ACADEMIC STEREOTYPES AND ASIAN STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

MASTER OF EDUCATION THESIS

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Dedication

This thesis paper is dedicated to my husband, Chongwon, and my daughter, Angela.
Academic stereotypes and Asian students in the college classroom

Abstract

This thesis project explores the student and faculty experience(s) of Asian stereotypes in a regional Midwestern university setting. Data was collected through one-on-one interviews with students—both Asian and non-Asian—and faculty of the university. Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes on three tiers: individually, within the interviewee’s group (i.e. Asian student, non-Asian student, or faculty), and across all groups. Major themes included Asian stereotypes in the media and in pop culture, language-related stereotypes of Asians, Asian academic stereotypes (e.g. attitudes toward school, performance, etc.), and stereotypes concerning how Asian students socialize. These themes were presented from a faculty viewpoint and student viewpoints, which included Asian and non-Asian students. After discussing the emergent themes, implications for students, faculty, and university administration are addressed.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

It seems like a stereotypical pairing: Asian students and higher education together in the same news headline. A group of 60 organizations is suing Harvard over alleged admissions practices that follow a quota system (Carapezza, 2015). A Duke professor spouts racist comments that put down “the Blacks” and hold up “the Asians” as model students who strive to integrate into American society (Berenson, 2015). These are just two of many Asians-and-education headlines that have graced newsstands recently, and one doesn’t have to look hard to find more. In fact, if one steps beyond the nightly news and into the realm of popular culture, Asians and academics appear to be even more tightly connected—stereotypically so. What is the meaning of this trend, and why does it matter?

In college classrooms around the United States, it is becoming less accurate to call Asians a “minority”—in fact, in some state university systems like the University of California, they are the largest racial group in undergraduate education (Associated Press, 2009), accounting for 40% of student enrollment. Though not a minority in US undergraduate education per se, these students belong to an overarching race-based categorization termed “the model minority” (Petersen, 1966). This stereotype has endured more than forty years, and has labeled Asian students as smart, working diligently, staying out of trouble, and earning high grades. Asian adults, then, reap the benefits of their diligence earlier in life: they are seen as successful, high-earning, well-educated people who abide by laws. Scholars (Chun, 1980; Wong & Halgin, 2006) have argued that despite the seemingly good image the concept of “model minority” projects, it might not have positive implications for all students. This current study seeks to answer the following question: how is stereotype affecting Asian students as learners in a regional
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Midwestern university where they are (1) a true ethnic minority (as opposed to university systems like that of California) and (2) are not attending one of the top 100 schools in the U.S. (i.e. the school could potentially be seen as more “average”).

**Purpose of the Study**

In both real life and in popular culture such as television shows, music, and books, Asian Americans are viewed with high academic achievement and a strong motivation to succeed. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to analyze the student and faculty experience(s) of academic-related Asian stereotypes in a regional Midwestern university setting. How are such stereotypes conceived and propagated? It is my hope that this study will shed some light on the Asian stereotyping experience from several points of view, and will start a dialogue that can help get us one step closer to an inclusive learning environment. Such a study could also provide some insight into how the stereotypes held by one or more groups can influence the thoughts, actions, and potentially performance of another group, and how educators and students can work together to make the classroom atmosphere one that is more conducive to everyone’s learning.

**Background**

The “model minority” stereotype has endured—and thrived—since its inception in the 1960s. Many scholars (Sue & Sue, 1973; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998) have pointed out that such a notion is potentially very harmful for Asians. More recently, scholars have focused specifically on one of the tenets of the notion of “model minority”: that Asians are more

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1 This university ranks #36 (tied) in the category of “Regional Universities (Midwest)” and has a 78.22% acceptance rate, per the current (as of August 10, 2015) rankings found on the US News & World Report National University Rankings website.
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academically successful and driven than their non-Asian peers. Yoo, Burrola, and Steger (2010), Yu (2006), and Ruble and Zhang (2013) deal with the topic of Asians in higher education, and each makes the case that stereotypes can have negative outcomes for students, especially those who are struggling. According to S. J. Lee (1996), students who internalize the “model minority” image and cannot live up to its perceived expectations may experience some degree of psychological damage. Lee also notes that such internalization may also limit students’ ability to engage in help-seeking behaviors. Whether students need to seek psychological help overall or help on a particular assignment for class, it is necessary for students to feel that they are not looked down upon for doing so. This frightening fact alone is enough to warrant more research on this subject. Furthermore, while the above and other extant research point to the fact that this kind of stereotyping and discrimination are indeed occurring, little research has been conducted on Midwestern campuses. The Midwest is often seen as less diverse than its costal counterparts perhaps because it is not a port of entry for immigrants. Nevertheless, the numbers of Asian students are growing in universities around the country, and such a study could be valuable for the well-being of Asian students and pedagogues alike.

Setting

The present study was conducted at a medium-sized regional university located in northern Minnesota, with a total student population of about 11,000. The city in which the university is located does not have a large Asian population, but the university itself has seen some growth in the Asian student population in recent years.

2 According to the 2010 census (United States Census Bureau), this city had a 1.5% population of people who identified as “Asian.”

3 The information referred to above was gathered by the university’s office of institutional research between the years 2005-2013.
Assumptions

As this research relied on the answers of students and instructors who were interviewed, it is assumed that those participating were being truthful and forthcoming with their responses, and that no one was either playing up or downplaying their personal experiences. It is also assumed that due to the confidentiality of the interview process, no one was fearing a negative outcome for his/her responses.

As someone raised in a rural setting in Northern Wisconsin, I did not interact with many Asians during my childhood. As an adult, I went to a university where I met a diverse group of people that challenged my preconceived notions about cultures other than my own. My husband is a foreign-born American citizen and my daughter is Asian American. I have always thought that the “model minority” stereotype benefits Asians; who wouldn’t want someone to think that he or she is naturally good at academics? Upon closer examination, though, it seems that this stereotype could have some serious implications, and for my family and for myself, I want to know more. For this reason, I hope this study has an actionable outcome for both the university studied and for me on a personal level.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. It is a small-scale study conducted at a regional university, and the results cannot be seen as representative of a greater population than that of the one studied. Secondly, it must be understood that within the various ethnic groups of the Asian race, it is important to know that there are many cultural differences that have an impact on students’ attitudes toward academics, education, and American culture/stereotypes. A study
conducted on a single ethnic group could yield very different results than those of this study. Nevertheless, this study is valuable in that it will provide a snapshot of the overall racial (i.e., Asian) climate of one regional university and provide a jumping-off point for future research with a more refined scope.

Definitions

Before continuing, some terms require definition. In this paper, the terms “Asian,” “Asian American,” or “Asian students” refer to any people who are of Asian descent. This can include exchange students, first- and second- generation Asian Americans, meaning those who are foreign-born, or who have parents who are foreign-born, and Asians with a long family history in the United States. In this paper, the term “Asian” and all combinations thereof refer to those of East Asian (from China, Japan, Korea) descent as well as those of South Asian, South East Asian, or Island (from the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Hawaii, etc. and groups like Hmong) descent. The term “Asian” does not include Indians in this paper, simply because there is a very different and distinct set of stereotypes that applies to Indian students in the U.S.

Summary

This study attempts to analyze the ways Asian stereotypes affect Asian students in the classroom in a regional Midwestern university setting. Using interviews as a method of gathering information, Asian students, non-Asian students, and university faculty were asked to respond to a number of questions about Asian stereotypes and their effects. As “diversity” has become a buzzword on college campuses in recent years, this study provides information that is of interest
to many constituents, especially those in similar regional universities who belong to diversity commissions and cultural student associations, and to others such as academic advisors, instructors, and mentors, who work closely with students.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Much research has been conducted on Asian stereotypes and their effects, both inside and outside of the American education system, since the 1960s. The themes running through the literature can be divided into three major categories: the inception of the “model minority” stereotype and how the very root of this concept is steeped in racism; the cultural perspectives held by Asians that lend to the believability of the stereotype; and finally, empirical and qualitative evidence that this stereotype harms and hinders the progress of Asian Americans in the American educational system. This chapter will explore these themes, and touch on how academic research, mass media, and popular culture have contributed to our views on the influence of stereotypes today.

The Racism and Misconceptions behind the “Model Minority”

The term “model minority” originated in the 1960s, a time of racial turmoil in the United States. The Civil Rights movement was on center stage, and race was a hot-button topic for Americans on both sides—those for and against expanding the rights of people of color—of the debate. While Blacks were fighting for progress, two important articles were published that highlighted the hard work of Asians, who have “... overcome the bondage of racial discrimination” and “have become a successful model minority worthy of emulation by other minorities” (Chun, 1980, p. 2, emphasis my own). In 1966, Berkeley professor and New York Times essayist William Peterson published an article entitled “Success Story: Japanese American Style.” Scholars like K. T. Chun have stated that this “portrait created a glowing image of a population that, despite past discrimination, has succeeded in becoming a hard-working,
uncomplaining minority deserving to serve as a model for other minorities” (p. 2). In the same year, *U.S. News & World Report* published “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” This article not only focused on the achievements of the Asian population (specifically the Chinese), but it also downplayed the plight of the African Americans: “What you find, back of this remarkable group of Americans, is a story of adversity and prejudice that would shock those now complaining about the hardships endured by today’s Negroes” (US News and World Report, 1966: p. 6).

What is, perhaps, the most interesting about these accounts is that before these articles were published, Asians were typically portrayed rather negatively in the media. Indeed, Kitano and Sue (1973) states that “[t]he change of status for Asians is a dramatic one since their past history of discrimination and prejudice was of an especially severe nature” (p. 1). In a 2002 article, B. Suzuki elaborates on this, saying that “[e]ven as recently as the 1960s, Asian Americans were still portrayed quite negatively, either as obsequious, slavish, and subservient or as treacherous, deceitful, and untrustworthy” (p. 21). Suzuki goes on to provide commentary about his wariness of the swift about-face:

I was therefore quite suspicious of the sudden change in the image of Asian Americans and did not find it fortuitous that this change was occurring at a time when the country was facing a major crisis in race relations. (p. 22)

Some (Chun, 1980; Suzuki, 2002; Uyematsu, 1971; Yu, 2006) have supported the theory that the Asian success story was put in the foreground in an attempt to subvert the Civil Rights movement. If one could say that “Asian Americans have overcome disadvantages and attained
more upward social mobility compared to members of other racial minority groups” (Yu, 2006)
and have done so uncomplainingly, then perhaps one could attribute the current situation of other
ethnic groups—namely the Blacks—to their lack of diligence and work ethic. As Uyematsu
(1969) states

Asian Americans are perpetuating White racism in the United States as they allow White
America to hold up the “successful” Oriental image before other minority groups as the
model to emulate. White America justifies the blacks’ position by showing that other
non-Whites—yellow people—have been able to “adapt” to the system. (n.p.)

While some scholars focused on this aspect of the emergence of the “model minority”
stereotype, others took note of the discrepancy between the claimed “success” of Asian
Americans and reality. The first, perhaps most obvious, oversight in the claim of higher success
of Asian Americans was the fact that “Asians” does not refer to a homogenous group, but rather
lumps many different cultures and ethnicities into one category. According to Yoo, Burrola, and
Steger (2010), South and East Asian ethnic groups (e.g. Indians, Japanese) generally fit the
“success” aspect of the model minority stereotype in the United States in that they, as a whole,
are educated (high school diploma, bachelor’s degrees, advanced degrees) compared to other
minority groups, while Southeast Asian Americans—such as Hmongs, Cambodians, and
Laotians—may have educations comparable to or lower than other racial minority groups. Yu
(2006) concurs, reasoning that “Hmong refugees certainly have a different experience in the
United States than, say, Chinese urban middle-class professionals. The success story attached to
the model minority concept is hardly a story of Asian Americans as a group” (p. 327).
The term “Asian” was not the only thing that could be broken down further to provide a different picture. Several scholars (Chun, 1980 and Suzuki, 2002, among others) have also challenged the supposed high income of Asian Americans that is a tenet of the model minority image. According to Chun (1980), income is a very complex piece of data to be measured, and high income can be reflective of the size of the household and “longer work hours or sacrificed weekends” (p. 5). Additionally, he claims that half of the Asian Americans living in the continental U.S. are “concentrated in the four metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, and the income of the metropolitan area residents is known to be higher than the national average or that in non-metropolitan areas” (5). Without knowing how these factors came into play, using income as an indicator of success could potentially be very misleading. Suzuki (2002) agrees, and claims that the disaggregation of the data shows a very different situation. In addition to living in high-income areas, Suzuki finds another reason this data is not reliable: “[s]uch analyses showed that the median family income of Asian Americans was higher than that of white families because Asian American families had more earners contributing to family income [...]” (p. 22). It seems that the discrepancies between the reality and the claims abound.

