## Being Asian American: Identity, Cultural Constructs, and Stereotype Perception


Daphna Oyserman and Izumi Sakamoto



*Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 1997; 33; 435
DOI: 10.1177/0021886397334002

# Being Asian American

## *Identity, Cultural Constructs, and Stereotype Perception*

**Daphna Oyserman**
**Izumi Sakamoto**
*University of Michigan*

The interplay between individualist and collectivist orientations, ethnic identity, and beliefs about stereotypes was explored among Asian Americans. The authors proposed four components of Asian American Identity: feelings of interdependence with family, a sense of connectedness to heritage and tradition, a belief that achievement would reflect well on one's family and group generally, and an awareness of structural barriers and racism. A sample of 162 Asian American university students perceived stereotypes about Asian Americans as focusing primarily on school achievement and secondarily on social attributes. Although rarely engaging in strategies to avoid being academically labeled, students engaged in strategies to avoid labeling in other domains. Students varied in their valuation of the model minority label, with those high in Asian American Identity, collectivism, and work ethic more likely to view the label positively.

American society is a multiethnic, multicultural society (e.g., Fowers & Richardson, 1996; Gutierrez, 1992; Phinney, 1996). Yet, in the cultural psychology literature, America is often described as individualistic in orientation (e.g., Markus & Kitayama,

*We are grateful for funding support from a W. T. Grant Faculty Scholar award to the first author and from the Culture and Cognition Program, University of Michigan, for the second author. David Van Eck programmed the Clipper executable used for the studies. Junko Boland, Kaori Moritomo, Robert San Juan, Eiichi Schimizu, and Akane Zusho helped with focus groups, data entry, and coding. Without the participation and sharing of the focus group participants, we would not have been able to develop the measures for this study.*

JOURNAL OF APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, Vol. 33 No. 4, December 1997 435-453

1991; Triandis, 1995). That is, Americans are said to focus primarily on individual traits and attributes, to view personal independence as an important value, to believe that individuals are defined primarily by their achievements, and to believe that the individual is the causal agent, not his or her circumstances (Hsu, 1983). This individualistic focus is said to interplay with another part of American culture, the work ethic (e.g., Katz & Hass, 1988; Tropman, 1988), which focuses on the value of hard work and effort as well as a belief that those who succeed by dint of hard work are morally "good" as well as successful. But whereas individualism has been described as encouraging a focus on the individual and not the group, American society clearly does take social groups into account—especially ethnic and racial groups. The current study focuses on the interplay between individualist and collectivist orientations and ethnic identity of Asian Americans, a group sometimes described as a "model minority," and explores and describes the stereotypes that Asian Americans perceive others hold of them.

**Being American: Individualism and . . .**

The interplay between individualism and the exclusionary cohesiveness of majority society has taken different forms over the course of America's history. Traditionally, immigrants were thought of as members of foreign groups that were to "melt" into and take on characteristics of the majority while adding some flavor from their own local customs (e.g., Ramiez, 1991; Schlesinger, 1994). Assimilation was assumed to be the goal, attainable by all who were willing to abandon allegiance to their culture of origin and take on the "American" characteristics of hard work and individually based striving achievement (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Phinney, 1990). If being American meant valuing hard work and pursuing striving achievement, then all who chose that path should have been able to view themselves as being part of the mainstream. Yet, some groups were excluded from the melting process (e.g., Takaki, 1994). These groups were believed to be different; they looked different and had such a different culture that they would permanently remain outside the American mainstream. Thus, the Irish were described as "a race that will never be infused into our own, but on the contrary will always remain distinct and hostile" (1840 statement by a Boston mayor, cited in Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 193). Becoming American was never really simply about internalizing the work ethic and values of individualism.

In realization of the barriers faced by minorities, a new way of thinking about and describing American society is currently being developed with calls for increased sensitivity to the cultural values and mores of the many different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups in America (e.g., Asante, 1994; Ravitch, 1994; Rodriguez, 1994; Schlesinger, 1994; Takaki, 1994). Concomitantly, new ways to merge one's cultural roots with American individualism are being sought (Clark, Kaufman, & Pierce, 1976; LaFromboise et al., 1993). A recurrent theme focuses on balancing the values of

*Daphna Oyserman is an associate research scientist at the Institute for Social Research, Research Center for Group Dynamics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

*Izumi Sakamoto is a doctoral candidate in the Joint Program of Social Work and Social Psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

individualism—independent striving and achievement with communal, interdependent, collective values—and commitment to some group larger than the self (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; LaFromboise et al., 1993). This article explores the situation of Asian Americans, examining the interplay between individualism, collectivism, ethnic identity, and the perceptions of Asian Americans about the stereotypes others hold of them.

**Asian Americans: Model Minority?**

The case of Asian Americans is of particular interest because one could argue that as a group, Asian Americans are not a minority in the sense that they are not viewed as underrepresented in academic or economic structures (e.g., Raspberry, 1994). Further, Asian Americans appear to be socially integrated; rates of intermarriage are higher among Asian Americans than they are among other ethnic minority groups (Fugita & O'Brien, 1991; Kitano, Yeung, Chai, & Hatanaka, 1984; Tinker, 1973, 1982). Yet, Asian Americans carry the label model minority—and the very label model minority suggests that they also are not viewed simply as an indistinguishable part of the mainstream in spite of the overlap between Asian and American valuation of striving achievement and Asian American attainment of educational, occupational, and income markers of success (Chan, 1991; Fugita & O'Brien, 1991; Lee, 1996; Osajima, 1988; Takaki, 1994).

