

Do labels matter? Attitudinal and Behavioral Correlates of Ethnic and Racial Identity Choices among Asian American Undergraduates

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This study explored the relationship between Asian American students' choices of racial and ethnic identity labels, their attitudes toward racial and ethnic issues, and involvement in campus organizations. The findings suggest complex relationships between racial and ethnic self-identification and attitudes for some identity groups and no relationship for other groups.

In recent years there has been a rise of Asian American student services, from targeted offices and services to Asian American student centers. Generally these programs and services are of a pan-Asian¹ nature, appealing to students' sense of a shared identity. The unstated assumption behind this umbrella identity is that students from Asian ethnic backgrounds have enough in common to be able to identify with each other racially and perhaps even have a common understanding of what *Asian American* means.

Yet given a choice, individuals often choose to identify with their ethnicity (e.g., Chinese) or as ethnicity-American (e.g., Chinese American). Studies of ethnic groups including Filipinos (Besnard, 2003), Indians (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002), and Chinese and Koreans (Hong & Min, 1999) showed most participants primarily (or solely) identifying with their specific ethnic group as opposed to Asian American. A study in Southern California showed that two-thirds of Asian American respondents preferred to identify themselves according to their ethnicity compared to only one in six preferring the Asian American label (Lien, Conway, Wong, 2003). However, six in ten of them did claim the Asian American identity at certain times and understood the utility of it. In other words, people may check the Asian American box on a form, but its use can be contextual or it may not necessarily hold much personal meaning (Kuo, 2001; Phinney, 1996).

Espiritu (1992) described the historical development of an Asian American identity in the mid-1960s when various Asian groups came together for pragmatic political and economic reasons. It was made possible by a U.S.-born generation with fewer language and cultural differences than their parents. However, today the majority of Asian Americans are foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), meaning these differences are once again prominent (Kibria, 2002). The ethnic composition of the Asian American population is changing as

¹ For purposes of this paper, "pan-Asian" means "pan-Asian American."

well, with more South and Southeast Asians who have generally identified less with the Asian American label (Espiritu, 1992; Shankar & Srikanth, 1998).

Asian American is a term that some students consider externally imposed, reactive in response to being non-White in a racist culture, and something they identify with by default (Kibria, 1999; Min & Kim, 1999). This socially constructed term Asian American can be confusing as an identity choice (Kibria, 2000; Shankar & Srikanth, 1998), particularly during the college years (Kibria, 1999; B.W. Kim, 2001, Kuo, 2001) or for second generation Asian Americans (Min & Kim, 1999). There are additional layers of this labeling debate, with use of the term Asian *Pacific* American to be inclusive of Pacific Islanders, but some feel this is not accurate as Pacific Islanders have different issues and needs (O.A. Poon, personal communication, November 16, 1006). In fact, the 2000 census moved Pacific Islanders from a subset of the classification of the Asian American category into the Native American one (Lai & Arguelles, 2003).

Racial identity theories (Cross, 1971; Helms 1995) describe a developmental process for people in understanding and identifying with their race and that of the White majority. These theories focus on the struggle that individuals have with their identity as a non-white person in a racist society (though there are White identity theories as well), in this case as Asian Americans. Racial identity theories are often used by student affairs practitioners, psychologists, and other educators to better understand how students of color see their world, interpret their experiences, and integrate their understanding of race into their overall identity. Often programs and services are developed based on these theories to design appropriate experiences or address relevant issues for students dealing with the different stages of racial identity.

However, Asian Americans may not be thinking of their identity in terms of race but ethnicity, which may reflect slightly different meanings (though some researchers admit they mean *race* when they refer to *ethnicity*, e.g. Phinney, 1996). Racial identity theories and even ethnic identity theories (e.g. J. Kim, 2001; Kitano, 1989; Phinney, 1989; Sue and Sue, 1971) do not adequately address the complexity of persons of Asian descent who choose to identify with their ethnicity in addition to (or in place of) their race, perhaps not entirely subscribing to the idea of a pan-Asian identity. Yet it is not clear what meaning students construct when they choose to identify with certain identity labels over others, and if these decisions reflect any particular characteristics or racial attitudes.

