

Racism and Prejudice: A Qualitative Exploration of the Effects of Perpetual Foreigner

Stereotype on Asian Americans

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## **Abstract**

Although many Asian Americans are now American born citizens, do they continue to be viewed as perpetual foreigners? How prevalent is this phenomenon and what are its emotional consequences? The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore personal accounts among Asian American young adults about their experiences of being perceived as foreigners. Sixteen Asian American young adults, ages vary between 18-25 were recruited primarily from a suburban city outside of New York. In addition to collecting demographic data on age, ethnicity, country of origin, gender, place of growing up, all participants read an experimental vignette portraying a scenario of being asked, “where are you from?” with the assumption that the individual is not American born. Participants then record written responses to the perception and affective response to the scenario and the rating of how frequently participants have experienced this scenario in their own lives. Responses are then evaluated as to prevalence and nature of this experience among Asian American young adults.

## **Introduction**

Racism is social constructed based on racial and cultural characteristics, often referring to the disparagement of people of a certain group. It often involves the relegation of targeted ethnic groups who possess little social power (Liang, Li, Kim, 2004). Racism can influence various aspects of life, such as one's residence, educational and economic opportunities, and experiences with health care (Gee, Ro, Shariff-Marco & Chae, 2009). In light of recent events, including the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin of Florida and Mike Brown of Ferguson, Missouri, there is no equivocation that racism is more than just an ideology; it is very much still a reality for many ethnic groups. That said, racism in the United States has often been deemed to be an issue between Whites and Blacks (Liang, Li, Kim, 2004). Such inattention results from the majority of Americans' penchant to classify racial issues into a spectrum where Whites are on one end and the Blacks on the other.

Another reason for unintentional overlooking of Asian Americans' encounters with racism is the model minority stereotype (Liang, Li, Kim, 2004). This stereotype embodies the notion that Asian Americans have accomplished success through hard work and adherence to Asian cultural norms (Lee & Kumashiro, 2005). Though the model minority stereotype may have a positive chime to it, the stereotype possesses several negative implications. One of which is silencing the validity of racial outcry by black and Latino Americans (Kwong, 1998). In other words, when other ethnic groups claim racial inequality in economic opportunities, instead of tackling white racism, blacks and Latinos are perceived as not working hard and diligent enough as Asian descents. As a result, a white-dominated political structure is perpetuated. Another

repercussion of the stereotype is hiding the diverse experiences of Asian Americans. According to the National Education Association, there are over 50 ethnic groups within the Asian American category (Lee & Kumashiro, 2005). This means different Asian communities have different complex racial nuances related to language, history, religion, and social class. By lumping all Asian ethnicities together, complex unique problems to various Asian communities are often overlooked. Most importantly, the model minority stereotype conceals tangible social and psychological problems experienced by Asian Americans and diverts attention away from racism that may affect their lives (Liang, Li & Kim, 2004).

Though arguably invisible to a large segment of the American public, racism towards Asian Americans is no recent or uncommon phenomenon. From a historical point of view, Asian Americans have experienced outright segregation and discrimination from the U.S. government. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese Exclusion Act was implemented to outlaw the immigration of Chinese laborers into the country. In 1913, the state of California passed a law that prohibits first-generation Japanese immigrant from owning land (Abreu, Ramirez, Kim & Haddy, 2003). Fortunately, these acts, which undoubtedly resulted from negative perceptions of Asians and the intention of segregation, have been repealed. Yet, racism towards Asian descent continues to manifest in other manners.