It is not clear whether Asian Americans are this country's current generation of Irishmen—now seen as a minority and later to be completely absorbed—or whether they represent the boundaries of majority society's willingness to absorb others even when those others have the valued attributes that make up American-ness. Rather than being labeled successful Americans, Asian Americans are a model minority. Being a model minority may be a good thing in the eyes of some Asian Americans; that is, one is viewed as a model. On the other hand, it may be viewed as a means of peripheralizing this group, keeping the minority status and not allowing Asians into mainstream society (e.g., Sue, 1991; Uyematsu, 1971). In fact, there is some evidence of structural racism and prejudice in that educational attainment is not as strong a predictor of employment and income success for Asian Americans as it is for Anglo-Americans.[1] Thus, Uyematsu (1971) asserted that "If the Protestant Ethic is truly a formula for economic success, then why don't Japanese and Chinese who work harder and have more education than whites earn just as much? . . . In essence, the American capitalistic dream was never meant to include non-whites" (p. 13).

**Asian American Identity**

Some recent work has begun to explore how Asian Americans define themselves (e.g., Iwamasa, 1996; Ling & Chung, 1996; Oda, 1996). For the most part, this work draws on the literature on collectivism and familialism, with a focus on child-rearing and family patterns (see Kagitcibasi, 1996). The interplay between Asian American Identity and Asians' perception of the model minority label has not been explored. We propose that Asian American ethnic identity builds on the interdependence and group

connectedness that are said to be the cultural hallmarks of Asian cultures of origin (e.g., Chan, 1991; Daniels, 1988; Fugita & O'Brien, 1991; Lee, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Rosenberger, 1994; Takaki, 1994). Concrete evidence for such interdependence in the context of America can be found in the ways in which individuals organize their responses to everyday issues, such as rotating credit associations to deal with financial concerns (Light, 1994). Similarly, our own research with African American Identity (e.g., Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Oyserman, Sanchez-Burks, & Harrison, 1997), as well as the work of J. Garcia and M. Garcia on identity among Hispanics (Garcia, 1982; Garcia & Lega, 1979), lead us to propose a multidimensional model of Asian American ethnic identity focused on four content domains: family relatedness, pride in heritage–connectedness to traditions, awareness of discrimination–barriers, and achievement as integral to group membership. These components take into account (a) the family-oriented focus of interdependence (e.g., Chan, 1991), (b) the more general influence of a collectivist worldview on sense of common fate (e.g., Oyserman, 1993; Triandis, 1995), (c) a minority group member's need to take into account the possibility of negative stereotyping or devaluation of one's group by others in America (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989), and (d) a minority group's need to integrate achievement and group identity (e.g., Oyserman et al., 1995). Thus conceptualized, Asian American Identity was hypothesized to correlate positively with collectivism and with a positive valuation of one's ethnic group generally—collective self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989). In addition, Asian American Identity was hypothesized to correlate positively with valuation of the model minority label, because individuals who identify as group members may be predisposed to accept the notion that others view them in this way as well. In addition, we hypothesized that Asian American Identity would correlate with a belief that hard work is central to identity but would be independent of the "American" cultural value of individualism. Further, Asian American Identity was proposed to correlate with sensitivity to ways in which one's ethnicity may reduce one's chances to succeed due to overt prejudice or structural barriers.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 162 Asian Americans (86 female, 75 male, and 1 who did not provide information on gender) attending a large midwestern university who took part in the study in partial fulfillment of their introductory psychology research requirements. All had identified their race/ethnicity as Asian/Asian American as part of a large prescreening questionnaire filled out by most of the introductory psychology students. Most (80.9%) reported that they were U.S. citizens; the others were permanent residents. Most frequently, the latter were citizens of Hong Kong, China (mainland), Korea, or Vietnam. International students and those who described themselves as Asian

Indians were not included in this study because the model minority stereotype is primarily applied to Americans of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent (e.g., Chan, 1991; Lee, 1996). The final sample was composed of roughly one third Chinese (33.3%), one third Korean (28.4%), and one third other (35.8%). The latter comprised diverse ethnic origins (primarily Filipino, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Thai, in descending order).

## Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaire as part of a larger study that took 30 to 60 minutes to complete. Participants were administered the questionnaire in groups of 5 to 15 individuals; each was provided individual work space. A DOS-based clipper executable program was used to present the Asian American Identity, Individualism, Collectivism, and Protestant Ethic scale to the first 80 students. The rest of the scales were presented in paper and pencil format. Due to technical difficulties, the next 82 participants did not use the computerized version and filled out all scales in the paper and pencil format. No difference in mean responses to the scales by mode of administration was found (*t*-tests). Participants were asked to what extent they were identifiable to others as Asian—all responded with the highest scale point, indicating that they believed themselves easily identifiable as Asian.

## Measures

### *Asian American Identity*

The Asian American Identity scale (AsAmID, $M = 3.71$, $\alpha = .72$) was based on Oyserman's model (Oyserman et al., 1995), although the specific items in the scale were developed for this study. Exploratory factor analyses with a varimax rotation of the 12 items resulted in a four-factor solution.

*Connectedness.* Items included "It is important to me to learn about my group's traditions, customs and values," "I try to carry out at least some of my group's customs and traditions (e.g., relating to holidays, food, language)," "I want my children to be raised with my group's traditions," and "I feel a lot of pride in the achievements of my group" ($M = 4.13$, $\alpha = .77$).