Kibria (2002) pointed out a shift in the contemporary formulation of race and ethnicity. She referred to the “racialization of ethnicity,” in which ethnic identities, labels, practices, and symbols acquire racial meaning and form. For example, something specific to an ethnic culture like Chinese New Year,

becomes racially labeled as Asian. This adds to the confusion over ethnic and racial identity from both within and outside of Asian American communities and may have an impact on the use of ethnic and racial identity labels.

Given that ethnic and racial identity seem to be a central student development issue for Asian American students in particular (Alvarez, 2002; Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2001), it is important to understand how these students conceptualize race. However, is Asian American the most useful framework in which to capture this understanding? In other words, what meaning do identity labels such as Asian American have for students of Asian descent?

Do students who identify with the Asian American term have a certain racial consciousness or perspective about Asian American issues? Espiritu (1992) suggested that choosing to use a pan-Asian identifier reflects a certain political consciousness around Asian American issues. This is somewhat supported by a study of high school students that showed Asian American-identified students as more activist and conscious of racism than other students (Lee, 1996). However, Lee also found students who took on pan-Asian identities based purely on social networks with little or no political consciousness, as did Kibria (1999). This kind of group identity may differ depending on both the presence and also visibility of an Asian American community (B. Kim, 2001).

Conversely, what does it mean to choose an ethnic identity label over a racial one? It is unclear how students who prefer an ethnic identity label differ from students who prefer the pan-Asian label. Does self-identification with one's ethnicity translate into a need for more ethnic-based outreach and ethnic-targeted programming? Today ethnic student organizations outnumber pan-Asian groups on most campuses (B.W. Kim, 2001).

Finally, what does it mean to elect not to be identified with a racial or ethnic label? Does it necessarily mean that students who prefer to do so are disconnected from their cultural heritage or that race and ethnicity are unimportant to them? It could be that these students are merely resisting societal tendencies to be placed in a social category, but may still have some need for targeted programs and services.

Purpose

The primary goals of the present study were to examine students' self-identification with various identity categories and to explore the attitudinal and behavioral correlates of the selection of an identity category. The study examined how college students of Asian descent self-identify when given the choice of a pan-Asian (i.e., racial) label and labels that were primarily ethnic in nature, and explored how these labeling choices might be related to their involvement in campus activities as well as their perceptions of campus. Researchers expected that despite checking the Asian box on a college

application, not all participants would select a pan-Asian label if given other identity label choices.

Consistent with existing research, it was expected that students who select the pan-Asian label would be the most likely to be involved in activities targeted for students of Asian descent and to be the most aware of, and concerned about, issues affecting Asian Americans. In contrast, it was expected that students who choose not to identify with the pan-Asian or either of the ethnicity-related labels would be the least involved with targeted activities and the least concerned about Asian American issues. It was expected that students who elect to identify with either of the ethnicity-related labels would have concerns and levels of involvement intermediate between the aforementioned two groups of students.

Method

Participants

Participants were 620 undergraduates enrolled in a public, Research I university located in a large Midwestern city. The university has an undergraduate population of approximately 16,000 students. Asian Americans are the largest racial minority group on campus, comprising 25% of the undergraduate student body. Distribution of other racial/ethnic groups is as follows: 9% African American; 16% Hispanic; 44% European American; 5% unknown; 1% international; and 0.2% Native American. Sixty-two percent of the respondents were female. Although the majority of respondents (63%) were second generation (i.e., born in the United States), a sizeable number (34%) were first generation Americans (i.e., born in Asia, not necessarily first generation college students). The sample was representative of the population of the surrounding city. The four largest ethnic groups represented in the study were Chinese (26%), Filipinos (22%), Asian Indians (22%), and Koreans (18%).

Procedure

Students could participate in the study if they were: enrolled in an undergraduate program at the beginning of the fall semester 2003 and had identified themselves as being of Asian descent on their university admission application². A list of the email addresses for all undergraduate students fitting the enrollment criteria was obtained from the university's institutional research office.

In April 2004, students were sent an email informing them of the purposes of the study. This email notice referred them to the URL for the online survey.

² Note: on this particular campus, the check box is labeled Asian rather than Asian American, even though it means Asian American, as international students have a different form to fill out.

Students who did not respond after one week were sent a reminder email notice. An additional email reminder notice was sent one week after the first reminder to students who had not responded by that time. Because the survey was conducted during the last month of the spring semester 2004, a follow-up mailing to 300 non-respondents was conducted. In total, replies were received from 620 respondents.