In regards to racial manifestation, the iceberg model is introduced. Adapted from *Asian American Communities and Health: Context, Research, Policy and Action* (2009), the iceberg model displays racial discrimination at multiple tiers (Gee, Ro, Shariff-Marco & Chae, 2009). Acts of hate crime represent the tip of the iceberg. An example of hate crime is the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was mistaken as a Japanese American (Lee, Vue,

Sklecki & Ma, 2007). Chin was murdered in Detroit, Michigan by two white Americans who blame Japanese Americans for the loss of employment. The base of the iceberg includes covert and more subtle actions of racism. It also represents implicit racial bias attitudes as well as institutional and structural racism. An example of a subtle act of racism is the ridicule of Judge Lance Ito. Judge Ito was the presiding judge over the prominent O.J. Simpson murder trial. He is also a third-generation Japanese American. Due to the public's growing impatience with the trial's progress, Judge Ito received a fair amount of disparagement (Tuan, 1998). One of which came from back-then New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato. As a guest of a radio show, Senator D'Amato ridiculed the judge by mimicking an Asian scent (Tuan, 1998). The irony here as pointed out by the author of *Forever Foreign or Honorary White?* is that, similar to Judge Ito's background, Senator D'Amato is also a third-generation American.

One distinct form of racial discrimination that happens on a regular basis is racial microaggression, which is defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007)." Racial microaggression insinuates racial indignities and offenses that people of color encounter on a regular basis (Torres-Harding, Andrade & Diaz, 2012). Examples of racial microaggression consist of a taxi driver who fails to pick up passengers of color and an airport security officer screening passengers of color with tremendous frequency and caution. Racial microaggression can also manifest as degrading verbal statements such as "You speak English really well!" and "So where are you really from?" Both of these statements suggest that speaking English fluently is a rarity and that Asians do not *really* belong in the United States.

Exploring further, there are several types of microaggression: microassaults that are explicit racial derogation, microinvalidations that are actions that annul experiential reality of ethnic minorities, and microinsults that reduces an individual's ethnic heritage to a few essentials (Ong, Burrow, Fuller- Rowell, Ja & Sue, 2013). Among the three types, microassaults are certainly more salient and overt than microinvalidations and microinsults. While microassaults involves labeling someone a "Chink" or "Jap" or displaying caricatures of slanted eyes and buck teeth, microinsults and microinvalidations are unintentional and tend to operate outside an individual's awareness (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal & Torino, 2009). Take for example when a white employer says the following to a prospective candidate of color, "I believe the most qualified person should get the job, regardless of race." The statement here seems benign. But context determines the underlying message, which in this case suggests that people of color are not qualified (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esuqilin, 2007). Sue et al. (2007) outlined specific themes of racial microaggression. The following is a list of themes with illustrative examples (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal & Torino, 2009; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007):

- Alien in own land (Where were you born? Where are you really from?),
- Ascription of intelligence (You are a credit to your race. You are really good at math.)
- Denial of racial reality (I'm not racist. I have several Asian friends.)
- Second – class citizen (individual of color mistaken for a service worker.)
- Pathologizing cultural values (To an Asian person: "Why are you so quiet? Be more verbal.")

In many cases of racial microaggression, the context of what was said and acted on, which are more than often deemed harmless, determines the underlying messages. Based on the listed examples, the derogatory underlying messages vary from “You are not American,” “It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent,” to “Assimilate to the dominant culture.”

Studies have showed that racial microaggression may impact an individual’s well being (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja & Sue, 2013; Liang, Li & Kim, 2004). One of the repercussions is racism-related stress, which is a psychological response that specifically results from exposure to racism (Liang, Li & Kim, 2004). Harrell (2000) identified several sources of racism-related stress. The following is a list of the sources with examples (Harrell, 2000):

- Racism-related life events (being harassed by the police or being discriminated against in housing)
- Vicarious racism experiences [death of Vincent Chin and Joseph Ito (Lee, Vue, Sklecki & Ma, 2007)]
- Daily racism microstressors (racial microaggression)
- Chronic-contextual stress (unequal distribution of resources and opportunities)
- Collective experiences (lack of political representatives and negative stereotypic portrayals in the media)
- Transgenerational transmission (the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II)

While some sources of stress have people so immersed with racial discrimination without awareness, others serve as constant reminders that one’s race/ethnicity is salient factor in the world.

