

## **Chapter 10**

# **RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH**

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A key predictor of one's mental health is his or her race. Racism has been identified as one of the potential stressors contributing to racial disparities in mental health. According to the Surgeon General, "racial and ethnic minorities in the United States face a social and economic environment of inequality that includes greater exposure to racism and discrimination, violence, and poverty, all of which take a toll on mental health" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Mental health problems are developed throughout the life course, making it imperative to examine the experiences that contribute to these outcomes from a young age.

In this chapter, we discuss how experiences of racial discrimination are associated with mental health outcomes among a young, diverse Asian American population. We approach this chapter by conceptualizing racial discrimination as a potential stressor. We examine commonly experienced types of discrimination among Asian American youth and young adults and explore how racial discrimination may negatively influence mental health. Finally, we discuss individual characteristics that may protect Asian American youth against the negative effects of racial discrimination.

## **RACISM FACED BY ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH**

Throughout the chapter, we refer to four key terms: racism, discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice. The term “racism,” in Clark and colleagues’ seminal paper, is defined as “the beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation” (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999, p. 805). Racism exists at the individual and institutional levels (e.g., laws) but in this chapter, we primarily focus on individual-level racism. “Discrimination” refers to differential behavioral acts, ranging from exclusion to physical assault, that disadvantage an individual or group based on social group membership (e.g., Brown & Bigler, 2005; Gee, Ro, Shariff-Marco, & Chae, 2009). “Stereotypes” are generalizations about a social group that are often linked to experiences of discrimination (Brown & Bigler, 2005). Finally, “prejudice” is a “predetermined judgment or bias based on one’s social group membership” (Fiske, 1998). Though discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice can be generalized to the experiences of many social groups (e.g., gender, perceived income, and age), we focus on their associations with racial group membership.

Asian Americans have historically been targets of racial discrimination (Gee et al., 2009; Leong & Okazaki, 2009; Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004), yet until recently, there has been less attention to their experiences compared to other racial groups. This discrepancy may be due to two reasons. First, because of the unique historical relationship between African Americans and Whites in the United States, research has primarily focused on African Americans’ experiences. Second, because Asian Americans are perceived as having achieved success in the United States, they are not seen as potential targets of discrimination (Gee et al., 2009; Liang et al., 2004; Okazaki, 2009).

Research focusing on discrimination among adolescents has differentiated between discrimination perpetrated by adults and peers. Some evidence suggests that Asian American youth experience more discrimination from their peers compared to youth from other racial minority groups (e.g., Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Discrimination from peers can be particularly stressful given the importance of positive peer acceptance among this age group (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Grossman & Liang, 2008; Rivas-Drake et al., 2008; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Qin, Way, & Rana, 2008). As adolescents transition into late adolescence and early adulthood, they incur new responsibilities and increased stressors (Greenberger & Chen, 1996) that may increase the number of contexts in which they experience discrimination. In the following section, we categorize the various discrimination experiences faced by Asian American youth, beginning with more blatant

and overt forms of discrimination to more subtle forms. Although racism has become less blatant and more covert and subtle over the past few decades (e.g., Sue, Capodilupo, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007), instances of blatant racism are still evident, especially among youth.

### **Blatant and Overt Racism**

The most blatant forms of racism against Asian Americans are hate crimes, defined as bias-motivated crimes that can involve physical assault or harassment, verbal abuse, threats online or through phone calls, or damage to property (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Umemoto, 2000). Many of these hate crimes occur in high school and college, but can occur as early as in elementary school. The timing of these incidents often coincides with key dates in U.S. history that create anti-Asian bias (NAPALC, 2002). For example, after the events of September 11, there was a sharp increase in hate crimes targeting Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Asian Indian Americans. Specifically, hate violence reported as “anti-other ethnicity/national origin” in the U.S. Department of Justice’s annual hate crime statistics increased by 350 percent from 2000 to 2001 and doubled in 2002. Many of these victims included Asian Americans, particularly in the South Asian American community. Moreover, it is likely that these statistics are underestimating hate crimes involving Asian American victims because of underreporting (NAPALC, 2002).

