

Mentoring Asian American Scholars: Stereotypes and Cultural Values

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Students of color in higher education face myriad challenges that supersede the academic, including feelings of isolation, lack of belongingness, and overt discrimination that confer stress on top of their academic workload. One avenue to tackle these issues and reduce the negative outcomes associated with these stressors is the effective mentoring of scholars of color. Research has typically focused on African American and Latino scholars. Asian American scholars have received less attention despite studies showing high levels of anxiety, depression, isolation, and reported experiences of targeted microaggression and discrimination among this population. This article highlights the cultural issues that need to be raised and considered in the mentorship of Asian American scholars. In particular, mentors need to be aware that stereotypes of Asian Americans are pervasive, insidious, and harmful, even those that may be thought of as positive stereotypes, and to examine their own beliefs about them. Second, mentors should be aware of the cultural values that predominate in Asian American cultures—in particular, hierarchical collectivism and a high-context communication style—that may be at odds with the mentor's cultural values or pose as obstacles that negatively influence the mentoring process. Finally, broad considerations and recommendations for mentoring Asian Americans scholars are offered.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

To achieve a diverse research workforce, scholars who are underrepresented in the research field need to have appropriate resources and mentorship to have an equal chance for success in their academic careers. In the case of Asian American scholars, some factors that derail a successful educational and career trajectory are pervasive cultural stereotypes, made all the more pernicious because they are often thought of as positive. Effective mentoring of Asian American scholars may support successful educational outcomes and career advancement, creating a diverse and innovative workforce in academia and research.

Mentoring has long been recognized as a necessary and desirable component of higher education, especially in the postgraduate milieu where knowledge is highly specialized and keys to that knowledge handed out to relatively few. In particular, scholars of color face obstacles in the university environment including tokenism, isolation, racial and ethnic bias, and lack of mentoring (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). Previ-

ous studies have pointed out that scholars of color often feel alone and invisible (e.g., Pololi, Cooper, & Carr, 2010) and face higher workloads than their White counterparts because of overt and unspoken demands and expectations to represent what might be considered the minority voice on campus (Rodríguez, Campbell, & Pololi, 2015). One strategy that mitigates the stress and burnout that may ultimately derail the academic careers of underrepresented scholars is effective mentoring (Kim, Goto, Bai, Kim, & Wong, 2001; Padilla, 2008; Williams, Thakore, & McGee, 2016).

In recent years, attention has been paid to the mentoring of minority students in major universities and mentoring programs have been established, especially for African American and Latino scholars. However, even in environments where mentoring is prized and cultural issues are prioritized, Asian American scholars are often overlooked, in spite of evidence that Asian American students suffer from high levels of anxiety, depression, isolation, and overt and covert discrimination and microaggressions (Huang, 2012; Okazaki, 1997; Uba, 1994). This omission may result from

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the widespread perceptions of Asian Americans as high achieving, implying a lack of need for mentoring. Asian Americans are often seen as what has been termed the *model minority*, a stereotype that may undermine perceptions of vulnerability in those around them and inhibit help-seeking on the part of the students themselves (Kim & Lee, 2014). In addition, Asian American students who perform less well academically suffer even greater academic stress when the model minority myth is internalized (Yoo, Miller, & Yip, 2015). That the model minority stereotype is so profoundly pervasive and influential is exemplified in the following quote of an Asian American student at an elite university, upon failing math over and over again (counter to another pervasive Asian stereotype): “I feel so ashamed that I’m not good at math that I cannot tell anyone. I do not talk about it. I keep taking it, and I keep failing” (H. Lawler, personal communication, March 12, 2017). It is ironic that many Asian American students may deeply internalize a stereotype that their experience actually contradicts, to the extent that it may damage their self-esteem and derail their academic careers.