*Family Focus.* Items included "My relationship with my family is more important than other relationships I have," "Respect for my elders is an important part of how I was raised," and "It is difficult for me to imagine celebrating major holidays without my family" ($M = 4.16$, $\alpha = .64$).

*Interdependent Achievement.* Items included "Working hard and getting good grades are a part of who I am as a member of my ethnic group," "It is important for me as a member of my ethnicity to work towards a socially respected career such as medicine or law," and "Every time a member of my ethnicity receives public recogni-

tion for occupational or academic success, it helps my group achieve success" ($M$ = 2.98, $\alpha$ = .72).

*Awareness of Racism.* Items included "Most people are prejudiced against Asians in at least some ways" and "As a member of my group I will probably have to work harder than most people in order to get ahead" ($M$ = 3.26, $\alpha$ = .63).

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither disagree nor agree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Family Focus and Connectedness were correlated ($r$ = .32, $p$ < .01), as were Interdependent Achievement and Connectedness ($r$ = .22, $p$ < .01) and Interdependent Achievement and Awareness of Racism ($r$ = .32, $p$ < .01). Other correlations between subscales were not significant.

### *Collectivism*

The Collectivism scale (COL; modified from Oyserman, 1993) focused on collectivistic orientation, the extent to which group membership is perceived as providing information about values, beliefs, and goals of the self and others. Collectivism items were measured on the same 5-point Likert-type response scale described above ($M$ = 2.94, $SD$ = .81, $\alpha$ = .82). Items included "If a person knows I am a member of my ethnic group, he/she will know a lot about who I am," "Willingness to take action to help members of my ethnic group is a sign of maturing," "To understand who I really am, a person would have to see me with members of my group," "As a member of my ethnic group, my values and beliefs differ importantly from those who don't belong to my group," "I feel a strong attachment to my ethnic group as whole," and "I feel a strong sense of belonging to the people in my ethnic group."

### *Collective Self-Esteem*

Luhtanen and Crocker's Collective Self-Esteem (CSE; 1992) 16-item scale was measured on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *disagree somewhat*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree somewhat*, 5 = *agree*; $M$ = .40, $SD$ = 1.30). Collective self-esteem focuses on the positive feelings associated with one's group membership. Components of CSE include one's beliefs about others' valuation of one's group (Public: $M$ = 4.00, $\alpha$ = .79), one's own private valuation of one's group (Private: $M$ = 4.51, $\alpha$ = .80), one's sense that one is a good group member (Membership: $M$ = 4.08, $\alpha$ = .73), and the centrality of group membership to one's sense of self (Importance: $M$ = 3.62, $\alpha$ = .83). The scale has been used in studies of Black and White (e.g., Arroyo & Zigler, 1995), as well as Asian American, students (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994). Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) reported total alpha reliability scores of .85 to .88. In our study, total alpha was .85. The Membership component correlated with the other CSE components at the $p$ < .001 level ($r$ = .44 with Importance, $r$ = .60 with Private, and $r$ = .27 with Public). In addition, the Private component also correlated with Public ($r$ = .34) and the Importance components ($r$ = .48) at the $p$ < .001 level.

### *Work Ethic*

The six items from Katz and Hass's (1988) Protestant Work Ethic scale that focused specifically on the work ethic were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*; $M = 3.74$, $SD = .55$, $\alpha = .64$). Specific items included "If I work hard enough, I will likely make a good life for myself," "If I do not succeed in life, it will probably be because I did not try hard enough," "Dislike of hard work usually reflects weakness of character," "Most people who don't succeed in life are just plain lazy," "Anyone able and willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding," and "A person who can approach an unpleasant task with enthusiasm is a person who will get ahead." Katz and Hass (1988) reported alphas of .76 to .93.

### *Individualism*

The 5-item Individualism (IND; $M = 3.74$, $SD = .51$, $\alpha = .60$) scale (modified from Oyserman, 1993) focused on individualistic orientation, the extent to which one views being unique, different from, and independent of others as important characteristics of the self and others. Specific items included "I am different from everyone else, unique," "It is important to me to live by my personal values and to try to achieve my personal goals," "Decisions I make on my own are best," "If I like an idea, I do not care what others think about it," and "Others cannot know me as I know myself." Due to an omission in questionnaire administration, only 71 participants completed the IND scale.

### *Race/Ethnicity as a Barrier to Success*

Two statements, again measured on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *only a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *quite a lot*, 5 = *completely*) revealed if "My racial or ethnic background has prevented me from succeeding" or "Prejudice against my race has prevented me from succeeding." The two items were summed to form a belief in ethnic barriers score.

### *Stereotypes and Model Minority*

*Model Minority.* Feelings about the model minority label were assessed with a single item ("Do you like to be referred to as a model minority?") measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *most of the time*, 5 = *always*; $M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.1$). In addition, this was followed by an open-ended question, "Why or why not?"

*Stereotypes and Strategies.* Participants were asked to describe stereotypes about Asian Americans held by non-Asian Americans using an open-ended format. After each stereotype, participants were asked to describe their strategies, if any, to deal with the stereotype. After this open-ended response, participants were asked to read through what they had written and circle the stereotypes they "really suffer from and don't like."

*Triggering Events*. Participants were asked about events that made their ethnicity salient to them. A closed-ended question was asked: "Thinking back over the past week or so, was there a time when something reminded you that you are Asian/Asian American?" (1 = yes, 2 = no). Following this, participants were asked to describe the event that made them aware of their ethnicity ("Please describe this [these] occasion[s]").