Survey instrument

Respondents completed either a web-based or mail-survey. The majority of respondents completed the web-based version. A multidisciplinary committee of faculty, staff, and students designed items for the survey, which was implemented to learn more about the needs and interests of Asian American students enrolled at the university. The final version of the survey contained 66 items covering the following content areas: student demographics and other background information, involvement in student organizations and activities, awareness of university resources, opinions about a potential Asian American Resource and Cultural Center, opinions about possible Asian American Studies curriculum, and perceptions of campus climate.

The major variable of interest in the study, self-identification, was assessed by asking students to indicate with which of the following five options they primarily identify: (a) Asian American, (b) specific ethnicity (e.g., Chinese), (c) ethnicity American (e.g., Indian American), (d) just American, or (e) haven't thought about it. Though all participants in this study had previously checked the Asian box on their university admissions application, the purpose of this study was to examine students' selection of identity labels that offer alternatives to the university's official racial/ethnic categories. These categories included options (d and e) that did not focus on being of an Asian race or ethnicity given researchers' experiences with students who prefer not to personally identify with a racial/ethnic term, even though they feel they should indicate they are Asian on an official university document. The dependent variables in this study consisted of student attitudes related to Asian American concerns and student behaviors, represented by their involvement in campus activities and organizations. Student attitudes were assessed by seven items. Five of these items were on a four-point Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree, while two additional items were on a five-point Likert scale that included "no opinion" as a response alternative. The latter two items were recoded so they would be on a scale similar to the other five items. Student involvement on campus was assessed by two sets of items: the first set focused on students' participation in student organizations, while the second set focused on their attendance at Asian American events held on-campus.

Data Analysis Plan

Participants were categorized into four groups according to their responses to the self-identification item. Given that there were a small number of students who chose to select just American or haven't thought about it labels, these two categories were combined into one category that was renamed "other." The majority of the respondents self-identified with one of the two ethnicity-related labels on this survey: forty percent of the respondents self-identified with the specific ethnicity category, while 28% of the respondents self-identified with the specific ethnicity American category. An additional 21% of the respondents self-identified with the pan-Asian American label while only 11% of the respondents fell into the other category.

Using self-identification as the independent variable, a set of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to determine if the students' attitudes differed according to their self-identification. To minimize Type 1 error, the p-value for individual analyses was set to 0.01. Bonferroni post-hoc tests were used to determine the nature of any specific differences among the identity categories. Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine if students' self-identification was related to their level of participation in campus organizations and events.

Results*Student attitudes*

The first set of analyses examined the relationship between students' self-identification and their attitudes toward various issues relevant to Asian American students on campus. As can be seen in Table 1, statistically significant differences between the four categories of students were obtained on four of the attitude items.

Table 1 *Analysis of Variance and Mean Differences on Attitudinal Statements*

	Asian American	Specific ethnicity	Specific ethnicity American	Other	F	P
[the campus] is supportive of ethnic diversity (n=620)	3.55	3.79	3.7	3.84	1.61	.19
[the campus] is supportive of Asian American students (n=620)	2.93	3.00	3.01	3.39	2.68	.05
I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group (n=618)	2.72	2.71 ^b	2.99 ^a	2.47 ^b	7.55*	<.01
I have a strong attachment to my ethnic group (n=617)	2.94 ^b	3.00 ^b	3.2 ^b	2.43 ^a	13.03*	<.01
There is a strong Asian American community at UIC (n=613)	3.09	3.05	3.18	3.31	2.22	.08
It is important that I can find students who look like me on campus (n=618)	2.25 ^b	2.26 ^b	2.4 ^b	1.79 ^a	6.67*	<.01
It is important that I can find faculty who look like me on campus (n=617)	2.19 ^b	2.17 ^b	2.32 ^b	1.74 ^a	5.86*	<.01

Note: F and p values noted are overall values

Note: ^a and ^b refer to the groups which had statistically significant differences between them

* p <.01

The first hypothesis that students who identify with the pan-Asian American label would be the most aware of, or connected to, issues of concern to Asian Americans was not supported by the data. In general, the analyses showed that students who selected the Asian American label did not differ significantly from students who selected either of the ethnicity-related labels. The sole exception was found for the item related to learning about one's ethnic background; students who selected the specific ethnicity American label had the highest level of endorsement for this item.