One interesting thing to note is that while the model minority stereotype is present both on a personal and institutional level (to be discussed in a later section) in the United States, it is coexisting with a sense of extreme “otherness,” which is quite possibly due to the difference between cultural values and beliefs held by Asians and non-Asians in the United States. Suzuki (2002) notes that “[p]aradoxically, even as the model minority stereotype continues to be perpetuated, the older stereotype of Asian Americans as the ‘perfidious foreigner’ seems to be reemerging” (p. 24). According to Suzuki, this Vietnam War-era propaganda has been making a
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comeback in the 80s and 90s when Japan and China, respectively, were viewed as a threat to the United States, both in terms of economy and competition. In one study, Ho and Jackson (2001) found that non-Asians associated many negative characteristics with their Asian American counterparts. These characteristics include: cunning, selfish, deceitful, narrow-minded, cold, and anti-social, among others (p. 1564). Based on the work of Hamilton, Driscoll, and Worth (1989), Ho and Jackson (2001) propose that these “negative attitudes can also arise from positive stereotypic instrumental attributes partly because the positive and negative attributes are assumed to be closely linked” (p. 1555). Though this interesting paradox does not fall within the immediate purview of this paper, it is an interesting phenomenon, and worth noting in terms of the politics surrounding the model minority stereotype.

Evidence that the “model minority” concept was actually built as a “political instrument used to bash other minorities” (Yu, 2006) as opposed to being a true status report, and the fact that it was built on misleading and/or improperly aggregated statistics, has led scholars to question its validity since its inception. Nevertheless, this stereotype still prevails in the mainstream. For some reason, this concept is appealing and believable, and as such, is reinforced through media and popular culture, and it seems that no one—even those with the highest level of education—is immune to its reaches. In May 2015, Duke professor Jerry Hough made national headlines because of comments he posted on an online article about the Baltimore riots. The website for Time magazine reports that Hough claimed that “‘the Asians’ were discriminated against just as much as ‘the Blacks,’ but that Asians ‘worked doubly hard’ and African Americans ‘just feel sorry for themselves’” (Berenson, 2015). Hough’s comments continued along the same vein, but even from what is quoted above, one thing is certain: the “model
minority” stereotype is alive—even in academia—and its harmful effects can be felt by more than just Asian students.

Up to this point, the discussion has centered on how untruths (overgeneralization, misconceptions, inaccurate data, ulterior motives) have come in to play with Asian stereotypes. In the next section, however, I will discuss some of the actual cultural beliefs and practices of several Asian groups that make this stereotype seem to be a plausible truth for the average non-Asian American.

Asian Cultures—A Brief Background

There are various beliefs and practices in “Asian culture” that lend to the believability of the “model minority” concept. Whether due to the longer history in the U.S. or sheer numbers of immigrants, East Asian culture is often seen as the blanket culture of Asia without regard to the fact that Asian culture is not homogenous. Many of the cultural attitudes of this group lend to a perception of better, higher-achieving students. According to Sue and Okazaki (2009), these attitudes include “demands and expectations for achievement and upward mobility, induction of guilt about parental sacrifices and the need to fulfill obligations, respect for education, social comparisons with other Asian-American families in terms of educational success, and obedience to elders such as teachers” (p. 48). Additionally, “Asian American parents who adhere to

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4 The term Asian culture is in quotes here, because I am referring to what non-Asian Americans are exposed to and know of in terms of the cultures of Asia (i.e. the images and practices that have been popularized through various media). I do not intend to refer to all cultural beliefs and practices of all Asian groups.

5 According to the U.S. Department of State (Office of the Historian), Chinese began immigrating to the U.S. in the mid-1800s. The Library of Congress pinpoints the onset of significant Japanese immigration to the U.S. after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. These appear to be the earliest Asian immigrations to the U.S.

6 According to the U.S. Census Bureau information for 2010, Chinese are the largest Asian ethnic group in the United States, followed closely by Filipinos and Indians.

7 While “East Asians” are also not a homogenous group, there are some similarities among the attitudes (Sue & Okazaki, 2009: 48) toward education and academic achievements (Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010: 115) among the cultures in this group.
traditional Asian values are more likely to approach parenting using the authoritarian style...” (Lui & Rollock, 2013, p. 453). So, not only are the values instilled in each generation, they are also enforced. In terms of the “model minority” construct, this group—East Asians—is high-achieving (Yoo, Burrola, and Steger, 2010). It would stand to reason that if East Asian culture is the representative Asian culture to non-Asian Americans, and if East and South Asians are doing very well academically, then the conclusion that “all Asians do well in the classroom” is not farfetched, even if it is based on a false assumption.

If the above was not enough to convince the American public that the model minority construct is valid, popular culture has also played a large role in reinforcing stereotypical Asian-ness. A recent term to emerge concerning Asian American academic success (and the stereotypes that stem from the associated cultural values) is *tiger mom.* Coined by Amy Chua in her 2011 book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,* this term refers to the attitudes (demanding, perfectionist, success-driven, highly focused on academics and music) that Asian—specifically Chinese—mothers have toward their children. The book opens with the following: “A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies [...]” (p. 3). What follows is a look inside the Chua family, showing how Amy Chua is able to produce her “stereotypically successful” Chinese American daughters. Inarguably, this kind of portrayal of Chinese, and in turn Asian, culture—by an Asian, no less—proffers the non-Asian American public reassurance that their beliefs in the Asian stereotype and the model minority are valid.
The Harm in the Model Minority Construct

While “model minority” status might seem appealing, this stereotype, like all stereotypes, is not benign. In a previous section, it was discussed how the model minority stereotype surfaced as a way to subvert the Civil Rights movement. A foundation built on racism and inequity is only the beginning, however; the model minority myth was perpetuated—validated and justified—by the overgeneralization of a heterogeneous group comprised of many unique cultures. In this section, the quantifiable outcomes of this stereotype and its effect on education are explored.

In 1973, Kitano and Sue published an article that states the status of Asian Americans at the time. “The widespread belief that Asian Americans have somehow overcome prejudice and discrimination has given them a low priority in terms of attention and aid” (p. 1, emphasis my own). Ideally, it would be wonderful if any group could be viewed as no longer needing special attention or aid to right previous injustices, but the problem with such a generalization is simply that it is an overgeneralization—the disaggregation of data shows that this is simply not true for all groups lumped into the “Asian” category, especially in terms of education (Coalition for Asian American Children & Families, 2011; Suzuki, 2002; Yu, 2006). Any outliers in the group of Asians who do require more help or are not performing up to the group standard of relative perfection might be overlooked or discriminated against due to the model minority perception. Yu (2006) attests to this phenomenon in American schools: “[o]ne such negative impact is that [the model minority perception] causes and/or reinforces people’s indifference and ignorance to these students’ needs and problems” (p. 330). People’s indifference to Asian students’ needs and problems is not the only cause for concern; the model minority stereotype has also created some problems that are exacerbated by indifference and ignorance of those able to help. According to Suzuki (2001), “[b]ecause of the model minority stereotype [Asian students] are often subjected
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to unrealistically high expectations by their parents, their instructors, and even their peers” (p. 27). Additionally, S. J. Lee (1996) and Wong and Halgin (2006) suggest that Asians Americans who have internalized the model minority image might be harmed psychologically if they fail to live up to the expectations of the stereotype. If all of this is true, then this stereotype—which is purported to have been created to undermine the progress of the Blacks in the Civil Rights era—also negatively impacts Asians on a profound level.

Perhaps one of the most telling titles one will encounter in the search for information on Asians in American education is a report by the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (from here forward, CACF): “We ‘re not even allowed to ask for help: Debunking the myth of the model minority” (2011). With such a title, it is not surprising to find that this report—concerned mainly with the distribution of funds and support for Asian American students in New York City—finds that not all Asian students are doing well, for a variety of reasons. According to the CACF,

[t]he monolithic stereotype of the model Asian student also does damage to the identities, cultures, and needs of the overwhelming majority of the [Asian Pacific American] students in other ways. More specifically, it stands in the way of students receiving the full range of educational opportunity and support to which they have a right and complicates their claim to those resources. (p. 10, emphasis my own)

The all-Asians-excel-academically attitude is due mostly to people’s (mis)perceptions of Asians, specifically with reference to the ignorance of the heterogeneity of the group. Asian Pacific Americans (from here forward, APAs) are one such group that is falling through the educational cracks due to the stereotype of the academically-successful Asian. The report uses
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qualitative evidence provided by students in the NYC school system to show that “many non-Asian peers and teachers presume that all [Asian Pacific American] students have an innate, superior academic capability, they feel that they are held to a higher academic standard, and they are expected to overcome any challenges without assistance” (p. 11). This is a frightening statement. According to a 2009 paper by Sue and Okazaki (concerning the data from Sue and Padilla, 1986), “Asian Americans show not only high educational attainments but relatively higher proportions of individuals with no education whatsoever compared with [other races/ethnic minority groups]” (p. 46). Yu (2006) echoes this sentiment, and perhaps speaks to the plight of APAs, by claiming that “…many Asian American subgroups suffer low academic achievement” (p. 331). With such polarized degrees of education among the various subgroups of Asian American students, the need for aid, assistance, and educational opportunities without prior assumptions about “one group’s” ability to persevere in the classroom seems to be absolutely crucial.

While being Asian and being intelligent are seen to be stereotypically linked, there doesn’t seem to be much research to back up such an assumption. Many scholars have investigated and compared the IQs of Asians and non-Asians (and, indeed, many other races and among ethnic groups); in the end, there has been no evidence found to suggest there is a correlation between being Asian and having high intelligence (Flynn, 1982; Sue & Okazaki, 2009; Yee, 1992). There has been some research done on the relation between socioeconomic status and academic success (Fejgin, 1995), suggesting that students with a higher socioeconomic status have higher test scores. This is, perhaps, due to opportunities such as tutoring, extracurricular academic group opportunities, lower teacher-to-student ratio, and preferred schooling. While not all Asians fall into a higher income bracket, those who do tend to
seek out educational opportunities like the above somewhat aggressively. This, coupled with the fact that some subgroups of Asians have very strong beliefs about the value of education (e.g. Chua, 2011; Lui & Rollock, 2013; Sue & Okazaki, 1990), might produce a certain cross-section of students whose parents provide expensive supplementary opportunities for their children and also demand a diligent approach to schoolwork. If these students were from a larger subgroup of Asians (say East Asians), then studies that average Asian success across the board might be very misleading. Disaggregation of the data and a closer look at what factors are associated with academic success is absolutely necessary before any claims can be made.

Summary

The literature on the model minority, from its racist beginnings to its harmful implications, has formed the basis for the current research. While many have drawn ties between the model minority stereotype and educational experience, this thesis is unique in that it seeks to examine a regional Midwestern post-secondary setting. Not much research has been conducted in such a setting, likely due to the smaller populations of Asians in most non-coastal, non-urban areas. Moreover, the setting—a regional university—also plays a big role in the absence of extant research: this university is ranked in Regional University (Midwest) category as opposed to being among the Nationally Ranked Universities, which are viewed as the top tier of American universities. This means it is an unlikely target for Asians—both nationally and internationally—who are more inclined to be conscious of the ranking system.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The present qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to better understand the experience of Asian stereotyping on a regional Midwestern university campus. In order to better understand the construction and propagation of Asian stereotypes, interviews were conducted to gather student and faculty experiences with Asian stereotypes both in general and in an educational setting. Of special interest were stereotypes of an academic nature, and/or those which could potentially affect the socio-academic aspects of the school experience. Participants with diverse demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, rural-/urban-raised, race, areas of study) were selected through a convenience sample, and asked to participate in hour-long interviews concerning their experiences with Asian stereotyping. Trends and commonalities were then examined within the groups (Asian students, non-Asian students, instructors), and later, across the groups.

