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The Fetishization of Asian American Women: Where We Are and Where to Go

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Abstract

Women of color in the United States suffer from hyper sexualization and fetishization, and Asian American (AA) women are no different. These racial microaggressions and normalized expressions of oppression based on both race/ethnicity and gender contribute to a distinct marginalization that women of color experience. This paper seeks to 1) explore the unique layers of oppression that AA women face, including combating the model minority myth, westernized beauty standards, and fetishization, as well as 2) address the difference in reception between the Stop Asian Hate movement and Black Lives Matter, while defining and critiquing the whitewashing of this field in terms of research and literature about mental health for black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

Introduction

In what seems to be a year full of mass shootings and violent, racist incidents, the attack on March 16, 2021 only adds to the unfinished list of domestic terrorism happening in the United States. Robert Aaron Long, through a series of shootings that took place in three different massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia, killed eight people. Six of these victims were of Asian descent, but when asked if this attack was racially motivated, Capt. Jay Barker of the Cherokee sheriff's office reported that Long was simply suffering from a sex addiction and wanted to eliminate temptation. Barker went on to report that the day of the attacks was "a really bad day for him," and that this assault did not have racial motivation because, when they asked the suspect, he denied it (Shapiro, 2021).

This erasure of racial trauma and fetishism of AA women is not new, and only further suppresses the notion that all people of color in the United States are suffering. Fetishization can be contextualized as "the act of making someone an object of sexual desire based on some aspect of their identity". For black, indeginous, and people of color, this is not a new concept, and contributes to the racism that they are already subjected to (Asare, 2021). The assault in Atlanta was a direct result of this fetishization, and the implications go deeper than just trendy hashtags asking people to stop brutalizing Asians on the street.

For AA women specifically, gendered microaggressions include aspects of the model minority myth, submissive stereotypes, orientalism and exotification, racial

fetishism, and a Eurocentric beauty standard set by the assumption of a universal appearance (Ahn, Keum, Meizys, Choudry, Gomes, & Wang, 2021). These stressors, in addition to the rise of anti-Asian sentiment that COVID-19 created, contribute to the layers of oppression of AA women that can carry significant psychological stress and the risk of danger and violence.

The Model Minority Myth: A Pawn of White Supremacy

The model minority myth is one of the largest themes to be studied and critiqued among research associated with the AA population, and despite the fact that this has been proven to be a historical tool used for propaganda, it still remains a longstanding characterization that plagues Asian Americans today (Aguirre & Lio, 2008).

According to this stereotype, Asian Americans have overcome the impacts of discrimination by being "conservative, hard-working, and well-educated" rather than seeking assistance from governmental institutions or by addressing racial inequalities (Wu, 1995). Through sheer hard work and determination, Asian Americans "can achieve universal educational and occupational success" (Yi, Mac, Venturanza, Museus, Buenavista, & Pendakur, 2020, p. 543).

While remnants of this harmful trope can be traced back to the 1800s and a history of colonization and globalization (Wu, 1995), the model minority myth became cemented in mainstream American culture during the civil rights movement, when Black Americans were rallying for the recognition of systemic racism and equality

Several articles and reports came out around this time stating that, despite their minority status, AA individuals were able to find success. Promoted as self-sufficient and flourishing, this "model minority status" was used as a political tool to pit Asian Americans against other racial minorities (Kim, Lu, & Stanton, 2021). White supremacy, in an effort to protect itself against the civil rights movement that was making waves across history, weaponized this myth in order to uphold certain structural inequalities, and to insist that the problems these communities faced were self-inflicted. These claims pit Asian Americans against other communities of color, hindering the unity needed to overcome these social justice barriers (Yi et al., 2020).

And while the model minority myth began to bloom and bleed its way into becoming a permanent fixture of American history, it proved to be a double-edged sword for the AA population (Yi, & Hoston, 2020). This myth created the assumption that Asians were prosperous, and therefore not in need of scientific or clinical attention. The AA population, despite its vast in-group diversity, became one of the least represented populations within scientific and medical studies (Yip, Cheah, Kiang, & Hall, 2021). And while Asians were being used as a means to suppress other marginalized populations, they continued to be othered, exotified, and disregarded.