The second hypothesis that students who did not identify with the pan-Asian American or ethnicity-related labels would be the least aware of, or connected to, issues of concern to Asian American populations was partially supported by the data. Note that for three out of the four items for which statistical significant findings were obtained across the four groups, the mean level of endorsement was lower for students in the other group than for students in the other three groups. That is, students who self-identified as being other were less likely to agree that they have a strong attachment to their ethnic group, that it is important for them to find students who look like them on campus, and that it is important for them to find faculty who look like them on campus.

For the fourth item on which a statistically significant difference was obtained between the identity groups, the mean level of endorsement for students in the other group differed only from students in the specific ethnicity American group. That is, while students who self-identified as being other were less likely to agree that they had spent time trying to find out more about their ethnic group, they were not any less likely to do so than students who self-identified with the Asian American or specific ethnicity label.

Student Involvement On Campus

The second set of analyses examined the relationship between students' self-identification and their involvement in campus organizations and events. Similar to the hypotheses concerning students' attitudes, researchers hypothesized that students who did not identify with the pan-Asian or ethnicity-related labels would be the least involved, students who identified with the pan-Asian label would be the most involved, and students who identified with one of the ethnicity-related labels would have an intermediate level of involvement. The first thing to note is that overall, students appear to be uninvolved in campus life. Only about 34% of the students reported being involved in cultural organizations, the type of organization that was most frequently selected by students. As can be seen in Table 2, statistically significant differences across the identity groups were found for five of the eleven types of student organizations.

Table 2 Percentage of students participating in various student organizations by identity group

Organization	Asian American	Specific Ethnicity American	Specific Ethnicity	Other	Overall
Cultural	31.0	33.2	39.1	25.7	33.5
Honor*	31.7	27.6	37.0	18.6	30.1
Religious**	28.3	22.3	42.0	25.7	29.4
Hobby*	28.6	22.7	35.1	22.9	27.4
Professional*	31.0	21.9	34.1	22.9	27.3
Intramural sports	11.1	14.2	15.6	17.1	14.3
Service**	15.1	5.7	16.7	8.6	11.0
Residence hall association	11.1	7.8	9.8	4.3	8.7
Greek (fraternal)	7.1	11.3	7.5	2.9	8.4
Student government	8.0	3.7	3.5	5.7	4.7
Political	4.0	3.2	7.0	4.3	4.6

*statistically significant at $p < .05$

**statistically significant at $p < .01$

Students in the four identity groups did not differ in their levels of participation in cultural organizations, Greek organizations, intramural sports, political organizations, residence hall organizations, and student government. Students in the four identity groups did differ in their levels of participation in

organizations related to hobbies, honor societies, professional organizations, religious organizations, and service organizations.

The students' level of involvement as assessed by their participation in various types of campus events is depicted in Table 3. In contrast to their reported levels of involvement in student organizations, the students appear to be more likely to be involved in one-time campus events. When attendance at these events targeted toward the general student body are compared to events that are Asian American focused, students appear to be more likely to attend non-targeted events. While attendance at non-targeted events was greater than for targeted events, no differences in participation across the identity groups were obtained. The identity groups did not differ in terms of their level of participation in: campus movies ($X^2 = 3.19$, $p = 0.36$); career fairs ($X^2 = 2.12$, $p = 0.55$); lectures ($X^2 = 3.45$, $p = 0.33$); activities fairs ($X^2 = 1.71$, $p = 0.63$); and athletic events ($X^2 = 2.96$, $p = 0.40$). The only non-targeted event in which participation varied across identity groups was cultural events ($X^2 = 8.58$, $p < .04$). Students who identified as being other were the least likely to participate in these types of events.

