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# Perceived racial discrimination, acculturative stress, and psychological distress among Asian immigrants: The moderating effects of support and interpersonal strain from a partner



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the roles of partner support and strain as moderators of the associations between Asian immigrants' experiences of (a) acculturative stress and (b) perceived racial discrimination and their levels of psychological distress. Using data from an Asian immigrant sample ( $n = 1012$ ) from the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS), multiple regression analyses indicated that acculturative stress and perceived racial discrimination are associated with greater psychological distress. In addition, interpersonal strain from a partner exacerbated the negative association between perceived racial discrimination and psychological distress, but interpersonal support did not act as a moderator. The findings suggest that intervention programs focused on helping Asian immigrants cope with acculturative stress and discrimination should target individuals' couple relationships in addition to parenting and individual functioning. Longitudinal studies are needed to more thoroughly test causal pathways linking stresses faced by immigrants, risk and protective factors, and psychological distress.

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## 1. Background

Although Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States, little is known about their life experiences. According to the United States Census, the general population grew by 9.7% between 2000 and 2010, whereas the Asian American population grew by 43.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Moreover, it is projected that by 2020 the Asian American population will increase to 20 million (Ong, 2000). Immigration is the most significant factor in this growth, as approximately 66.7% of Asian Americans are foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Considering this rapid growth in the number of Asian immigrants, there is a need for more research to increase understanding of factors influencing the quality of their lives. Although people typically immigrate with positive goals for their lives, the process of adapting to a new cultural and socioeconomic environment can be quite challenging.

Asian immigrants commonly are believed to experience few adjustment difficulties during the acculturation process (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993) and are often perceived as model minorities due to characteristics such as strong collectivist family values and the emphasis they commonly place on education and achievement (Wong & Halgin, 2006). However,

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Asian immigrants also face numerous difficulties in the U.S. (Tummala-Narra, Alegria, & Chen, 2012). Learning a new language, missing friends and relatives who they left behind, and adjusting to new social norms can be sources of acculturative stress that they share with immigrants from many other countries (Noh & Kaspar, 2003). Asian immigrants also commonly experience stress from racial discrimination, as a growing literature has identified a stereotype of Asian Americans as foreigners whose basic values and customs are inherently different from those of Westerners and who thus cannot assimilate to U.S. culture (Kim, 1999; Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez, & Li, 2011; Tuan, 1998). Based on discrimination experiences when interacting with members of the host culture, they often feel distant, frustrated, and helpless (Tuan, 1998). Therefore, Asian immigrants are likely to experience stress from two major sources: (a) acculturative stress involving difficulties from being uprooted from their homelands and having to adapt to new cultural and living conditions and (b) racial discrimination. A limited number of studies (e.g., Leong, Park, & Kalibatseva, 2013; Tummala-Narra et al., 2012) have examined effects that one or both sources of stress have on the well-being of Asian immigrants, so one purpose of the present study was to address those gaps in knowledge by investigating the degrees to which acculturative stress and discrimination are associated with severity of symptoms of psychological distress in Asian immigrants.

In addition to examining risk factors for psychological distress in Asian immigrants that are associated with their interactions with the host culture, this study also had a goal of investigating whether the qualities of immigrants' relationships with their intimate partners moderate the negative effects of those risk factors on individual functioning. According to Family Stress Theory (Hill, 1949; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989; Price, Price, & McKenry, 2010), negative effects of life stressors can be moderated or buffered by individual (e.g., economic, psychological), family (e.g., emotional support), and community (e.g., financial assistance, mental health services) resources (Skelton, Buehler, Irby, & Grzywacz, 2012). Among this variety of potential stress-moderating factors, we chose to focus on the interpersonal realm, in particular couple relationships, because Asian American cultures place a high value on marriage (as demonstrated by high rates of marriage),<sup>1</sup> but the effects of couple relationship quality on immigrants' well-being has received little empirical attention. Leong et al. (2013) found that lower family cohesion and higher family conflict were associated with greater probabilities of depression and anxiety disorders in Asian American immigrants, but no studies have focused on the influence of couple relationships on Asian immigrants' psychological functioning.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Acculturative stress and mental health among Asian immigrants

Most immigrants experience significant changes in many aspects of their lives during the acculturation process (Bernstein, Park, Shin, Cho, & Park, 2011), including feelings of loss, separation, alienation, and anxiety about the new cultural environment (Tummala-Narra et al., 2012). These experiences can lead to acculturative stress (Oh, Koeske, & Sales, 2002), involving the emotional burden of adapting to a new culture (Berry, 2003). Even though many immigrants adapt well to the new culture, the process can disrupt psychological functioning, at least temporarily.

Acculturative stress has been associated with mental health problems among Asian immigrants. In particular, studies have found that acculturative stress contributes to Asian immigrants exhibiting depression symptoms, even after controlling for effects of general perceived life stress (Hwang & Ting, 2008; Miller & Chandler, 2002; Shin, 1994). Rice, Choi, Zhang, Morero, and Anderson (2012) demonstrated that acculturative stress significantly predicts Asian international students' depression levels by interacting with their self-critical perfectionism. In addition, Tummala-Narra et al. (2012) found that acculturative stress was associated with depression among Vietnamese and Filipino immigrants. Furthermore, Leong et al. (2013) found that acculturative stress predicted the probability that Asian American immigrants would have an anxiety or depression clinical diagnosis. Lee and Yoon (2011) found that lower acculturation was associated with both anxiety and depression symptoms among elderly Korean immigrants. Thus, given the burdens of acculturation that face Asian immigrants, there is a need for further research to explore forms of psychological distress associated with acculturative stress.

### 2.2. Discrimination and mental health among Asian immigrants

In addition to acculturative stress, discrimination based on race and ethnicity is a common life stressor for Asians in the United States. A recent study using the 2002–2003 National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) found that 74% of Asian Americans reported experiencing routine unfair treatment in their lifetime, and 62% reported being disliked, treated unfairly, and seeing friends being treated unfairly because they were Asian (Chae et al., 2008). Despite progress that has been made in eliminating formal sanctions against Asian Americans, many Asian Americans still face racial discrimination while seeking better occupational, educational, and economic opportunities (Nadimpalli & Hutchinson, 2012; Okihiro, 2001).

Recent studies consistently indicate that racial discrimination is linked to Asian Americans' experiences of poor mental health. Yip, Gee, and Takeuchi (2008) found that more frequent reports of discrimination were associated with greater reports of depression and anxiety among Asian Americans. Bernstein et al.'s (2011) study on Korean immigrants in New York City

<sup>1</sup> According to *America's Families and Living Arrangements* (2012), Asian ethnic groups living in the U.S. have a greater than 60% marriage rate, higher than that of non-Hispanic Whites (53.5%).

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