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Diversity within Asian Americans:
Barriers to the Public Discussion of Discrimination

By
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Abstract

This purpose of this thesis is to discuss barriers to the public discussion of discrimination against Asian-Americans. The literature addresses three major barriers: model minority status, portrayal in media, and cultural desire to assimilate. This thesis discusses how Asian-Americans contain generational, ethnic, and immigration-based diversity that complicates these barriers, while also positing that diversity itself presents a barrier. This project concludes with a brief discussion of “intra-ethnic othering,” the discrimination that occurs between Asian subgroups, as another barrier to public discussion of Asian-American discrimination.

Diversity within Asian Americans: Barriers to the Public Discussion of Discrimination

In the 1980's, there was a significant increase in the number of racial harassment cases on college and university campuses. Delucchi et al (1996) published a study on the repercussions of one such case in the *College Student Journal*. In a University of California dorm room, a white student physically assaulted a Vietnamese-American student. The assault was so aggressive that the victim required extensive medical attention. His attacker was booked by the police but released the next day. As for the student, both the incident and outcome upset him so much that he went to the Asian Student Coalition (ASC) for support. With the support of the ASC, the student approached the Dean of Students stating that the attack was racially charged, and that he had been the victim of a racial attack. The Dean, however, would only go as far as characterizing this incident as an "unfortunate act of violence," and was clear that the administration would not be investigating the matter further. Meanwhile, the attacker continued to harass the victim using threatening language that intimidated the student to the point that he had to employ a buddy-system for safety. The editorial section of the school newspaper after this incident became public, was filled with staunch political statements that the harassment of Asian-Americans was justified by their economic success as a minority group. One segment went as far as stating that Asian-Americans should not be perceived as disadvantaged because they were economically equivalent to whites. The consensus among editorials was that Asian-Americans should accept the treatment they faced because they did not qualify as a minority group.

Delucchi et al's study aimed to compare the outcomes of this attack on an Asian-American student with an attack on an African American student. To do this, Delucchi et al compared this reaction to a racially charged attack against an African-American student on

campus during the same time period. He found that while the attack on the Vietnamese student was met with public disinterest, the latter was met with student support from both African-Americans and non-African-Americans as well as calls to action. This case study exemplifies the reluctance of non-Asian Americans to support Asian-Americans' efforts to discuss discrimination and to recognize them as a minority group that faces issues similar to those faced by other minority groups (Delucchi et al, 1996).

Discrimination against Asian-Americans is not regarded as significant by the public, especially in contrast with that against other minorities. One reason for this may lie in the way that Asian-Americans tend to react to such discrimination. Asian-Americans address racism in several ways, either by suppressing, repressing, or erasing memories that cause them pain (Rosalind, 2008). They internalize instances in which they experience discrimination, causing build-up that can be harmful to mental health. Much research has been conducted surrounding African-Americans and how their health is affected by racism. Depression, tension, and rage because of racism are the most commonly reported problems in psychotherapy (Barbee, 2002). Studies have also shown that related symptoms worsen with more frequently reported race-related events (Williams et al, 2000). Similarly, accumulation of these experiences is often considered a large predictor of depressive and anxiety disorders in Asian-Americans (Gee et al, 2007). Though in studies, Asian-Americans are shown to be higher in ranking in favorable treatment, and thus viewed by white Americans more favorably than African-Americans, Asian-Americans are still viewed less favorably than white Americans (Gee et al, 2007). According to Committee 100, an organization whose goal it is to address issues that Chinese-Americans face, 24% of Americans would disapprove of intermarriage with an Asian-American, and 23% would be uncomfortable with an Asian-American president (Committee 100, 2001). Because of this, it

is clear that Asian-Americans share the consequences of discrimination with other minority groups. In a study performed by Gilbert et al (2007), the researcher similarly discovered that self-reported racial discrimination was correlated with an increased risk of mental health problems. For these reasons, racial discrimination against Asian-Americans should not be overlooked.

Sociological research has identified three barriers to the acknowledgment of racial discrimination against Asian-Americans. The most widely cited barriers include portrayal in the media, cultural desire to assimilate, and model minority status. These barriers limit their visibility as a minority group. Portrayal in the media of Asian-Americans reduces their presence to token roles, and does not often utilize them in major plots. Media advertising and TV shows subliminally affect the way that people view those around them, creating a powerful portrayal of Asian-Americans as silent entities (Taylor et al, 1997). Cultural desire to assimilate discourages Asian-Americans from speaking up about discrimination for fear of “rocking the boat” and identifying as a minority group. The last barrier, model minority status, is cited the most often. The summary statistics of Asian-Americans portray them as more educated and more financially successful. These are referred to as “positive” stereotypes, but the consequences of these stereotypes can be quite negative. These stereotypes put unnecessary external stress on Asian-Americans, and cast a broad generalization on the experiences of the entire Asian-American population.

