more accessible. College officials could also explore the use of other sources of support, such as Asian American studies, which may enhance self understanding and provide a space for students' ethnic identity development. This approach may also be perceived as more accessible because of its academic orientation. Many students also reported that Asian American cultural groups, at school and in the community, enhance identity development, suggesting that they may benefit from opportunities to develop the leadership and interpersonal skills that may have been underemphasized or discouraged in their upbringing. Formal mentorship programs may also be useful, as they connect students with role models who serve as an alternative to the stereotypical images of Asian Americans in society. Finally, students can be recruited and trained to increase awareness of mental health related issues in the larger Asian American community, using techniques such as story-telling and social marketing.

The participatory action research model used in our study may be an effective means of empowering Asian American youth to promote mental well-being. Suyemoto et al. (2009) used a similar model with Asian students at an east coast college, and reported that it helped increase dialogue about the Asian American student experience on campus. We are also convinced that there is a need to investigate the levels of chronic stresses faced by Asian American youth and their long-term effects on physical health. Emerging research shows that chronic stress may increase risk for metabolic conditions such as diabetes and obesity (Gee, 2008), and that these conditions are occurring at younger ages than previously reported (Clark, 2009). Given the paucity of research on the physical health of Asian American youth, there is an urgency to promote interdisciplinary research among mental health and physical health researchers to better understand the effects of chronic stress in Asian American youth on overall health and well-being. Our data show that Asian American college students face various socio-emotional stresses that are largely eclipsed by their academic achievement. Universities need to take steps to ensure that counselors are aware of the various pressures Asian American college students face and offer culturally competent mental health services. Researchers and educators should take action to address the stress experienced by Asian American students with programs and services that are sensitive to students' needs.

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