Cultural Congruence

In terms of the mentor–mentee relationship, one important element to consider is the degree of cultural congruence or incongruence between the mentor and mentee. A previous study (Nguyen, Huynh, & Lonergan-Garwick, 2007) found that Asian mentees who use the assimilation strategy (i.e., communicating according to Western norms) elicited more mentoring from European American mentors, whereas those who used a more traditional Asian interpersonal style (i.e., reticence and face-saving) received more mentoring from Asian American mentors. Thus, cultural match—the congruence between the cultural styles of the mentor and mentee—plays a role in mentoring outcomes. This article focuses more on the culturally incongruent match, as mismatches present more challenges and are more often encountered in mentoring situations. It is important to note that even in “culturally congruent” matches, the issues of internalized racism need to be considered and acknowledged.

The scope of this article does not allow for the discussion of each Asian American ethnic group (e.g., Vietnamese Americans, Korean Americans). Instead it addresses the intersections and commonalities among these diverse ethnic groups. Given that the stereotypes of Asian Americans are typically that of all Asians as an aggregate group, we have chosen to offer broad recommendations for Asian American scholars, noting that Asian Americans are a diverse population with differing historical experiences in the United States (e.g., internment, forced labor, refugees), cultures, and citizenship status (e.g., recent immigrants vs. multigeneration U.S. citizens).

Cultural Stereotypes

The widespread perception in mainstream American culture that Asian Americans enjoy high levels of achievement and general well-being, that is, the “model minority myth,” has been previously discussed (e.g., Goto, 1999; Kim et al., 2001; S. Sue, Sue, Sue, & Takeuchi, 1995; Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010). Much has also been written calling the validity of this perception into ques-

tion. For example, studies have shown that Asian American students exhibit significantly higher social anxiety and depression than their counterparts from other backgrounds (Okazaki, 1997). In addition, immigration status appears to be a stronger predictor of outcomes than ethnicity (Kim et al., 2001), with Asian Americans whose families have been in the United States longer demonstrating better outcomes than more recent immigrants. In spite of data that dispute the generality of the stereotype, however, the model minority myth is entrenched in academic settings, even among faculty and mentors (cf. Ching & Agbayani, 2012). For example, studies have shown that the stereotype of high achievement leads educators to track Asian American students in advanced courses and high-level math and science despite little evidence of aptitude or previous achievement (Lee & Zhou, 2015). Interestingly, once tracked, students may find themselves living up to the stereotype, a phenomenon called *stereotype promise*. (Lee & Zhou, 2015). However, the pressure to live up to the stereotype may come at great cost, even for those who eventually attain high levels of achievement, as Asian American students report high levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems (Okazaki, 1997). The complexities of these intertwining phenomena are apt topics for discussion between mentors and Asian American mentees. Rather than assuming that Asian American scholars are fine and doing well, evidence suggests that the overall picture is much more complex and concerning.

An enduring component of the model minority myth is the stereotype that Asian Americans are good at math, which also encompasses the perception that if one is Asian American, one must be in either a mathematical or technical field. These perceptions have important ramifications for the mentoring process. Asian American scholars may be unwittingly pushed by their mentors away from academic leadership roles to serve in roles of technical support, to be the “statistics” or “computer” person. Ultimately, this may undermine the career trajectory of Asian American academics—are they encouraged to take the lead in applying for grants? Are they recognized as initiators of projects and scholars in their own right? Do they receive due credit or funding for worthy projects? A recent study by Ginther et al. (2011) found that among applications for federal funding of major research grants (ROI grants) that receive equally strong priority scores, Asian American applicants are four percentage points and African American applicants 13 percentage points less likely to receive National Institutes of Health investigator-initiated funding compared to White applicants. Moreover, in a study of Silicon Valley companies, White men and women were found to be 150% more likely than their Asian American counterparts with the same qualifications to be executives, with the gap between Whites and Asian American women even greater (Gee, Peek, & Wong, 2015). Asian Americans are assumed to have lower leadership potential than White candidates with identical qualifications (Sy et al., 2010), and although Asian Americans comprise 6% of college students in the United States, they are only 2% of college presidents (Lee & Zhou, 2015), and Asian American leaders at the highest level across the board in such institutions are even more uncommon (Suzuki, 2012; Yamagata-Noji & Gee, 2012).