Studies that delve into these barriers often ignore the diversity of Asian-Americans because it adds many layers of complexity to gathered data. Diversity can be found in the generation, ethnicity, and wave of immigration of Asian-Americans. It is important to discuss diversity alongside these barriers, however, because a significant part of what makes Asian-

Americans invisible is the public's lack of knowledge about the history of Asian-Americans and vast diversity within this group. To get a more complete picture of discrimination against Asian-Americans, we must address this diversity, and how it affects the different barriers, and lastly, whether it should be considered a barrier itself. By addressing this diversity, we may call attention to the inappropriate nature of stereotypes and also address how this diversity affects the various barriers Asian-Americans face in gaining visibility.

Current literature also addresses intra-ethnic othering, a phenomenon that can be described as the prejudice present between Asian-American subgroups. While there has been some research on this topic, intra-ethnic othering has not been addressed as another barrier to discussion of Asian-American discrimination. This angle is important because intra-ethnic othering emphasizes the diversity within Asian-American culture and acts as yet another barrier by creating a hierarchy within Asian-Americans.

I first encountered this topic as a pre-medical student at Portland State University. I was uncomfortable with the response I sometimes received when telling people about my goal to become a physician. Instead of asking about my motivations for pursuing medicine, some of my peers would dismiss me with "it's because you're Asian, isn't it?" or another version of this question that implied that my ethnicity was responsible for the majority of my career decision. My non-Asian-American pre-medical peers never received questions like this, and instead were praised for pursuing such a lengthy and difficult path. These interactions I had with my ethnicity and my peers made me question many things. How did model minority stereotyping affect the public's view of Asian-Americans? Were their responses to my career goal out of passive-aggression for Asian-Americans in the educational system?

These questions lead me to the purpose of my thesis: to address these questions and encourage literature to address diversity when considering Asian-American discrimination. I will accomplish this by first providing a brief history of Asian immigration to the United States, definitions of relevant terms, and methodology for my literature review. The literature review is divided into three sections. The first talks about the three major barriers to acknowledging discrimination faced by Asian-Americans. The second section describes diversity with Asian-American culture, and how it relates to these barriers. The third section is devoted to intra-ethnic othering, a phenomenon of discrimination between Asian-American subgroups, which I will explore as an additional barrier.

History of Asian-Americans

Asian-Americans are a unique minority group within the United States. They are the result of voluntary immigration, and have immigrated to the US for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from economic need to competitive academics. They represent just 5.3% of the population with the United States, according to a 2013 US Census, relative to 62.6% whites, 17% Hispanic-Americans, and 13.2% African-Americans. Asian-Americans represent over 50 ethnicities, and the label itself is ambiguous, and not geographically defined. Asian-American immigration has seen incredible growth within the United States. Asian populations in the United States have grown from 6.9 million people in 1990 to 17.3 million people in 2010 (Shao-Kobayashi, 2013).

Understanding the state of Asian-Americans in US society also requires knowledge of their immigration history. Though there are variations in motivations for coming to the United States, there are two widely acknowledged waves of Asian immigration. Prior to these two

waves, Asian immigration in the late 1700's was limited to mostly Pilipino seamen and Asian Indians (Hune, 2002).

First wave or Old Wave immigration began in the 1850's and ended in the 1950's. This wave was more diverse than previous immigration, but was mostly made up of immigrants from Japan, China, and the Philippines (Hune, 2002). They were laborers and small business operators. Socially, these immigrants faced heavy racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and restriction on their civil and political rights.

Immigrants of Chinese descent were the first to come in large groups, their immigration catalyzed by the California gold rush and unfavorable domestic conditions in China, including government corruption and natural disasters (Yang, 2011). They experienced considerable racism, and large Anti-Chinese movements, resulting in the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, signed by President Chester Arthur (Yang, 2011). This act banned Chinese immigration for ten years and prevented the naturalization of any Chinese immigrants. The Magnuson Act, in 1943 repealed all laws created by the Chinese Exclusion Act, and was driven by Japanese propaganda that the United States was “anti-Asian” (Yang, 2011). Japanese immigrants, the second group to come to the United States in large droves, suffered similarly under The Gentleman’s Agreement (1907), an agreement between the US and Japan wherein Japan agreed not to allow further emigration if the United States would not restrict Japanese immigration (Yang, 2011). Japanese immigration also created tension among the American public, especially around World War II, when there was a general fear that Japanese-Americans would support invasion of the United States. This fear resulted in Executive Order 9066, which

authorized the mandatory placement of Japanese- Americans in four western states into internment camps (Mc Cormick, 2008).

A gap in immigration followed because of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which limited Asian-American immigration in favor of European immigration (Lee, 2009). This act lasted from 1924-1965, but with passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, immigration started to increase again (Lee, 2006). This act marked the start of Second Wave or New Wave immigration. This wave of immigration was more selective than the previous wave. It was mostly made of professionals, those who would accept small unskilled job positions, and refugees torn apart by war, translocation, and trauma from the end of the Vietnam War (Lee, 2006). The most common ethnic groups were Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian (Hune, 2002). One of the more prominent characteristics of this wave was the bimodal distribution of social class created by the varying motivations that immigrants had for leaving Asia (Lee, 2009).