In general there were few differences between the four identity groups in terms of their participation in events specifically designed for Asian Americans. No statistically significant differences across the identity groups in reported participation were obtained for: attendance at Asiantation (an orientation-related activity targeted to Asian American students) ($X^2 = 12.35$, $p = 0.06$); attendance at Asian American organization meetings ($X^2 = 3.50$, $p = 0.74$); enrollment in an Asian American studies course ($X^2 = 6.34$, $p = 0.39$); attendance at an Asian American conference ($X^2 = 7.97$, $p = 0.24$), and attendance an Asian American speaker ($X^2 = 11.09$, $p = 0.09$) or workshop ($X^2 = 9.36$, $p = 0.15$). The sole exception was for the item focusing on attendance at Asian American Awareness month events ($X^2 = 12.78$, $p < .05$). For this item, students who did not identify with the pan-Asian American or ethnicity-related labels were the least likely to report that they had attended these events. This was the only finding that supported the hypothesis that students who do not identify with the pan-Asian or ethnicity-related labels would have the lowest levels of participation. While 20% or more of the students in the other three identity groups reported that they had attended an event during the month, only 7% of the students who identified as being other reported doing so. Interestingly, participation in Asian American focused events was typically low in comparison to attendance at events that focused on the general student body on campus.

Table 3 Percentage of students participating in various campus events by identity group

Campus event	Asian American	Specific Ethnicity	Specific Ethnicity American	Other	Overall
<u>Non-targeted events</u>					
Speakers	63.3	57.7	65.1	55.7	60.7
Cultural event	50.0	49.0	56.3	35.7	49.8
Activities fair	48.0	46.3	50.3	41.4	47.2
Career fair	48.4	44.1	42.9	51.4	45.5
Campus movies	41.7	34.8	37.7	30.0	36.5
Athletic events	24.4	24.3	30.3	21.4	25.7
<u>Targeted events</u>					
Asian American Organization meetings	28.1	29.1	34.7	24.6	30.0
Asiantation (Asian American orientation)	21.9	23.5	21.4	14.5	21.6
Asian American Month*	20.3	24.1	22.5	7.2	21.0
Asian American Speaker	21.9	18.0	27.2	11.6	20.7
Asian American Studies course	18.8	19.1	20.2	23.2	19.8
Asian American Focused workshop	14.1	13.9	13.5	5.8	12.9
Asian American Conference	14.8	11.9	11.6	5.9	11.8

statistically significant at $p < .05$ ** statistically significant at $p < .01$

The data also do not support the hypothesis that students who identify with the pan-Asian group would have the highest levels of participation in Asian American-focused organizations and events. As can be seen in both Tables 2 and 3, it was often the case that the level of participation reported by students who identified with the pan-Asian label was similar to the levels of participation reported by students who identified with one of the ethnicity-related labels.

Discussion

The primary goals of the present study were to examine students' self-identification with various identity categories and to explore the attitudinal and behavioral correlates of the selection of an identity category. The findings raise some theoretical and practical issues which we discuss here.

Identity group selection

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents identified with an ethnicity-related label while only 21% of the respondents identified with the pan-Asian American label. This finding is consistent with the findings of other researchers (e.g., (Hong & Min, 1999; Kuo, 2001; Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2003) that persons of Asian descent prefer to identify with their ethnic group over a more pan-Asian group. Despite the similarities in attitudes and behaviors across the four identity groups, there do appear to be patterns of responses within each group that are distinctive.

The other identity group. The other group was the only group which did not choose identify themselves in racial or ethnic terms on the survey. Though these students had originally checked Asian on their official college application, as noted previously sometimes Asian Americans will self-identify with a different term (including not using a racial or ethnic identifier at all) if given a choice. This group appears to be the most different from the other groups in their response pattern, which demonstrated a lack of connection to their ethnic group in a variety of ways: they were least interested in learning more about their ethnic group, less attached to their ethnic group, and least interested in finding students and faculty who looked like them.

Yet 26% of students from this group indicated involvement in cultural organizations, a seeming contradiction for students who appear to not self-identify using ethnic or racial terms (Alvarez, 2002; J. Kim, 2001). In fact, cultural organizations were the most common choice (along with religious organizations) for this group. It may be that these students do not view involvement as connected with their racial or ethnic identity, but instead merely a social outlet (Kibria, 1999).

Note that a small proportion of students fell into the other category. An in-depth analysis of the reasons underlying the selection of the just American or haven't thought about it response alternatives was beyond the scope of the

present study. Future research can address some possible explanations. For instance, work by Kim (2001) and Kim (2001) suggests that people of Asian descent who grow up in primarily white neighborhoods do not see themselves as Asian American. Other researchers (e.g., Kibria, 1999) have suggested that some individuals resist being identified in racial or ethnic terms while other individuals resist the label Asian

American specifically (e.g., Kim, 2001; Kibria, 1999).