Blatant discrimination that occurs against Asian American adolescents happens most frequently in the form of physical and verbal harassment, bullying, and exclusion by peers. These experiences include being called racially insulting names, being mocked for assumed poor English skills, being excluded from peer groups, and being robbed (Fisher et al., 2000; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). In two quantitative studies completed in Boston and New York, Qin and colleagues (2008) found that more than half of first- and second-generation Chinese American adolescents reported physical harassment (e.g., being beaten, bullied, and hit) and verbal taunts and slurs (e.g., being called “Chino” and being told to “go back to China”) from their peers. These blatant experiences of discrimination have been linked to poor psychological adjustment for Asian American youth (Greene et al., 2006; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004).

Although the aforementioned studies focus on Asian American victims and non-Asian American perpetrators, blatant racial discrimination against Asian American youth can also be perpetrated by Asian Americans themselves. First-generation Asian American students are especially likely to be targets of verbal and physical bullying from their U.S.-born counterparts

because of the group's immigrant status, lower levels of acculturation, and poorer language skills (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Qin et al., 2008; Qin, Way, & Mukherjee, 2008). Mistreatment may also occur between different Asian ethnic groups (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Lee (1996) found that some highly identified Asian high school students engaged in name-calling and arguments over current political situations in their native countries. However, a shortage of research exists on such interethnic conflict, which is surprising, given that Asian Americans consist of at least 43 ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

### **Subtle and Covert Racism**

Discrimination also involves subtle and covert forms of racism. Examples can include being ignored for service or being watched by security at a store. In qualitative interviews, African American and Latino American students noted harassment from law authorities, the racist practice of low teacher expectations, and the comparison of academic achievement across ethnic groups in school settings (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). In contrast, for Asian American youth, unfair and differential treatment based on race may reside in interpersonal experiences of discrimination involving peers, suggesting an asymmetry in discrimination experiences between racial groups.

Sue and colleagues (2007) presented a taxonomy of brief, everyday exchanges that send marginalizing messages to racial minorities, enacted intentionally or unintentionally by perpetrators (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007; *see also* Harrell, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). For Asian Americans, these exchanges, termed "racial microaggressions," often take the form of interpersonal slights based on common Asian American stereotypes, such as asking an Asian American where she is really from (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007). Unlike blatant discrimination, racial microaggressions are harmful because of their "invisible" nature, cloaked as seemingly positive or innocuous cultural or racial comments and remarks. Because many perpetrators do not realize that these experiences are a form of aggression, experiencing potential racial microaggressions can lead racial minority targets to wonder whether they are being oversensitive and increase race-related stress (Harrell, 2000). However, these experiences can be easily dismissed and deemed negligible by perpetrators.

### **Discrimination Based on Stereotypes**

Discriminatory behavior toward racial minorities is often linked to stereotypes. Stereotypes of Asian Americans focus on a variety of

characteristics—including physical appearance (e.g., Qin et al., 2008), mannerisms, interpersonal styles, and gender-specific stereotypes (e.g., Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997). In this chapter, we review two commonly noted stereotypes of Asian Americans: model minority and perpetual foreigner.

### **Model-Minority and Positive Stereotypes**

Prior to the emergence of the model-minority stereotype in the 1960s, the dominant stereotype beginning in the late 1800s characterized Asian Americans as untrustworthy and troublesome (Gee et al., 2009). Stimulated by the civil rights movement and the 1965 Immigration Act, which reversed years of restrictive immigration and led to an increase of highly educated professionals and scientists entering the United States from Asia, policy and public sentiment shifted in the mid-20th century. A new stereotype emerged that cast Asian Americans as the “model minority,” a highly successful group that excels in academic and economical domains because of supposed Asian cultural values emphasizing hard work (Dinh, Weinstein, Nemon, & Rondeau, 2008; Ho & Jackson, 2001; Wu, 2002).

At first glance, the model-minority stereotype appears to confer positive attributes on Asian Americans, and in some instances, these positive attributes may benefit Asian American youth. Subtly reminding Asian Americans of their ethnic identity can boost the math performance of Asian American female students. In an experiment, Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) randomly assigned Asian American female students to think about their ethnic identity, gender identity, or neither identity (i.e., control) before taking a math test. Participants who thought about their ethnicity performed better on the test than those who did not think about their ethnicity. This performance boost has been found in Asian American girls as young as five (Ambady, Shih, Kim, & Pittinsky, 2001). Such findings suggest that positive stereotypes can positively affect performance, even among young children.