This act of being viewed as a "forever foreigner" can be a universal experience for many different ethnic and racial minorities in the United States, and Asian American individuals are no different. Asian Americans' ethnic status has

been politically weaponized to be viewed as alien and permanently foreign (Yi et al., 2020). Due to this, Asian Americans have been subjected to the continuing stereotype that one of their core identities of being an American can be denied.

So while the ideological construct of the model minority myth was congratulating Asian Americans on fully assimilating into mainstream American culture, AA individuals were still seen as a subject of control under the American system and considered perpetual foreigners (Aguirre & Lio, 2008). The model minority status that pushed the narrative that Asian Americans were passive and do not experience discrimination erased the history of struggle and equality that Asian Americans were fighting for, and instead turned them into a dogmatic tool to be used against other oppressed communities.

The Fight for Recognition

Even the phrase Asian American itself comes with a complicated history of combatting struggles and subjugation. Between 1870 and 1970, the only options under "race" on the national census were black, white, Chinese, and Japanese. Others who did not fit these categories campaigned to be included in "white," as that meant better access to housing, education, and opportunity (Nash, 1997). Due to this push, the U.S. Census Bureau grouped Asians and Pacific Islanders together to create the category of "Asian Pacific Islander" in 1970, which included all people of Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander ancestry. Realizing their overgeneralization, the U.S. Census Bureau officially separated "Asian" from "Pacific Islander" in 1997. The label "Asian American" was not known until it was coined by student activists in

1968 in an effort to identify Asian groups as well as validate their American status during a time where the slur “oriental” was being used regularly

This umbrella term encapsulates one of the most diverse groups of people, with countless different ethnicities, languages, and traditions (Cheng, Kim, Reynolds Tsong, & Joel Wong, 2021). This category represents people with direct or ancestral connection to East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the different cultures that each subcategory contains. Some scholars argue that this conglomeration of so many distinct political, social, economic, cultural, and behavioral differences is not remarkably insightful for research (Sue, Sue, & Sue, 2021). However, to someone with an Asian fetish, these women are all the same.

Asian American Women and Internalized Racism

Many forms of oppression exist in today’s society, all of which involve a dynamic of power and control. For BIPOC individuals who have been historically the subject of control through white supremacy and globalization, this can take the form of internalized racism, and the difficulties of coping with the effects of discrimination.

And while society has moved past the need to blatantly push harmful narratives of the model minority myth and perpetual foreigner syndrome, these tropes still exist and impact individuals in more nuanced and contemporary forms. Internalized racism became a consequence of accepting those racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by a white-dominate society about one’s own racial group. Internalized racism works to be another cog in the white

supremacy machine. Hwang (2021) discussed the notion of othering, and how it can be displayed in two forms that focus on "fragmenting minority communities." Oppressive othering is the general notion that BIPOC are inherently inferior, and therefore distant from white individuals on a hierarchal scale. Through this belief, an individual can justify the oppression, colonization, slavery, and genocide that minorities have faced.

Defensive othering, however, is a byproduct of internalized racism, in which members of an oppressed group try to align themselves with the ideologies of the oppressor in an effort to distance themselves from and disenfranchise their own group. This can be seen as a consequence of the model minority myth, as Asian Americans were perceived to have a proximity to whiteness that others did not have, with some Asian Americans disregarding their own group in order to align with these racist ideologies.

These internalized messages lead individuals to not only diminish and reduce the worth of others that look like them, but to also diminish themselves in order to fully embrace a whiteness they can never truly achieve.

These messages for Asian American women include ascribing to Western ideals of beauty, in which the standard of beauty for women include being tall, blonde, pale, buxom, thin, and having sharp European facial features. And although the diversity in physical presentation for AA women is vast, most are far from this standard (Hall, 1995).

Asian American women have a pool of cultural diversity within their looks, but similar themes that exist are epicanthic folds in the eyelids, a flatter and thicker nose bridge, and a stockier build in comparison to their white counterparts. Additionally, AA women have a variety of skin tones and hair textures, all of which do not match these Eurocentric beauty standards. This can cause significant mental and physical distress, including heightened risks for eating disorders, depression, and negative self-worth (Le, Kuo, & Yamasaki, 2020).

