Asian American Stereotypes and its Side Effects

Abstract

This project aims to answer the following questions: Why do we have Asian American stereotypes around the world and especially on campus? How do these stereotypes affect Asian American students at the University of Illinois? What are some of the causes that results in Asian American stereotypes? Do Asian American students feel more pressure to do well in school, especially in math and science? Do Asian American students have lower self-esteem due to stereotypes? How does the model minority image effect Asian American student’s performances? In order to answer these questions, we conducted a survey, interviewed many Asian American students at the University of Illinois, and made a field observation. Through our research, we have found that the causes of Asian American stereotypes are caused by cultural and language differences that exist between Asian countries and the United States. We have also found that some Asian American students do feel more pressure to do well in school, but not all. Lastly, we found that although many Asian Americans feel pressure to perform well, it is unclear if Asian Americans have lower self-esteem due to stereotypes.

Introduction

Stereotypes are present for every ethnicity. They are simple truths usually relating to various individuals that are generalized and applied to a whole category of people. The common portrayal of Asians as the model of intelligence, which some consider positive, depicts
them so flawlessly that they are partially robbed of humanity. In particular, the image of Asian Americans as over-achievers with minimal social life can be just as confining and dehumanizing as any overtly negative portrayal. A major cause that contributes to this stereotype could be the inevitable cultural differences and language barriers Asian students experience on this campus. This greatly hinders most Asian student’s social abilities and creates obstacles that restrain them from crucially voicing their opinions and interacting with others. Therefore the students affected by this stereotype are often not given the attention they deserve academically because most do not feel they need it. The result can make Asian students feel as though they need to live up to the expectations set for them, at the same time assuming they do not need assistance with areas they struggle with. This type of pressure can be harmful to their well being and their outlook on life and society. Through our primary and secondary source research, we have found some of the causes and effects of Asian American stereotypes at the University of Illinois.

Literature Review

Stereotypes are “a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group” (Dictionary.com). Stereotypes can be found for every race and ethnicity. They commonly are simple truths usually relating to a few folks that are generalized and applied to a whole category of people. We personally feel that the topic of stereotypes have not been mentioned enough and is definitely an action that causes major damage and should be kept to a minimum. The major questions that we are going to address in this paper are:

1) What are the stereotypes that exist about Asian-American students?
2) How do language barriers and cultural differences give rise to stereotypes of Asian American students?

3) How does the stereotype affect Asian students emotionally and academically?

In a lot of ways, Asian Americans have done remarkably well in achieving “the American Dream” of getting a good education, having a good job, and earning a good living. So much so that the Asian Americans are now looked upon as ‘the model minority’ - a group of Americans who have worked to overcome all obstacles in their way in order to achieve socioeconomic success and therefore, they stand as examples for other racial minority groups to follow and emulate. From a first generation perspective, a perfect Asian student would be one to have obtained a perfect SAT score, to play the violin or piano on the level of a concert performer, to go to an ivy-league and win enough scholarship money to pay for school, to aspire to be either an engineer or a doctor, then eventually marry and Asian-American doctor or engineer and have perfect, successful children thus entering this vicious cycle all over again, the social stereotypes that exist about them are that they have the tendency to keep to themselves, are comparably more shy, when being bullied they always end up keeping quiet, not voicing their opinions and only prefer to hang out with other Asian American students. The article Accent, Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype, and Perceived Discrimination as Indirect Links Between English Proficiency and Depressive Symptoms in Chinese American Adolescents (2011), further supports the existence of the Asian American student image, “The formation of the foreigner image may be due to the fact that Asian Americans usually have a strong preference for retaining their ethnic and cultural practices while simultaneously struggling for full acceptance in mainstream U.S. Society. (Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, & Li, p.291).
Yong Zhao and Wei Qiu (2009) wrote an article about how Asian Americans do academically. In their article, they showed us how not all Asians are good at math and science. In reality, not all Asian American students do well in school, which causes them to feel pressured to do well in school in order to live up to their stereotype. Another common misconception is that “Asian American students’ academic achievement is the result of conscious choice, not a genetic determination.” (p.2. Asian Americans are not born smart. They do not have a superior genetic disposition than other races (p.2). Chinese Americans are among the Asian Americans that feel the pressure that this stereotype creates. Not all Chinese Americans are intelligent. Each person is different; they have different talents, abilities and intelligence level.