Setting

The present study was conducted on the campus of a regional Midwestern university in a city with a population of about 86,000. According to the most recent census (United States Census Bureau, 2010), 1.5% of the total population of this city self-identifies as Asian. The university had a somewhat more diverse composition, however, with 3.6% of the total student population self-identifying as Asian, according to the most recent report.

Interviews took place at an on-campus location convenient to the participants. Faculty were offered the option of interviewing in their offices or at the office of the primary investigator.

8 Total student population was about 11,000.
9 This information comes from a 2013 report compiled by the Office of Institutional Research at this university. For confidentiality purposes, this citation was not put into the text of the thesis.
Participants

Participants in the study were students (graduate and undergraduate) and instructors at the aforementioned university. Participation in interviews was voluntary, and all participants were legal adults (age 18 and older). Because the study focused on a trend that could be seen as generational (among students themselves,), only the surveys of traditional students, aged 18 to 25 years, were used in the student groups. Students were divided into groups of Asian and non-Asian students, and faculty were examined as a whole without further breakdown. Faculty participants were active instructors (teaching at least one course in the semester the data was collected).

Initially, three interviewees were sought in each of the categories: Asian students, non-Asian students, faculty, but the final number of interviewees was actually fourteen. Of these, three were Asian students: one was a male international graduate student of English from Korea; one was a male Hmong student from Minnesota; and one was a female mixed race Chinese/Caucasian linguistics and computer science student, also from Minnesota. The Asian students were purposely selected for their very different backgrounds; as the term “Asian” often describes heterogeneous peoples, Asian students, too, have very different experiences and backgrounds—ethnic and otherwise—and that is relevant. The university where this research took place has been making a big effort to recruit international students from China and Korea, so having the voice of an international student was important. Additionally, Minnesota is known for its large Hmong population. Of the Hmong in Minnesota, many are refugees themselves, or the children of refugees. As such, their experience as college students would be different from,
say, fourth- or fifth-generation Chinese American students. It was important to have a Hmong voice among the interviewees, not only because of the Hmong influence in Minnesota, but also for the unique experience of Hmong students. Finally, the last student, a mixed-race female of Chinese descent, was an important contributor to this project because she was not only the voice of a Minnesotan-born person with East Asian descent, but also as a mixed-race Asian, she would give input that would help the PI determine whether her experience was more similar to that of the other Asian students, or if it was a unique experience in itself.10

The non-Asian student group included the following five students:11 12 one male computer science major from a small town; one male Spanish/business double major with a suburban upbringing; one female foreign language student from a small, rural town; one female biochemistry major from a the Twin Cities area; and one female from a small town, major unspecified. The faculty group included six instructors, and they are as follows: one female professor in the College of Liberal Arts (from here forward, CLA) who identifies as African American; one female professor in CLA who identifies as white; one male professor from CLA who identifies as Asian and was also foreign-born/raised; one male instructor from the College of Education and Human Services Professions (from here forward, CEHSP) who identifies as white; one female instructor from CEHSP who identifies as white; and one female instructor from the College of Science and Engineering who identifies as white. Due to the nature of their career choice, members of this group were born and raised in a variety of national and international locations, and have studied in even more national/international locations. This

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10 I do acknowledge that Minnesota is known for its high number of Asian adoptees, but unfortunately, I was unable to find one that was able to interview. Having an adoptee Asian would have been a fabulous addition to this project, but I will leave it for future research.

11 All students in this group were originally from Minnesota unless otherwise noted.

12 As some of the instructors are the only ones in their field, I will identify them by their collegiate unit for confidentiality purposes unless they have otherwise specified something field-specific in their interviews. Even in that case, I will try to be as general as possible.
contrasts with the homogeneity of the non-Asian student group, where all interviewees from that group had a Minnesotan upbringing. This is not surprising, however, due to 1) the nature of being a university instructor and 2) the nature of being a student at a regional university.

Potential interviewees were made aware of this research project via an informational email (complete with consent information attached, should they want to peruse that information before committing), and asked if they were willing to participate in one-on-one, confidential interviews on the topic of Asian stereotypes. If a potential participant responded positively, a follow-up email was sent to set up a time and location (on-campus only) convenient to the interviewee.

**Research Design**

The present study called for a qualitative phenomenological approach due to the nature of the major research question at hand—what are students’ and faculty members’ experiences with Asian stereotyping at a particular regional Midwestern university?—and also because of my plan to gather data through personal interviews. Creswell (2012, p. 16) describes pure qualitative research as 1) “exploring a problem and developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon”; 2) “collecting data based on words from a small number of individuals so the participants’ views are obtained;” and 3) “analyzing the data for description and themes using text analysis and interpreting the larger meaning of the findings.” As these traits aligned with my plan, it was clear that the qualitative approach was optimal.

Interviewees participated in hour-long, audio-recorded interview regarding their experience with and perceptions of Asian stereotypes of Asian students on campus. Because interviewees could be divided into three distinct groups (Asian students, non-Asian students, and
instructors/faculty), interview protocols were developed to address the experiences and perceptions of each distinct group accounting for the differences in experience of the groups. The interview questions for all three groups are provided in Appendix A.

Prior to interviewing the participants, I reviewed the consent documents with the interviewees and reiterated to them that they had the right to 1) skip over any question, 2) strike any previous answers from the record, and 3) terminate the interview at any time.

**Data Gathering and Analysis**

The method of data gathering used in this project was the interview. Denzin (2001) describes the interview method for research in the social sciences as follows: “[...] journalists, social scientists, psychiatrists, physicians, social workers and the police use interviews to gather information about individuals. Interviews objectify individuals, turning lived experiences into narratives. [...] Thus does the interview society affirm the importance of the speaking subject and celebrate the biographical” (p. 28). Since personal narratives from several points of view were needed to gauge the experience of both students and faculty in this project, the natural choice for a data gathering method was one-on-one interviews.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. After interviewing a participant, I transcribed the audio-recording by hand and highlighted main themes and experiences that stood out. After the interviews and transcription process were completed for all participants, I employed a three-tiered analysis strategy. First, I looked at each individual’s interview to draw out themes and important points. Then, when all individuals in a particular group (e.g. Asian students) had been analyzed, I was able to analyze across the group. Finally,
when all three groups had been analyzed, I was able to look across the groups for shared or similar themes and experiences.

**Summary**

In sum, the data were gathered through hour-long interviews with participants. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify emerging themes within and across groups that describe the experience of stereotyping. In the following chapter, I describe the themes that emerged within and across groups, namely language-related stereotypes, academic stereotypes, and cultural stereotypes.


Chapter Four: Results and Analysis

Introduction

The fourteen interviews conducted for the present thesis on Asian stereotyping were analyzed in three layers. First, each interview was examined to identify emergent themes. This process is not detailed in the following sections because it naturally leads to the next step, which is identifying themes within the group to which the interviewee belonged: Asian students, non-Asian students, or faculty. By comparing similarities among interviews, group-level emergent themes were identified. Finally, the interview data were examined across all groups to uncover any emergent themes among the three groups, as well as experiences that were anomalous.

Asian Student Interviews

I conducted three interviews with participants in the Asian student group; two were male, and one was female. One of the male Asian student interviewees was an international student from Korea. It was assumed that his experience with Asian stereotyping would be significantly different from American-born Asians in that he was not raised in a culture with the same ingrained stereotypes about Asians as a whole (like those stereotypes we have here in the U.S.). The other male student was Hmong American. The experience of being the child of refugee parents could be very different from that of other American-born Asians, as their families have had decades, if not centuries oftentimes, to establish themselves here in the U.S. The female student was also unique in the Asian student group, as she is a mixed-race Asian, though she said she identifies more as a Minnesotan than anything else.
All three students in this category acknowledge that there are a variety of Asian stereotypes in the U.S. that they have experienced personally, though their experiences did differ greatly, as one might expect of three students from very different backgrounds. One of the male students, a Korean-born graduate student in CLA, shared that his experiences with stereotyping have been mostly academic-oriented and cultural. One such example is when his neighbor approached him for help in structuring an essay, claiming that his “high quality education” has given him an edge on such assignments. It felt “weird” to have this label thrust upon him, likely due to his ethnicity, he said. Another education-related experience this interviewee had was when a professor pulled him aside and told him he needed to speak up more in class, and overcome his cultural attitude of being quiet in the classroom. While the interviewee said that it seemed to him that this reflected an Asian stereotype, he thought the advice was good.

On other occasions, students have expected him to have a decent knowledge about Buddhism, again, due to the fact that he is Asian, and quite possibly because he is an Asian-born Asian. Recently, he noticed some posters around the campus that are part of an effort to dispel stereotypes, and one in particular resonated with him. The poster, which featured an Asian male looking at the camera, read “I am Asian. You might think I am good at ping pong. Actually, I am pretty terrible at that game.” The poster invoked some uncomfortable feelings for the interviewee. “To me, I feel a little weird [about the poster]. I like ping pong a lot. [...] Just, I like ping pong. Not as [an] Asian. [...] As a person.” Clearly, the interviewee was frustrated with the stereotype, and with being viewed as part of a group more than as an individual. This is interesting, because often, we think about people’s frustration as coming from not fitting the stereotype (i.e. being perceived as something they are not), when actually, the reverse can also happen. Whether this student likes ping pong because it is his personal preference, or because he
had more exposure to the game due to his upbringing in Korea where ping pong is more popular cannot be determined, but the big take-away here seems to be the importance of recognition of the individual on a personal, not cultural, level. The interviewee’s comments do bring up, however, the interplay between cultural practices/values and stereotypes; often, things that are valued by a culture, like ping pong as a pastime in Korea, can become a stereotype, which means it can apply broadly to anyone who might look Asian. Naturally, not all Asians—and not even all Koreans—like ping pong, in the same way that all Americans do not necessarily like football.

With small experiences like the above adding up over the course of this interviewee’s time in the United States, I asked him what his overall feeling is about being the target of a set of stereotypes. “It’s kind of [a] burden to me because [others, Americans] have some expectations of me. I feel confused whether I need to match their expectation or not.” How does this feeling of being burdened by others’ expectations affect his life, especially in the classroom? “I just accept it as a fact. I cannot avoid it. I might also have some stereotyp[es] of American people. Everyone has stereotypes.” Though this interviewee was frustrated about being stereotyped, his attitude toward stereotyping as a phenomenon was very matter-of-fact and self-reflective.

The second Asian interviewee was a female undergraduate student of mixed race. She acknowledged her Chinese and Caucasian heritage, though she said she identifies more as a Minnesotan than anything else. She was not the only interviewee to identify as Minnesotan in response to the question about racial identity. In fact, one female faculty interviewee did so as well, but the present student was the only Asian student interviewee to do so. Due to the smaller sample of Asian students, there were fewer responses to consider than for other groups. The Asian student group was made purposefully diverse by including an international student and a Hmong student as well to represent a range of experiences, but the feeling of being
“Minnesotan” was nonetheless an interesting response. To her, the categorical judgment of race/ethnicity was not a consideration; rather, a feeling of belonging to a specific geographical region in the U.S. trumped other factors. This may indicate a tie to the Minnesotan community, which puts her on common ground with the rest of the population of the state who also feel ties to this community. Because of her in-group identity as Minnesotan—and indeed, her Minnesotan upbringing—she may be less likely to participate in more visible “stereotypical Asian” behaviors, such as socializing with groups of Asian students or being noticeably quiet/passive in class. Though she may still be visually identified as Asian, she may not be perceived as much of an “other” because her appearance as an Asian does not match the “typical Asian” behavior of the stereotypes. As such, her experience with Asian stereotyping might very well be drastically different from the first interviewee, who was an international student who felt most comfortable socializing with other Asian students, spoke with an accent, and was asked by a professor to speak up more in class to get over his cultural attitude. Differences aside, the present interviewee was not entirely immune to Asian stereotyping, however, and she went on to talk about stereotyping in the context of humor.