## RESULTS

### Individualism, Collectivism, and Ethnic Identity

Asian American students endorsed collectivism ($M = 2.9$) less than individualism ($M = 3.6$; $t[70] = -5.78$, $p < .001$), which suggests they were acculturated in the American cultural perspective. Levels of individualism and collectivism were independent of one another ($r = .01$). In addition, whereas COL was positively correlated with both CSE and AsAmID ($r = .43$ and .68, respectively, $p < .01$), IND was correlated with CSE only ($r = .38$, $p < .01$). Thus, those with a more collectivist perspective felt more positive about their ethnic/racial group and were more likely to view themselves in terms of the components of Asian American Identity—connectedness, familialism, interdependent achievement, and awareness of racism. However, having an individualistic perspective was related to viewing one's group membership positively but was unrelated to the content of Asian American Identity. Further, striving achievement as assessed with the work ethnic scale correlated with COL ($r = .20$, $p < .05$) and with AsAmID ($r = .34$, $p < .01$) but not with IND or CSE. Thus, for our Asian American sample, striving achievement was related to an interdependent sense of self and Asian American ethnic identity but not to individualism or positive collective self-esteem.

Table 1 displays correlations between subscales of Asian American Identity, Collective Self-Esteem, and the cultural perspective variables. Briefly, the relationship between striving achievement and Asian American Identity is based on the correlation between striving achievement and the Interdependent Achievement component of Asian American Identity. Also, the relationship between CSE and Asian American Identity seems focused on the Connectedness component of Asian American Identity. Further, higher levels of both IND and COL correlate with higher Private self-esteem and higher Membership self-esteem. However, the relationship of IND and COL to the remaining two components of CSE diverges; COL relates to the importance of group identity to self-concept, whereas IND relates to Public self-esteem. With regard to the content of Asian American Identity, COL correlates with all aspects of Asian American Identity, whereas IND correlates only with Connectedness. Asian American Identity is rooted in a collectivist perspective, whereas collective self-esteem is grounded more jointly in both individualist and collectivist perspectives. While striving achievement is said to be a component of American culture, for Asian Americans the work ethic correlates with collectivism, not individualism. The relationship between cultural perspective, ethnic identity, and perspectives on the model minority label was explored next.

**TABLE 1**
**Pearson Correlations Among Identity and Cultural Perspective Variables**

| | *1* | *2* | *3* | *4* | *5* | *6* | *7* | *8* | *9* | *10* | *11* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Achievement | — | .22** | .16 | .32*** | .38*** | .17* | −.13 | .19* | −.01 | .56*** | .39*** |
| 2. Connectedness | | — | .32*** | .06 | .56*** | .63*** | . 29*** | .59*** | .24* | .48*** | .13 |
| 3. Familialism | | | — | .06 | .27*** | .19* | . 13 | .26** | .21 | .28*** | .13 |
| 4. Awareness | | | | — | .11 | −.05 | −.30*** | −.07 | −.07 | .34*** | .15 |
| 5. CSE importance | | | | | — | .48*** | .04 | .44*** | .04 | .55*** | .15 |
| 6. CSE private | | | | | | — | .34*** | .60*** | .36** | .28*** | .11 |
| 7. CSE public | | | | | | | — | .27*** | .35** | −.08 | −.01 |
| 8. CSE membership | | | | | | | | — | .38*** | .41*** | .12 |
| 9. IND | | | | | | | | | — | .01 | .12 |
| 10. COL | | | | | | | | | | — | .20* |
| 11. Work ethic | | | | | | | | | | | — |

NOTE: $N = 145$-$154$ due to missing responses. In addition, $n = 71$ for correlations with IND due to omission of this scale from some of the protocols. Variables 1-4 are the Asian American Identity subscales. Variables 5-8 are the Collective Self-Esteem components. IND = Individualism, COL = Collectivism.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

**Perspectives on the Model Minority Label**

To predict respondents' valuation of the model minority label, two hierarchical multiple regression equations were used. The first equation contained IND, COL, the work ethic, the four components of ethnic identity, and the four components of CSE, and the second equation dropped IND. This was done because only 71 participants had complete IND scores; therefore, the full sample could be studied only without IND. In both equations, the general cultural perspective variables (IND, COL, and work ethic) were entered at Step 1 and the identity and self-esteem components were entered at Step 2. With regard to Equation 1, at Step 1, with only the cultural perspective variables entered, the equation did not attain conventional significance, $F(3, 67) = 2.53$, $p = .06$, $R^2 = .10$. However, higher levels of collectivism predicted more positive valuation of the label, $\beta = .2$, $t = 2.30$, $p < .05$. When the components of identity and self-esteem were added, the equation attained significance, $F(11, 59) = 2.37$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .31$. Specifically, two Asian American Identity components—Interdependent Achievement ($\beta = .33$, $t = 2.02$, $p < .05$) and Connectedness ($\beta = .38$, $t = 2.47$, $p < .05$)—predicted positive valuation of the label, whereas one CSE component—Private self-esteem—predicted negative valuation of the label, $\beta = -.35$, $t = 2.35$, $p < .05$.