Regardless of the source, racism-related stress undeniably affects functional wellbeing (Harrell, 2000). Ong et al. (2013) researched on the relation between racial microaggression and daily wellbeing of Asian Americans and classified three types of impact racial microaggression may produce: somatic symptoms, positive affect, and negative affect. Somatic symptoms include aches, gastrointestinal symptoms, and other physical discomforts. While positive affect includes “enthusiastic,” “energetic,” and “joyful,” research participants are required to rate how “angry”, “irritated,” and “sad” they feel for negative affect (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja & Sue, 2013). According to research findings by Ong et al. (2013), microaggression is the most commonly encountered form of racial discrimination, with 78% of sample participants reporting one form or the other of racial microaggression within 2 weeks. It was also demonstrated that while negative affect and somatic symptom are expected on days with elevated microaggression, there was no association between microaggression and positive affect, suggesting that the environmental factors influencing negative affect may be different from those affecting positive affect (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja & Sue, 2013). Another study by Gee et al. (2009) revealed that experiences with discrimination may increase the risk of engaging in maladaptive behaviors, which include smoking and/or alcohol disorders as a way to cope with stress. A review of 62 studies pertaining to racism and mental health reveals that Asian Americans who report discrimination are more likely to experience morbidity (Gee, Ro, Marco & Chae, 2009).

One of the significant research findings is that the commonly encountered theme of racial microaggression. By disaggregating the frequency distributions, it is revealed that the assumption that all Asian Americans are foreign-born contributes as the most common category of racial microaggression (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja & Sue, 2013). This assumption is

known as the perpetual foreigner stereotype, which is also the primary focus of the current study. The current study aims to explore how the perpetual foreigner stereotype affects Asian Americans, especially in terms of social identity and psychological adjustment in effort to continue the significant works of past researchers (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos & Heng, 2007; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Huynh, Devos & Smalarz, 2011).

Even though a large number of Americans claim that individuals should not be treated differently base on the color of their skin and cultural heritage, Devos and Banaji (2005) reiterated that most Americans hold an inclusive definition of what it means to be American. One study examined the predictive power of the degree of inclusiveness of ethnic minorities into the national category of ‘American’ and found that sample participants responded faster to the pairings of American symbols and white Americans faces, as opposed to the pairings of American symbols and Asian American faces (Devos & Banaji, 2005). In other words, being “American” is implicitly equated with being white. Cheryan & Monin (2005) found that while there were no differences in the level of belonging in America reported by Asian American and White Americans, Asian Americans were nearly 5 times more likely to be mistaken as a foreigner and/or a non-native English speaker than White Americans.

In a study involving identifying American landmarks after exposing faces of Asian and White individuals, Devos & Heng (2007) tested the idea that the American = White effect reflects an automatic accessibility bias, which is assumed to lead individuals to expect that a White person is more likely to be American than an Asian person is. Results were generated through sequential priming technique and indicated that sample participants are more likely to incorrectly identify American landmarks after being exposed to faces of Asian individuals, as

opposed to the faces of White individuals. This finding not only confirms the implicit bias against Asian Americans, but also supports the notion that whites are established as Americans quicker than Asians do, as did previous research studies (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Cheryan & Monin, 2005).

Researchers have attributed the social dominance theory in explaining the phenomenon that results from the perpetual foreigner stereotype (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Huynh, Devos & Smalarz, 2011). The social dominance theory essentially focuses on individual and structural factors that contribute to various forms of group-based oppression (Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar & Levin, 2004). According to this theory, the relations between ethnic groups in the United States are characterized by disparities in power and social status. Theory assumes that White Americans are seen 'owning' the nation, while ethnic minorities sit at the sideline of the American society (Devos & Banaji, 2005). In other words, by being a member of an ethnic minority seems to involve a degree of exclusion from the national identity of 'American' and thus, potentially contributing to marginalization and a reduced sense of belonging to America (Huynh, Devos & Smalarz, 2011).