The next important theme of this interview was the humorous and/or non-malicious side of stereotyping. At the heart of every race-based joke is a racial stereotype, and Asian jokes are no different. This interviewee said that she knew someone—of Asian heritage, nonetheless—who is known for telling “the worst Asian jokes [she has] ever heard.” I asked if it bothered her when he told such jokes, and she replied, “[...] it doesn’t really bother me. I mean, if someone’s really being malicious, then yes, it would.” It seems that for this interviewee, the joker’s intention is the barometer by which offense can be measured. Much like the other Asian interviewee who was raised in Minnesota, the current interviewee reported that she experienced
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more stereotyping in the school environment during her high school years. For her, the comments were not necessarily on a daily or weekly basis, but happened from time to time, and many of the instances featured the interviewee’s classmates, who would make comments about her Asian-ness. One of the examples she mentioned featured the purported math/science abilities of Asian students. “If I had any kind of question [in math or physics] or something, they’d just kind of poke fun. Like, “C’mon, [name], you’re supposed to be able to do this kind of stuff!” While this differs from a joke about race where Asian-ness is the punchline, this kind of remark makes a target of the student toward whom it is directed. Nevertheless, the interviewee was not always offended:

I knew when they were just joking around and when they were actually malicious.
They’d make a couple cracks at me, supposed to be good at physics and math or something. I wasn’t bothered by it. [...] I don’t see it so much in the college classroom because I feel like there’s a delicate atmosphere that people try to maintain of being really sensitive to people’s emotions and to be aware of stereotypes. But, I mean, I think that’s just in the classroom setting. I don’t hang out with people that would be racist or make stereotypes. So maybe students, when they’re hanging out with their friends, are stereotyping people this way, but I don’t really see it that much in the classroom.

An important thing to note was that the people making racial/stereotypical comments during the interviewee’s high school years were fellow classmates who had attended the same small K-12 school with her since early childhood. This is a very different situation than a large public high school, where students don’t necessarily have a decade of history together, give or take a few years.
Overall, this student had some very interesting experiences to share, and it was encouraging to hear that Asian stereotyping has not been a hindrance in her life, academically or otherwise. The same cannot be said for everyone, however, as discussed below.

The third student interviewed in the Asian category identified as Hmong American. This ethnic group is particularly important in the context of this research, because the Midwest is home to three of the five major Hmong cities in America, and two of these cities—Minneapolis and St. Paul—are within driving distance (less than 5 hours) of the university in this study. According to the interviewee, who has been an active member of the Asian and Pacific American Student Association on campus, a large portion of the students involved in this group are also Hmong—because of this fact, the Hmong students were able to form their own student group recently to focus more on programming that showcases the Hmong culture. While this interviewee focused on Asian concerns throughout the interview, he also mentioned that, as he identified as Hmong American, he had some American traits too. Unlike international students who retain their “foreign-ness” or many third- or fourth-generation Asian Americans who seem culturally more American than Asian, it seemed as though this student had a strong grasp on both cultures.

This interviewee was very forthcoming about his feelings of frustration with Asian stereotypes. One important point to note is that this student, being Hmong American, is not an East Asian, and the source of many Asian stereotypes are found in the values and practices of East Asian cultures. However, not many Americans can identify an Asian’s ethnicity by sight alone, nor might they understand the cultural differences between East Asians and other groups of Asians. As such, this student could potentially have stereotypes applied to him that are not in any way reflective of his culture, or the experience of his people.
The major source of frustration for this student, who grew up in first a small town, and later in the greater Minneapolis/St. Paul area, is the “passive Asian” stereotype, where Asians are just quiet, obedient, and respectful observers going with the flow, rather than having a voice and being assertive. The interviewee recalled one time in particular when another student said to him, “Oh yeah, I thought you were a typical Asian, just sitting in the classroom and never talking to anybody. A really quiet Asian in the classroom.” He wondered, “Is that how we really seem? [...] Not being social, not able to talk to people?” Later, he made a definitive statement about the stereotype of passivity: “This is not how we should be viewed.” Talking about a different experience along the same vein, the interviewee described being asked to help with another (non-Asian student’s) math homework in high school:

I would always get asked for help, especially on exams and whatnot. Yeah, a lot of the time, all the time. People are like, ‘Hey, can you help me with this?’ Especially with math, with science. They’ll always grab the Asian. [.]‘Hey, Asian, you know about this stuff. Can you help me?’ [.] It’s just how people, they view us as really obedient, really passive people who will just give them our homework. Here, yeah, like ‘Go ahead and copy it.’ I mean, it’s not not true. I see it all the time with my Asian friends. Just really passive and willing to help people with their math and science problems.

This student’s goal, he said, is to challenge Asian stereotypes and effect change, and his heavy involvement in Asian student groups on campus and willingness to participate in the interview demonstrate his effort.

Another stereotype the interviewee mentioned as problematic is Asians’ prowess in the classroom. “Coming as refugees, our parents, they weren’t educated—not like the East Asians
who come here and are very educated and are very well-off most of the time. But we came as refugees and our parents really did have to start from the bottom.” Situations like forced migration can definitely have economical and social impacts on the education of the next generation. The interviewee also mentioned graduation rates being lower for some groups of Asians, but that their statistics get mixed into the general “Asian” group of statistics, and the rate looks good overall, so no one cares about those groups that are not thriving. The interviewee is clearly upset; this is one of the concerns that extant research targets as a damaging effect of Asian stereotyping.

One area of confusion for the interviewee was the use of Asian stereotypes in comedy, especially in YouTube videos made by Asians, of which the interviewee has seen several. There is a plethora of videos online about Asian stereotyping, often made by Asians who are trying to make relatable content. While the interviewee said he could sometimes relate to the content of the videos (e.g. having strict parents) and find them funny, this is not always the case. “Sometimes I find it offensive. And sometimes I don’t. It’s weird.” This highlights the difficult position that Asians are in—stereotyping begins with a group of people having something in common, and for many Asian stereotypes, the commonalities are cultural. Sharing a culture makes some things very relatable. At the same time, grouping others based on a shared culture (which, in itself can often be an overgeneralization) becomes a stereotype when the generalization is too widely applied and includes people who are outside of the shared culture group. Because this student is Hmong, a lot of the stereotypes rooted in East Asian cultures may not fit his experience. The videos might include things that he can relate to, like having strict parents, which is also part of the East Asian stereotype, but other stereotypes in these videos
might not be a good fit, making his experience of watching them confusing, offensive, or uncomfortable.

As a whole, the Asian student interviews did not have many common themes apart from the two Asian males experiencing the “quiet, passive Asian” stereotype—one by a professor, the other by students. For the most part, though, these interviews were very different from each other. It cannot be said whether this is a mere coincidence or the natural by-product of interviewing Asian students from very diverse backgrounds, but it is interesting nonetheless.

This particular group of interviews did not yield much in common, which is not surprising due to the intentional diversity of experience of the interviewees. Nonetheless, one thing that does stand out is that the first two interviewees expressed less frustration than the third. The first Asian student, an international student from Korea, did have some frustrations, but overall approached stereotyping in a matter-of-fact manner. The second student, a mixed race Asian American, was not particularly bothered by stereotyping, and often experienced it in ways that she acknowledged as non-malicious.

The third interviewee, whose frustration I perceived to be greater than the other two, does not belong to the East Asian group like the other two students (one by birth, the other by heritage), as he is a Hmong student. His attitude toward Asian stereotypes took on more of an activist stance; he wanted to see changes, and he wanted to be a part of making those changes. As he mentioned in his interview, the stereotypes that were born of East Asian values and practices, do not fit all Asians. As a result of this, some groups can be overlooked; as he pointed out, statistics do not tell the whole story when it comes to graduation rates. If this is true, then what else might be overlooked when it comes to serving these non-East Asian populations?
Non-Asian Student Interviews

I conducted five interviews with participants who belong to the non-Asian student group: two with male students, three with female students. As this was a convenience sample, I knew that many of these students came from diverse majors and collegiate units at this university, and many of them talked about their field of study in their interviews. The areas of study of the students who shared this information are: business, linguistics, Spanish (several of them are double majors in this and another major), biochemistry, and computer science. All students had a Minnesota upbringing—at least from high school through the present—and grew up in a variety of environments: rural/small town, suburb, and the metro-area of Minneapolis/Saint Paul.

One of the main themes that emerged in these interviews was language issues, with sub-themes including accent bias, English-speaking ability, and groups of Asian students speaking together in a language other than English. While these may not all be directly related to academics, they all do play a large role in the socio-academic environment of an educational institution, and therefore should be analyzed under the assumption that they do indeed impact the holistic “school” experience for Asian—and non-Asian—students. The aforementioned are all themes that have been addressed abundantly in previous research about Asian stereotypes, so it does not appear that any are unique to the university in the present study. Each sub-theme—accent bias, English-speaking ability, and Asians speaking with other Asians in another language—will be addressed respectively below.

One student shared that her former roommate would often mock [the roommate’s] statistics instructor’s accent, which the roommate perceived as difficult to understand. When asked if this was something that occurred only in the beginning of the semester, and thus could be chalked up to a transition issue, the interviewee responded that her roommate mocked the
instructor’s accent throughout the semester. This same interviewee identified the portrayal of
accents and tonal qualities of some Asian languages as the target of much stereotyping and
criticism, and that it almost seems as if non-Asians perceive Asian languages as “trash.” One
place where this accent-based stereotyping can be seen is social media; in particular, the
interviewee identified Vine as a place where she has seen social media contributors use and
exaggerate an Asian accent for comedic value.

Concerning the second sub-theme, English-speaking-ability, another interviewee
described a situation in which he had taken some classes for his major that were taught by Asian
faculty. He rated the instructors’ ability to communicate in English very low—not because of a
difficult-to-understand accent, but rather, an actual inability to communicate successfully in
English. Interestingly, he pondered whether there was a connection between Asian stereotyping
and the professors being hired—were they hired because they were perceived as more intelligent,
despite having a seemingly significant communication deficit, simply because they were Asian?
While this cannot be proven one way or another, the main point here is that there are two Asian
stereotypes in tension: one stereotype, that Asians are more intelligent than others and the other,
that Asians have language problems. In this case, that means an English deficit. Preferential
hiring based on perceived intelligence without regard for basic skills, like communication, seems
to be damaging to both sides of the teacher-student teacher experience.

Finally, Asians speaking together in a language other than English was a sub-theme of
the language stereotype discussed in this section. However, this has significant ties to another
theme that was uncovered during the interviews of this group, and that was the theme of Asians
forming homogenous social groups—that is, Asians only socialize with other Asians. These
themes will be discussed together because it is unclear whether these are two distinct stereotypes,
or one that has several facets. It should be noted that Asians socializing in homogenous groups was brought up in three of the five interviews in this group, while the language factor was brought up directly in two interviews. One male student responded to the question about what non-Asian students’ attitudes might be toward Asian students, and his response addressed the non-language aspects in detail. In fact, his response very thoroughly addressed the sense of “otherness” about Asian students that many of the other non-Asian students alluded to.

If you’re at [university in study—name redacted], [non-Asians’] attitudes [toward Asian students] may not be negative, but I would say separate. Like, um, there doesn’t seem to be a lot of overlap or something between Asian and non-Asian college students. [...] The word that I keep coming back to is ‘separate.’ There’s not a lot of, um, what would you say, like, fraternizing between the two [groups]. [...] If you’re looking at like, other [than Caucasian] races, I often see groups of just Asian students a lot. Like, I don’t see as much groups of just Black students or just Hispanic students, but I see groups of just Asian students, so I don’t know if that’s a result of people not socializing with the Asian students, or a result of the Asian students not socializing with others, and maybe it’s an isolated group that stands out because I notice it or whatever.

We might assume that, given the nature of universities with diversity missions, recruiting efforts concentrated in Asia, and study abroad programs like the institution targeted in this research, stereotyping about Asians socializing in Asian-only (or more likely ethnicity-language-specific) groups would apply mostly to students whose first language is not English (this could include American-born Hmong students), foreign-born students, and international students. This might be one reason that the student above does not see as many exclusively Black
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or Hispanic friend groups socializing on campus—many Black and Hispanic students’ first language is English at this university, and many are U.S. citizens. Additionally, Asian students in these purported groups might know each other from international student orientation, an ESL class, or any number of other programs specifically targeting students who are non-native English speakers and who may or may not be foreign. While it is not surprising that Asian students who share—to some extent—a common experience may know each other and socialize, and might be inclined to converse in a language comfortable to them, this type of phenomenon would not likely go unnoticed in a university with such a small population of Asian students.