This stereotype may be reinforced by another prominent one, that Asian Americans are quiet and reticent and therefore are not leadership material. As an Asian American administrator at a community college said, “As a Korean American, I always sur-

prise people by how outspoken I am. I'm that way by nature, but people always seem a bit surprised when I'm the one that talks a lot in meetings!" (H. Lawler, personal communication, March 12, 2017).

Thus, Asian American scholars may be constantly working against this stereotype in academic settings, which can cause stress. In the context of mentoring, mentors must examine their own beliefs about and expectations of their mentees. Even when the mentor is Asian American, these stereotypes may be internalized and applied without much thought.

In addition, Asian Americans are stereotyped as socially inept and perpetually foreign (Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005). These beliefs, often portrayed in mainstream media, result in the assumption that Asian Americans do not speak English and do not belong. For example, an Asian American law professor writes about this exchange (Wu, 2001):

"Where are you from?" is a question I like answering. "Where are you really from?" is a question I really hate answering. Often the inquisitor reacts as if I am being silly if I reply, "I was born in Cleveland, and I grew up in Detroit," or bored by a detailed chronology of my many moves around the country: "Years ago I went to college in Baltimore; I used to practice law in San Francisco; and now I live in Washington, DC." Sometimes she reacts as if I am obstreperous if I return the question, "And where are you really from?"

Such interpersonal interactions are in fact microaggressions, defined as everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to individuals based solely upon their marginalized group membership (D.W. Sue, 2010). The microaggression of asking an Asian American person where he or she is from or if he or she speaks English or being surprised when an Asian American person speaks without an accent, whether intentional or unintentional, perpetually casts Asian Americans as outsiders. Moreover, being treated as an outsider, a type of social stress, has effects as harmful as physical stress (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2005). Therefore, interventions that increase a sense of belonging in academic settings (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011) must not fall prey to the "model minority" stereotype and should include Asian Americans scholars.

Microaggressions may also be present in the physical environment. For example, in an eatery on a university campus, a tip jar was labeled "Confucius say: tipping good, not tipping bad," next to a slant-eyed caricature of an Asian. Needless to say, this message represents several pernicious layers of microaggression. Mentors of Asian American scholars need to be mindful that nonverbal and indirect microaggressions may exist in the academic environment and talk to their mentees about their stressful effects.

Cultural Values

Hierarchical Collectivistic Cultural Orientation

Hierarchical collectivistic cultural orientation. Voluminous research has been devoted to the distinctions between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individualism and collectivism are broad cultural orientations that have been found to reliably distinguish cultures from one another. In individualistic cultures, individual autonomy and independence

are emphasized and self-interest takes precedence over the interests of the group, whereas collectivistic cultures emphasize interdependence within groups (family, tribe, nation, etc.; Gudykunst, 2001; Triandis, 2001). In collectivistic cultures, intragroup harmony is paramount. A great deal of attention is paid to the role that each individual plays within the group and fulfilling the responsibilities of that role rather than the fulfillment of individual desires. Important distinctions between hierarchical and egalitarian cultures also exist (Schwartz, 2006). In hierarchical cultures, roles are dictated within a hierarchical structure, with older individuals as well as those in higher positions accorded higher status and respect and deferred to by younger and less experienced individuals. In hierarchical collectivist cultures, hierarchies and associated role expectations and norms are played out in families, school, work, and social settings (Huang, 2012). Conversely, in egalitarian cultures, members are considered equal in status and in their inherent right to pursue their own individual desires and interests.