The consequences of stereotyping can start effecting even young children who are very suggestible. Stereotypes involving race and gender are implemented in children as young as kindergarten. To show this, Nalini Ambady, Margaret Shih, Amy Kim, and Todd L. Pittinsky (2001) performed an experiment concerning children and the Asian-American stereotype of achieving higher scores in mathematics than whites (as well as the gender stereotype). When a stereotypical identity is activated, the parties involved tend to act towards the implications of the stereotype. For example, in this experiment, if a young Asian-American girl was about to take a math test and her gender identity was subtly activated, she would perform worse then if her ethnic identity were activated. This is because girls are commonly stereotyped as performing badly in math compared to boys; and Asian Americans are seen as the best at this subject. The results of their study clearly indicate that both positive and negative self-relevant stereotypes are insidious and can affect the performance of even very young children. Unexpectedly, even children as young as 5 years old are susceptible to the activation of identities associated with
positive and negative stereotypes regarding quantitative performance (p. 388).” While adults see stereotypes as generalizations, their thoughts have potential to be changed with evidence. Children are much less adaptable in understanding stereotypes and their meaning. Instead of experiencing ethnicities on their own as they develop, they become prone to having pre-determined notions about different races. This seems to be an early example of the role-theory in adults. If a race or individual is thought that others see them in a particular light, then they will be more apt to act this way in order to satisfy the other’s pre-conceived notion. Asian Americans who feel labeled in a certain way will act out that role.

According to credible sources, another major consequence of stereotyping is that suicide rates among Asian-American teenagers have risen as much as threefold over the past two decades. In the article, Model minority myth seen as driving some youths to suicide (1991, July 10). The Wall Street Journal, we learn that that as found, the suicide rate among Chinese-Americans 15 to 24 years old was 36% higher than the national average among that age group. Asian American youth face all kinds of pressures from people around them such as their parents, their friends and their teachers. These expectations are so deeply rooted in their families that even their names translate to titles such as ‘Treasure of China’ or ‘Universal Versatility’. At home, they grow up listening to success stories of their ancestors and have to by default carry on that legacy or be a disgrace for the family and at all other places like amongst their colleagues, and classmates they are expected to withhold the ‘model minority’ image, or be an embarrassment for the entire Asian American community. Studies have noted a spike in prescription drug abuse by Asian Americans, particularly students. Many have come to the conclusion that the use of illegal prescription drugs has been in response to the pressure to
succeed academically. In the article, Cornell Task Force to address Asian American issues (2003, January 28). *The Cornell Daily Sun*, Kate Cooper, the author talks about how the authorities at Cornell University are worried about the Asian American student situation as they found out that six out the thirteen suicides committed at Cornell have been committed by Asian male student and there is a similar scenario in a lot of colleges all over America. Thus, this ‘model minority’ stereotype affects the entire Asian-American student community in a very adverse way.

**Research Methods**

For our combined research, we decided to compile ten questions into a survey to get a general sense of how the Asian American students at the University of Illinois are affected by stereotypes. A couple of questions on our survey asked students about what they think the causes of Asian American stereotypes could be related to. This survey was distributed to forty individuals of Asian descent. We also conducted an email interview with the president of the Kappa Phi Lambda sorority at the University of Illinois. We asked her a couple of questions about language barriers, consequences of stereotyping and how stereotypes affect her own life on campus. All members of our group also conducted our own interview about our particular area of research. Including an field observation of how Asian American students interact socially with their own or other races in the Illini Union, a place where we believe has a lot of diversity on it’s own.