In looking at the language aspect of Asians socializing amongst themselves, one of the female students shared her experience with Asian student groups living in on-campus residence halls. She began by saying that one thing she noticed about Asian students was that, in the residence halls, they would often cook traditional ethnic foods together. I asked how she thought non-Asian students might feel about that, and she replied that they might be:

[M]aybe slightly resentful. The only reason I say that is just ‘cause a lot of the international students, if they’re able to find people who are from the same country, whatever, they tend to speak in their native language and then do their own thing, and so it’s kind of hard to feel open to interaction with them when they’re kind of doing their own thing and using the [cooking] space and stuff. So I think people kind of tend to put... make... a separation there, in that way, saying ‘you’re different; I’m not going to interact with you.’

I followed up by asking if she thought the reaction might be the same if the students—still Asian—were speaking in English.
I think language is a factor. I think it is a big factor because it’s hard to, if you want to interact with somebody and they’re not speaking English, then you’re asking them to switch to a maybe a language that they’re not as comfortable with, and then you’re not that comfortable interacting with them for that reason. I think maybe people feel like foreign students aren’t necessarily open to those interactions so maybe people from here aren’t open to them either.

The experiences of the students in this group generally point to limited interaction between groups of Asian students—more so those who are culturally different from the general university population, or who share a common language—and non-Asian students. This topic will be revisited in the cross-group analysis section for the purpose of comparing viewpoints of those from different groups.

Two other closely-related themes that emerged across the members of this non-Asian student interview group were those of Asian students’ attitudes toward school and their school performance. Asian students’ attitudes toward school generally fit into a stereotype of superior work ethic. Four of the five students in this group identified Asian students, and in some cases specifically international Asian students, as “hard-working,” “studious,” “diligent,” and as possessing “a work ethic we don’t have [in the U.S.]” One female interviewee mentioned that her international Asian student neighbors from across the hall in her on-campus housing building were in the library every time that she, herself, went to the library. Interviewees did not have much more to say about this particular stereotyped trait, as most interviewees simply stated that the “typical” Asian college student exhibited one or more of the characteristics listed above.

School performance stereotypes of Asian students generally fell into the category of academic excellence. Two out of the five interviewees identified math and science as areas in
which Asians supposedly excel. Every single member of this group mentioned the supposed academic superiority of Asian students in some way. One male student said that Asian students were “expected to be smarter,” citing that Asians were “held to almost a higher [standard] in some respects and a lower [standard] in others”—meaning Asians are held to a higher standard in some respects (i.e. academically), while in other respects, like language ability (which the student mentioned just previous to the quote above), they are not held to as high a standard.

Interestingly, one female student mentioned that academic inclinations could depend more on the students’ personal experience as either an Asian American or as an international student. In her experience, Asian Americans could be smart and do well in classes—or not—whereas international Asian students may try harder to find academic success, and because of this effort, some actually do. She attributed this to the fact that the international students have “higher stakes” than American students, due to the fact that they were studying in another country, which is very expensive (higher tuition, flights home, etc.).

It could kind of go either way [with Asian Americans]. [...] I’ve definitely seen Asian Americans who were very smart, like one of the, kind of, gunners in a class of mine, but then I’ve seen Asian Americans who struggled in classes of mine, whereas I feel like with the foreign exchange students, you almost always kind of see them towards the top. So I think that might be a difference there.

It is not unexpected that students raised in different cultures, and moreover, studying under different conditions (going to a university in one’s own country vs. studying abroad) would have different types of experiences with school. However, since Asians are often lumped together based on visual cues more than cultural cues, it is possible that not everyone makes the
distinction that this student did. Applying a characteristic of one group too widely results in stereotypes that are at best inaccurate, and at worst, damaging.

The non-Asian student group provided a range of experiences that aligned well with themes identified in the literature on the topic of Asian stereotyping: stereotypes surrounding language ability, stereotypes concerning Asian-exclusive social groups, and academic stereotypes, specifically Asian students’ attitude toward school and their scholastic performance. While none of these themes is surprising to find, as they are all discussed in extant literature, each interviewee provided a unique experience that is shaped not only by their life experiences, but also their participation in the university environment. The latter is especially important, as the purpose of this study is to analyze the student and faculty experience(s) of academic-related Asian stereotypes in a regional Midwestern university setting.

Faculty Interviews

In the faculty group, six interviews were conducted. Three of the interviewees were faculty in social sciences and humanities, which has a relatively low Asian student population in comparison with other collegiate units on the campus in this study. However, one of the professors is an Asian himself, and could speak to both a student and a professor experience as an Asian. Another of these professors specializes in race as a topic for her research, and as such, shared a perspective that was informed by her research. Finally, the third professor interviewed teaches one section of a course specifically for non-native speakers, and in doing so, had many Asian students pass through her classroom.

The education and human services college, where two other faculty interviewees teach, is also not heavily populated with Asian students, but these two instructors work largely with
international students and non-native English speakers in a service program, which means that they both have had a significant number of Asian students in their classes.

The final faculty member to interview was an instructor in the science and engineering college, which houses most of the University’s Asian students. As an instructor in the Mathematics and Statistics Department, she works not only with many Asian colleagues and graduate teaching assistants, but because math is a part of the university’s liberal education, she is likely to have a diverse slice of the student population in any given section of any given class.

One of the major themes found in faculty group of interviewees is that of students forming social groups based on a similar cultural background. While this particular theme does not appear to be particularly academic in nature, it is tightly related to the social aspect of education and the holistic “school experience.” No one in the faculty group really alluded to “Asians socializing with Asians,” but rather, half of the interviewees in this group (that is, 3) mentioned students grouping by similar language and/or culture. This could be attributed to the proportion of instructors in this group—three out of the six—that work exclusively with non-native English speakers in some capacity by definition of their positions, though one of the faculty members that brought up this point does not teach any classes geared toward the English language learner. Two of these people—both CLA faculty; one white female and one Asian male—brought up the fact that this trait, while part of the stereotype that applies to Asians, is really something that applies more widely. The Asian male professor weighed in:

It’s basic human nature. This happens everywhere, and it’s not just based on race or ethnicity. People are looking for common ground. If you look at this university, you will likely find people from the same small town socializing together. You will find people socializing based on a common interest, like people who are on a sports team together, or
people who are involved in student political groups. Asian students, and other international students, do this too due to their shared cultural background, and it is not surprising.

Similarly, when asked about the stereotype of Asian-exclusive social groups, a female professor (Caucasian, CLA) said that in her experience, Asian students do form social groups among themselves in her classes. Her classes at the university in the present study are often divided into sections that are exclusively for either international students or non-native English speakers (sometimes immigrant, sometimes just students whose first language is not English), and previously, she worked with students in an intensive English program at another institution. Of her experience with the latter, she said: “[The Asian students’] closest friends, they had a shared language or something else. They did stick together, and I don’t know if it’s a defense mechanism, or cultural, or what.” When I asked if other culturally-similar or shared-language students form social groups, for example, the Somali students in that program, did the same thing, she said yes. Though it seems that groups other than Asians also choose to socialize amongst themselves—university instructors are confirming it, so students must be able to see these other groups too—for whatever reason, the “Asians stick together” stereotype is particularly pervasive.

This group also had much to offer in terms of where Asian stereotypes can be found in pop culture. Several television shows were identified 1) as having either stereotyped Asian roles, or 2) as simply using Asian stereotypes for comedic value. In the first group, faculty identified shows such as *Gilmore Girls* and *Community* as ones that have very stereotyped Asian characters (Lane, a Korean student and Senor Chang, a Chinese Spanish teacher, respectively). One
comment in particular concerning the character of Lane in *Gilmore Girls* was especially interesting; one female faculty member (Caucasian, CLA) interpreted Lane’s experience as needing to fulfill the role of “that which is Korean” regardless of the fact that she was growing up in America. The faculty member identified several ways in which Lane’s life differed from that of her friends, most notably in her limited career and future spouse options: Lane could be a doctor, go into the ministry (or marry a minister), or she could be a teacher. This situation seems to speak to the difficulty of growing up in a household that embraces cultural values, norms, and practices outside of the culture in which that household is situated. In the second group, *Family Guy* was identified as a television show that frequently uses Asians as a comedy bit, and not necessarily as recurring characters. One faculty member recalled an episode where the main character—Peter Griffin, a white male—was portrayed as Asian (the interviewee could not remember for what purpose), wearing a paddy hat, and with his two front teeth sticking out in a “bucktoothed” manner. Another faculty member mentioned an episode where Peter had to take a standardized test, and, instead of taking out a calculator, he set a small Asian boy squarely on the corner of his desk and said, “Do math!”

One television show that two faculty members mentioned but had not watched was one that was piloted several months before the interviews, and that was the show *Fresh Off the Boat*—a sitcom featuring an Asian family adjusting to their new life after a big move. One female faculty member (African American) said that her reason for not watching it was mainly because she was “anxious about these kinds of [racial, cultural] stereotypes being present.” What is interesting is that the title of this program is a stereotype itself; the term “fresh off the boat,” or FOB for short, is often used to negatively describe Asian immigrants whose appearance or actions reflect(s) their foreign-ness, or newness to this continent, hence they are “fresh off the 13

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13 Of note, one student in the non-Asian student group identified this same scene in *Family Guy*. 
boat.” This term does not seem to be easily applied to other (i.e. non-Asian) immigrant groups, and for that reason, it seems to reflect a uniquely Asian type of otherness.

Another theme discussed by the interviewees in this group was that of the poster campaign that was taking place on the campus at the time of the interviews. Simply called “The Stereotype Project,” students are pictured on large posters with words that follow a format, challenging readers to question how accurate, if at all, stereotyping really is: “I am_________. You might think_________. Actually,__________.” Two strong opinions about this project stand out in the faculty interviews; one opinion is more a comment on how the poster campaign should be understood as not a singular effort, but rather a part of a bigger dialogue. The other opinion is more a critique of the approach to challenging stereotypes seen in the posters.

One female professor (Caucasian, CLA) said that while these posters were worthwhile in that they might make some students stop, think, and have a conversation, they really are only a small step toward solving the greater problem of stereotyping.

[...] the poster campaign is great. [it] can be successful, but [it’s] totally baby steps unless the rest of us can change the way we talk about it. The poster shouldn’t have to teach me anything. It should be part of a bigger conversation about diversity and respect, and all of those things.

The Asian faculty member had an entirely different opinion, however. Whether due to his unique experience as an immigrant or not, it is starkly different from the other views of the campaign:

I think the [university] poster campaign is well-intentioned, but in my opinion, it should be the opposite of what it is. There are two ways to destroy a stereotype. You can find
outliers who defy the stereotype and highlight them, discrediting the stereotype. The other way is to find ways in which the stereotyped group is similar to everyone else and highlight those. For example, Asians often eat octopus in many traditional ethnic dishes. [In the western hemisphere], I have experienced octopus in a traditional Spanish dish when [I was] in Spain. The main ingredient was the same, but the dish was prepared differently. Like this example, many cultural values and practices may be similar at the core, but simply expressed differently. [...] If we highlight the fact that two groups share the same core, we show people how similar they really are. If we highlight only the differences, we make people “others.”

The gist of this opinion was unique to the faculty group, but certainly provides insight from a different angle. While it is beyond the scope of this project to opine on campus efforts to reduce harmful stereotyping, the professor quoted above makes an interesting point.

In sum, the faculty group provided detailed information about stereotyping, most of these faculty members have not seen much Asian stereotyping in their classrooms, though as several instructors said, this does not mean that stereotyping is not happening. The next section will synthesize the results of the faculty group with the two previous groups, the Asian student group and the non-Asian student group. From there, some themes that were universal among the groups are discussed.

**Cross-Group Analysis**

The analysis of the interviews for this study would not be complete without discussing the responses across the groups for commonalities among themes and experiences. Themes that stood out across all three groups include: 1) Asians socializing amongst themselves and 2) Asian
Academic stereotypes as a whole. Both of these will be examined in terms of the responses of all three of the groups of interviews.