The specific ethnicity identity group. It is interesting that there were rarely statistically significant differences between this and the ethnicity American category so perhaps respondents do not make a distinction between these two labels. One possible explanation is that perhaps students just use *Chinese* instead of *Chinese American* because it is shorter and easier to say, not because they have thought much about the nuances of the differences between an ethnicity and ethnicity American term. Some research suggests that selection of a specific ethnic label for Asian Americans may be related to acculturation, with first generation immigrants more likely to primarily identify with this type of label (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002; Hong & Min, 1999; Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2003). The present study supports this, with 51% of first generation respondents identifying with the specific ethnicity category, yet only 35% of those who were second generation.

The specific ethnicity American identity group. The ethnicity American group seems to have the most interest in and identification with their ethnic and racial heritage as evidenced by their responses to survey items. This group had the highest score for I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, which was significantly different from all other groups. This group also had the highest score for I am attached to my ethnic group, even higher than the ethnicity group.

In terms of involvement, the ethnicity American group had the highest level of involvement in religious organizations. It is possible that the religious involvement might be correlated with their identification with their ethnic heritage, as churches have often been a central vehicle for developing ethnic communities, particularly for Koreans (Hong & Min, 1999) and in the Midwest (B. W. Kim, 2001). Also, this group was also most likely to be involved in student organizations overall. It is not clear why or how these students who self-label as ethnicity American are more engaged with the campus experience, but it seems like a topic for future research, given that campus engagement has shown to be positively correlated to various aspects of college success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

These results show a distinction between those who identify specifically as ethnicity American and other groups, including the ethnicity group. Previous to the analysis of results, researchers wondered if there would be much difference

between the ethnicity American and ethnicity group, wondering if the "American" part of the label has particular meaning for students. It appears that this subtle difference in identity label does indeed reflect some differing attitudes, though it is not clear why or how. Future research on this issue, particularly as related to racial identity development and the idea of a pan-Asian identity, might provide some insight on what results of this study mean.

The Asian American identity group. There was a lack of statistically significant differences between the Asian American group and the others on virtually all items. In looking at the raw scores, also, this group appeared to generally score in the middle of the other groups, rarely the highest or lowest score. In terms of involvement, this group did not seem to have a strong preference for type of organizations. In other words, there was no clear pattern of answers. Perhaps Asian American is too amorphous of a term to mean much, a "catch-all" category that contains a variety of people for different reasons rather than those who share a common perspective. For example, Kibria (1999) found that even students who avoided pan-Asian activities still considered themselves in some way Asian American for a variety of reasons. Vo (2004) also pointed out that there is no singular Asian American identity but instead is interactive, in constant flux and contextual for many people.

Additionally, for many students of Asian descent Asian American is a term that they may not encounter in a significant way until college. Previous to college, family or community influences may have emphasized ethnic ties given specifics of food, cultural traditions or religion (Kibria, 1999; B.W. Kim, 2001). In college, however, Asian Americans encounter other Asian Americans from different backgrounds as well as multicultural student organizations, political movements, or even academic courses, all of which can raise awareness of a racial identity as opposed to just an ethnic one. So perhaps an Asian American identity is not yet fully understood by students at this point in their lives (Alvarez, 2002; Vo, 2004). For example, Kibria (1999) found that many of the subjects she interviewed were not involved with Asian American issues or organizations in college but did so later in life. However, there are also those who have a more antagonistic view or reaction to the term, and do not want to be considered Asian American. For example, in administering the survey for this study, researchers received a couple of angry responses to the invitation to participate, such as "I'm not Asian, I'm INDIAN, [expletive]!" (Anonymous Personal Communication, April 7, 2004).

Another explanation for the undefined Asian American group might be the unique situation of being Asian American in the Midwest (B.W. Kim 2001). Compared to the West and East Coasts, for Midwesterners there may be less exposure to Asian American issues, people, and organizations, and thus less of a pan-Asian consciousness. For example, it is not unusual to hear people comment that Asian American means Asian and Caucasian, (i.e., biracial or

Amerasian), so there is not a clear understanding of what this term even means. A study of Midwestern Asian Americans found that though they lacked organized Asian American communities, they formed a sense of Asian American identity that they felt was different from that of their friends and relatives in other parts of the country (B.W. Kim, 2001).

