Chapter 1

“I Can’t Afford for You to Flunk”: Positive Asian Stereotypes and Supportive Communication for Asian College Students

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ABSTRACT

While self-endorsing positive stereotypes such as high achievement and perseverance could be beneficial to Asian college students, pressures to fit all expectations of the Asian model minority myth could be psychologically damaging. The way we interact with our family and friends is influential in how we perceive ourselves and our ability to cope with life’s stresses. The current chapter examines the way distinct types of endorsement of positive Asian stereotypes are related to the quality of family interaction, social support, and coping among 128 Asian college students. Results indicate that family satisfaction and parental perfectionism are positively related to the endorsement of Asian stereotypes at the group level, while family satisfaction, subjective social support, and highly person-centered messages are positively related to self-endorsed positive Asian stereotypes. Family satisfaction, social support, and highly person-centered messages predicted Asian students’ ability to cope with their academic problems and stresses.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7467-7.ch001

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INTRODUCTION

Life can be filled with unexpected twists and turns. Many people get by each day knowing that their friends and family will always be there to pick them up when they are down. Having social support available when one needs advice or someone to confide in is considered vital to one’s well-being. Asian Americans are no exception to needing social support from their social networks, despite the supposed superior qualities associated with their model minority status. The higher expectations of model minorities and potential stresses associated with model minority status emphasizes the importance of having a social environment conducive to seeking and providing social support.

To understand these social environments, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the relationship of family interactions with the endorsement of positive Asian stereotypes and how social support may be related to the ability of Asian college students to cope with their problems and stresses. We begin by reviewing the problems the model minority myth creates for Asian college students. Then we review supportive communication theory and Asian students’ supportive communication experiences. Finally, we present a study that examines the influence of Asian students’ endorsement of positive Asian stereotypes and their social environments on their ability to cope with problems and stresses.

The Model Minority Myth and Its Problems

The model minority construct and depiction of Asians as model minorities have been traced to the publication of two 1966 U.S. magazine articles that heralded the economic success and hard work of Japanese and Chinese Americans (see the analysis of Wang, 2008). Subsequently, Kitano and Sue (1973) initiated academic scholarship to contextualize the culture and history of the model minority construct. Despite resistance from scholars to blatantly label Asian Americans as a model minority, the minority myth asserts that due to their hard work, drive to excel, and priority on education, Asian Americans have overcome racial discrimination against them (Wang, 2008), to become the most successful minority to have adapted to U.S. life (Leong, Chao, & Hardin, 2000; Wang, 2008). The primary evidence for the concept has been U.S. Census and survey data which shows that Asian Americans, compared to other racial minority groups, have higher academic achievements (e.g., test scores, graduation rates, enrollment at top research universities), economic achievements (e.g., high median family income; presence in engineering, science, and professional occupations), and social achievements (e.g., comparatively fewer experiences with
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