**Asian-exclusive social groups.**

The first stereotype addressed in this section, Asians forming seemingly Asian-exclusive social groups, is one that was talked about in one way or another by the majority of the interviewees, spanning all groups. The first way in which the social grouping of Asians was discussed was in a practical manner. One instructor in CSE (Caucasian, female) told the story of a large lecture class she taught where three Chinese students regularly sat together. Two were international students, and the background of the third was unknown. “It was natural for them to sit next to each other—these two students in particular, and maybe this third student—they were trying to relate the way they learned something in China with what [was] presented [during that class].” In this way, the social grouping became a sort of survival method, where the students would try to decode the way in which material was being presented, which was different than the problem-solving methods used in China. Forming an in-class group to overcome some cultural curriculum barriers seems to be, as the interviewee said, a natural thing for the students to do.

More than half of the non-Asian group expressed “otherness” feelings/experiences about Asian social groups on campus. Nevertheless, this feeling of otherness did not seem to apply to individual Asian students; the majority of the students in this group mentioned having Asian friends, some international, and others, Asian American. It was the social group itself that non-Asian students perceived to be impenetrable.

Evidence of this perceived impenetrability can be found in several interviews. One non-Asian student described Asian students as “separate,” meaning that the Asian groups on campus
kept to themselves without a more diverse fraternization pattern. Another non-Asian student pointed out that while she understood that the Asian students might be forming a group based on a common language in which they can best express themselves, it made socialization difficult between the Asian group(s) and non-Asian groups on campus. A group of students speaking in a language that is foreign to the majority of the other students might highlight the group’s “otherness,” making the majority group less willing to interact with the foreign language-speaking group, she commented.

The reason behind the lack of socializing between the groups could really be any number of variables (or a combination of several), but non-Asian students’ unwillingness to interact with Asian student groups at the university in this study did not escape one of the Asian interviewees. He offered his perspective on the situation:

I can’t say for all colleges, but for [university], I feel like nobody wants to approach us. People are always, like, ‘All Asians, you know, you guys stick together. You guys do everything together. Like, we can’t. . .even if we asked you, you guys wouldn’t want to participate.’ And it’s like, ‘But you didn’t try, you know?’ Uh, but it is kind of true. Asian Americans here at [university] really do stick together. But I feel like it’s almost like the environment made it like that. The environment up in [city], up at [university] is very clique-y. Even with the majority population, they’re very clique-y within themselves. So we find groups, like, fast, and I don’t know, we never want to leave [the group we join].

The introspective response of this interviewee showed that while Asian students do often “stick together,” there are many similar social groups among non-Asian students that, while they may
not be based on ethnicity/culture or language, may be just as exclusive from the perspective of someone outside the group.

The Asian student quoted above was not the only person to mention the majority population’s tendency to form groups either: the Asian professor (CLA, male) mentioned the same phenomenon, chalking up social grouping practices to human nature. He mentioned that while Asian students do indeed group together sometimes, that is more likely because they are comfortable socializing with people who share a common experience, such as cultural norms/values, a shared first language, or any number of other experiences. He went on to say that this was in no way exclusive to Asian students, or even international students, and that most people tend to form social groups in this way.

Similarly the Korean graduate student expressed that he felt more comfortable around those with which he shared some “bigger picture” things (i.e. culture, common interests, common ways of thinking about issues, etc.).

Compared to American students, Asian students are kind of, much more easy to approach because, in my personal experience, American students, they have their own kinds of personalities, very diverse. So, it would be difficult to make some common thought, common background. Asian students, usually, they have some kind of common idea about culture, about some issues. It’s easy to understand, easy to make some kind of common interest.

I then asked if he thought if the same feeling of a shared experience applies to Asian Americans, or if it was only something he felt about non-American Asians. “Yeah, actually, I have some
American-born Asian friends. I also feel comfortable meet[ing] them, compared to other Americans. I don’t know. Whenever I talk to them, I feel comfortable.”

With perspectives from all groups considered, the most salient commonality among them is that most interviewees understood that common ground was important for group socialization. Many interviewees—some from every group—clearly indicated that they knew why Asians might group together, be it for reasons of a shared native language, common cultural values, or even for a similar curricular foundation. Group socialization, however, seemed to be different for the interviewees than one-on-one socialization.

Due to the fact that many of the interviewees talked about being a part of Asian/non-Asian friendships, interaction between Asian individuals and non-Asian individuals does not seem to be an issue. Socialization only appears to be impeded when a group is present. The perception that a group is “other” and that one is not a part of the in-group seems to be the trouble... and this is not unlike the phenomenon of stereotyping. By its very nature, stereotyping is a way to describe a group. When a stereotype is applied, it is assumed that a group of people—bound by some big-picture commonality, like geography, culture, or skin color—share a finite and specific list of traits from which a member of the group cannot stray. It can happen though, that upon meeting a member of such a group, one discovers that this person does not match the description set forth by the stereotype. Common ground can be identified, and two individuals can interact, and maybe even become friends. If this happens often enough, the stereotype loses some credibility. As one of the professors (Caucasian, CEHSP) said in her interview, “The biggest challenge [to] a stereotype is exposure.”

Asian academic stereotypes.
Another very commonly spoken-about theme among the groups of interviewees was that of Asian stereotypes concerning academics. While the initial goal was to identify stereotypes about Asian students, an entirely different stereotype about Asians in academia (i.e. graduate TAs, instructors, professors) emerged across the groups. While this seems somewhat removed from the experience of Asian students on a college campus, the feelings about Asian graduate TAs and faculty could potentially influence students’ feelings about Asians in general.

*Asian students in the academic setting.*

Interviewees across all groups in this study identified several common academic stereotypes about Asian students: that Asian students are inherently smarter, especially with math and science (the term “nerdy” was also used here); that they work harder for their grades; and that as students, Asians are quiet, passive, and obedient in the classroom. Every single interviewee from all three groups identified one or more of these as stereotypes they have seen applied to Asian students, either in popular culture or in their own experience.

To address the first item in the list, Asians being inherently smarter than their non-Asian counterparts, faculty were able to weigh in with some relatively objective observations, while students provided their first-hand experiences in the classroom. One professor, an Asian himself (CLA), has seen no difference between the performance of Asian students in his classes. Though he doesn’t have large numbers of Asian students, the handful he has every semester have demonstrated a wide range of ability ranging from the very bottom of the class to the very top.

I have had all kinds of Asian students. At [university in study, name redacted], it has been my experience that Asian students do not perform any better than their peers. I’ve had a few good ones. I’ve had a lot of average-performing Asian students, and a few who have
really struggled. Just like any other race, really. There is no ‘consistent Asian performance’ that I can see. Even when I think about breaking down the sample and looking at East Asians, South Asians, international students vs. Asian Americans, etc., there is really no pattern [in the students I have seen].

His experience is similar to some extent to a non-Asian student, quoted in an earlier section, who makes a distinction between Asian students who are Asian American and those who are international students. She has seen Asian Americans as both top students in her classes and also as students who have struggled. To her, the difference between the two groups was that Asian international students had “higher stakes,” especially in terms of the money spent on their education. International students must pay higher tuition rates than their in-state Asian American counterparts, and they have many expenses, such as international airfare, that don’t apply to the majority of the university’s student population. Though not mentioned in her interview, it is pertinent to the discussion to mention that unlike U.S. citizens, international students cannot take on a part-time job to offset the cost of their studies because of F1 (student) Visa restrictions. Many of the American students (regardless of race) at the university in this study do have some form of employment, whether it be an on-campus work-study or an off-campus job.

Another person who made a distinction between Asian Americans and Asian international students was an instructor (Caucasian, SCE) who said that she is aware of a recruitment effort in the math department to bring top-level math students from China to study at the university in this study. “We actually have a program where a professor in our department recruits top students from China.” She attributes her experience with two Chinese international students as top students in her class “by a long shot” to this factor, though she has had Chinese
international students who struggled with understanding the content of the class. This differs from her experience with Laotian students, who have tended to struggle more in her classes. Many of these Laotian students, she notes, were raised in the U.S. and are from the Minneapolis area. In terms of math curriculum and culture, there are big differences between Chinese international students and Laotian students at the university in this study; while math performance cannot be attributed to either factor without further investigation, it is simply important to note that these two groups of students are very different. Not all Asian students (international or Asian American) are good at math, or science, for that matter, but the stereotype reflects them as prodigies in these areas. Many might wonder how Asians and the fields of math and science are connected, or how such a stereotype could take root. In short, those fields are valued in many Asian cultures as fields where a person can find the highest success, whether that is measured in money, fame, or any number of other ways. As one Asian interviewee put it, there is definitely a pressure to perform, especially from Asian parents. Moreover, the stereotype itself has some power: “Being Asian, definitely makes me—with the math and science stereotypes—I feel like I have to do something in those fields.” It appears that this kind of expectation can really limit a student to only certain fields of study.

From the data presented above, it looks as though Asians as a race are not perceived as smarter than their non-Asian counterparts by the participants in this study. One professor reported no difference at all between Asian students (of any categorization) and students of any other race. Another made a distinction between Asian Americans, who generally perform along the same academic spectrum as anyone else, and Asian international students, who tend to have

14 It was not said whether this could have been due to a language deficit, a difference in curriculum, or a general difficulty in grasping mathematical concepts.
more academic success. If Asian Americans perform along the same academic spectrum as everyone else, then race is not a sufficient condition to determine scholastic performance.

International students can be considered outliers of the Asian group in that they self-selected to study abroad as a part of their education. Whether recruited or not, not every student can study in the United States. Money, ability to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language, motivation, and willingness to live outside one’s own culture for the sake of education all play a role in a student’s ability to study abroad. Clearly, for international students to spend the money and effort to study in the United States, education must be a priority. It would be no surprise if these students were more hard-working than the average American student, but as far as intelligence is concerned, these students are not necessarily any smarter than their peers in the U.S.

Several of the interviewees in the three groups mentioned an Asian stereotype revolving around a superior work ethic. One student (Caucasian, male) in the non-Asian student group flat-out stated that Asians are stereotyped as having a work ethic “that we don’t have here [in the United States].” Others mentioned diligence, studiousness, and working harder; in essence, having an excellent work ethic.

Naturally, the conversation in the previous section might carry over here: if Asian international students have “higher stakes” than the run-of-the-mill university student (regardless of race), then it follows that they might put more effort in to doing well, meaning more hours studying, doing homework, and seeking supplementary help if need be. The fact that this group of students is doing all of this in a second language may only add to the amount of time spent on these things compared to their non-international student counterparts. Any of this could be
interpreted as an inherent diligence, when in fact, international students are simply in a unique learning situation that necessitates, for many reasons, extra work.

Apart from the above, there may be some cultural factors at play as well, and these factors may not be limited to international students. The length of the school day (which is much longer in East Asia than the U.S.) was referenced in one non-Asian student’s interview, and several students generally referenced the difference in school systems in Asian countries as compared to the school system in the United States. Most notably, the Korean graduate student mentioned that his peers believed him to have had a “high quality education” before coming to the U.S. In many interviewees’ perceptions, education was valued in Asian countries, and Asian parents imposed those values on their children. In terms of culture, what interviewees said in their interviews did fit some general attitudes that East Asians hold about education.

Asian American parents do not seem to be immune to the cultural factors that cause them to push their children academically, however. Many of the interviewees, the majority from the two student groups, mentioned the stereotype of the “tiger mom,” an immigrant or American-born Asian who pushes her child(ren) to excel at academics and/or music (particularly piano or stringed instruments, both of which were brought up in interviews.) One faculty interviewee told the story of a childhood friend who, as the child of Chinese parents, was expected to practice and perfect her playing of the piano and violin. The child was also fairly competitive in her approach to academics, though the interviewee could not say for sure if that was an idiosyncratic trait, or something that was culturally instilled in her. Though the book on tiger “motherhood” (Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother by Amy Chua) was written by a Chinese woman, this is not to say that other Asian cultures don’t value pushing their children to excellence. The student interviewee who identified as Hmong American described “growing up really traditionally” with strict
parents who favored their child studying at home after school to extracurricular activities. With Asian parents instilling such study and music practice habits in their children as seen in interviews, it seems like a variety of Asian cultures do value good work ethic.