Asian cultures are prime examples of hierarchical collectivistic cultures. First, Asian families are highly collectivistic. The interests of the family prevail over individual interest and desire. It is not uncommon to see large extended Asian American families encompassing three generations living under one household, having meals together routinely, and spending leisure time together. Career choices are not dictated so much by individual interest or talent, but rather by their functionality within the family unit (Hui & Lent, 2018). This cultural expectation may cause tension for younger generations frustrated by a lack of freedom and choice, yet they may ultimately defer to the family's wishes, so strong the pull of collectivism within the family and culture (Yoon et al., 2017). The hierarchical nature of Asian American cultures is also manifested in family dynamics. In Asian families, individuals are given a level of respect according to age and experience. For example, elders are treated with the utmost respect and deference in Asian cultures compared with other cultures. This is reflected in fewer numbers of elder Asians in nursing homes, for example, than elders of other cultural backgrounds (McLaughlin & Braun, 1998). Asian families experience a strong cultural mandate to care for their own elders. Similarly, hierarchies are also exhibited and salient in work and educational settings. Employer–employee, supervisor–supervisee, and teacher–student relationships are all governed according to hierarchical principles, where the individual in the higher, authoritative role is given respect by virtue of the role rather than his or her individual qualities, as would be the case in individualistic cultures.

A prime example of an individualistic egalitarian culture is mainstream American culture. Individuality and independence are prized in American culture, and dependence, even interdependence, frowned upon and viewed as second-best. For example, young adults who live with their parents or move back home after college may be viewed as unsuccessful and experience some degree of embarrassment or shame for not being independent. The ethos of rugged individualism runs deep in American culture, as reflected in cultural products such as art, movies, and literature in which the story centers around a single hero or a protagonist who overcomes obstacles to find his or her own unique nature or pursue his or her own dream.

In the context of mentoring Asian American scholars, the hierarchical collectivistic cultural orientation has important implications. First, if the mentor is from an individualistic culture, it may

be difficult to bridge the two perspectives without some mutual understanding. The individualistic mentor may assume and expect egalitarian exchanges in which both parties have equal respect, rights, and duties, whereas the collectivistic mentee may view the mentor as the absolute authority and hesitate to challenge such authority. In this scenario, the mentor might expect the mentee to voice concerns and speak up and may actually be inclined to disrespect reticence and subordination. Further, collectivistic mentees may work for the betterment of the research team as a whole rather than prioritize their individual advancement. If the mentor is not aware of such cultural tendencies, he or she may misinterpret such behavior and assume that the mentee is unambitious or not a go-getter, a stereotype that has undermined the advancement of Asian Americans to leadership positions (Nguyen et al., 2007; Yamagata-Noji & Gee, 2012).

High-Context Communication Style

Asian American cultures are known to have a high-context communication style, in which communication is based on understanding the context in which it occurs than what is actually said (Leong & Lee, 2006). In contrast, a low-context communication style is based on the words that are said directly without regard to nuances or the social context in which the words are communicated. López and Guarnaccia (2000) cited the example of turn-signaling in Mexico as one in which high-context communication is routinely used, where a truck driver either turning right or allowing a car to pass would signal right, and the driver following the truck can tell which is meant even though the behavior is identical. Subtle cues in the context allow for the correct interpretation in high-context cultures.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) cited examples of cross-cultural miscommunication between high- and low-context cultures in work settings. For example, an American doing business in Japan may wait for an obvious contextual cue such as a designated meeting to begin talking business, whereas his Japanese counterparts, without directly voicing so, may conduct business on the golf course or during a meal in indirect ways. Individuals from low-context cultures may find communication with high-context individuals to be frustrating and confusing and complain that the person “does not say what he means” or “mean what he says,” whereas low-context individuals may find the high-context communication style to be rude, overly emotive, and without subtlety or nuance.

In the context of mentoring, a low-context mentor might assume that everything is fine unless the mentee directly poses a question or states a problem, whereas a high-context Asian American mentee may feel such directness to be too demanding or off-putting. Relatedly, in Asian cultures, speaking of one’s accomplishments is viewed as boastful and deeply frowned upon, and it is ingrained in Asian Americans to never bring up their own achievements. For example, in mentoring an Asian American scholar, one mentor stated:

I looked at her c.v. and there were some things that seemed missing, so I kept asking, “what about this, what about that.” And she said, “Oh I didn’t think of it, I didn’t think of bringing that up.” I told her, “You have to. No one knows about it if you don’t write it.” She didn’t even realize that it was important. (V. Kameoka, personal communication, June 4, 2006)

The tendency to minimize one’s accomplishment, in particular, runs counter to the type of self-promotion essential for recognition and advancement in academic and scientific settings and often undermines a scholar’s career trajectory to ultimately assume leadership roles.