Yet, despite its apparent positive effect, the model-minority stereotype also has far-reaching, insidious consequences for Asian Americans. These negative consequences include resentment from peers, increased interracial conflict, community indifference to discrimination experiences, ignored heterogeneity within the Asian American population, and impaired academic performance. We consider each in turn below.

First, perceiving Asian Americans as model minorities can generate increased negative resentment from peers of other racial groups. Emotions like resentment, envy, and hostility can be elicited by those who perceive

Asian Americans as a model minority (Ho & Jackson, 2001). For example, some White, African American, and Latino adolescents felt resentful and in turn bullied Asian American peers who they perceived as receiving preferential treatment from teachers (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Qin et al., 2008). This resentment is intensified in domains involving achievement. Among college students, those who stereotyped Asian Americans as intelligent and ambitious viewed Asian Americans more negatively when they were competing for scarce resources such as job placement than when there was no competition (Maddux, Galinsky, Cuddy, & Polifroni, 2008). These findings are consistent with other research suggesting that Asian Americans are viewed not with admiration or exclusive positivity, but rather with ambivalence and resentment for their perceived success (Ho & Jackson, 2001; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Frisbie, Cho, & Hummer, 2001; Gee et al., 2009).

Second, increased resentment can lead to interracial conflict by pitting Asian American students against other racial minority students in at least two ways. Inherent in the model-minority stereotype, particularly within academic settings, may be a message to other minority groups that “[Asian Americans] overcame discrimination—why can’t you?” (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004, p. 444). For example, White college students perceived the social problems of African Americans as due to personal shortcomings rather than structural factors (Ho & Jackson, 2001). The model-minority stereotype thus creates a distorted image that all Asian Americans persevere and succeed academically without complaint and that other racial minority groups are lazy and complainers. Second, the model-minority stereotype may lead some Asian Americans to endorse negative stereotypes of other racial minority groups. Rosenbloom and Way (2004) noted that although some Asian American students were upset by the model-minority stereotype, they endorsed racial stereotypes about other groups. For example, some Asian American youth believed that Asian Americans do not fight back as African Americans or Latinos do, and hence, are not disruptive and aggressive like those groups. In other words, these Asian American youth used stereotypes to define and magnify the differences with other racial groups. These findings suggest that the model-minority stereotype can polarize perceived differences between racial minority groups and exacerbate interracial tensions.

Third, the community perceptions of model minorities can lead to indifference and inaction toward discrimination targeted against Asian American youth. This indifference may stem from beliefs that Asian Americans experience little discrimination, or are unharmed by these experiences. For example, Delucci and Do (1996) found that UC Berkeley students

and administrators reacted less urgently and strongly to blatant incidents of racism faced by Asian Americans than to similar incidents faced by African American college students. Racial incidents against African Americans were labeled as racist, while racial incidents against Asian Americans were viewed as isolated acts of hostility and not racially motivated. More recently, controversy has surfaced regarding whether attacks on Asian American high school students in Philadelphia were racially motivated and received adequate attention from school officials (Hoye, 2010). In both cases, school administration responses were criticized on the basis of inaction in addressing potential racial violence against Asian American youth. Unlike other racial minority groups, Asian American youth may not be readily recognized as targets of racial discrimination because of the model-minority stereotype.

Fourth, the model-minority stereotype masks problems faced by Asian American youth who do not fit the stereotype. This is particularly true of the newer wave of Asian immigrants. Many Southeast Asian Americans (e.g., Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans) who tend to be in a lower socioeconomic class than Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Asian Indians are often neglected by social programs because the model-minority stereotype renders their struggles invisible. This invisibility overlooks experiences of discrimination among Southeast Asian American youth and other Asian American youth of lower socioeconomic status. Many of these youth may be viewed as incapable of academic achievement and are treated unfairly by teachers due to limited English skills (Yang, 2004). The model-minority stereotype can thus overlook the varying levels of success and experiences within the Asian American community.

Finally, the model-minority stereotype can also impair Asian Americans' academic performance. Asian American youth may perceive the stereotype as an unfair burden that places pressure on them simply because of their race (Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997). Although, as discussed above, reminding Asian American college women of their ethnicity could boost their math performance (Shih et al., 1999), positive stereotypes can also undermine performance in situations where the targets of those stereotypes are concerned with being unable to meet those high expectations. Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) randomly assigned Asian American female students to answer questions about their ethnic identity or assigned them to a control group. The researchers found that Asian American females who were thinking about their ethnicity performed worse on a subsequent math test than those in the control condition because the positive expectations made salient by thinking about their ethnicity impaired their concentration. These findings suggest that performance may suffer when expectations

are blatantly made by positive stereotypes. Taken together, although the model-minority stereotype may appear to confer some benefits to Asian Americans, other research demonstrates far greater negative impact for Asian American youth, potentially outweighing any seemingly positive benefits.