The perpetuated model minority myth has created a lack of representation for Asian Americans within research, thus erasing their physiological and psychological struggles. Internalization of these variables, in addition to the lack of positive representation in both research and mainstream media, have shown to significantly predict negative attitudes towards help-seeking behaviors, which discourages AA women from reaching the help they need.

And while this beauty standard is inherently oppressive for all women under the umbrella of misogyny and the patriarchy, these narratives still recognize whiteness as the most revered representation of beauty. This creates the unique intersectionality of gendered racism that AA women face (Ahn et al., 2021). Not only do they compete to reach an unattainable standard, but they must also cope with the stereotypical social image that history, colonization, and subjugation has painted of them.

The Fetishization of AA Women

The phrase for this fetishization of AA women (and men) is commonly known as "yellow fever," and with this term comes whispers of crude jokes about sideways vaginas and exotic fantasies. This fetishization has an old history tied to the United States that stems from colonization, war, and globalization, and the racial analysis of the AA woman's experience would be considered incomplete without the conversation of gender, sex, and white supremacy (Hall, 1995). Whereas AA men, through this lens, have been emasculated and backed into a corner of appearing weak and nonsexual, AA women have been viewed in an almost completely sexual light, in which they are nothing but erotic goods for consumption. This unique and specific stressor contributes to the objectification of AA women, and can potentially lead to a significant amount of psychological stress and a risk of racially motivated attacks like the one in Atlanta.

This can be traced back through many different branches of the same tree. Historically, and as a western tool to justify imperial aspirations, Asia had been romanticized and exotified to the masses (Brady, Kaya, Iwamoto, Park, Fox, & Moorhead, 2017). One of the first documented accounts of this theory is found in *Madame Chrysanthème*, written by Pierre Loti in 1887. This book presents itself as an autobiographical journal of a naval officer who temporarily obtained a second wife while stationed in Japan. Loti solidified this portrayal of Asians by describing the women in Japan as extremely sexual beings who aimed only to please, and were "groveling" at the main character's feet. Loti wrote that the women of the East were

petite and doll-like, and "no more human than ornaments." And although this was a work of fiction, Loti's novel was extremely successful, translated into several different languages, and read across the world.

Additionally, the United States' chronicles of war and colonization fostered a sense of ownership and superiority over Asians. AA women were considered a lower class within a sexist society, and western soldiers assumed the Asian sex workers they interacted with represented the whole of Asian women. This can be seen in Stanley Kubrick's 1987 "Full Metal Jacket," a critically acclaimed film about the Vietnam war, which includes a scene where a Vietnamese sex worker explains to two GIs that for ten dollars each, they could have "everything." While one can argue that this was a fictional movie based off of a historical event, the lines "me so horny" and "me love you long time" still reverberate strongly in today's culture.

This combination of racism, sexism, and nationalism did not stop with mainstream media and the rise of the movie industry either. Hollywood, utilizing white actresses in yellowface, had long crafted the Asian woman's image on the big screen. By the time Asian women were able to portray themselves in media, they had been portrayed into two distinct categories: The Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady (Zheng, 2016).

The Lotus Blossom character, who existed as an echo of Loti's portrayal, was helpless, submissive, docile, and obedient. This emulated the feeling that many soldiers had that Asian women needed to be saved from their countries, and rescued via marriage. By contrast, the Dragon Lady trope was a devious, mysterious, and

sexy woman that was evil and served as temptation for white men. These representations only further normalized and strengthened this fetishization, and validated white men's virility and position in the current racial hierarchy. The United States had as much occupation over Asian women's bodies as it did their land.

This orientalizing puts Asian American women in a dangerous predicament. Not only are they at risk for feeling homogenized and objectified, but because of the overarching racism that this is rooted in, they are at the same time exotified and othered. Yellow fever threatens AA women's belief that "they are or can be loved as individuals rather than as objects in a category" (Zheng, 2016, p. 408).

Deadly Consequences

Although Asian fetishes and yellow fever are assumed to be harmless and trivial indicators of preference, they have real world impacts (Lewis, 2018). Asian American women consistently report being wary of men with histories of yellow fever, even warning each other against dating areas where they are likely to be targeted for their race. Additionally, stereotypes about Asian women render them particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence by men who target them on that basis, and AA women who date non-Asian men are at a higher risk of being sexually victimized, especially if these women have limited English skills (Zheng, 2016). Yellow fever either reinforces the belief that AA women are obedient, foreign, and submissive, or the notion that they are hypersexual and therefore rape is impossible (Keum, Brady, Sharma, Lu, Kim, & Thai, 2018).

