

Asian American Adolescents' Adaptation to American Society

Lucas Du

Mills High School, USA

ABSTRACT

As presented by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health in 2019, suicide was the most common cause of death among 15-24 years old Asian American youth. Such devastating influence includes many factors like generation gaps, language fluency, cultural differences, and family problems. Asian American adolescents have gone through experiences of discrimination from prejudices and stereotypes, and many scholars have conducted research on the mental health effects. This paper focuses on Asian American adolescents' adaptation to conditions in American society today. It can help readers understand how resilience is important in this growing American society and provide a reference for other adolescents on how mental health awareness needs to be considered.

Introduction

Asian Americans are defined as immigrants coming from Asian descent and have migrated to the United States. In a study done on the development of identity among Asian American high school students, the group of Asian Americans identified themselves in terms of "ethnicity, social class, and length of time in the United States" (Lee, 426). A study conducted by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health found that suicide was the most common cause of death among 15-24 years old Asian American youth in 2019. Due to many health factors, such as generation gaps, language fluency, cultural differences, and family problems, many negative impacts have occurred on Asian American adolescent health. According to Iyer et al., "The Asian American community is currently one of the fastest growing populations in the nation" (Iyer et al.). In order to adapt to American society, they have shown clear resilience and strength. Resilience is the ability to adapt to harsh life experiences. Building resilience takes time, and it does not mean that one will not face any difficulties along the way. In fact, building resilience goes through the process of pain and distress. Being resilient requires strong coping skills, a positive mindset, and the ability to handle pressure. They must be willing to look for resources and help when in dire need. Flach notes that the people who do show resilience not only "possess insight" into the psychological effects, but also show the capability to "verbalize it" to others (Rahill et al.).

Asian American successes and achievements have gradually increased. According to Frank H. Shih, Director of the Singapore Study Abroad Programs at Stony Brook University, they are known for their hard work and their persistence to achieve more, which has helped them in the United States (Shih, 356). These beliefs have led Asian Americans to be discriminated against because of the model minority stereotype. This stereotype implies an Asian American who does not participate in social activities, but only focuses on academic achievements and personal life. Stacey J. Lee, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, further states that Asian Americans are successful because they work hard and come from cultural beliefs that education has high value (Lee, 413). As a result, Asian Americans are not often viewed as victims of racism and thought to experience more accomplishments than Whites or other minority groups (Tong). This, although may seem positive

at first, is actually detrimental towards all Asian Americans. At school, Asian Americans face frequent discrimination. According to Suniya S. Luthar, Chief Research Officer and Co-Founder at Authentic Connections, the widespread model minority stereotype “sets them apart” from the majority of the White peer group because of their commitment to academics, obedience to their parents, and reservedness (Luthar et al. 644). In a study done to examine patterns among Asian American students in high achieving schools, two main factors consistently appeared and were connected to depression and isolation. These factors were discrimination, and the urge to hide their “true self” (Luthar et al. 643). The sacrifices made to achieve such high levels of accomplishment are often overlooked. Asian Americans frequently feel anxious. “The authors argue that despite their competencies, the social and cultural context of the school may not foster belonging and emotional security” (Doan et al.).

The Misconceptions of Asian Americans

There are many misconceptions with Asian Americans. They are often perceived as a homogeneous group of people, but actually differ. They can be classified as “voluntary and involuntary minorities” (qtd. In Ogbu 1989). Voluntary minorities are minorities who came to the United States in search of a better life. Involuntary minorities are minorities who came to the United States because of some conflict that happened to arise in their country, such as slavery or war. “According to Ogbu, voluntary minorities tend to do well in school because they see schooling as a necessary step to social mobility” (Lee, 413). Many parents are willing to spend money on education as their first priority. Involuntary minorities may be low achievers at school because they see schooling to be against their identities and there are not enough resources provided to them by their parents. Both groups face anxiety every day when making efforts to live up to the standards of the model-minority stereotypes.

Besides facing the discrimination from society, Asian American adolescents also face pressure from their families. The culture differences in American and Asian societies are very different. Many vital values in Asian society are seen as faults in American society, such as being humble about oneself. Additionally, family pressures play a key role in a person’s identity. Asian children and adolescents are taught that family success or failure is linked within each member of the family. “Because success or failure is shared with one’s family, the consequences of one’s actions are greatly magnified, making success more imperative, and the fear of failure more intense” (Shih, 357). Asian American parents have high expectations and often choose career goals for Asian American adolescents that the adolescents don’t agree with. “Chinese culture emphasizes family interdependence, obligation, and cohesion” (Juang, 2404). Under these conditions, they need to figure out how to deal with all the stress around them and look for freedom.

Asian American adolescents have a higher need for mental health facilities than White adolescents (Li et al.). However, many are not willing to ask for assistance and share personal issues. In order to prevent the shame of families, some Asian American family members may avoid mental health treatment because they fear for their family’s reputation. Additionally, families from Asian American backgrounds encounter many obstacles to mental health services. “Some parents may not perceive the need for treatment; thus, this affects their motivation to engage in treatment of their child’s mental illness” (Li et al.). Moreover, in public, Asian American adolescents may not express their true selves because they are afraid of negative judgment. They also feel that this represents a feeling that “one’s true self” will not gain acceptance and liking from others” (Luthar et al. 655).