### **The Perpetual-Foreigner Stereotype and Identity Denial**

In addition to the model-minority stereotype, Asian Americans must contend with the common misperception that they are foreign, despite how American they may feel, think, or act (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). The common Asian American experience, punctuated by questions such as “Where are you really from?” and comments such as “You speak English really well,” are indicative of the prevalence of this stereotype (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Liang et al., 2004; Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007; Takaki, 1989). Cheryan and Monin (2005) demonstrated that college students rated Asian faces as less American than White faces, and Asian Americans themselves reported being misperceived as non-native English speakers or as from another country more often than White Americans and African Americans.

While it is the case that foreign-born immigrants comprise about 75 percent of the Asian American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), the U.S.-born Asian American population is steadily growing, and the perpetual-foreigner stereotype is often imposed on them. For example, many U.S.-born Asian Americans find their loyalty to the United States contested (Committee of 100, 2009). They are often perceived as socially distanced from other American groups and unassimilable (Gee et al., 2009).

The perpetual-foreigner stereotype may be especially harmful to U.S.-born Asian American youth, who are socialized to be American, yet are not perceived to be so. The second generation, socialized within the U.S. racial minority context, forms their identity in a context that is different from foreign-born immigrants (Wiley, Perkins, & Deaux, 2008). U.S.-born Asian Americans see their membership in American society as a birthright, whereas immigrants see being American as more of an acquired identity (Ying, Lee, & Tsai, 2000). As a result, the two groups may react to discrimination differently. Whereas foreign-born Asian American youth appear to experience more racial discrimination, U.S.-born Asian Americans report being more negatively affected by it (Ying et al., 2000).

In reaction to instances of having their American identities denied, Asian American youth attempt to prove their American identity to those who doubt it. Cheryan and Monin’s (2005) study of college students showed that Asian Americans attempted to defend their American identity by



demonstrating American cultural knowledge (e.g., American TV shows) and reporting greater participation in American cultural activities. Asian American youth also reported poorer emotional well-being in response to having their American identities denied. In the following section, we describe how racial discrimination experiences, including identity threat and the model-minority stereotype, can have far-reaching, negative impacts on the health and well-being of Asian American youth.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION ON MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES**

Racial minorities in the United States suffer from poorer mental and physical health than their White counterparts (Adler & Rehkopf, 2008; Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Reviews of population-based studies have found mostly that reporting greater discrimination is associated with increased mental illness (Williams et al., 2003; Williams & Mohammad, 2009). For example, in a national study of Asian American adults, Gee, Spencer, Chen, Yip, and Takeuchi (2007) found that self-reported racial discrimination was associated with a greater likelihood of having any depressive or anxiety disorder within the past 12-month period, even after controlling for many factors such as acculturative stress, family cohesion, self-rated health, and poverty. Racism contributes to differential health outcomes beyond other forms of general distress (Pieterse & Carter, 2007) and socioeconomic status (Chen & Matthews, 2001; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). In a recent review focusing on Asian American adults, greater self-reported racial discrimination was associated with increased risk of mental health problems in 37 of 40 studies (Gee et al., 2009).

Experiences with racial discrimination are not only a social reality for adults, but as discussed above, for children and adolescents as well. Among younger children, perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination, commonly in terms of being excluded or being called names, can harm identity formation, peer relations, and physical and mental well-being (Brown & Bigler, 2005). Among adolescents and older youth, the messages and treatment they receive about their racial group have implications on their health and well-being, both physical and mental (Greene et al., 2006; Huynh & Fuligni, 2010). The following section on mental health is not meant to be a comprehensive summary of all studies on Asian American youth and mental health outcomes. We instead focus on outcomes and correlates most relevant to perceived racial discrimination, specifically self-esteem, emotional well-being and psychological distress, depression and anxiety, adjustment and motivation, physical health, substance use, and culture-bound syndromes.