“Kung-Flu”: Hate and COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was a monumental moment in history for most of the world, and with it came a rise in reported racist attacks for the United States. Since the initial outbreak, hate crimes targeting Asians has seen an unprecedented upsurge, with over 3,800 hate crimes reported since March of 2020 (Cheng et al., 2021).

Those in political and/or agency leadership who carried these same anti-Asian sentiments only added fuel to the fire. Politicians treated hate crimes lightheartedly and promoted the underlying principle that racism equaled patriotism (Lee & Johnstone, 2020). Former President Trump’s comments on the pandemic, referring to COVID-19 as “the Chinese virus” and “Kung-flu” normalized this anti-Asian belief, and subjected many Asian Americans to vicious, physical hate crimes (Sue, Sue, & Sue, 2021). During the height of the pandemic, a Southeast Asian family of four was stabbed outside of a Walmart in Texas, including their two-year old child. A Filipino man was slashed across the face with a boxcutter, an elderly Chinese woman was slapped and set on fire by two attackers, and a Korean American woman was punched in the face while walking in New York City (Cabral, 2021). These attacks, while extremely brutal, were not isolated incidents.

This anti-Asian sentiment rests on the notion that Asians are to blame for the global pandemic, and is a soft reminder of what other marginalized groups have experienced. Arab Americans have long been assumed to be terrorists, Black Americans have been afflicted with being labeled as criminals, and Asian women

have been regarded as homogenous commodities. The violence against people of color in the United States is not new, and the spa shootings that occurred in Atlanta in March of 2021 were a violent display of that.

Although the Atlanta police department denied any racial motivation for the attack and the suspect was not charged with a hate crime, many have pointed out the decision for him to attack an Asian spa during such a politically charged climate and when hate crimes against Asian Americans were at an all time high. Long defended himself by saying that these shootings were motivated by his sexual addiction and an attempt to eradicate desire (Shapiro, 2021). Scholars, however, have pointed out that this motivation further reinforces this racial belief that Asian women are seen as objects for a sexual addiction and are perceived as temptation to be eliminated.

Stop Asian Hate and Black Lives Matter

The shooting in Atlanta was not the origin of the Stop Asian Hate movement, but it was the catalyst of #StopAsianHate rocketing into mainstream media. Protests filled the streets, and megaphones ruptured with the pain and anger that the Asian American community was enduring. The world was experiencing a period of quietness that COVID-19 brought, but the United States was filled with protesters armed with hand sanitizers and masks, fighting for justice. And what made the Stop Asian Hate movement so successful was both the support and precedence of Black Lives Matter.

Anti-black racism is as old as racism itself (Ho, 2020). There existed a long list of unjust deaths before George Floyd, and the list continues after. However, for the United States, his death seemed to be the last straw. The Black Lives Matter movement revolutionized how people thought about social justice issues. It challenged the pillars of white supremacy that the United States was built on, and emphasized the systemic racism that black people faced on a daily basis.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize the implications of #StopAsianHate and how its backlash compares to that of Black Lives Matter. There has been little pushback against the Stop Asian Hate movement, and while it is hard to argue against campaigning to stop anti-Asian hate crimes, this would not have been possible if Black Lives Matter did not receive the initial criticisms that come with demanding equality against an unjust system. While they are both fighting against white supremacy (Ho, 2020), Black Lives Matter was one of the first contemporary movements to increase awareness around systemic racism and the ways in which every individual contributes to upholding white supremacy on a daily basis (Hargons et al., 2017). Black Lives Matter paved the way for the Stop Asian Hate movement to gain real support and created a unity between black and Asian activists.