Definitions

In order to properly discuss the American public's view of Asian-Americans, terms related to racism must be defined. Racism refers to the belief that one or multiple ethnic groups are superior to others (Solorzano et al, 2002). Racism takes many forms, ranging from individual interactions to institutionalized racism, racism that pervades social institutions, such as government or corporations. In the United States, racism is often associated with the power that whites have over non-whites, and the inability of non-whites to gain this power. Racism results in prejudice, and can be defined as the "belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or race" (Oxford). Non-whites are assigned stereotypes,

generalizations that govern thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors towards another group (Barbee, 2002). These stereotypes often result in discrimination, a term that refers to an action or behavior that shows preference or aversion to a certain group.

The consequences of racism are as variable as the forms of racism that exist. Ethnic groups may adopt panethnic identities in order to address their treatment. The panethnic identity refers to a general identity adopted by multiple ethnic groups to address a similar treatment (Hune, 2002). The panethnic Asian-American identity was promoted by the lack of distinction given to various subgroups in the eyes of the American public.

Methods

The methods used here were chosen in order to conduct a thorough literature review. The literature used in this project came from online databases: PubMed and Google Scholar, as well as from the Portland State Library catalog. Literature from before the 1950’s was used to provide historical background and theory from this review, but information pertinent to today’s population of Asian-Americans was limited to literature from the 1950’s to 2015, with dates skewed towards early 2000’s. It was important to find current literature because the Asian-American population is so dynamic, and a specific time period was needed in order to cast concrete conclusions. Here, I’ve included a list of various phrases used to find relevant research. They are organized by subject.

Populations	Generations	Sources of Diversity	Media
Asian-Americans	1 st Generation	Diversity	Television
Korean- American	Nissei	Ethnicity	Margaret Cho
Chinese	Generations	Model Minority	All-American Girl
Japanese	Joy Luck Club	Immigration	Fresh off the Boat

Stereotypes	Intra-ethnic Othering	Immigration	Other
Discrimination	Subgroups	Old Wave	Quota
Over-achieving	FOB	New Wave	African-Americans
Under achieving		Second Wave	Health outcomes
Racism		First Wave	
Prejudice			
Stereotypes			

Literature Review

Three Barriers

Discrimination against Asian-Americans is not widely discussed by the American public, however academic research has been discussing it for many years. Researchers have examined the consequences of racism against Asian-Americans, the stereotypes that exist, and the barriers to public acknowledgement of discrimination against Asian-Americans. Here, we will focus on the barriers that have been acknowledged. The three main barriers that are addressed are portrayal in the media, model minority stereotype, and desire to assimilate.

Media

The presence of Asian-Americans in media has been dynamic. Chinese men were once portrayed as a part of “Yellow Peril,” as they threatened the job market and political scene, and sometimes even the desire of white women for white men. Women of Asian descent were portrayed as exotic, hypersexual property of white men (Mok, 1998). More recently, however, the role that Asian-Americans have in American media is quite different, and contributes to the invisibility of this minority group. Here, we will explore Asian-Americans in specifically TV and movie roles.

There are three most common roles for Asian-Americans to play in the media. The first role is a minor or background role. Asian-Americans get cast in these roles more frequently than other minorities (Taylor et al, 1997). They are the canvasses for white narratives, narratives which focus on the dominant white culture and hardly address the presence or role of Asian-Americans in plot. Not only the people, but the cultures and places associated with Asian culture are used for the backdrop for plots that are white-centered. The second role is a tokenized role played by an Asian-American. This means that media includes Asian-Americans in order to

make a symbolic gesture of diversity. While well-intentioned, this presence without significance is detrimental to the psyche of Asian-Americans (Taylor et al, 1997). This is especially troubling, as the passive viewing of such stereotypes often goes unchallenged, and shapes both non-Asian Americans' and Asian-Americans' view of themselves (Taylor et al, 1997). This has the potential to make Asian-Americans feel insignificant themselves. The role that Asian-Americans play, is a role that involves them in plot, but in roles based on stereotypes. Asian-Americans are overrepresented in work environments yet underrepresented in social environments, contributing to the stereotype that they are socially inadequate and academically driven (Taylor et al, 1997). This stereotype is linked with the immigrant narrative of chasing the American Dream through hard work (Park, 2013). These roles successfully contribute to the "otherness" that Asian-Americans feel and perpetuate these harmful stereotypes.

The consequences of these roles for perceptions of Asian-Americans have been discussed, but the media also plays a role in the perception of white Americans. Whiteness is idealized and becomes the standard for attractiveness (Pyke, 2010). This makes logical sense, as most of the lead roles in media are taken by white actors and actresses, subliminally engaging viewers in the idea that these leads, appearance included, are the most important. This idea creates insecurity amongst Asian-American and minority viewers, and can negatively impact self-confidence (Pyke, 2010).