### **Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is widely considered a reliable indicator of mental health for U.S.-born and immigrant Asian Americans (Rhee, Chang, & Rhee, 2002). Low self-esteem is associated with negative emotions, depression, anxiety, and maladjustment (e.g., Baumeister, 1999). Although the conceptualization of what self-esteem really is and the benefits of pursuing high self-esteem have been debated (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004), Asian Americans have been found to have lower levels of self-esteem than African Americans, Latino Americans, Whites (Fisher et al., 2000; Rhee et al., 2003; Twenge & Crocker, 2002), and Asians living in Asia (Chang, 2002). In particular, the difference between Asian Americans compared to Whites and Asians living in Asia might account for differences in psychological distress—such as having to deal with experiences of discrimination (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Greene et al., 2006).

Some research has demonstrated that greater perceived discrimination is associated with lower self-esteem among Asian American youth. For example, among Chinese American sixth-graders, discrimination from peers was associated with lower self-esteem compared to their African American counterparts (Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2008). Additionally, among Asian American high school students, increased peer discrimination was also found to be associated with lower self-esteem over a three-year longitudinal study (Greene et al., 2006). Among college students, discrimination has also been found to be associated with lower self-esteem (e.g., Lee, 2003). Asian Americans who anxiously expected rejection from others due to their race reported lower self-esteem because they felt greater shame (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008), thereby highlighting the variability that exists among Asian American college students in their response to discrimination. Some researchers argue that unlike African Americans, who may be more likely to direct their emotions outwardly (e.g., anger) in response to expectations of discrimination (e.g., Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002), Asian Americans have not had the racial consciousness-raising movement to protect their self-esteem against racial discrimination (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

### **Emotional Well-Being and Psychological Distress**

Racism can also have indirect effects on health through its influence on emotional well-being and psychological distress (Adler & Rehkopf, 2008; Gallo & Matthews, 2003). Emotional well-being refers to people's own evaluations of their lives in terms of pleasant and unpleasant emotions and judgments of satisfaction (Diener & Lucas, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas, &

Smith, 1999). Little is understood about how Asian Americans' emotional well-being is influenced by racial discrimination experiences. It is likely that Asian American youth have to negotiate cultural patterns of ideal emotional functioning, as some Asian cultures may value restraint of emotions as a sign of maturity (Kim & Chu, in press; Yeh & Yeh, 2003). As a result, Asian American youth may be less emotionally expressive about their own discrimination experiences, even if negative emotions are experienced.

Ambiguous and subtle racial discrimination experiences are related to a variety of negative emotions among older youth. Siy and Cheryan (2011) provide evidence that U.S.-born Asian American youth did not find positive stereotypes (e.g., "Asians are good at math") complimentary; on the contrary, they prefer these stereotypical comments be left unsaid. Similarly, among Asian American college students, interpreting potential racial microaggressions—such as receiving poor restaurant service or being snickered at by a group of teenagers—as a result of one's own race instead of due to another social membership (e.g., age and/or gender) was associated with greater negative emotion intensity (Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011). While White college students were just as likely to report experiencing such situations as Asian Americans, they did not generally report experiencing greater negative emotion intensity when they were prompted to think about their race as a possibility for their mistreatment. These findings suggest that the harmful emotional experiences of these racialized incidents may be tied to the experiences of racial minorities.

Discrimination also increases psychological distress, a general term that refers to day-to-day perceived stress. For example, Romero, Carvajal, Valle, and Orduna (2007) found that in a study of California eighth-graders, Asian Americans reported more intense psychological distress in reaction to racial jokes compared to White Americans. For Asian American youth, peer discrimination in particular may lead to greater psychological distress. Fisher and colleagues (2000) found that East and South Asian youth reported greater peer-caused psychological distress than African Americans or Whites. Interestingly, some work suggests that racial discrimination contributes to increased psychological distress beyond other types of stressors, such as acculturative stress (Gee et al., 2007). For example, acculturative stress, that is, balancing family obligations and the demands of American society, did not predict daily psychological distress, subclinical anxiety (e.g., nervousness and uneasiness), and depressive feelings (e.g., sadness, hopelessness, and discouragement) among Chinese American adolescents (Fuligni, Yip, & Tseng, 2002). Future work should continue to examine whether discrimination may be a bigger factor in determining the mental health of Asian Americans beyond the stress induced by having two cultural identities.