Saving Face

Related to communication style is the idea of saving face, an interpersonal value very important in Asian American cultures (Ha, 1995). *Saving face* refers to upholding social integrity according to the prescribed roles and norms of the culture (Zane & Yeh, 2002). Failure to do so results in loss of face, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment (Zane & Yeh, 2002). Saving face with respect to others as well as for oneself is important, particularly if the other person is in a position of authority. Thus, Asian Americans may calibrate or modify their behaviors to save face for bosses, teachers, and mentors. Such behaviors may include acquiescing with mentors’ suggestions or opinions when in actual disagreement, abstaining from sharing their opinions in public to avoid challenging a mentor or exposing mentors’ weaknesses or mistakes (Mak, Chen, Lam, & Yiu, 2009; Zane & Yeh, 2002). This often undermines the mentee’s ability to demonstrate his or her competence, problem-solving skills, and ability to resolve issues constructively and may diminish leadership potential as perceived by those in positions of power. A culturally congruent mentor may be able to accurately read these behaviors as saving face and may in private probe more deeply as to the mentee’s actual feelings and progress, but a mentor from a different culture may misinterpret such behaviors as the mentee being absolutely fine and “being on the same page.” Thus, in conjunction with the high-context communication style, saving face may pose significant challenges for culturally incongruent mentors of Asian American scholars.

Coupled with the hierarchical collectivism of the mentee, which may prohibit the Asian American mentee from impinging on the mentor’s time with questions or problems, the model minority stereotype may lead to a disconnected mentoring relationship that lacks richness or support. Further, Asian American mentees who struggle academically (or are just not good at math) may feel undue shame and embarrassment for not measuring up (and for going against the stereotype), which they themselves may have internalized. Thus, a mentor who is aware of these issues can help the Asian American mentee tremendously with a proactive and supportive approach.

Recommendations for Mentoring

Mentors of Asian American scholars from a different cultural background may find it helpful to be aware of the insidious Asian American stereotypes that inhabit mainstream culture. This is no less true even if some of these stereotypes are often viewed as positive. The effects of the stereotypes are harmful, as they have stressful effects and lead to the channeling of Asian Americans into undesirable roles, curtailing their academic development and career trajectory. In addition, cultural values may influence the mentoring relationship. Although it may seem paradoxical, the issues discussed here point to the need for the mentor to be more direct and proactive in their mentoring, at the same time recog-

nizing that the mentee may have a different set of values and communication framework. We offer the following suggestions for mentors of Asian American scholars:

1. Proactively discuss with the mentee the cultural stereotypes of Asians that abound and their possible effects, including emotional and behavioral effects. For example, ask Asian American mentees if they have had to counter the stereotype of being “quiet” or “mathematical,” and what effects these stereotypes have had as they move through their academic careers.
2. Asian American mentors should examine their own possible internalization of stereotypes. Do they expect their Asian mentees to be more capable but less outspoken than other mentees? Are there other assumptions they hold that reflect internalized stereotypes?
3. Non-Asian American mentors should also examine their own beliefs: Do they expect Asian American scholars to have computer know-how or to provide statistical support? Do they actively promote Asian American scholars to lead a project?
4. To enhance feelings of belonging in the academic environment, a community of Asian American scholars should be built and fostered.
5. Mentors can help bridge the gap between the low-context and high-context communication styles, encouraging mentees to be candid and to promote their achievements to advance their careers.
6. Mentors should recognize that separate organizations representing and promoting Hispanic scholars, African American scholars, and Native American scholars are common in many colleges and R1 doctoral institutions, yet such organizations for Asian American scholars are uncommon within institutions of higher education. In efforts to promote diversity agendas, institutional leadership should expand diversity efforts addressing the unique challenges of Asian American scholars and students.

Keywords: Asian American; mentoring; stereotypes; cultural values

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