Resilience from Asian American Adolescents

Despite all the social and emotional difficulties and problems, Asian American adolescents show strong resilience. Their diverse cultural background provides a limitation for successful adaptation (Suárez-Orozco et al.

792). However, even in all these conditions, they have overcome these barriers. These experiences cannot be empathized, and the situation can be compared with Nelson Mandela's experience in prison. "Nelson Mandela was the leader of the movement against South Africa's policy of apartheid in the 20th century, during which time he spent 27 years in prison" (Mandela). He had to withstand the endless days of loneliness in prison, which was intended to destroy one's confidence. Indeed, this is very similar to situations for Asian American adolescents. They feel isolated in American society. The challenge for them is to confidently accept themselves for who they are, without changing their beliefs. Mandela states, "The first task in accomplishing that is learning exactly what one must do to survive" (Mandela).

Optimism contributes to resilience and is key to how people adapt to stressful situations. In a survey done to evaluate impacts on the aftermath of an earthquake in Haiti, they focused on resilience among Haitians. "All (100%) of participants, regardless of gender or neighborhood of residence, accepted that they were limited as human beings, recognized and managed uncertainty, and integrated their emotions with their cognitions (Rahill et al.). The impacts on resilience are very similar to impacts on Asian Americans adolescents. Even though it may not seem apparent, discrimination against Asian Americans is everywhere. The aftermath of the Haitian earthquake portrayed many situations of resilience. With all the discrimination, racialization, and stereotypes, Asian Americans also show their resilience, and the importance to stay positive throughout everyday struggles.

Asian American adolescents build their resilience in three areas: individual, family, and their school community. This is done by working on attitudes like self-respect and self-compassion. Self-compassion involves seeing one's own journey through life, accepting that suffering, failure, and mistakes are part of human experience, and that all people deserve compassion. It is connected to greater knowledge and understanding of one's beliefs. Self-compassion is also related to the ability to control one's emotions, including stress. Because Asians are more interdependent and have likely had some sort of experience with Buddhist teachings, they have more self-compassion than others (Neff, 94). Asian American adolescents feel proud of their culture and embrace their culture. A study looking at Chinese American young adults shows that strong cultural identity, through multilingualism and pride in heritage, is positively associated with higher self-esteem (Tsai, 285). High self-esteem is a positive factor for resilience, which positively affects life enjoyment and helps reduce stress.

The importance of family bonding has shown how Asian American parents have helped their children develop skills to overcome discrimination. Family connectedness in adolescence was linked to four-fold lower odds of mental health outcomes (Iyer et al.). Research has suggested that strong family relationships have been protective against suicide attempts by Asian American adolescents (Wong et al. 1459). Asian-heritage parents are likely to share their heritage culture, highlight diversity, and promote equality. They would rather not deliver negative messages to avoid conflict with other races. Aside from sharing heritage culture, Asian American parents have prepared their children to oppose racism, "develop a critical consciousness, and cultivate appreciation for diverse people and perspectives..." (Juang et al. 31). Parents have used their own experiences and provided support, knowledge, and energy to conquer acts of oppression.

Teacher and friend relationships are important to alleviate stress from parent related academic problems. Problematic relationships with parents are aspects of risk. During adolescence, other sources of support have helped Asian Americans comfortably show resilience. A study found that greater peer support reduced the negative correlation between discrimination, distress, and cooperation (Grossman and Liang, 7). According to Robert Crosnoe, an associate dean of liberal arts and the Rapoport Centennial Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, "Asian American adolescents have the most friends and receive the most support from teachers" (Crosnoe and Elder, JR. 590). Among them, these supportive relationships have reduced the risk of distant relationships with parents.

Social support for adolescent health is highly valued. This includes physical and emotional support. Social support has a generally beneficial effect on relieving individual psychological pressure, inhibiting negative emotions, providing positive emotional experience and promoting mental health (Liu). It is one of the most effective ways to counter stressors and increase self-esteem. One study found that when adolescents received

social support, they felt confident and safe. Parents, teachers, and friends are all forms of social support, and have already helped Asian American adolescents deal with self-esteem, resilience, and mental health.

Conclusion

Asian Americans adolescents have currently shown resilience in academics, family settings, and community situations. Many solutions are presentable for how to further strengthen resilience for them. Encouraging participation and social connection will help improve one's communication skills to break the model minority stereotype and become part of mainstream American culture. Asian American parents should respect decisions and life choices for their kids. Teachers should ask about one's physical well-being and learn more about the students' daily routine, which can help the needs of Asian Americans adolescents. They should also encourage them to seek help from mental health and wellness when signs of academic stress are shown. Furthermore, American society should address this issue of discrimination and help ensure that Asian American adolescents have a healthy mindset. Under all the pressure they face, there is still room for improvement. This can be compared to the situation of the Haitian survivors of the 2010 earthquake. "The understanding of resilience among Haitians can strengthen resilience where it exists and provide key factors that are important in health and reconstruction" (Rahill et al.). Until the understanding of mental health among Asian American adolescents is established, mental health awareness needs to stay relevant and be considered.

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