### **Depression and Anxiety**

Asian Americans may be at heightened risk for depression and anxiety compared to other racial groups (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Okazaki, 1997, 2000). One source of depression and anxiety among Asian Americans appears to be discrimination. Grossman and Liang (2008) found a significant association between distress in response to discrimination and increased depressive symptoms among Chinese American middle school youth in the Boston area. Among older Chinese American adolescents, perceptions of discrimination have been found to be associated with increased depression and decreases in self-esteem over time (Greene et al., 2006). Depression may be associated with how other people perceive their own racial group. More specifically, Rivas-Drake and colleagues (2008) found that Chinese American sixth-graders who perceived more favorable regard from others toward their group (i.e., public regard) reported fewer depressive symptoms than those who perceived less favorable public regard. These discrimination experiences need not be highly frequent to produce depressive symptoms. Using a two-week daily diary method, Huynh and Fuligni (2010) examined the frequency and role of discrimination on several indicators of well-being, including self-esteem, among Asian American twelfth-graders. The researchers found that though discrimination experienced every day among these youth occurred for only 11 percent of the sample, perceptions of discrimination were associated with higher levels of depression, psychological distress, and physical complaints, as well as lower self-esteem for the entire sample. Thus, discrimination experiences may not be commonplace yet perceptions of discrimination remain highly impactful for Asian American youth.

Although most studies of perceived discrimination and mental health focus on depressive symptoms as opposed to disorders (Gee et al., 2007), some studies on college-aged Asian Americans have found links between discrimination and diagnoses of clinical depression. For example, Hwang and Goto (2008) found a positive association between frequency of and perceived stress resulting from racial discrimination and mental health consequences like psychological distress, suicidal ideation, state and trait anxiety, and clinical depression. Future work should continue to examine whether discrimination impacts the onset of clinical depression and other disorders among Asian American youth.

### **Adjustment and Motivation**

In addition to the mental health outcomes discussed above, mental health outcomes are often examined in terms of adjustment, such as academic achievement and motivation among youth. Research examining educational

outcomes has suggested a paradox in which some Asian American youth may have seemingly high educational achievement yet poor psychological outcomes (Qin et al., 2008). Combined with other stressors like family dynamics and miscommunication (Qin, 2008), the severance between high academic achievement and poor psychological adjustment may be associated with peer discrimination among Asian American youth. Because Asian American youth are more likely to experience peer discrimination compared to adult discrimination, peer discrimination may have less dire consequences on academic achievement but have negative effects on peer relations and psychological adjustment (e.g., Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). In other words, Asian American students may be perceived to be well-functioning as demonstrated by high academic achievement. Yet this shrouds the reality that some Asian American youth are not functioning as well in other areas of their lives.

One potential outcome of perceived racial discrimination is poor interpersonal adjustment, defined as engagement with peer groups. As noted earlier, Asian American youth tend to experience more discrimination from peers than from adults (e.g., Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). This may have important implications on adjustment, such as less cross-racial engagement—defined as having fewer friends of other racial backgrounds compared to other racial groups, including Whites (Wong & Halgin, 2006)—and greater mistrust and discomfort with other racial groups (Kohatsu, Dulay, Lam, Concepcion, Perez, Lopez, & Euler, 2000; Romero et al., 2007). Thus, poor interpersonal adjustment among some Asian American youth may be tied to peer-discrimination experiences.

### **Physical Health**

In addition to mental health risks, exposure to discrimination may be related to physical health risks. For example, among a sample of Asian American adolescents living in Southern California in an urban context, acculturation to American society predicted sedentary activities like watching TV and playing video games and also eating fast foods like pizza and hamburgers (Unger, Reynolds, Shakib, Spruijt-Metz, Sun, & Johnson, 2004). The researchers argue that in an attempt to become American and fit in with peers, Asian American youth may become more involved in unhealthy activities.

In an experimental study investigating identity denial on physical health, Guendelman, Cheryan, and Monin (2011) found that the perpetual-foreigner stereotype contributes to the unhealthy eating habits of Asian Americans. After being denied their American identity, Asian American

college youth were more inclined to report an American food as their favorite as well as to select an American food to eat off a menu with both American and Asian options. Given that traditional Asian foods are on average healthier than prototypical American foods, this compensatory strategy to assert their American identities may contribute to poorer physical health among Asian Americans. Thus, the unique burden placed upon Asian American youth to prove that they are American can lead to detrimental behavioral outcomes that put the health of these youth at risk.