With regard to Equation 2, at Step 1, when the cultural perspective variables COL and work ethic were entered, the equation was significant, $F(2, 142) = 7.41$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .10$. As before, higher levels of collectivism predicted more positive valuation of the label, $\beta = .21$; in Equation 2, striving achievement as measured by the work ethic also predicted positive valuation of the model, $\beta = .19$ ($p < .05$ for each). Although the two were not correlated, it is possible that IND suppressed the effects of work ethic when it was in the equation. At Step 2, the components of identity and self-esteem were added, $F(10, 134) = 3.07$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .19$. As before, the general cultural perspective variables were no longer significant when the specific identity and self-esteem components were entered into the equation. However, in the full sample, only one Asian American Identity component—Interdependent Achievement, $\beta = .29$, $t = 2.73$, $p < .01$—and one CSE component—importance of group identity to self-concept, $\beta = -.23$, $t = -2.18$, $p < .05$—predicted valuation of the model minority label. Asian American Identity that includes interdependent achievement predicted positive valuation, whereas viewing one's group identity as important to one's sense of self predicted negative valuation of the label.

**Qualitative Analyses of the Model Minority Label**

The next set of analyses focused on the open-ended responses, as we sought to understand how participants made sense of the model minority label and other stereotypes about Asian Americans. A summary of responses (positive, ambivalent, negative) to the open-ended probe with regard to the model minority label is presented in Table 2. Some students generally viewed the label positively. Most positive responses seemed tied to a sense of rootedness in tradition and heritage, an interdependent perspective on achievement, and a belief that group identity is important in self-definition. For these students, others viewing Asian Americans as a model minor-

ity seemed to flow smoothly from their own pride in their heritage. For example, a Chinese American student wrote, "It depicts success in my ethnicity, and I take great pride in it." Similarly, a Korean American student wrote, "I like to know that people respect Asian Americans. When we are referred to as a model minority, then it shows that we are not neglected and that people see good in us." Others viewed the label positively because they hoped it would promote generational continuity of heritage and traditions. One Hmong American student wrote, "Because we need to motivate ourselves and our youth. If we don't promote a 'model minority,' who will our youth look up to?" Finally, some viewed the label positively because it seemed to provide the promise of positive labeling of the self by others. One Vietnamese American student wrote, "It's nice because due to stereotypes, this will be associated with me."

Other students were ambivalent about the label, seeing both positive and negative aspects to it. For these students, the label meant that they were kept out of the mainstream; however, they also felt that the label emphasized roots that they should be proud of. Thus, one Korean American student wrote, "I am divided on how to answer this question. On one hand, it is nice to see that people recognize the hard work that people who happen to be Asian put forth. Yet it is still sad that people view us still as a minority instead of as Americans." Ambivalence also was expressed by students who seemed to realize that stereotypes for some minorities are more negative, and in this sense the stereotype cup could be considered "half full." Thus, a Chinese American student wrote, "Asians being referred to as model minority is better than being associated with crime, laziness, stupidity, etc. The 'characteristics' perceived true of Asians are more positive and in some case can help."

Perhaps connected to the fact that our Asian American participants were higher in individualism than collectivism, a large percentage did not like the model minority label because they did not want to be tied to a group or committed to a social identity. Thus, a Korean American student stated, "Because regardless of its positive connotations, it is STILL a STEREOTYPE. This means that there are certain expectations of Asians based simply on their appearance. I think this is b_s_, and I try with all my ability to avoid being labeled." Some responded strongly to the exclusionary aspects of the label. One Taiwanese American student wrote, "To be referred to as a model minority seems to me like we are being petting and told 'good dog.' " Still others simply felt that it is not an accurate label. According to one Thai American student, "Growing up in a predominantly Asian neighborhood, I know that Asian Americans cannot and should not be used as models." Others were concerned that it would create barriers for Asian Americans. A Japanese American student stated, "Once again it creates biases. Not everyone is a perfect example. Often it is a setback in certain fields which are lacking in Asian Americans, such as sports, lit, drama, psych, etc."

### Content of Stereotypes

As shown in Table 3, Asian Americans described an array of stereotypes non-Asians have about them. Stereotypes focused primarily on being a high achiever, driven, or intense; physical characteristics; and being focused on the in-group or denigrating out-group members. The achiever stereotype, mentioned nearly unanimously (over

**TABLE 2**
**Model Minority—Why or Why Not Like It? Reasons Given Categorized as Ambivalent, Positive, or Negative in Overall Tone (in percentages)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Ambivalent | 15.9 |
| It makes us a minority, but we should be proud of our accomplishments. | |
| At least it's a good stereotype. | |
| Positive | 26.3 |
| Proud of heritage that previous generation has established this reputation. | |
| Good to be recognized as good students. | |
| Negative | 51.7 |
| The label is peripheralizing or marginalizing, it reduces opportunity. | |
| Don't like stereotypes and this stereotype does not fit. | |

80% of participants), included such responses as "smart," "genius," "intelligent," "overachiever," "nerdy," "law, math, or science major," "4.0 GPAs," and "competitive and diligent, don't have fun." Physical appearance or mannerisms were described by half of participants and included "Asians are all generic," "short," "wear glasses," "don't speak English well (or at all)," "have accents," "can't communicate," and "techno-Eurobeat." Almost 40% described stereotypes related to focus on the in-group/denigration of out-group. Example responses were "tend to hang out in groups," "confined to own race," "not willing to mesh with American culture," "racist," "racially prejudiced," and "condescending to other races." Over 20% described stereotypes related to interpersonal style, such as "submissive," "humble," "passive," "quiet," "stoic," "good boys," "in compassionate," "close-minded," "devious," "sneaky," and "sly." Less common were stereotypes about socioeconomic status and money: "stingy," "greedy," "rich," "poor," "own grocery store," "dry cleaners," "own restaurants," and "chef." Finally, there were those who believed that stereotypes focused specifically on Asian Americans' desire to join the mainstream: "trying to be like Americans," "want to be Caucasian," "inferior to the American race," "F.O.B. [fresh off the boat]." A few mentioned gender-specific stereotypes or stereotypes focused on political orientation ("communist," "conservative"). Stereotypes about Asian Americans seem to be positive in the achievement domain but negative in the interpersonal and intergroup domains, as well as exclusionary in terms of physical characteristics or mannerisms. At least some Asian Americans feel that others are observing Asian Americans' attempts to fit in and that this knowledge makes these others feel superior. Thus, stereotypes about Asians—other than the achievement issues—seem to fit squarely into the mold of negative group stereotypes encountered by other minorities. We now turn to a description of the strategies participants described to avoid being stereotyped.

