Qualitative Study of the Experience of Asian-American Students During the Pandemicok

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented demand on society and individuals. In Spring 2020, SUNY-Geneseo students were sent home with an anticipated potential delay in their return, as the COVID-19 situation was still developing. All instruction was provided remotely for the remainder of the semester. It was clear at the outset that the impact of online instruction on students would be differential. We adjusted our originally planned research to study the impact of the pandemic on Asian-American students. Thirty Asian-American and Asian students enrolled at SUNY-Geneseo were recruited for an interview study. Nine students consented to participate. We subjected the interview transcripts to an *a priori* content analysis with categories that emerged from the literature review. Results showed that perceived advantages of living on campus were independence and autonomy among students. The perceived disadvantages include a low variety of cuisines, lack of emotional support, feelings of isolation, limited transportation, homesickness, and worry about family. Perceived advantages of living at home were the availability of appealing foods, emotional support, and developing stronger bonds with families. The perceived disadvantages of living at home were increased stress and distractions, extra household responsibilities, familial conflicts, lack of personal space, lagging internet access, and lack of access to academic resources. The study also finds that some participants were hesitant to express their distress. The participants did not experience discrimination/harassment first-hand. However, they expressed intense worry for their parents related to potential COVID-19 and rising discrimination against Asians. We recommend that culturally relevant psychological and educational resources be made available for students.

Keywords: Coping strategies, adjustment to online instruction, family relationship

Results

- *Perceived advantages of staying in a dorm or on an apartment on-campus:* maintaining independence, freedom from responsibilities, having personal space and control of their life, a sense of safety from infection, and the ability to form their own opinions and speak their mind.
- *Perceived disadvantages of living in a dorm or on an apartment on-campus:* feelings of homesickness, missing homemade food, lack of food diversity on campus, feelings of isolation, limited emotional support, lack of transportation, and worry about their family back home.
- *Perceived advantages of being at home and/or with relatives*: emotional support, building a stronger bond with siblings and parents, not having to worry about cooking food, and financial issues.
- *Perceived disadvantages of being at home with family or relatives*: increased stress, taking on extra responsibilities, family conflicts such as parent-child conflict due to intergenerational differences, limited study space, limited personal space, many distractions that could not be controlled, and lack of access to educational resources.
- None of the participants experienced any discrimination or harassment personally during the COVID pandemic. However, a participant mentioned being fearful of going to a large store because of their ethnicity. Participants reported experiencing discrimination in their middle or high schools, due to their ethnicity. Most of the participants were from the NYC area, thus they were aware of the discrimination and crimes targeting Asian Americans. This induced high stress and worry among the participants, especially those living away from home.

Literature review

- Asians and Asian-Americans are the fastest-growing minority group in the U.S.
- Experiences of "otherness" are commonly reported by Asians. Pham, S., Lui, P. P., & Rollock, D. (2020), found parent-offspring intergenerational cultural conflict to be common in immigrant Asian families and to be linked to psychological adjustment problems among Asian Americans.
- In a mixed-methods study exploring the phenomenon of suicide ideation among Asian American college students, Wong, Koo, Tran, Chiu, and Mok (2011) identified a core phenomenon of unfulfilled intrapersonal expectations and interpersonal expectations, comprising the sub-themes of (a) family, (b) relationship, (c) cultural differences, (d) racism.
- Wei, Liao, Heppner, Chao, & Ku (2012) report that South Asian students are more likely to use forbearance coping strategies and hold expectations that individuals should not burden others with their distress. In this phenomenon, there is an assumption that the individual holds an obligation to be sensitive to others' needs. The study concludes that the association between forbearance coping and psychological distress was significant and positive when they experience a high acculturation gap with parents than those students who had a weak identification with their heritage culture.

Participants

All participants were female enrolled at Geneseo. Six (6) participants were South Asian and two (2) East Asian. Of the 8 participants, 4 participants went home to stay with family or relatives during the pandemic, 4 participants stayed at campus apartments or on-campus dorms until the end of the spring semester. Also, 7 out of 8 participants were originally from New York City or near the NYC Area.

Method

- Research Assistants recruited volunteers for the study and requested signed informed consent
- Professor Anjoo Sikka interviewed 8 volunteers via Zoom during late Spring to Early Fall 2020. Interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and shared with the research assistant.
- Research assistants developed *a priori* categories for manifest and latent content analyses of the interview transcripts.
- Research assistants individually conducted the content analysis and resolved any discrepancies by reaching a consensus.

Discussion

Since most of the participants were first-generation students, being on campus was one way to be independent. However, being on campus came with many difficulties such as lack of diversity in cuisine, limited transportation which led them to feel isolated. The participants were from NYC so they may not have a car.

For some students being at home provided emotional support and they did not have to worry about food and cooking.

Students experienced high stress due to the responsibilities that came from being at home with limited space and high distractions, such as taking care of nieces and nephews, issues with lagging internet due to multiple members taking online classes and working.

There was financial stress due to the lockdown and businesses being closed and resultant unemployment.

Students experienced issues with parents due to differences in acculturation especially when the participants wanted to be independent.

Participants took on the role of caregiver when their parents were ill. This caused extremMany participants tended to keep their distress to themselves and not want to bother others with their problems. This is common within the Asian culture which can have a negative effee stress on their academic and personal well-being. Some felt guilty because they could not help their parents.

ct on their mental health in the long term especially when they are in space where other are not sensitive enough to recognize their distress and offer help

One participant states... *"I was with a friend at that time, and I left (to reflect on the news of a family member being sick), and when I returned after a while, she was like where were you? And I kind of pretended that everything was fine, and like I downplayed my pain and everything and the hard news was like very scary, and I think that I tend to push down things that possibly hurt me…or like affect me in that way…"*

Some steps that can be taken by the campus to reduce the stress level and improve students' experiences and belongingness at the university is to increase the variety of cuisinse served in dining halls, such as making halal food available for Muslim students. Although the students did not directly experience any discrimination, they were greatly affected by the increasing blame and hate crimes against Asians. . It is still important for the campus to reduce the incidence of discrimination and provide increase awareness about the negative effects on students of crimes against Asians, whivh have increased substantially in the U.S. Most of the participants did not use the resources provided by the campus, especially counseling services because it did not fit their needs. Thus, it is essential to make culturally relevant psychological as well as other resources available to students.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include a small sample size and participant characteristics which included a majority of South Asian emerging adults. The study includes only female Asian American students attending SUNY Geneseo. This research report is based on interview data on student experiences during the first half of the pandemic. It does not address stereotypes and negative or positive experiences with model minority labels, whether participants ranked high in collectivism or individualism, distress resulting from acculturation gap with parents.

Implications

All the participants were Asian American women. Gender may be related to intergenerational cultural conflicts, with it being higher among women. Potentially, with more restrictions placed on women in Asian cultures, there may be a higher parent-offspring acculturation gap or mismatch, especially in the domain of independence and autonomy in social relationships, including dating and marriage. However, this is accompanied with a high expectation for educational and career success. Future studies should include diverse Asian-American groups (i.e., students from different states in the U.S., males, and individuals who are second-and third-generation immigrants) to explore their experiences at colleges and difficulties faced during the coronavirus pandemic.

References

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