Racial stereotypes and peer pressure may also contribute to body image and eating disorders among Asian American girls and young women. Racism may contribute to negative feelings among young Asian American women regarding their physical features, due to body-image dissatisfaction in pursuing the Western beauty ideal (Hall, 1995). Similar to findings on eating habits, acculturation appears to play a role in Asian American women's perceptions of their own bodies. Specifically, Asian American college women who reported higher internalization of Western media portrayals of beauty ideals reported higher body-image dissatisfaction. Thus, for some Asian American women, the effects of racism and acculturation can lead to low self-esteem and vulnerability to eating disorders (Hall, 1995).

### **Substance Use**

Substance use, including alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, frequently co-occurs with psychological distress and depression (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009). Perceived discrimination is an important factor to consider in tangent with acculturation in examining substance use among Asian American youth. For example, higher levels of acculturation among Asian American adolescents were found to be related to higher levels of binge drinking (Hahm, Lahiff, & Guterman, 2004) and higher smoking prevalence rates (Chen, Unger, Cruz, & Johnson, 1999). In a study examining a large sample of Asian American female high school students of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and Vietnamese descent, depression was found to be significantly associated with alcohol and tobacco use (Otsuki, 2003). Similar to physical health findings, acculturation may play a role in increased substance use in response to discrimination. Yet a paucity of work has examined the role of discrimination on substance use among Asian American youth.

However, emerging work has begun focusing on discrimination and substance use among Asian American adults. A recent national study found that Asian American adults' exposure to racial discrimination was associated with higher history of alcohol disorder among those with low ethnic identity

(Chae, Takeuchi, Barbeau, Bennett, Lindsey, Stoddard, & Krieger, 2008). Among Asian American adults living in Arizona, reports of differential treatment due to race were associated with increased alcohol and controlled substance use, and being treated not as American was associated with increased tobacco use (Yoo, Gee, Lowthrop, & Robertson, 2009). Extensive research linking discrimination and substance use, however, is understudied among this population, and it remains to be seen whether these associations will be found with Asian American youth.

### **Culture-Bound Syndromes**

In addition to Western disorders, Asian American youth may experience culture-bound syndromes, or psychiatric and somatic symptoms considered recognizable disorders only within specific cultures (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). These syndromes occur with greater frequency in immigrant, refugee, student, and sojourner populations in the United States than in native-born populations (*see* Dana, 2002, for a review). Often these physical states and symptoms (e.g., poor appetite or pain) cannot be translated to an English equivalent (Gee, 2004). This area of research has received little attention among youth. Because mental illness may be heavily stigmatized in certain Asian communities, some youth may experience their anxieties in terms of physical aches and pains consistent with specific culture-bound syndromes. For Asian American adolescents, the earliest symptoms of anxiety may be somatic complaints, sleep and appetite disturbance, and poor school performance (Gee, 2004; Huang, 1997), but this work has yet to be examined through the context of racial discrimination.

As emphasized throughout this chapter, discrimination has been found to be associated with worsened mental health outcomes for Asian Americans and other racial minority groups. However, little research has addressed *how* perceptions and experiences of discrimination influence the development of mental illness and distress (Brondolo, Gallo, & Myers, 2009). Among adults, Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Dovidio (2009) have suggested that rumination, defined as the tendency to passively and repetitively focus on one's symptoms of distress and the circumstances surrounding those symptoms, may be one explanation for the association between discrimination and psychological distress among African Americans and lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. However, to our knowledge, this line of research has not been examined among Asian Americans. Future research should examine how processes like rumination may impact the development of mental illness among Asian American youth.

## **POSSIBLE BUFFERS AGAINST NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION**

What types of individual characteristics may help mitigate the harmful effects of perceived racial discrimination among Asian American youth? In the following section, we focus on two potential buffers: ethnic identification and social support.

### **Ethnic Identity**

Research on ethnic identity, defined as the attachment one feels toward one's cultural heritages (Cheryan & Tsai, 2006), has shown that being highly identified with one's ethnic group is positively associated with life outcomes such as well-being and self-esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Lee, 2003). However, there is inconclusive evidence on what role ethnic identity plays in the connection between discrimination and health outcomes.