### Strategies

With regard to strategies to reduce stereotypes, more than half of the individuals who discussed stereotypes relating to a focus on in-group members and interpersonal relationships more generally (e.g., stick to own group, only hang out with other Asian

**TABLE 3**
**Stereotypes That Non-Asians Have Toward Asian Americans and Strategies to Cope With Them**

| *Stereotypes About Asian Americans* | *Stereotype Category (% mentioned)* | *Coping Strategies (% mentioned)* |
|---|---|---|
| Achievement (grades/studying) | 82.1 | 22.7 |
| Observable characteristics | 50.0 | 39.0 |
| Focus on in-group/family, denigrate others | 41.9 | 55.1 |
| Interpersonal style | 22.8 | 48.6 |
| Socioeconomic markers | 18.5 | 10.3 |
| Socially marginalized status | 16.6 | 20.0 |
| Cultural, political, other | 7.3 | 10.0 |
| Gender based | 10.4 | 53.3 |
| Female: exotic, prude, shy, submissive | | |
| Male: arrogant, domineering, husbands beat wives | | |

Americans, shy, lacking social skills) described strategies to avoid being perceived stereotypically. Strategies focused on avoiding the stereotypic situations, such as not going to the dance clubs Asian Americans were said to hang out in, trying not to join all Asian student activities, trying not to speak Asian language "in front of Whites," and making friends with non-Asians. In contrast, relatively few participants had strategies to deal with the most common stereotype—the overachiever. Only 22.7% of those who focused on the high achiever stereotype responded that they have strategies to avoid this stereotype. If they had a strategy, it was to avoid the image of "all study but no play" but not to avoid getting good grades, which suggests that what they really want to avoid is the perception of being seen as a nerd but not the actual performance itself. Table 3 provides a summary of the percentage of respondents who described strategies to avoid being viewed stereotypically.

### Identity Triggers

Participants were asked if something had happened in the past week to remind them that they are Asian American. Those who said something had happened were asked to write down what it was. Only 52.5% of participants felt that something had happened in the past week to remind them of their ethnic/racial/minority status. The question was meant to elicit information about triggers of ethnic identity salience. However, some participants responded that they always felt like a minority. Therefore, it is possible that the "no" responses conflate those for whom ethnic identity is not salient and those for whom it is always salient. Among those who responded, some individuals felt particularly Asian when they were the only non-White in a group (e.g., "When I look around and everyone else in my class is White"). Others felt particularly Asian when in a group situation that included Asians (e.g., "When I am in a restaurant and I look around and everyone looks like me"). Some felt Asian when they were specifically included by Asians (e.g., "I was approached in a store by a Japanese salesman who spoke to me in Japanese"). Others felt Asian when non-Asians attempted to include

**TABLE 4**
**Events That Trigger Feeling Asian**

| |
|---|
| When Asian Americans are not represented or are omitted in public |
| Physical presence ("I was the only Asian in class") |
| Media ("reading newspaper articles about the opinion differences on the OJ verdict among blacks and whites, I wondered where I would stand") |
| Political or representational frameworks ("I'm on the executive board for KSA [Korean Student Association] and I headed a discussion on racism on campus") |
| When presented with Asian-ness |
| Surrounded by Asians ("realized that there were a lot of Asians in class") |
| Custom, heritage, language ("felt comfortable in mingling with Asian friends") |
| Intergroup interaction ("I was at work helping an older guy, when he looked up and stopped in mid-sentence and asked what I was") |
| Feeling distinctive (being American is not a fact of birth/citizenship, but Caucasian features, especially blue eyes and blond hair). |
| Always aware ("all the time, except when I'm at home," "I'm always aware that I'm in the minority") |

them without reference to difference (e.g., "When I told my boyfriend who is White that he is so American and he said I am too"). Finally, there were those who felt that their Asian identity was chronically salient. Table 4 summarizes all of the categories of response.

### Ethnicity as a Barrier

A final set of analyses explored the extent to which cultural perspective, collective self-esteem, and ethnic identity predicted the extent to which participants viewed their ethnic group as a potential barrier to success. We used a hierarchical regression, first stepping in COL and work ethic and then stepping in mean CSE and mean AsAmID scores. We did not carry out a regression with IND because this would reduce analyses to the 71 respondents with IND scores, and IND did not correlate significantly with the perception of barriers variable. The equation was significant at Step 1, $F(2, 142) = 4.02, p < .05, R^2 = .05$, due to the effects of collectivism ($\beta = .22, p < .05$). Collectivism predicted viewing ethnicity as a barrier. At Step 2, the equation was also significant, $F(4, 140) = 5.87, p < .001, R^2 = .14$, with barriers being predicted by high ethnic identity ($\beta = .26, p < .05$) and collectivism ($\beta = .18, p = .10$), and low collective self-esteem ($\beta = -.30, p < .01$).