Cultural values aside, not every Asian student has a superior work ethic. Some interviewees personally knew Asian students (international and American) who were, as one student put it, just “skating by.” One faculty member alluded to the fact that groups of Asians have different work ethic among themselves too—she cited that her East Asian students were hard workers in terms of grades, while her Hmong students were hard working in terms of striving to have a solid understanding of the material. Another faculty member mentioned that, in her experience, Korean international students were more likely to skip class and receive a slightly lower grade in the class (a B instead of an A) because of lack of effort and not lack of intellect. No matter what cultural, generational, or idiosyncratic truths are behind the experiences mentioned above, the fact of the matter is that a one-dimensional stereotype of excellent work ethic cannot even begin to describe the cultural values of one group of Asians, let alone, a whole race of people.

Finally, there is a stereotype concerning Asians being quiet and obedient in the classroom. Many interviews backed up the existence of this stereotype, using words like “respectful,” “deferential,” “apologetic,” and “passive.” Like other interview topics, there was a whole spectrum of responses, ranging from general perceptions of Asians in the classroom to culture-specific, first-hand experiences.

According to one Asian student who was interviewed, the perception of Asians was as follows: “You can make fun of them, and they’re just like, ‘whatever, I don’t care.’ [...] They’re the model minority. They’re passive. You can throw anything at them, and they’ll be okay with
it. They’ll suck it up.” This general perception was very frustrating to the interviewee, and he identified one of his personal goals as trying to change this view.

Some faculty mentioned that some international students, because of the cultural attitudes in their home countries, may be more apt to address teachers more respectfully (e.g. “Thank you, Teacher.”), and some even bow to their former teachers in the hallway. The Asian international student that was interviewed said that because of his perceived cultural attitudes (e.g. being quiet in class), his professor took him aside and asked him to speak up more in class. These attitudes and practices are not harmful in themselves, and if they are the result of one’s culture, they are not likely to cause too much trouble on a small-scale. However, when these predominantly East Asian attitudes and practices become stereotyped as something that applies to all Asians, the result can be frustrating for Asian people not raised in an East Asian tradition, whether they are Hmong, Asian American, or anyone else who the stereotype does not fit.

Asian faculty and TAs in the academic setting.

In stark contrast to the stereotypes of Asian students, who are seen as having superior ability in the classroom, Asian graduate student TAs and Asian faculty are looked at from the viewpoint of inability in the classroom. Several interviewees, students and faculty alike, identified issues with Asian teachers, all of which revolved around language issues (e.g. language ability and accent). While this topic was covered fairly thoroughly in the non-Asian student section, it is worth mentioning that the issues mentioned there were also addressed in an interview from the faculty group, where one faculty member attested to hearing students complain about the Asian graduate TAs who teach classes in her department. However, she says

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15 As the specific people mentioned were either graduate Teaching Assistants (who are students, not faculty) and also instructors/professors, I will use the term “teacher” to apply to any person who heads the classroom in these situations.
that students tend to complain about their TAs more in the fall, which corresponds to many TAs’
arrival in the United States a few days before classes start. Naturally, there is an adjustment
period for international students who are experiencing English immersion for the first time, and
it would stand to reason that, for most people in this situation, language ability (though not
necessarily foreign accent) would improve over time. According to this faculty member, though,
it is obvious that at least some of the students who complained were really trying to understand
their teachers, and this manifests in a more polite complaint. “It seems like if they can tell their
TA really is trying and wants to help them, then they have a different way of complaining about
it too, where they say, ‘I know he’s really trying, I know,’ or ‘I still don’t understand. I don’t
know what to do, and I feel bad.’”

Not everyone is polite about venting their frustrations, however. The word that one non-
Asian student interviewee used to describe her roommate’s impressions of her professor was
“mock[ing],” which has a decidedly negative connotation. The roommate that the interviewee
mentioned kept up her mocking of the professor throughout the semester, and attributed to her
poor performance in his class to his underdeveloped communication skills.

With these specific references to language ability, it is hard to ignore how this parallels
the way that Asian language ability is portrayed in popular culture as well. Several interviewees
across groups identified unflattering portrayals of Asian language through various media. One
faculty interviewee talked about the character with the tongue-in-cheek name, Chin-Kee, in the
graphic novel *American-born Chinese*, whose poor pronunciation was a very obvious part of his
character. Another interviewee, a non-Asian student, talked about the way that some people in
online videos use the tonal qualities of some Asian languages to put on a fake Asian accent. In
her opinion, it was as if the impressionists thought of the language as “trash,” which was
evidenced by the way the languages were portrayed. Other than the examples seen in popular culture, the issue of language inability (again, actual language speaking ability and pronunciation) was really only mentioned significantly in terms of teacher stereotypes. The going stereotype of Asian students is that they may socialize with other Asian students and speak a common language together, as seen in previous sections. The interviews show that Asians who head the classroom, however, are more likely to be criticized for their speech. This is not surprising, since the communication skills of any teacher are vital to the success of every student in the classroom, and as such, are far more likely to be criticized than any random student. Nevertheless, if students apply this stereotype of language inability to an Asian teacher before ever beginning a class, the outcome could be damaging for the teachers and the students too. One potential outcome could be that teachers with Asian-sounding names could potentially have lower enrollment due to perceived language inability—even if the teacher’s ability to speak English was impeccable. Though it can be frustrating to understand a foreign accent, especially when class performance depends on it, getting through the experience without perpetuating a stereotype for others is of the utmost importance.

The language inability stereotype, while not unique to Asian languages alone, is part of a bigger phenomenon called “language prestige,” which was mentioned by one of the faculty interviewees. The professor recalled having a French-born TA for one of his classes, and throughout the semester, he received feedback about the TA’s “cute” and “sophisticated” accent, which was very thick. No students complained, and no students attributed their struggles to the French student’s accent. Because the French are perceived as “high culture” in the United States, the students’ responses were not surprising. The same professor says he has heard similar comments from students who were talking about a particular CLA professor from the United
Academic stereotypes and Asian students in the college classroom

Kingdom, another country generally perceived as high culture. However, he suggested if either the French TA or the British instructor were replaced with an Asian, the likelihood of student complaints would be much higher. The interviewee doubted that anyone would comment on the “cuteness” or “sophistication” of an Asian TA’s accent. Perhaps this is exactly what the student interviewee quoted above was getting at when she said it was almost as if Asian languages were “trash.” The perception of Asian languages in the United States is significantly less prestigious than certain European languages. Language prestige poses some very difficult problems for speakers of languages that are not held in such high esteem, and much like stereotyping, it is based on arbitrary perceptions that might not have a strong grounding in reality.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to analyze the student and faculty experiences of academic-related Asian stereotypes in a regional Midwestern university setting, with the hope of seeing how these stereotypes are conceived and propagated. Because inclusive learning environments are very important to the well-being and education of students, it was another hope of mine that this research could start some important conversations about Asian stereotyping in the university. For this thesis project, the participants were divided into three groups: Asian students, non-Asian students, and faculty interviewees. After the interviews were conducted, the transcripts were analyzed for commonalities within groups and across groups. Some of the major themes that emerged were the portrayal of Asian stereotypes in the media, Asians interacting in Asian-exclusive social groups, academic stereotypes pertaining to Asians, language stereotypes, and the stereotype of passivity and/or obedience that applies to Asians. These themes were
discussed in detail in Chapter 4, and their implications for students, faculty, and administration of the university will now be addressed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

After conducting fourteen interviews with students and faculty at the regional university in this study, a variety of real, colorful, and compelling experiences were compiled into this thesis. The data and analysis from these interviews can be found in the previous chapter. In Chapter 5, the discussion turns to a discussion of the importance of and implications from the results of this project. I will first discuss my general conclusions, after which I will address the implications of this research for students, faculty, and administrators in this regional university and others like it. Finally, I will focus on how future research could be conducted to expand upon the present thesis.

Conclusions

The research question for this project was “What is the student and faculty experience(s) of academic-related Asian stereotypes in a regional Midwestern university setting?” To arrive at an answer, one-on-one interviews were conducted with both students and faculty, and the transcripts from these interviews uncovered diverse experiences with being both a witness of stereotyping and a victim of them. Several emerging Asian stereotype themes were discovered both in and across groups. Among the most-discussed in the interviews were language-related stereotypes, socialization stereotypes, and academic motivation/performance stereotypes, and all generally aligned with Asian stereotypes reported in extant literature on the topic. What is unique about the present research, however, is the setting, where Asian students are a definite minority, and overall diversity is low. Because of the small population of Asian students at this university,
it is imperative that their needs are met even if their numbers are few. For that reason, the
implications section later in this chapter is divided into three sections: students, faculty, and
administration. Meeting the needs of a group that is, in itself, a diverse group is something that
needs to be addressed on every layer of the university system.

Each person interviewed had something to say on the topic of Asian stereotypes, despite
the fact that some of the interviewees (mostly non-Asian students and faculty) experienced little
diversity until their college years. If their personal experience didn’t allow for generalizations to
be made about Asian students, pop culture provided a basis. However, many of the
interviewees—and especially many of the faculty interviewees—agreed that the idea of “typical
Asian” did not mean much in their personal experience; many examples contrary to the
stereotype existed. Perhaps the reason faculty chose to mention this fact was because they come
into contact with so many students over the course of the semester, and are in tune with the
measures of classroom performance of these students. Grades, performance in class, and general
attitudes toward education can be easily gauged by a seasoned instructor, which all of the faculty
interviewees were.

Non-Asian students, the most homogenous group in terms of their Minnesotan
upbringing, were very aware of Asian stereotypes and how they apply to the university
community in particular. Additionally, most students in this group were strong supporters of
challenging cultural stereotypes when an incidence of stereotyping occurred. Many members of
this group understood that culture plays a big role in stereotyping; when a group of people is
observed doing something—perhaps living out a cultural attitude or participating in a cultural
practice—that is not common in the majority population, it can become a generalization that is
then applied to a larger group, albeit incorrectly. This, in a nutshell, is the process of stereotyping
that was described in part by many of the students in this group. One student thought that the ideal situation would be for students, and in this case Asian students, to not feel stereotyped, but rather, understood. This is an interesting statement; on one hand, it implies that the general student/faculty population would become more educated about world cultures. Most people would agree that more cultural education is a good thing, and indeed, the university (and countless others like it) in this study makes a point to mention increasing cultural and diversity education in their strategic plan. However, in the case of the Asian student who likes ping pong mentioned in the previous chapter, understanding the cultural value of ping pong in Korea would not be helpful, as the student attributes his love of the game to his personal identity and not his cultural one. While there would likely be some instances like this, it is my personal opinion that the benefit of more cultural education would outweigh any potential misunderstandings like mentioned above. It is impossible to completely understand anyone’s cultural or personal identity, but working toward a goal of “more understanding” is certainly a positive effort.

Asian students provided a diverse range of experiences and opinions about Asian stereotypes. One student appeared indifferent to the stereotyping; she acknowledged that it existed, and that she had been the object of some Asian stereotype remarks. However, she was not offended as she felt that the remarks were not ill-intentioned, and moreover, she did not identify as Asian so much as she did Minnesotan. Another student in this group, an international student working on a graduate degree, said that his experience with stereotypes was sometimes frustrating and confusing. He wondered if he needed to live up to the expectations imposed on him. The third student was also frustrated with stereotyping, so much so that he was actively trying to effect change through student groups and on an individual level. His frustration was particularly high concerning the Asian stereotypes of passivity and obedience, which equated to,
among other things, not being social or able to talk to people, and handing their homework over without question to non-Asian counterparts looking for answers to copy. His thoughts could be summed up as follows: “Is that how we really seem? [...] This is not how we should be viewed.” Additionally, this student addressed the academic stereotypes of Asians, which are not real reflections of Asians as a whole. The student brought up that graduation rates (presumably high school) are low for some groups of Asians, but their statistics are lumped in the general “Asian” category, and as a result, the problem becomes almost invisible, statistically. Just because the problem cannot be seen in the aggregated Asian data does not mean that it does not exist, and Asian stereotypes concerning academic superiority do nothing to shed light on the problem.