All-American Girl TV show, the first network TV show to star a mostly Asian cast, served as a petri dish for breaking these media roles. The show was loosely based on Korean-American Margaret Cho's standup comedy, and attempted to capture Margaret's experience growing up with feet in two different cultures (Park, 2013). It was a brave attempt, but the show was cancelled after one season, panned by critics and Asian-American viewers alike, who were

both unable to relate with the main character and offended by many of the jokes made at the expense of Korean-American culture. Twenty years later, Margaret Cho, who has since had other shows and presences in the media commented, “when I was growing up I never saw Asian people on television [...] I welcome stereotypes, because at least we’re visible. Anytime we’re on it, it’s better than being invisible” (Park, 2013 p. 647). Margaret was not trying to capture the entire Asian-American experience, but because of the lack of Asian-American presence in the media, specifically TV and movies, she was forced to try to represent the experiences of many, an attempt which fell short. *All-American Girl* is significant because it was the first major effort to rise above Asian-American invisibility in popular television programming (Park, 2013). What the failure of *All-American Girl* shows us is the difficulty that Asian-Americans encounter when breaking the status quo and becoming visible in the media. However, this difficulty is nothing compared to the repercussions of not actively working to have Asian-Americans visible in the media and not challenging the whiteness of popular American media. The implications of Asian-American portrayal in the media include feelings of social unattainability and invisibility (Taylor et al, 1997). These ideas silence Asian-Americans and make them feel like their voices are insignificant.

Model Minority Status

Asian-Americans experience discrimination in many different ways, including hate crimes, racial profiling, and barriers to college admission (Dhingra, 2003). The most well-known form of discrimination is stereotyping. Asian-American stereotypes are different from that of other minority groups in that they are labeled “positive.” The stereotype includes characteristics of being academically driven, work-focused, and financially successful. This stereotype is rooted in the pressure that first-generation Asians felt to take care of their families and validate the

sacrifice that their families had made by immigrating to the US (Lee, 1994). “The disposition for many first generation Chinese immigrants in America to see life as a constant test of survival, to the extent that it almost becomes ethnic symbolism, is a complex mentality. It is deeply rooted in China’s past of hardship and numerous famines and wars.” (Xu, 2010 p.48) Another explanation of the survival of this stereotype can be found in the media, which gives disproportionate attention to high-achieving Americans.

Today, however, this stereotype represents something different entirely. Asian-Americans use financial and academic success to gain social desirability where they are inherently unable to achieve it, being non-white. The social ceiling, or the symbolic barrier to minority groups achieving social parity with whites, is present because of physical differences that are present between Asian-Americans and whites (Dhingra, 2003). In Dhingra’s 2003 collection of interviews, Tammy, an Asian-American actress, speaks about this. “These stereotypes come because you’re different; you look different. They don’t know if you are an immigrant or have lived here all your life. It’s all physical. I’m as Americanized as you can be...” (Dhingra, 2003, p.123). Tammy’s inability to overcome the “otherness” she felt was purely physical, and could not be avoided even with assimilation.

While the model minority stereotype is considered positive, there are grave consequences for the Asian-American identity that should not be ignored by the public. The stereotype puts pressure on both high and low achieving students (Lee, 1994). High-achieving students suffer because they feel an unnecessary external pressure to succeed on top of the stress caused by their already present internal motivation. Their achievements are undermined by the model minority stereotype, and their peers often attribute their success to race and not to their efforts. Low-achieving students feel outcasted, as they feel pressure to live up to the stereotype but are unable

to (Lee, 1994). Their failure to live up to the stereotype feels unacceptable, and thus they feel unaccepted.

Lee, an ethnographer, was notable for interviewing Asian-Americans at Academic High School in 1994, and capturing the effects of the model minority stereotype on different types of students. A quote by Mei Mei, a high-achieving student at Academic High School illuminates the way that students feel about model minority status in relation to academics. “They [whites] will have stereotypes, like, we’re smart-They are so wrong; not everyone is smart. They expect you to be this and that, and when you’re not-[shakes her head]. And sometimes you tend to be what they expect you to be, and you just lose your identity-just lose being yourself...When you get bad grades, people look at you really strangely because you are sort of distorting the way that they see an Asian...” (Lee, 1994, p.419). Mei Mei explains that the stereotype, whether applicable or non-applicable, is uncomfortable and harmful to her identity.

The portrayal of Asian-Americans as more financially successful is not entirely unfounded. Asian-Americans as a whole, do have higher incomes and more education than whites. Asian-Americans, while more likely to have incomes of \$75,000 or above, incomes considered more than financially stable, are also significantly more likely than whites to have incomes of \$25,000, the threshold for being considered in poverty for a family of four (Lee, 2006). What is problematic about this positive stereotype is that it puts Asian-Americans at odds with struggling working-class whites and minorities struggling to assimilate (Lee, 2009). It also ignores the distribution of wealth within this minority group and puts undue pressure on Asian-Americans in a lower socioeconomic class to meet the standards set by this stereotype.