## DISCUSSION

We explored the interplay between individualism and collectivism as cultural underpinnings of Asian American ethnic identity and collective self-esteem and the ways in which these components of identity may influence perceptions of the model minority label. We further described the stereotypes Asian Americans perceive others

to hold and the interplay between beliefs about stereotypes and strategies to avoid them.

The Asian American students in our sample were higher in individualism than collectivism. Because the two cultural perspectives were independent of one another, we speculate that this suggests a process of cultural accommodation in which being American does not necessarily mean losing a rootedness in one's traditions. Cultural accommodation should allow Asian Americans to view their ethnic group as self-defining and themselves as good members of their ethnic group while also focusing on individualistic goals of self-definition. This appears to be the case in that both individualism and collectivism are positively correlated with collective self-esteem. However, to the extent that Asian Americans perceive others as stereotyping them as Asians, this may function to reinforce a collectivist/group-focused orientation. In fact, collectivist beliefs are correlated with holding a strong Asian American Identity and predict positive valuation of the model minority label, whereas collective self-esteem is negatively correlated with valuation of the model minority label. These findings suggest that the stance Asian American students take with regard to being labeled as a model minority is related to the extent that being Asian matters and the extent that Asian-ness is defined by achievement.

We also found that collectivism and ethnic identity increase sensitivity to barriers due to being Asian, whereas collective self-esteem reduces one's sense that being Asian may pose a barrier. Thus, collectivism may increase sensitivity to possible discrimination, whereas collective self-esteem may reduce one's sensitivity to possible discrimination. Students who view the model minority label positively and are insensitive to the possibility that being Asian may be a barrier for success may be less likely to see structural disadvantage when it exists and may unnecessarily blame themselves for failures and setbacks, increasing the risk of negative mental health outcomes. A seemingly positive label, model minority may make negative stereotypes and discrimination ambiguous, minimizing the target's ability to perceive discrimination when it occurs (e.g., see Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995). Because collectivists have been found to be less likely to make self-serving attributions (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), Asian Americans may be generally at risk for making self-blaming attributions about individual effort, skill, and talent, when in fact a self-serving attribution about structural or personal prejudice would have been more appropriate.

Our sample is limited in a number of ways. It is possible that both the stereotypes identified and responses to them are colored by the context of being a beginning undergraduate at a prestigious university. Further, generational status in the United States may affect aspects of the current study. It may be that more recent migrants are glad for the positive recognition of the model minority label, happy to follow in the footsteps of those on whom the stereotype is based, and remain relatively high in collectivism as compared with individualism. On the other hand, by the third and fourth generation, full acculturation into majority culture may be the goal, and the model minority label may feel increasingly restrictive, especially if individualism has increased over these generations, so that any group label will tend to be viewed with aversion. Future work will need to assess the extent to which generational and perhaps

socioeconomic status interplay with cultural perspective, levels of Asian American Identity, and collective self-esteem.

In spite of sampling and measurement shortcomings, this study does point to the interplay between Asian American ethnic identity, perceptions about being a model minority, and stereotypes about Asian Americans more generally. Generally, collectivism heightened awareness of barriers but also increased acceptance of the model minority label. The label focuses on the positive aspect of self-described stereotypes about Asians—academics. The more negative stereotypes tended to focus on nonacademic issues—students felt that others might see them as uncaring, aloof, or shy; uninterested in non-Asians; or even negatively evaluative of non-Asians. These parts of the stereotypes were issues of concern to the participants. Although this is a preliminary study, our findings suggest that Asian Americans are weaving a complex cultural perspective that contains both Asian and American traditions of individualism and collectivism.

With regard to the model minority label, differences in valuation appear to be based on a student's ethnic identity and endorsement of Asian- and American-based cultural values. Those who viewed tradition and heritage positively seemed to like the label more than those who wanted to be free to define themselves however they pleased. When asked to describe stereotypes about Asian Americans, students overwhelmingly reported achievement and intensity of effort as being Asian stereotypes—content overlapping the model minority label. In explaining their evaluation of the model minority label, students who valued it positively tended to focus their response on the issue of achievement. Their statements focused on pride in being viewed as a model, a sense of connection to previous generations of Asian Americans who worked hard and therefore had a hand in the creation of the stereotype, a belief that the stereotype had some accuracy, and a sense that the stereotype was consonant with the value of hard work. Students who judged the model minority label as negative focused on the exclusionary power of the word *minority*. Their statements focused on the ways in which being labeled a model minority seemed to denigrate their own personal efforts by turning success into a group trait. They voiced concern that this label kept them down and out of the mainstream.

Asian Americans have been described as a model minority. In the current article, we have suggested that they are in fact a test case for the willingness of American society to allow ethnic minorities to self-define as they choose—to view ethnicity as central or peripheral to personal identity. Our sample of Asian Americans endorsed both individualistic and collectivistic values—a sign of cultural accommodation. Both individualism and collectivism were positively related to valuation of Asian-ness as assessed by the collective self-esteem construct. Collectivism also was related both to content of ethnic identity and valuation of the model minority label. Asian Americans view the content of the model minority label as the most prevalent stereotype about Asians in this country. However, as with other minorities, stereotypes about Asians also contain negative descriptions of Asians as lacking social competence and interpersonal and intergroup generosity. The Asian American students in our sample described strategies to avoid these stereotypes in their struggle to craft a self-definition based on their own skills and attributes, not on those others see in them. Although some

feel good about basking in a positive group identity, others prefer to be able to be part of the mainstream, unique individuals defined by their personal traits and characteristics in the tradition of American individualism.