Attitudinal correlates of identity choice

Perhaps more important than the selection of an identity group is the consequences or correlates of this selection. The researchers hypothesized a certain degree of variance across the four identity groups in terms of their endorsement of several survey items focusing on the needs and concerns of Asian American students. While attitudinal differences were found across the identity groups, the levels of endorsement of the attitudinal items were generally not that high with the average mean response between 2.00 and 2.50 (on a 4 point scale). The item I am attached to my ethnic group was the only item that had a response greater than the mean of the scale (i.e., over 3.00). These low scores may reflect a lack of consciousness among the respondents with racial and ethnic issues or with the specific issues represented on the survey.

Behavioral correlates of identity choice

The literature suggests that different types of racial and ethnic identification would reflect different levels of involvement in Asian American organizations (Alvarez, 2002; Kibria, 2002; B. Kim, 2001; Lee, 1996), but those differences were not reflected here. Few statistically significant differences across the four identity groups in involvement in organizations and attendance at Asian American events were obtained. Similar levels of involvement were found across the identity groups, even between the ethnicity American and other groups.

Practical implications

Despite checking an Asian American box on official forms, it appears that when presented with ethnic labeling options, a large proportion of students may choose an ethnic label over a pan-Asian label and that they may attach some particular meaning to these choices. These identifications with different labels may have implications for the ability of students to relate to outreach campaigns for participation in campus services, organizations, and events that target on Asian Americans. Thus, institutions should examine the ways in which they categorize students of Asian descent and if those labels match the way students prefer to identify themselves. Perhaps even more importantly, administrators should also assess differences in the student attitudes that may underlie these different choices.

Data such as that collected in this study can be used to better inform faculty and staff on how to effectively market services and programs to various Asian

groups. Staff may want to explicitly ask students who use their services about their self-identification rather than assuming that students identify with a pan-Asian identity. Instead of offering blanket pan-Asian programs, student services staff may want to focus more on working with specific constituencies on campus and consider their input on issues of most interest to their communities. Invited speakers or performers should represent a variety of Asian ethnic backgrounds throughout the course of the year, and be targeted to members of specific ethnic groups. It is also important that Asian American offices try to hire diverse staff from different Asian ethnic backgrounds to reflect the students whom they are serving.

Related to this study's findings of differences in behaviors and attitudes to due self-selection of identity label are differences that might exist between specific Asian ethnic groups. Institutions might consider disaggregating data collected on students of Asian descent into subcategories of Asian ethnic groups as an alternative to using only one Asian American category. Recently the University of California has made the decision to collect and report data specifically on 23 Asian subgroups to better understand the complexities of the Asian American student population ("University of California," 2007). Allowing students to specify their ethnicity would reveal information not only about their ethnic identity, but also on factors such as socioeconomic status and educational attainment, which vary greatly across different Asian ethnic groups (GAO, 2007). Given the impact of these factors on students' experiences and success in college, disaggregated data could result in a reevaluation of campus services targeted to students of Asian descent.

Given students' propensity to identify ethnically rather than racially, however, it may be useful to show students how and why a pan-Asian identity impacts them, so they can be prepared for the ways in which Asians are seen as all the same due to the racial dynamics in the U.S. A recent example of this was the Virginia Tech incident of April 2007, when the Asian face of a Korean American shooter was broadcast around the world, with repercussions felt by many Asian American students regardless of their specific ethnicities. This incident did not just impact Korean Americans, but the media coverage and campus responses impacted all Asian Americans. For the first time, many Asian American students realized the connection between what they looked like and what this other, hated Asian American looked like, and were not prepared for both the internal and external messages they were experiencing. Indeed, in situations in which racial discrimination and anti-Asian sentiment exist, having such a perspective is self-protective for Asian American students, providing a means of coping with such phenomena in a proactive, non-self-blaming manner (Lee, 2005).

Thus, opportunities should be provided for ethnic student organizations to come together, learn about each other, and explore pan-Asian commonalities

and concerns. Possible ways to do this include collaborative programming, group dialogues, pan-Asian leadership training, and identity workshops.

Data on students' self-identification can also be used to inform the curriculum for introductory Asian American studies courses. Addressing identity issues or identity theories in addition to traditional topics such as history and activism can help students to understand themselves better and shed light on varying opinions and experiences with Asian American issues. Coursework that addresses both ethnic and pan-Asian topics will teach students to understand the different implications and contexts for identifying in different ways.