One of the numerous implications of imposing perpetual foreigner stereotype on Asian Americans is internalized racism. Asian Americans, youth in particular, may learn to despise what makes them different and wish they were born either black or white (Lee & Kumashiro, 2005). Huynh, Devos & Smalarz (2011) theorized that the awareness of the perpetual foreigner stereotype would yield higher levels of depression and lower levels of hope and life satisfaction for Asian Americans. In addition to confirming their hypothesis, research findings also revealed that those who are frequently perceived as foreigners might feel conflicted about their national

identity and thus, experience a sense of cultural homelessness (Huynh, Devos & Smalarz, 2011). When experiencing identity denial, which takes place in the form of questioning what language one speaks or where one is from, it is found that Asian Americans attempt to prove that they belonged in the mainstream America (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). As explained by Cheryan and Monin (2005), such assertion of national identity of 'American' comes in two forms: (1) by embracing one's in-group membership explicitly and (2) by engaging in prototypical behavior. The latter is would be more subtle and covert and leads to changing one's speech pattern and attitudes.

With all the above mentioned and previous studies analyzed, this study attempts to explore the effects of perpetual foreigner stereotype on Asian Americans, particularly young adults. To simply put it, it seeks to survey the sentiments and thoughts of Asian American young adults when they encountered instances of perpetual foreigner stereotype. I hypothesize that stereotypical expectation that Asian individuals must be foreigners produces unpleasant sentiments and evaluations about their 'American' identity.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research method is applied in this study in order capture the voices of Asian Americans. Not only does this qualitatively depict the implication of racial micro-aggression, it also enabled research participants to voice out their experiences that may have been silenced or neglected due to subtle expressions of racism and prejudice.

#### **Participants**

Research participants were recruited from the City and Long Island, New York. They were made aware about the study by the posters advertising the research and word of mouth by

students. The sample consists of 16 participants (8 men and 8 female). All participants are descents of Asian parents (this means that both father and mother are Asian descents).

The following chart is the breakdown of the ethnicity of sample participants:

Ethnicity	Percentage
Indian	49%
Filipino	25%
Chinese	19%
Vietnamese	7%

## Procedures

Once debriefed about the purpose of the research and obtained consent, participants were requested to complete a questionnaire that identifies their demographic information. The primary purpose of this survey is to distinctively acknowledge the diversity within the Asian American community. Participants then proceeded to read an experimental vignette (see Appendix A).

Based on the scenario the vignette portrays, participants responded to the following questions:

1. What do you think Belinda said?
2. Has this ever happen to you? If so, how often has this happen?
3. How did you feel during the situation?
4. How did you respond to the situation?

Note that there was no interaction between sample participants and the primary investigator while answering the questions of the vignette. With the application of Tropes, which is an analysis software designed to examine text and semantics, written responses were assessed by

primary investigator and research supervisor. The analysis of written responses is conducted is categorized based on discussion questions.

## **Results & Discussion**

### Discussion Question 1

Referring to the vignette, this discussion question enables sample participants to predict how Belinda the perceived Korean American would respond to a question asked by her friend, which insinuates the perpetual foreigner stereotype. Based on the responses given, three categories are created: (1) immediately clarify her family origin and ethnicity, (2) ask to clarify Joan's question, and (3) state that she is an American of Korean descent. 11 individuals opted for to clarify her family origin, 1 expected Belinda to state that she is an American of Korean descent.

### Discussion Question 2

This question primarily focuses on the frequency of the occurrence. All sample participants responded that they have encountered a similar scenario. The difference between the scenario depicted by the vignette and real-life scenarios encountered by sample participants is the question. While Belinda was asked "what about before that," most participants pointed out that they were asked, "where are really from?" and "what are you?" The significant finding here lies with the fact that male participants stated that they get the question more frequently than female participants do.