**Results**

When we asked if our participants has ever experienced self-segregation before,
40% said yes and 60% said no they have not experienced self-segregation. The next question we asked on the survey was about how fluently these Chinese international students can communicate socially in the English language. 32.5% of the students said they do not have a language barrier at all in communicating with their friends socially, 14% says they somewhat have a little language barrier when socializing with their friends, 27.5% says they are somewhere in the middle, and 25% says that they have a hard time communicating socially due to the English being a language barrier for them.

Because of these cultural and language differences, this leads people to create stereotypes. In an interview with an Asian American student, she states that she has not only noticed many stereotypes about her race, but has experiences with them as well. Although she does not take them personally, she states that they irritate her, “Sometimes I feel frustrated and annoyed, such as when being repeatedly asked to help other people do their math or science homework because I am supposed to be the math and science ‘genius’ of the world.” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 7, 2011). Another interviewee, when asked whether she had ever felt pressurized by the society to do well in Science or Math subjects, she said, “Yes, Math is one of the most important subjects for me. In China you are only called good academically if you are doing well in Math.” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 7, 2011).

The model-minority status places pressure on her to perform successfully in academics. People had expected her to get amazing grades, so she felt fear that if she did not get the grade that they were expecting, that they would not think she was as smart anymore.

Even though some Asian Americans feel that they must major in math or science,
according to our surveys, more Asian American students were in the College of Business (30%) than any other college on campus including Engineering (25%). In the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (20%) and other Colleges (25%), they have many Asian Americans in these colleges. This shows that not all Asian Americans are studying math or science related majors.

When we asked Asian Americans about their favorite school subject, we found that the majority of Asian Americans preferred math over the other subjects such as science, history and other. The second most popular subject was English and science and other tied for last. For the question about feeling the pressure to do well in math and science, we found that majority feel no pressure or little pressure to do well in math and science. However, there was still 30% that felt some pressure to do well in math and science.

Some students feel pressure and others do not, but some Asian Americans’ self-esteem could be weakened by stereotypes. In order to find out how Asian Americans’ self-esteem, we ask two questions more closely related to self-perception. These were, ‘at what age did you feel the need to perform above and beyond in respect to your race?’ and we also asked the participants to rate their self-esteem on a scale of one to five. 10% of the forty participants started to feel pressure to perform at an age younger than four, 22.5% between the ages of five and eight, 30% between nine and thirteen, 27.5% at the age of fourteen and older, and 10% reported that they have never felt this pressure. The self-esteem results showed a similar hill
pattern. Five participants rated their self-esteem as a 1, eight rated it as a 2, twelve rated it as a 3, eleven rated it a 4, and four rated it as a 5.

Discussion

Through the surveys, one could conclude that even though Chinese international students that come to the University of Illinois may pursue in all different majors in all different colleges but the language barrier problem is very widespread and has an influence on international students across all majors. And from question 5 on the survey, you could tell that only 40% admitted to have experienced self-segregation before and the majority of the students don’t think they have. This shows that the cause of stereotypes is most probably not due to the Chinese students self-segregating themselves but possibly to a larger reason like the judgments of other races. Our survey obtained the results that the majority of the students feels that they have a language barrier when communicating socially and only 17% thinks that they have a minor language barrier, 32.5% claims that they do not have a barrier at all.