Efforts to break model minority stereotypes are undermined by their label as a “positive” stereotypes. Many adopt a “if it ain’t broke, why fix it?” attitude, where broken is “negative”

stereotypes such as stereotypes about African-Americans being violent and uneducated. However we can see with Mei Mei, that these “positive” stereotypes have serious negative implications. In the first example of the attack on the Vietnamese-American in the introduction, we can see too, that these stereotypes hurt the willingness of non-Asian-Americans to understand Asian-American discrimination. The positive stereotype is used to justify the discrimination faced by this minority group. It also causes self-censure of the Asian-American individual, who struggles to live up to the high expectations set by stereotypes (Lee, 2009).

Desire to Assimilate

Classic assimilation theory is often applied to Asian-American presence in the United States. Classic assimilation theory posits that immigration creates a “marginal man,” and that immigrants are trapped between two cultures: that of their host and that of their country of origin (Zhou, 1997). The route to assimilation includes intermarriage, educational achievement, well-respected careers, English proficiency, and knowledge of American culture. Many Asian-American subgroups have been known to slowly and selectively integrate elements of their host culture with their new American identity in order to fit in better (Zhou, 1997). Sometimes, integration is prioritized and the American identity is given priority over the host culture to assimilate more smoothly.

A “bamboo ceiling” exists over the head of Asian-Americans. They are somewhere in between; not labeled a minority group but still not white, despite their best efforts. In an attempt to break this ceiling, Asian-Americans use success and assimilation to gain privileges inaccessible to other minority groups. In this way they are able to become the “darlings of whites” (Rosalind, 2008). A true mark of acceptance into US society to Asian-Americans is the act of shedding all connection with Asian culture in favor of gaining white American culture.

These motivation to appear more like a white American has a logical basis. To prove this, Gess, in a thorough literature review cited a 1990 General Society Survey in which white Americans reported feeling more positively about Asian-Americans than other minority groups, but did not regard Asian-Americans as highly as other white Americans (2000).

In field interviews, sociologist Rosalind Chou (2008) took note of the product of these motivations. In her book, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, Frank, a high school student, took great pride in his “banana” identity. The term “banana” refers to associating mostly with white culture but displaying Asian physical features. “He articulated strong views and uses clear language to describe his actions as he conforms to and mimics whites. He argues that the white ways are the ‘correct’ ways, and that contrasting Asian ways are usually ‘wrong’” (Chou et al, 2008, p. 153). Franks’ views fit with the Asian-American desire to be seen as white, and glorifying white culture as “correct.”

Asian-Americans are viewed as honorary whites (Lee, 2009). On the surface, this does not seem harmful, but the lack of differentiation between whites and Asian-Americans excludes Asian-Americans from the conversation about race. The current conversation about racial discrimination is reduced to a binary conversation, solely between African-Americans and whites (Lee, 2009). With no conversation, Asian-American discrimination is ignored.

Diversity

Understanding diversity within Asian-Americans is necessary to understanding this minority group in its entirety. It simply cannot be addressed as one homogenous group. Lisa Loeb, writes “not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities among Asians, but it may also inadvertently support the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group, that implies Asians are ‘all alike’ and conform to ‘types’” (1991, p.43) It would be

counterproductive to address barriers to discussing discrimination, while casting a broad generalization on an extraordinarily complex group.

Generational Differences

Classic assimilationists believe that succeeding generations of immigrants move away from old country ways, and forge new paths in the country in which they reside. Asian-Americans are no exception to this rule. First generation Asian-Americans are less likely to try to assimilate and judge themselves by the values of their host country, whereas second generation Asian-Americans move towards American culture, straying from the culture of their country of origin further with each following generation (Pyke, 2003).

Generational dissonance often occurs, most remarkably between first and generation Asian-Americans (Zhou, 1997). Generational dissonance can be defined as “dissimilar levels of acculturation” between generations (Kim et al, 2009). Dissonance affects the children of immigrants, who suffer from low self-esteem and high anxiety because of a lack of understanding of their parents’ culture (Kim et al, 2009).

Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club*, a best-selling novel that told the story of four Chinese-American families, touches on this distance between generations. One of her characters, June, who is more Chinese-American than Chinese, is sent to meet her family in China and break the news of her mother’s death. When she expresses doubt in her ability to perform the task, her aunts try to help by telling her different character traits of her mother. “And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in

fractured English...They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation” (Tan, 35).

First generation Asians who were born in Asia often refer to themselves as “Asians,” while second generations were more likely to choose to be called “Asian-Americans” (Mok, 1998). Much research has been done around the second and older generations, as these generations were more likely to evaluate themselves according to American society versus Asian society. In *Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity*, Lisa Lowe writes about this loss of native culture. “In many Asian American novels, the question of the loss or transmission of the ‘original’ culture is frequently represented in a family narrative, figured as generational conflict between the Chinese-born first generation and the American-born second generation” (1991, p.45).

The labeling of Asian-Americans with a hyphen is important is that this contributes to the response to stereotypes. Those who call themselves “Asians” are likely to speak out against stereotypes, relative to “Asian-Americans,” whose label represents the significance of American culture in their identity (Lee, 1994). For this reason, the label “Asian-American” has been used in this thesis to reference Asian immigrants and their families that have come to America. The subjects referred to in my thesis are ones that are actively interacting with American culture.

