

# Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience

Professor Derald Wing Sue and his research team at Columbia University conducted focus groups with Asian Americans to explore their experiences with racial microaggressions. Through the interviews, the researchers identified eight different themes or types of experiences.

**Theme 1: Alien in own land** – This is a type of microaggression that assumes all Asian Americans are foreigners or foreign-born and therefore are not considered ‘real’ Americans.

**Theme 2: Ascription of intelligence** – Asian Americans are assumed to be intelligent, particularly in the areas of math and science. This can be illustrated through statements such as, “If I see lots of Asian students in my class, I know it’s going to be a hard class”. On the surface this sounds positive, but many Asian American students feel the pressure to conform to these stereotypes and feel inadequate when they are unable to measure up. Those who strive to do well can feel that their hard work is overshadowed by their ethnicity.

**Theme 3: Denial of racial reality** – This is a type of microaggression that invalidates a person’s experience of racism and discrimination. For example, many Asian Americans do not feel supported when they report incidents of racial discrimination, because others view them as being successful and therefore have nothing to “complain” about.

**Theme 4: Exoticization of Asian American women** – This relates to the view of Asian American women as being exotic and passive.

**Theme 5: Invalidation of interethnic differences** – Asian Americans often hear that they “all look alike”. For example, a Chinese American being confused as a Korean American.

**Theme 6: Pathologizing cultural values/ communication styles** – This relates to the view that Asian cultural values and communication styles are seen as less desirable or awkward. For example, the cultural value of silence is seen by many Americans as lacking interest or being disengaged.

**Theme 7: Second class citizenship** – Asian Americans are treated as ‘lesser’ people or are given poor services in public places because of their race/ethnicity.

**Theme 8: Invisibility** – Asian Americans are not being seen by others. For example, an Asian American man may be standing next in line, but when it is his turn to order, the cashier skips on to the next person (who is not Asian) as if he is not there. This relates to the idea at the beginning of the article, in which the researchers pointed out that public discussions and even research on racism and discrimination often do not include Asian Americans. That is why this study is crucial in helping others see the actual types of experiences that Asian Americans face.

Source: Sue, D. W., Bucceri, J., Lin, A. I., Nadal, K. L., & Torino, G. C. (2007). Racial microaggressions and the Asian American experience. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 13(1), 72-81.

**"WHAT  
COUNTRY  
ARE YOU  
FROM?"**

**"SO DO  
YOU SPEAK  
CHINESE?"**

**"I WOULDN'T  
DATE AN  
ASIAN GUY."**

**"I THOUGHT  
ASIANS WERE  
SUPPOSED TO BE  
GOOD AT MATH."**

## Racial Microaggressions and Daily Well-Being among Asian Americans

Professor Anthony Ong at Cornell University and his colleagues conducted a study to understand the frequency of racial microaggressions in the daily lives of Asian Americans and how these experiences affect their well-being. The researchers asked 152 Asian American college students in New York to log their experiences for 14 consecutive days. Each day, they received an email reminder to go online and fill out a survey to see how frequently they encountered incidents of racial microaggressions. The students were given a checklist with items such as: a) I heard it suggested that Asians do not experience as much discrimination as other minorities, or b) I overheard or was told an offensive joke or comment concerning how Asians talk. The survey also asked students how many different physical symptoms they experienced (e.g. headaches, backaches, poor appetite) and how they felt during the day (e.g. sad, hostile, enthusiastic).

The study found that over 78% of Asian Americans reported encountering some form of racial microaggression over the two-week period. The most frequent type of incidents that they encountered were those that made them feel invalidated as a person. For example, participants were told that they spoke “good English” or overheard it suggested that many women find Asian men unattractive. The researchers found that participants reported experiencing more negative emotions and physical symptoms on the days that they encountered incidents of microaggression. These negative effects also continued over time. The team concluded that although facing overt types of racism, such as being called an insulting name, negatively affect a person’s well-being, microaggressions that invalidate their experiences have a much deeper impact, because more mental energy is spent trying to figure out if the incident was motivated by race. Not being able to pinpoint the source of distress can prevent it from getting resolved.

## Racial Discrimination Stress, Coping, and Depressive Symptoms among Asian Americans: A Moderation Analysis

Dr. Meifen Wei at Iowa State University and her colleagues carried out a study to explore how stress relating to racial discrimination affect depression in Asian Americans. Dr. Wei asked 201 Asian American university students to fill out an online survey that measures general life stress, perceived discrimination, stress related to discrimination, depressive symptoms, and coping strategies.

First, the researchers found that those who reported experiencing higher levels of stress relating to racial discrimination also reported higher levels of depression. This effect was stronger and more severe than the effect of general life stress.

Second, the results showed that the type of coping strategies Asian Americans used influence their well-being. Those who used more reactive coping strategies when they experienced racial discrimination, such as having strong emotional reaction or being preoccupied with thinking about the problem, were more vulnerable to depression.

Additionally, those who reported that their family was helpful and supportive in responding to racial discrimination reported lower levels of depression. The researchers concluded that stress relating to perceived discrimination is an important factor that affects the well-being of Asian Americans, but that positive and culturally-relevant coping strategies can be used to offset these negative effects.



Source: Ong, A. D., Burrow, A. L., Fuller-Rowell, T. E., Ja, N. M., & Sue, D. W. (2013). Racial microaggressions and daily well-being among Asian Americans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 60(2), 188-199.

Source: Wei, M. Heppner, P. P., Ku, T.-Y., Liao, Y.-H. (2010). Racial discrimination stress, coping, and depressive symptoms among Asian Americans: A moderation analysis. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 1(2), 136-150.

# Tips for Parents

- Avoid dismissing children's and youths' experiences of being discriminated against by telling them to ignore it.
- Listen, acknowledge what they are feeling, ask questions, and allow children and youths to describe their experiences without jumping in to offer advice and helping them 'fix the problem'.
- Recognize and address your own bias about different groups of people.
- Help your children feel proud of their cultural heritage and develop a positive ethnic identity. A strong sense of racial or ethnic identification helps to offset the negative effects of discrimination by lowering depression.<sup>1</sup>
- Help your children build a healthy support system of friends and other caring adults that they can draw on in times of distress.
- To learn about age-appropriate tips on how to talk to kids about racism, you can check out web resources below. You can also use this list of children's books to help start the conversation.

<sup>1</sup> Mossakowski, 2003



## Children's Books

- Let's talk about race by Julius Lester (2008)
- We All Sing with the Same Voice by Philip Miller and Sheppard M. Greene (2005)
- The Skin You Live In by Michael Tyler (2005)
- Whoever You Are by Mem Fox (2006)
- I Like Myself by Karen Beaumont (2004)
- Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson (2012)
- Same, Same But Different by Jenny Sue Kostecki-shaw (2011)

## Web Resources

- Kang, S. (2017). Talking to your children about racism. Website: <http://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2017-02-02/talking-to-your-children-about-racism>
- Mlyneck, A. (2017). How to talk to kids about racism: An age-by-age guide.

Website: <https://www.todayparent.com/family/parenting/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-racism-an-age-by-age-guide/>

- Race Conscious (2017). Raising race conscious children: A resource for talking about race with young children. Website: <http://www.raceconscious.org/>