For example, in a study of Chinese American sixth-graders in New York, Rivas-Drake and colleagues (2008) found that ethnic identification attenuated the link between discrimination and poor health outcomes. Experiences of peer discrimination were positively associated with depressive symptoms and negatively associated with self-esteem; however, students with higher ethnic identification reported fewer depressive symptoms in the face of peer discrimination compared to those with lower ethnic identification. Thus, ethnic identity was shown to buffer the negative effects of discrimination on self-esteem and depressive symptoms.

In contrast, other research has not found that level of ethnic identification influences the link between discrimination and well-being. In a diary study conducted by Huynh and Fuligni (2010), Asian American high school students from ethnically diverse public high schools reported their experiences of discrimination and completed a checklist measure of daily distress and self-report measures of self-esteem and depressive symptoms. They found, as others have, that greater experiences of discrimination were significantly associated with lower self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and increased distress. However, there was no evidence to suggest that ethnic identification played a role in attenuating or exacerbating the link between discrimination and these life outcomes. Similarly, Lee (2003) surveyed Asian American college youth at a large midwestern university on ethnic identification, perceived ethnic group and personal discrimination, and several measures of well-being. Replicating previous studies, greater perceptions of discrimination were associated with lower self-esteem and social connectedness. Lee (2003) found no evidence, however, to suggest



that ethnic identification had a significant influence on the link between discrimination and well-being.

This mixed evidence concerning the beneficial role of ethnic identity may be partly explained by the different approaches used by researchers. Ethnic identity is a multifaceted construct, yet much of the research within this domain has concentrated on two components: the extent to which individuals incorporate the ethnic group into their self-concept (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010; Lee, 2003; Phinney, 1990) and the private regard individuals hold for their ethnic group (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010; Lee, 2003). Focusing on these two components of ethnic identity has led to inconclusive evidence regarding how ethnic identity influences the relationship between discrimination and health outcomes. Meanwhile, other research investigating the sole influence of public regard, or an individual's perception of how others view their own group (Rivas-Drake et al., 2008; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), has shown that ethnic identity may buffer against the effects of discrimination. Rivas-Drake and colleagues (2008) speculate that the buffering effect of public regard may stem from how Asian American youth draw from overall positive perceptions of their group conferred by adults to discount the day-to-day discrimination faced from peers. Due to the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity, more research will be necessary to further understand what role and which components of ethnic identity affect the relationship between discrimination and mental health.

### **Social Support**

The quality of support from parents and peers may be crucial in buffering against the daily stressors that Asian American youth experience. Qin (2008) found that Chinese American parents who were compassionate and communicated with their children about developmental and acculturation challenges, such as language barriers and adjusting to peer groups, raised children who reported less psychological distress than parents who strictly emphasized performance and achievement. In addition, some research has found that greater peer support is associated with better mental health among Chinese American adolescents. Specifically, Grossman and Liang (2008) found that with greater peer support, the association between greater discrimination distress and lower social competence was reduced. Peer support may be especially critical in protecting against the negative effects of discrimination among Asian American youth. Together, adult and peer social support can buffer the negative impact of stressful events, including discrimination.

Support may also be provided through mental health services such as counseling. Asian Americans utilize mental health services at a lower rate compared to other Americans (Sue, 1994). One cultural explanation for this discrepancy is “loss of face,” or socially sanctioned claims concerning one’s social character or integrity in relation to prescribed roles (Zane & Yeh, 2002). Within the family context, Asian American parents may believe in keeping psychological issues within the family and be reluctant to seek mental health services (Gee, 2004). It is unclear how an increasingly U.S.-born population perceives mental health services, but there is some evidence to suggest that U.S.-born Asian American young adults also hide psychological problems because of fear of stigmatization (Lee, Joun, Martinez, Hsu, Robinson, Bawa, & Ma, 2009). Future research should examine how mental health services such as counseling can be more conducive to the needs of Asian American youth.

## CONCLUSION

Racial discrimination is a critical factor to consider in the healthy development of Asian American youth, beginning from a young age and particularly during adolescence. Increased evidence suggests that racial discrimination is associated with negative mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety. To improve the health among youth, research needs to expand our knowledge of discrimination experiences and develop effective interventions to reduce the discrimination and prejudice that afflict Asian Americans, who are often misperceived to be immune from the negative effects of racism. Understanding the negative effects of discrimination will be particularly important as the number of Asian American youth continues to rise steadily in the United States.

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