The media does not recognize this difference, however. As media has a large effect on the public and their interpretation of social situations, this lack of acknowledgement creates a general lack of understanding of generational differences. Little differentiation in the media has been made between “Asians” and “Asian Americans,” even though some have been in the US for over five generations (Mok, 1998). This is especially troubling because they make up entirely different cultures, with the later generations often feeling caught between two social worlds.

Ethnicities

The term, “Asian American,” is not geographically bound. In fact, it encompasses over 50 specific ethnicities, depending on what boundaries are recognized (Lee, 2006). “Asian” usually refers to East Asian, Southeast Asian, and the Indian subcontinent (Lee, 2009). Ethnic diversity affects the role that assimilation has in public discussion of Asian-American discrimination.

This is visible when discussing the interactions between various ethnicities and the barriers they face to assimilation. Most of those who identify as ethnically Korean prioritize assimilation into white culture more so than other Asian-Americans subgroups that identify as ethnically from China, Hong Kong, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, or Taiwan. Korean-Americans, in particular, tend to pull away from these subgroups, and operate independently of them (Lee, 1994). Wealthy Chinese immigrants are likely to do the same, imitating dominant white culture as closely as possible (Lee, 2006).

Ethnicity is also relevant in analyzing the effects of the model minority stereotype. There are specific Asian-American subgroups that are affected by the minority stereotype in a different way, and are marginalized as non-conformers. For instance, the Cambodian and Hmong populations live in areas with high rates of poverty and have low levels of academic achievement (Lee, 2009). This is because they do not have the same access to resources that other ethnic subgroups with higher socioeconomic status do. Because of this, the model minority stereotype affects them much more harshly than it affects other subgroups who are more successful in their assimilation. Ethnic diversity is also useful to disprove the model minority stereotype. Statistically, other than Japanese-Americans, a greater proportion of Asian-Americans than

whites are at the lower end of the educational spectrum, challenging the generalization that all Asian-Americans succeed academically (Delucchi et al, 1996).

Portrayal in the media often ignores ethnic diversity, as with generational differences, and also complicates the barrier. For instance, in “Memoirs of a Geisha,” a popular movie that was released in 2005, Chinese actors were used to play main characters in a movie that revolves around Japanese culture. While the actors themselves celebrated the representation of Asian-Americans in American film, there were conflicting views among Asian-American viewers. While some agreed with the actors and were happy to receive representation as Asian-Americans, others believed it was insensitive to use actors unfamiliar with Japanese culture who were perceived by the American public to look similar to Japanese actors, as if the difference between Japanese and Chinese cultures was irrelevant (Gritten, 2015). Ten years later, the TV show “Fresh off the Boat,” approaches the same topic, but encounters the opposite issue. Instead of the portrayal not being specific enough, the portrayal of Asian-Americans is not broad enough. “Fresh off the Boat” portrays a Chinese-American family in America, but draws controversy similar to “All-American Girl.” Asian-American viewers complained that they could not relate to the family on screen. In response, Constance Wu, the actress playing the matriarchal figure in Fresh off the Boat, retorts “If you see Tina Fey on television, you’re not like, ‘all white women are like Tina Fey’” (Feeney, 2015). Media creates a tug-of-war between the desire to express one’s own story and to represent a great diversity of experiences. This balancing act makes Asian-American presence in the media more complicated. It is not only the dearth of Asian-Americans on screen, but also the lack of consensus on how they want to be represented.

Old Wave/New Wave

There are many distinct reasons for immigration for Asian residents, but generally, there are two waves that have been labeled: Old Wave and New Wave. Old Wavers came from families that highly valued education. In contrast, New Wavers were from working-class families that more strongly valued hard work but they (Lee, 2009). These differences exist because of the history of Asian immigration to the United States. Old Wavers were laborers and small business owners who immigrated less because of necessity, than many New Wavers, who immigrated because of harsh conditions. Between these waves of immigration, there is also further division because of the ethnicities and cultures associated with each wave. The Old Wave mostly consisted of immigrants from Japanese, Chinese, and Pilipino cultures, while New Wavers mostly consisted of immigrants from Vietnamese, Cambondia, and Laotian cultures.

The differences between these waves have implications for model minority status. While the pressure that is created by this stereotype is applied to “Asian-Americans” in general, Old Wavers respond much differently to this pressure than New Wavers. New Wavers, mostly Cambodians, Hmong, Lao students reject stereotyped behaviors flamboyantly (Lee, 1994). They disregard educational success as a vehicle to social success among non-Asians. This is largely due to their class status. A lower class than many of the Old Wavers, New Wavers immigrated into neighborhoods among peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, a factor which is correlated with a poorer performance in school. New Wavers are also associated with their defiance of white culture and academic values. Teachers often assumed that New Wavers were gangsters and were not worth teaching because of their stark cultural contrast to Old Wavers (Lee, 2006). This was a direct consequence of not taking Asian-American diversity into consideration. There are unique cultural barriers associated with New Wavers assimilation into

the American education system. The parents of New Wavers often relied on school to educate and discipline their children without much interference (Lee, 2006). In contrast, American education encouraged whole families to participate in the education of their children (Lee, 2006). The cultural barrier slowed New Wavers' ability to do well in school.