Anti-blackness has existed within Asian communities for centuries, fueled by colorism and proximity to whiteness. Similarly, anti-Asian beliefs have existed within black communities, stemming from the model minority myth that was used to oppress them for so long. And while a history of tension, colorism, and mutual

racism are real, there are other stories of solidarity and alliance between these two groups that has been erased in order to push the narrative of pitting minorities against each other (Ho, 2020). There have been and still exist grassroots work by activists who advocate for cross-racial camaraderie. Asian solidarity groups, most notably ones started by lifelong activist Yuri Kochiyama, existed and worked closely with Malcom X's campaign for black liberation. Black, Latinx, and Asian coalition groups sprung up in the aftermath of the LA riots (Tseng & Lee, 2021), Black and Asian feminist unity groups work together to foster cross-racial collaborations (Ho, 2020), and many Stop Asian Hate and Black Lives Matter organizers have been working together in order to share stories and strategies for mutual liberation.

A Call to Action

The unique experience that people of color carry can be difficult for a white clinician to understand, especially if they have not committed themselves to the relatively new standards of multicultural competencies and antiracism work. Clinicians need to be able to comprehend that mental health may present differently to a person of color in comparison to what is presented in their textbooks, which focus mainly on the white experience.

In order to decolonize their work, clinicians need to understand the impact that race and gender has on mental health for a population such as Asian Americans.

Higher academia, research, and textbooks have centered on the white experience in mental health, while other multicultural considerations have been reduced to a paragraph at the end of a chapter. A study led by Steven Roberts

(2020) analyzed over 26,000 empirical articles published between 1974 and 2018 in academic journals for cognitive, developmental, and social psychology. Roberts and his team found that when editors were white, only four percent of all publications highlighted race. In comparison, when an editor-in-chief was a person of color, that number almost tripled to 11 percent.

This not only highlights the disparity in representation within research, but also the overrepresentation of whiteness and the impacts of structural racism. While Roberts hypothesized that cognitive researchers might avoid studying race in pursuit of more "neutral," science-based studies, he also contextualized that white editors, researchers, and writers were not excluded from the general reluctance that white people have when it comes to discussing race.

By avoiding the topic of race in academia and research, counselors are in turn ill-prepared to service communities that experience marginalization. It is a disappointment to consider that some clinicians also refuse to grow their multicultural competencies because they are dedicated to maintaining the fallacy of colorblindness (Tittler, Lannin, Han, & Wolf, 2020). This only hurts clients of color and contributes to the whitewashed ignorance that exists in counseling today.

Counselor education and psychology programs added a multiculturalism course to their curriculum in response to the perceived need, but it is important to notice how the presence or absence of BIPOC authors and contributors to a field impacts this framework (Gamby, Burns, & Forristal, 2021). While it may appear to be a step forward, this standard reinforces the belief that multicultural issues, or

considerations separate from the dominate white experience, are to remain on the periphery. One way to address this issue is to ensure that all courses are taught from a social justice lens, which shifts students' perspectives and infuses multicultural competencies into the core of the curriculum (Singh, Appling, & Trepal, 2020).

Additionally, faculty members need to be modeling these frameworks by integrating these practices in the classroom in order to engage their students in this process early on. By doing this, a commitment to social justice is endorsed throughout the entire program, and the students become culturally competent clinicians as they enter the field after graduation.

Melamed, Casado Pérez, & Hunt, (2020) have suggested two ways in which faculty can start implementing aspects of social justice and multicultural framworks into their curriculum are through intersectional case vignettes and critical self-reflecting exercises. Intersectional case vignettes incorporate a constructivist approach to cultural identity, in which students can not only examine the complexities of identity, but also the impacts of oppression on marginalized clients.

Self reflecting, in addition to case vignettes, are considered an essential part of counselor education. Critical self reflection offers students opportunities to begin to become aware of and address assumptions and biases that may exist in their learning. This creates new, flexible ways of thinking that allows them to explore how they conceptualize life and their clients.

The larger pursuit of racial equality will need to be a collaborative effort (Tseng & Lee, 2021), and it is one that goes beyond what is currently available in

research and higher academia. Until the field in general prioritizes research and guidelines regarding the lived experience of AA clients and the fundamental culturally competencies needed for entry-level counselors, the field will continue to rely on clinicians and researchers of color to enact chang. As such, the responsibility of gaining multicultural competencies and decolonizing practices falls to the individual counselor. Academicians and clinicians need to be diversifying literature, promoting antiracist practices, and enhancing their skills to match these new standards.

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