Our findings support the hypothesis that the higher grades earned by Asian students stem from cultural and behavioral differences. Two crucial cultural differences are that Asian parents...
push their children to get good grades and enter “safe” professions, such as become a doctor, engineer, accountant to name a few and the other is that China as a country itself promotes more and more students to select more math and science related streams rather than pursuing their talents and opting for the more ‘non-secure’ jobs, and this has been verified by the trend noticed in the selection of majors, the number of people that felt the need to perform better than their co-students from the small age of 9 and onwards, and by both interviewees. “People expect me to perform better in subjects such as Science and Math but it is not necessarily people of a different race, even my own parents expect me to be better at those subjects then say, Literature.” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 7, 2011) and the other claims that most of her friends are pursuing majors selected by their parents, which is a common practice in China, and that as a high school student she felt the need to take Math and Science classes because more than 80% of her classmates were doing so. The behavior of the common Chinese student proves to be a major factor in the existence of this stereotype. From the survey I learnt that 65% of the forty students surveyed spend over ten hours studying outside of class. This shows the perseverance and diligence that most of the Asian students have.

Even though many Chinese American parents are pushing their children to have stable jobs our research found out that majority of Asian Americans are not majoring in math and science related fields such as engineering at the University of Illinois. Asian Americans are studying in other colleges such as Business or in the Liberal Arts and Sciences. This showed that majority of Asian Americans are not following the stereotype. Also, majority of Asian Americans like math the best; however, the second subject area that Asian American students liked was English, not Science. This showed that Asian Americans do not science as much as
people thought. Lastly, 37.5% of Asian Americans feel little or no pressure to do well in math and science. This shows that not all Asian Americans feel pressure to live up to this stereotype. However, there was some Asian Americans who did feel pressure to live up to this stereotype; however, not as many as I anticipated.

Even though some Asian Americans feel pressure to pursue or not to pursue math and science related degrees or jobs, some Asian Americans self-esteem could be affected by stereotypes. A person being judged solely on appearance is an issue that our society has struggled with since the beginning of time. More often than not, it negatively affects the self-perception of an individual on some level. When a person’s worth becomes determined by their outward appearance, what does that say about society? The way we look on the outside is something that cannot be manipulated (to a certain extent). We are born a certain race, which comes with stereotypes that have been assembled throughout the years. While some of these stereotypes have been successfully altered, such as the stereotype of African Americans being of less worth than whites, some still remain prevalent in culture. This is shown by the personal experience stories that we have gathered in our research.

Knowing someone who is personally affected by a topic such as this is the most helpful alternative to understanding it. Even though the first mentioned interviewed student is extremely successful, she constantly feels pressure to do well and work harder. She even commented on how she feels behind because she does not play musical instruments like most Asians she knows. This leads me to wonder what is good enough? It’s also difficult to determine if this is because of race, or simply the desire to be an ambitious human being who learns useful skills. The survey questions related to self-esteem were inconclusive in regards to race being a
major factor. The results looked typical of many ethnicities. They were more average and there was nothing in the data that seemed irregular. I suspect that the reason not much was revealed in the findings of our data was because the sample size was simply too small.

Conclusion

We have assessed the negative consequences of Asian American stereotypes from multiple facets while keeping in mind language barriers they might have and the inevitable cultural differences between them and other ethnicities. In the absence of the “total picture”, stereotypes allow us to “fill in the blanks”. Our society often innocently creates and perpetuates stereotypes. It takes courage to raise objections to them and fight the prejudice and bigotry which stereotyping fosters, however, it is important to stand up against this subtle form of discrimination, which has only served as the precursor to persecution and other adverse effects. A common stereotype of Asian Americans is that they are drawn to the subject of math and science. This generalization is untrue, as the majority of Asian Americans we surveyed do not feel the need to excel in math and science. They also have a wider area of academic interest, as many like to study subjects such as English.

In society, some more than others feel the need to live up to an expectation and prove themselves to others. However, it was inconclusive through our data if stereotypes affect the self-esteem of Asian Americans. Stereotyping somebody can make that person feel helpless in his or her own identity. Although we may never completely understand the struggles of others, it does not mean they should be ignored. It is important for us all to understand this and keep advancing in the tolerance and reduce ignorance of our society.
References


Su Yeong Kim; Yijie Wang; Shiying Deng; Alvarez, Rocio; Jing Li. *Developmental Psychology*, Jan 2011, Vol. 47 Issue 1, p289-301.