Many of the interviewees across all groups made reference to the poster campaign against stereotypes that was taking place on campus during the time of the interviews. Some liked the idea, claiming that even if it started a few conversations, the effort would not be in vain. Others thought that there might be a better approach to attacking stereotypes; most notably, one professor thought that emphasizing the common ground between groups would be far more successful than showing that stereotypes don’t apply to everyone. Though most interviewees who mentioned the multicultural center on the campus in this study thought it was working hard to raise awareness of issues such as stereotyping, many of them had ideas about how to improve cultural programming. One faculty member said that singular events that occur as the only instance of education about culture X (e.g. a “culture night”), as opposed to regular or more frequent programming, may further exoticize a culture rather than promote the kind of understanding intended. Another faculty member thought that the best way to go about programming was not with the intent of students to teach others about their culture, but rather,

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16 Cultural programming consists of the events that the multicultural center or one of its student-led clubs host. These events often center around educating students/faculty/the community about a particular culture.
for members of that group to do what they would normally do, and for non-members of that
group to simply experience the cultural event as it is. Along the same vein, one of the Asian
students thought it would be nice if the Asian culture group on campus could focus more on
programming that reflected the majority of the group members (that is, Hmong students), instead
of presenting on various Asian cultures. The problem here seems to be that Asian students may
be put in the position of being “ambassadors” of Asian cultures that they are not even familiar
with, or on the other hand, for being an expert on the history and experience of their own culture.
It is not fair to expect Asians to be well-versed on the cultures of Asia; after all, no one would
make Caucasian students accountable for presenting Danish, British, French, and Finnish cultural
programming if they are not a part of any of those groups or have no prior cultural knowledge.
It’s similarly unfair to expect a person to be an expert in their own culture and its history. The
risk here is that because the students are responsible for providing more “diverse” programming,
the authenticity may be lost if students are teaching about cultural practices that are not their
own, and students may end up feeling burned out or resentful about representing cultures that are
not their own.

In sum, everyone interviewed—both faculty and students—were very aware of Asian
stereotypes as they apply in the academic realm. Faculty found that the stereotypes were simply
not accurate descriptions for the majority of their students, and non-Asian students indicated that
culture (practices, ideals, values) might play a role in the perception of Asian students as
“others.” Some students in this group thought that these cultural behaviors might be
overgeneralized and become stereotypes. Finally, the Asian group showed the widest range of
feelings about stereotyping. For one person, it was not a big issue unless the remarks were ill-
intentioned. For another, it was sometimes frustrating, but a fact of life. The third person in this
group thought that the stereotypes should be challenged, as they were not reflective of how he wanted to be viewed. With the breadth of the responses from all parties, the implications of this study are manifold.

**Implications**

The implications of this research can be broken down into the three groups to which they apply: administrators, faculty, and students in a regional university in the Midwest. For administrators, it must be understood that not every student has experienced ethnic and/or racial diversity prior to college. Rural areas of Minnesota, smaller towns, and even some sizeable cities in the state, had relatively low levels of racial/cultural diversity when compared to the costal regions of the U.S. This fact should be kept in mind when determining the kind of programming that multicultural centers on regional university campuses offer. More advertisement and recruiting of the general student population to attend cultural programming may be needed if students are hesitant to attend, which may be the case if they are new to such events. This could be resolved by adding or tweaking a cultural module in the “Introduction to College” seminar that universities often offer; mandatory attendance of X-amount of such events allows for a certain amount of flexibility (students choose *which* programming to attend) while making sure that they do attend at least *some* programs. Additionally, the student body of the campus in this study, and likely in similar such universities, was not particularly diverse either. Instead of focusing on the breadth of programming to cover more cultures, administrators should go for depth and “play to their strengths” and plan programming that is for the benefit of the cultures that are present on campus. This will avoid putting students in the awkward position of being an ambassador for a culture that is not their own. Finally, by offering more frequent programming,
as a faculty member pointed out, the over-exoticizing of a culture can be avoided. With more frequent events, the host groups would gain visibility on campus, which would, in turn, provide more exposure (even minimally so) to the student body. Efforts like these can not only create a better, more understanding environment for students of all backgrounds, but they could potentially have a domino effect in the areas of student retention and graduation rates. Students who feel understood and accepted in their environment may be less likely to seek out another institution, and may be encouraged to continue—and ultimately finish—their studies. Student retention and graduation rates are very big issues in higher education these days, and increasing them by promoting cultural education is a win-win for everyone.

Implications for faculty are few, though important. Some faculty teach large lecture classes and have little individual contact with their students, while other faculty members know most of their students on a first name basis. As such, not everyone’s role will be the same. Nevertheless, it is every instructor’s role to advocate for his or her students when necessary. If one student makes an open remark about another student about being a “typical Asian” in front of the class, for example, the instructor should know how to shut down such comments in a way that does not embarrass the target of the comment, and leaves no room for interpretation on the part of the remark-maker. In cases where in-class harassment of a student is ongoing, an instructor should lodge a formal complaint; while this is not something that every instructor will face in his/her career, knowing how to formally lodge a complaint, or help a student do so, is an important piece of knowledge to have. It goes without saying that the instructor should also be equipped to direct students to the proper resources should the instructor become aware of harassment occurring outside of the classroom. Finally, while it may be obvious, it should be said that instructors should lead by example and not make stereotype jokes in front of the class,
or make assumptions about their students before getting to know them. An instructor making a remark, even if intended to be funny, creates an awkward situation for students who feel uncomfortable.

There are some implications for students as well, though they are more suggestions than obligations. Students should get to know various members of the campus community. Through exposure to people from diverse backgrounds, stereotypes can be broken. Another suggestion is participating in a study abroad experience in a non-English speaking country. Though not everyone will have the language background to do so, those who can should do so. Being the foreigner can really change a person’s perspective on international students, and the experience of studying abroad as a whole is generally touted as a powerful, life-changing one. Finally, for students who are interested in leadership opportunities and are comfortable answering questions about their culture, being an active member of a student group is a positive way to be heard. It is also a good way to meet like-minded people who are willing to help effect change on campus. Not every student needs to be a student leader to help make changes, though; participating in the group in a non-leadership position is also an important role. A club with a leader and no members is not a club, after all.

**Future Research**

This project only minimally analyzed Asian stereotypes on one regional university campus. There are many ways this research can be expanded upon to be more comprehensive. One way to do so would be to increase the number of interviews conducted, especially in the Asian student group, which was the smallest group in the present study. Different Asian ethnicities/cultures and experiences (e.g. international students, Asian adoptees, Asian
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Americans, and mixed race Asians) should be examined in more detail as well; by doing this, similarities and differences among groups may become more apparent, and more information about the experience of stereotyping can be gained from multiple viewpoints.

Another way in which this research could be expanded upon would be to add a quantitative approach to data gathering, giving the project a mixed methods strategy. Many computer programs exist that can be modified to measure to what extent two variables correlate, such as photos of Asian and non-Asian students, and various stereotypes. A perfect computer-based program for this type of research would be an Implicit Association Test, which is a common measure of correlation in the field of psychology and was part of the original plan for the present research. This kind of test could be used alongside interviews to see which stereotypes correlate the strongest to Asian students, and compare that data to actual experience of stereotypes gathered in interviews to see if what is experienced is a manifestation of the most widely believed (among the test group) stereotypes. This might provide some interesting information about internal generalizations vs. actual experience of stereotypes in the regional university setting.

There are many ways in which this research could be elaborated upon so that it could yield more information about Asian stereotyping. The present project is small in its implications, but like a seed, it has potential to grow into something bigger. It is my hope that the negative impacts of Asian stereotyping can be reduced in my work environment, the regional university in this study. My hopes for the future of Asian stereotyping can be summed up in the thoughts of one student interviewee: Asian students should feel understood (in terms of culture) and not stereotyped.
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Academic stereotypes and Asian students in the college classroom


Appendix A
Interview Questions

**Asian Student Interview**

1) How do you identify yourself racially?

2) Please describe a typical "Asian college student."
   
   A) Describe this Asian student’s habits, appearance, and behaviors.
   
   B) What are other’s attitudes toward this student.
   
   C) What is this student’s nationality?

3) What racial stereotypes concerning Asians do you see in pop culture (YouTube, television, ads, media, etc.)?
   
   A) To what extent do these portrayals match the experiences you have had in real life?

4) As a student, have you seen any racial stereotyping in classrooms? If so, please describe.
   
   A) How did this make you feel? What effect did this have on you/the other student/whomever?

5) How often does the type of situation you just mentioned happen?
   
   A) Have you seen this happen in other educational settings than the one you mentioned?

6) What effect do you think racial stereotyping has on you as a student?
   
   A) As a person?

7) Going forward, what would you like to see happen in terms of Asian student stereotyping?
   
   A) Who can help facilitate these changes? (students, administration, etc.)

**Faculty Interview**

**In warm-up, find out what this person teaches, and for how long they’ve been teaching**
Academic stereotypes and Asian students in the college classroom

1) How do you identify yourself racially?

2) Please describe a typical "Asian college student."
   
   A) Describe this Asian student’s habits, appearance, and behaviors.
   
   B) What are other’s attitudes toward this student.
   
   C) What is this student’s nationality?

3) What racial stereotypes concerning Asians do you see in pop culture (YouTube, television, ads, media, etc.)?
   
   A) To what extent do these portrayals match the experiences you have had in real life?

4) What percentage of your classes are Asian students in a typical semester?

5) As an instructor, how have you seen the effects of racial stereotypes, especially of Asians, in the classroom? Please be specific.

6) Before you began teaching, what were your perceptions of Asian students?
   
   A) How does that compare to your perceptions today?

7) Have you ever taught anywhere other than UMD? If so, please tell me about that experience, especially in terms of our discussion on Asian student stereotypes.

8) Have you ever seen anyone trying to combat these (racial and/or academic) stereotypes, or change anyone’s preconceived notions? Is so, how?
   
   A) Was this successful?

Non-Asian Student Interview

1) How do you identify yourself racially?

2) Please describe a typical "Asian college student."
   
   A) Describe this Asian student’s habits, appearance, and behaviors.
   
   B) What are other’s attitudes toward this student.
C) What is this student’s nationality?

3) What racial stereotypes concerning Asians do you see in pop culture (YouTube, television, ads, media, etc.)?

   A) To what extent do these portrayals match the experiences you have had in real life?

4) As a student, have you seen any racial stereotyping, especially of Asian students, in classrooms? If so, please describe.

   A) What effect did this have on the student being stereotyped?
   B) Would you feel okay being stereotyped in the same way?
   C) Why might this student be at an advantage/disadvantage because of this stereotype?

5) How often does the type of situation you just mentioned happen?

   A) Have you seen this happen in other educational settings than the one you mentioned?

6) What effect did the racial stereotyping have on the student(s) being stereotyped?

7) Going forward, what would you like to see happen in terms of Asian student stereotyping?

   A) Who can help facilitate these changes? (students, administration, etc.)
Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

Human Research Protection Program

Office of the Vice President for Research

D528 Mayo Memorial Building
420 Delaware Street S.E.
MMC 820

March 26, 2015

Bridget E Park
UMD Philosophy
D162A 369 ABAH 1121 University Dr.
Duluth, MN 55812

RE: "Academic Stereotypes and Asian Students in the College Classroom" IRB Code Number: 1502P62241

Dear Ms. Park:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) received your response to its stipulations. Since this information satisfies the federal criteria for approval at 45CFR46.111 and the requirements set by the IRB, final approval for the project is noted in our files. Upon receipt of this letter, you may begin your research.

IRB approval of this study includes the consent form and recruitment materials received March 25, 2015.

The IRB would like to stress that subjects who go through the consent process are considered enrolled participants and are counted toward the total number of subjects, even if they
have no further participation in the study. Please keep this in mind when calculating the number of subjects you request. This study is currently approved for 9 subjects. If you desire an increase in the number of approved subjects, you will need to make a formal request to the IRB.

For your records and for grant certification purposes, the approval date for the referenced project is February 25, 2015 and the Assurance of Compliance number is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA00004003). Research projects are subject to continuing review and renewal; approval will expire one year from that date. You will receive a report form two months before the expiration date. If you would like us to send certification of approval to a funding agency, please tell us the name and address of your contact person at the agency.

As Principal Investigator of this project, you are required by federal regulations to inform the IRB of any proposed changes in your research that will affect human subjects. Changes should not be initiated until written IRB approval is received. Unanticipated problems or serious unexpected adverse events should be reported to the IRB as they occur.

The IRB wishes you success with this research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at 612- 626-5654.

Sincerely,

Clinton Dietrich, MA Research Compliance Supervisor CD/bw

CC: Lynn Brice