Segmented assimilation applies better to New Wavers than the classic assimilation that is used to describe the integration of Old Wavers. This assimilation theory posits that immigrants from different socioeconomic classes will assimilate differently into host society (Zhou, 2007). This is visible in the New Wavers' response to American schooling. New Wavers, in a lower socioeconomic class, must help out at home to a greater extent than Old Wavers or white peers, creating barriers to their assimilation. This difference creates repercussions for the future. Those from lower socioeconomic class will encounter poorer schools, fewer career opportunities, and other systemic barriers to increasing social status. Segmented assimilation, as opposed to classic assimilation, is shown in the way that New Wavers, generally of a lower socioeconomic class, reject host society while Old Wavers are more likely to idealize host society.

Intra-ethnic Othering

A further barrier to the public discussion of Asian-American discrimination exists internally within "Asian-Americans." A phenomenon called "intra-ethnic othering," is used as a social control between Asian-American subgroups (Zhou, 1997). By social control, it is meant that this action is used to assign levels of appropriateness to certain behaviors (Pyke, 2010). This term refers to the attempts of a minority group to resist stereotypes by stigmatizing those who display stereotypically minority behaviors, referenced earlier in mentioning the reluctance of Korean-Americans to associate with other Asian-American groups. "The empty promise that the oppressed can escape their 'otherness' by shunning their difference lures them into supporting

the very rules that define them into existence as the ‘other’-as those who are not allowed to share power. ‘Become like us and you will be accepted into our group.’ But they never are” (Pyke, 2010, p.557). This promise is what motivates Asian-Americans to “other” each other, hurting their ability to have a collective voice, and weakening their ability to speak out against discrimination from majority culture.

Within Asian-Americans, the term “FOB,” is brought to mind. “FOB” is shorthand for fresh-off-the-boat, and is primarily used by Asian-Americans to refer to those who have not acquired any characteristics of American culture. Those described as “FOB” are those who have stayed rooted in Asian culture (Shao-Kobayashi, 2013). In 2003, Pyke et al found that in schools with many Japanese exchange students, students describe “FOB” as being too ethnic, speaking non-English languages, befriending only Japanese, and not having white friends. More generally however, those who are associated with the term “FOB” are those who “...are newly arrived to the United States; speak in heavy-accented English or communicate in Korean or Vietnamese among friends at least some of the time; display traits associated with being a ‘nerd,’ such as social awkwardness or, contradictorily, with being a gang member; identify strongly with one’s ethnic group; assume ethnically ‘traditional’ values and customs; socialize mostly with other co-ethnics...” (Pyke, 2010, p.558). The term serves to “other” undesired traits while also glorifying whiteness (Pyke, 2010).

This “othering” can be observed among school children. “I’ve noticed there is a lot of intra-racial prejudice[...]because although they say they’re open to everybody, they tend to hang around more of the Americanized ones than hang out with the FOBs” (Pyke et al, 2003, p.163). The intention behind this term “FOB” is to marginalize peers that are likely to fit a stereotype.

Students fitting this label are perceived as inferior because they refuse to prioritize assimilation, fitting with assimilationist theory (Shao-Kobayashi, 2013).

Intra-ethnic othering is a reaction to the discrimination faced by Asian-Americans. There is no public discussion regarding stereotypes given to Asian-Americans or their negative implications, and so intra-ethnic othering is used to pressure those who fit those stereotypes into breaking them. It is a reaction, but not one that aids in developing discussion. Instead, it acts as an entirely different barrier. As opposed to other discussed barriers, it is an internal barrier, and fragments “Asian-Americans.” Intra-ethnic othering reinforces discrimination, only adding to the discrimination that Asian-Americans face, subjecting them to both internal and external prejudice. Internal discrimination has the same ramifications as external discrimination, and results in the internalization of inferior identities (Pyke, 2010). The consequence of intra-ethnic othering is the creation of hierarchy within Asian-American culture. The problem with this hierarchy is that it strengthens the voices of some Asian-American subcultures, while leaving others voiceless. Without one united voice, Asian-Americans lack the ability that other minorities have to speak about discrimination.

Discussion

Asian-Americans have gone undiscussed in literature and are not generally considered a minority group in the eyes of the American public. The Asian-American population is essentially a third of the size of Hispanic-American populations and a less than half the size of African-American populations. Why, then, are they not considered a minority? How do we define minorities? To determine this, we must discuss why issues of discrimination, similar to issues faced by other minorities, are not being discussed for Asian-Americans.

