Exploring the Identities and Career Aspirations of Southeast Asian American College Women

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Purpose of Study: To describe how social interactions shape the racial and gender identities and in turn, the career aspirations of Southeast Asian American females in higher education.

Background: Despite the recent rapid growth of the Asian American population, research on Asian Americans is greatly limited due to misconceptions stemming from the model minority myth, which stereotypes all Asian Americans as academically and financially successful. Consequently, existing data on Asian Americans is greatly aggregated, with the experiences and needs of the Southeast Asian American population often being ignored. To aid in the disaggregation of data, this study interviewed Southeast Asian American female students at an elite institution to better understand how social interactions shape their racial, ethnic, and gender identities and in turn, their career aspirations.

Methods

- A phenomenological study using critical race and critical feminist theory at an elite university in the Northeast, Shore University
- Utilized criterion sampling for participant recruitment, which was completed online
- Data collection – Structured interviews lasting an average of half an hour each

Data Analysis - Used NVivo for descriptive and in vivo coding on interview transcripts. Then developed a list of themes and created matrices and a concept map

Participants - Four self-identified female Southeast Asian American undergraduate students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Ethnicities</th>
<th>Immigrant Generation</th>
<th>Class Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Vietnamese, Chinese</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britney</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

1. The participants’ levels of identity awareness shaped how they viewed the relationship between their identities and career aspirations. Identity awareness was dependent on the university’s classes, programs, and/or student groups. The levels of awareness varied across the sample, but overall, Shore University increased awareness of racial and/or ethnic identities.

2. Discussions of career aspirations included the positive influence of peers and professors at Shore University as well as feedback provided by their families. All participants discussed their families’ concerns about financial stability.

3. Intersectional identities and gender identity were not discussed as much as racial and ethnic identities. All but one participant discussed race and ethnicity separately from gender. Gender identity was not listed as a significant influence on career aspirations by the participants.

Conclusion

While this study intended to focus on how social interactions at Shore University shape career aspirations, all participants spent more time discussing the salience of their families’ opinions of their majors and career aspirations. The influence of their families on their academic efforts was connected to narratives of migration history, family obligation, and family sacrifice. The salience of repaying families through academic and career success found in this study is consistent with previous work on Southeast Asian American college students. This study also intended to focus on the intersection of racial, ethnic, and gender identities, but participants’ racial and ethnic identities were the dominant identities discussed and when gender was discussed, it was typically mentioned on its own.

Implications

Better inform university policies and programs so that the specific needs of Southeast Asian American female students are better served by institutions of higher education.

Further demonstrate the need for the disaggregation of data on Asian Americans in research, policies, and demographic inquiries to account for the distinct and lasting effects of Southeast Asian American historical events and migration patterns.