### Discussion Question 3

The purpose of this question is to allow sample participants to express the emotion involved, both positive and negative, in response to the manifestation of the perpetual foreigner

stereotype. In their experiences, sample participants expressed the sense of “they” versus “me,” the in-group versus the out-group. Based on the responses, only 2 participants perceived the question with no negative underlying message. Female participants were either confused or surprised by the question. One of them wrote, “Sometimes I am in disbelief that in this day in age many individuals still cannot grasp the idea of Asians being born and raised in America.” Imagine being told and reiterated an American since birth and suddenly questioned regarding the identity of being an ‘American.’ For many of the male participants, they felt annoyed, upset, offended, or all three together. A male participant responded, “I was quite upset and somewhat infuriated because the whole time my friend didn't say a word given the irony of the situation. My friend was an international exchange military cadet from Lithuania and there I am getting questioned about my nationality even though I'm the one in the United States Military.”

Another spectrum of the sentiments expressed by participants is feeling like an outsider and gradually becoming accustomed to the situation. While one participant expressed “Honestly, I have become so accustomed to this situation and when people ask me I just offer the information of my family history. I find it a lot easier and it ignores a line of questioning,” another wrote, “The first few times I felt as if I were an outsider, but as the number of accounts increased, I became accustomed to it” As depicted by the responses, the perpetual foreigner stereotype may have implied that part of being an Asian American is receiving questions on a regular basis that suggest being foreign and constant affirming his or her American identity. This finding supports the notion of marginalization and a reduced sense of belonging to America (Huynh, Devos & Smalarz, 2011).

Discussion Question 4

Note that the final question refers to the participants' past experiences and not the scenario depicted in the vignette. Based on the responses given, four categories are established: (1) to explain family history and origin, (2) state ethnicity and country or origin, (3) ask to clarify, and (4) mention the U.S. state where he/she from. More than half of the participants claimed that they would explain their family history right off the bat, while one of them chooses to simply state the U.S. state in which she was born. While three participants state their ethnicity, two of them ask to clarify the question they perceive to be suggesting the perpetual foreigner stereotype. According to research findings, it is essential note that a large segment of the participants instinctively decide to clarify their family origin because they assume that it what s expected of them.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the present study was to survey and explore the implications of the perpetual foreigner stereotype on Asian American. While male participants tend to find questions that implicitly suggest Asian Americans are foreign offensive, female participants perceived these questions with no ill intentions. Regardless of gender, however, participants demonstrated their instinctive choice to explain their family origin and 'American' identity. This confirms the notion that Asian Americans are not frequently granted the 'American' identity and are frequently implicitly required to assert their 'American' identity.

In regards to limitations, , it is important to note that because this is a qualitative study; thus, findings are not meant to generalize the experiences of Asian American. Additionally, due

to the small number of participants, although research findings contribute and confirm findings of previous studies (Huynh, Devos & Smalarz, 2011; Sue Bucceri, Lin, Nadal & Torino, 2009), findings of present study should not oversimplify the phenomenon that results from the perpetual foreigner stereotype, as there are numerous critical nuances to this complex issue to investigate.

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### **Appendix A: Experimental Vignette for Sample Participants**

**Instruction:** Please read the following carefully. Then, proceed to answering the questions below. Feel free to be as explicit as possible.

Belinda is an 18-year-old third generation Korean American young lady who was born and grew up in San Francisco, California. She has visited South Korea three times. Even though Belinda enjoys being with her extended family members who are residing in South Korea, she identifies San Francisco her home.

As an outgoing person, Belinda enjoys getting to know new people and is extremely excited for her first semester of college in New York. The following scenario is of the conversations she had during student orientation:

Belinda: Hi! My name is Belinda! How are you?

Friend: Hello! Nice to meet you! I am Joan. Where are you from?

Belinda: I am from San Francisco. It's been quite a journey to uproot and be in the Big Apple!

What is your major?

Friend: Oh, I meant, what are you? Where are you really from?

Belinda: I don't think I understand your question... My parents were born in San Francisco, California. That's where I was born, grew up, and attended high school.

Friend: Oh, what about before that?

Discussion Questions:-

1. What do you think Belinda said?
2. Has this ever happen to you? If so, how often has this happen?
3. How did you feel during the situation?
4. How did you respond to the situation?