We have discussed the three barriers that the literature identifies. First, the media minimizes or tokenizes Asian-American presence, perpetuating their invisibility. This has two implications; they are invisible in the eyes of the public and lack a voice when speaking about discrimination. The second barrier is the model minority stereotype, the most prominent stereotype associated with Asian-Americans. Despite the stereotype putting pressure on low and high achievers that has been proven to create feelings of depression and inadequacy, it is often referred to as a “positive” stereotype. Its positioning as a “positive” stereotype provides a significant barrier to the public treating Asian-Americans as a minority group with the potential to face discrimination. The third barrier is the Asian-American desire to assimilate. Classic Assimilationist Theory posits that assimilation to host culture is the path used to gain favorable treatment by the host society. Asian-Americans assimilate by using financial and academic success and try to break the social ceiling created by the nature of being non-white.

These barriers are valid and have been demonstrated through qualitative and quantitative data. Diversity is a necessary part of this discussion because it presents a more complicated, more complete picture of the barriers to public discussion of Asian-American discrimination. Generational, ethnic, and immigration-based diversity are all factors that relate to these barriers in different ways. Generational differences often go unaddressed, but with such vast differences between 1st and succeeding generations, it is necessary because of the differing ways these barriers are experienced by succeeding generations. Generations following the first generation often lack representation in the media, which does not often distinguish between Asians and Asian-Americans. With succeeding generations leaning further and further towards host culture, the lack of representation is isolating. Generational diversity also affects the prioritization of assimilation, complicating the general Classic Assimilationist Theory that is most often applied

to Asian-Americans. Latter generations value assimilation into host culture more than early generations because early generations often have stronger ties to cultures outside of America. Ethnic diversity, the greatest source of diversity, fragments this minority group into many subgroups which may approach American culture differently. Korean-Americans tend to prioritize assimilation more highly than other Asian-American subgroups, and place a lot of value on white culture. Ethnic diversity complicates the cultural desire to assimilate. Subgroups that identify as panethnic are more likely to hold onto host culture more tightly, and so this barrier is less applicable. The third source of diversity, immigration waves, is perhaps the most divisive. Old Wave and New Wave Asian-Americans have very different values and thus respond to these barriers in differing ways. Old Wavers respond to the model minority stereotype by conforming to it because it follows their values, which prioritize academics. It also is easier for them to conform to this stereotype because coming from a higher socioeconomic background allows them privileges that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not have. New Wavers are the polar opposite. They come from a lower socioeconomic background and do not have as much access to academics, relative to Old Wavers. Because of this, many of them adamantly reject the model minority stereotype and actively rebel against it.

Diversity is important to consider when discussing barriers, because barriers that are present for some subgroups of Asian-Americans are irrelevant for others. There are also barriers that exist between subgroups that prevent the public discussion of Asian-American discrimination. Intra-ethnic othering in the context of Asian-Americans, is the process through which Asian-Americans marginalize those displaying characteristics that are associated with a present stereotype. This othering fragments the already unrecognized minority group and pits

subgroups against each other. It also reinforces the racism felt by Asian-Americans by letting some subgroups distance themselves from others using harmful stereotypes.

Researchers often don't address diversity, because it does complicate the issue of these barriers, which is already a very complicated topic. It introduces barriers that have not yet been discussed, and that are sometimes difficult to explain, such as intra-ethnic othering. It makes it more difficult to explain barriers when the group facing these barriers are not homogenous. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie author and novelist, once spoke of the danger of a single story. "I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (2009). Without addressing diversity, we tell a single story. Literature seeks to determine these barriers with the purpose of understanding how we can most efficiently tear them down, but when we ignore the multitude of Asian-American voices, we isolate the very groups that we seek to highlight. For these reasons, it is necessary to discuss barriers to the public discussion of Asian-American with respect to the great amount of diversity within this culture.

Conclusion

Asian-Americans are a unique minority, but their voice as a minority group has been silenced, a commonality that is shared with many other minority groups. This project is an attempt to give this minority group a voice, and the recognition that it is not one minority group, but more a collection of minorities. The hope in doing so is to bring visibility to the barriers Asian-Americans face in being recognized as a minority group and facing discrimination similar

to that of other minority groups. It is important to understand the way that these barriers are being experienced, and the deep complexity of the group being examined. Furthermore, homogenizing a diverse group is the root of discrimination against minorities, and so discussing the diversity within this group may help people become more aware how inappropriate these generalities are. By studying Asian-Americans, further implications can be drawn to other minority groups, including the ever-growing Hispanic-American population, that experiences two cultures, as well as generational and ethnic differences.

In order to examine this diversity even further, there are aspects not addressed in this thesis that should be explored, including but not limited to partial Asian-Americans, Asian exchange students, and Asian refugees in the United States. It would also be productive to examine public discussion of Asian-American discrimination in the future, as the role of Asian-Americans in the United States, much like their presence in the media is highly dynamic.

Intra-ethnic othering also requires further research. Karen D. Pyke et al has done the bulk of the research surrounding this idea of internalized racism, however there is not an abundance of literature on the subject. Pyke hypothesizes that the dearth of knowledge is due to the reluctance of researchers to make the oppressed group seem weak (Pyke, 2010). The silence, however, weakens the ability to discuss discrimination even further.

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