Results from this study also point to a need for future research on identity development for Asian Americans. Though this study found differences in the labels that students choose to self-identify with, it was not able to address how these labels relate to identity development or fit with existing racial identity theories. It is not clear what factors influence these self-labeling choices, and how college experiences might contribute to changes in identity.

Limitations of the study

Preliminary results from this study show distinct differences between identity groups, though results were not reported because of a methodological limitation in the way the specific ethnicity and specific ethnicity American categories were defined. On the instrument different ethnic groups were listed as examples for each identity choice: for ethnicity (Chinese, Filipino), while for ethnicity American (Indian American, Japanese American). This may have influenced participants' choices by priming responses if they looked for their specific ethnicity listed as opposed to the category itself. However, the results seemed to parallel other studies so we feel this influence was minimal. The use of a non-standardized instrument is also a limitation, but as an exploratory study it raises questions and can help researchers determine appropriate issues and instruments for future studies.

The unique urban demographics of the respondents also limit the study's generalizability. The study was conducted in a diverse metropolitan area that has a sizeable Asian and Asian American population. The reproduction of the city's ethnic enclaves within the campus setting allows students to remain immersed in their specific ethnic culture, interacting with classmates having similar cultural heritages and languages, and participating in ethnic student organizations. In this environment, students may not feel the necessity or desire to form a larger pan-Asian identity. Thus, the findings from this one campus are not necessarily generalizable to institutions that are less ethnically diverse and where few Asian Americans are enrolled.

Conclusion

Do ethnic and racial identity labels matter? The present findings indicate that on some level, they do. The findings also suggest that self-identification might be related more directly to student attitudes than to their behaviors. The present study did not examine how and why these differences occur, so future research can more fully explore the processes underlying the relationship between self-identification and student attitudes.

From a demographic standpoint, Filipinos and Indians perhaps reflect the best examples of this ethnic and pan-Asian dilemma. Although these groups are often included in definitions of pan-Asian communities, they have historically been resistant to the pan-Asian label (Espiritu, 1992; Shankar & Srikanth, 1998). As the largest and fastest growing groups, Filipinos and Indians are becoming a greater proportion of the total population of Asians in the United States. When the Asian American umbrella term was originally formed, East Asians (e.g., persons of Chinese or Japanese descent) were the largest proportion. The shifting demographic mix demands that we continually reevaluate the relevance and inclusiveness of the terms used to describe populations.

Findings from this study suggest that researchers need to reevaluate racial and ethnic identity theories in light of the fact that these theories do not fully reflect the complexity of identity for Asian Americans. Future research should examine how and why students identify with the Asian American label, the circumstances when switching between ethnic and racial identifying labels occurs, and the factors that lead to one of these identities being more salient than the other. Additional research can explore the developmental changes in identity choices throughout college and the types of experiences that trigger shifts in identification. As an attempt to understand how the different sociopolitical histories of various groups contribute to self-identification, it may also be interesting to compare specific ethnic groups on these identifying choices.

Future research can also examine the connection between ethnic and racial identities and involvement in greater detail. Findings from the present study show that students who identified as ethnicity American had the highest levels of involvement, while the other group had the lowest levels. Does this result mean that students with a more integrated racial or ethnic identity are more active in their educational environment, vice versa, or something else entirely?

Results from this survey are a reminder of the complexity of ethnic and racial identity for Asian Americans. Does it make sense to use a racial paradigm as the basis for interventions, programs, and practices if ethnicity seems to be the primary point of identification for most Asian Americans? What about the students who do not identify with either their ethnicity or a pan-Asian identity at all—how do we reach these students and meet their needs?

Practitioners and researchers should consider ways in which an ethnic framework might be a more appropriate way of serving our students of Asian descent in certain situations. We should also consider the possibility that students may identify with any combination of racial and ethnic identities (.e.g., with an ethnic label, a racial label, or both). Kibria (1999) and Cornell & Hartmann (1998) suggest that ethnic and racial identities are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping and can occur simultaneously.

Finally, a more complex understanding of how Asian Americans choose to self-identify ethnically and racially can help to shed light not only on that population, but on the larger questions of understanding today's diverse student body. Institutions should examine if the ways they label and classify various groups match how students themselves self identify, and more importantly, how to use this information to reach students who may need targeted programs and services.

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