## NOTE

1. Asian Americans are disproportionately likely to attend college and attain higher degrees (especially doctorates), and they are more likely to be employed in higher paying occupations than is the general American population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). But Asian American per capita income ($13,806) is lower than that of Americans generally ($14,143) (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, 1993, p. 7), and Asian American families include more working members than do other American families. Even so, the poverty rate for Asian Americans (14%) is slightly higher than that for the entire U.S. population (13%).

## REFERENCES

Arroyo, C. G., & Zigler, E. (1995). Racial identity, academic achievement, and the psychological well-being of economically disadvantaged adolescents. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*, 903-914.

Asante, M. K. (1994). The Afrocentric idea. In R. Takaki (Ed.), *From different shores: Perspectives on race and ethnicity in America* (2nd ed., pp. 283-287). New York: Oxford University Press.

Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chan, S. (1991). *Asian Americans: An interpretive history*. New York: Twayne.

Clark, M., Kaufman, S., & Pierce, R. C. (1976). Explorations of acculturation: Toward a model of ethnic identity. *Human Organization, 35*, 231-238.

Crocker, J., Luhtanen, R., Blaine, B., & Broadnax, S. (1994). Collective self-esteem and psychological well-being among White, Black, and Asian college students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20*, 503-513.

Crocker, J., & Major, B. (1989). Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma. *Psychological Review, 96*, 608-630.

Daniels, R. (1988). *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Fowers, B. J., & Richardson, F. C. (1996). Why is multiculturalism good? *American Psychologist, 51*, 609-621.

Fugita, S. S., & O'Brien, D. J. (1991). *Japanese American ethnicity: The persistence of community*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Garcia, J. A. (1982). Ethnicity and Chicanos: Measurement of ethnic identification, identity, and consciousness. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 4*, 295-314.

Garcia, M., & Lega, L. I. (1979). Development of a Cuban ethnic identity questionnaire. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 1*, 247-261.

Gutierrez, L. (1992). Empowering ethnic minorities in the twenty-first century: The role of human service organizations. In Y. Hasenfeld (Ed.), *The organization of human services: Structure and processes*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Hsu, F. (1983). *Rugged individualism reconsidered*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Iwamasa, G. (1996). *Introduction to Asian American Families in Transition Symposium*. 104th Annual American Psychological Association Convention, Toronto.

Kagitcibasi, K. (1996). *Family and human development across cultures*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Katz, I., & Hass, R. G. (1988). Racial ambivalence and American value conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 55*, 893-905.

Kitano, H.H.L., Yeung, W.-T., Chai, L., & Hatanaka, H. (1984). Asian American interracial marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46*, 179-190.

LaFromboise, T., Coleman, H.L.K., & Gerton, J. (1993). Psychological impact of biculturalism: Evidence and theory. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*, 395-412.

Lee, S. J. (1994). Behind the model-minority stereotype: Voices of high- and low-achieving Asian American students. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 25*, 413-429.

Lee, S. J. (1996). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Light, I. (1994). Ethnic enterprise in America: Japanese, Chinese, and Blacks. In R. Takaki (Ed.), *From different shores: Perspectives on race and ethnicity in America* (2nd ed., pp. 82-92). New York: Oxford University Press.

Ling, J., & Chung, R. (1996). *Areas of conflict in Asian American families*. Paper presented as part of the Asian American Families in Transition Symposium, 104th Annual American Psychological Association Convention, Toronto.

Luhtanen, R., & Crocker, J. (1992). A collective self-esteem scale: Self-evaluation of one's social identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 18*, 302-318.

Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for the cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*, 224-253.

Oda, A. (1996). *Relationship of parenting style to achievement, coping, and self-concept of Asian American college students*. Paper presented as part of the Asian American Families in Transition Symposium, 104th Annual American Psychological Association Convention, Toronto.

Osajima, K. (1988). Asian Americans as the model minority: An analysis of the popular press image in the 1960s and 1980s. In G. Y. Okihiro, S. Hune, A. A. Hansen, & J. M. Lim (Eds.), *Reflections on shattered windows: Promises and prospects for Asian American studies* (pp. 165-174). Pullman: Washington State University Press.

Oyserman, D. (1993). The lens of personhood: Viewing the self, others and conflict in a multicultural society. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*, 993-1009.

Oyserman, D., Gant, L., & Ager, J. (1995). A socially contextualized model of African American identity: School persistence and possible selves. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(6), 1216-1232.

Oyserman, D., Sanchez-Burks, J., & Harrison, K. (1997). *Implications of ethnic identity: Possible selves, school performance and resilience*. Unpublished manuscript.

Phinney, J. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*, 499-514.

Phinney, J. S. (1996). When we talk about American ethnic groups, what do we mean? *American Psychologist, 51*, 918-927.

Ramiez, M. (1991). *Psychotherapy and counseling with minorities: A cognitive approach to individual and cultural differences*. New York: Pergamon.

Raspberry, W. (1994). Beyond racism. In R. Takaki (Ed.), *From different shores: Perspectives on race and ethnicity in America* (2nd ed., pp. 231-232). New York: Oxford University Press.

Ravitch, D. (1994). Cultural pluralism. In R. Takaki (Ed.), *From different shores: Perspectives on race and ethnicity in America* (2nd ed., pp. 288-292). New York: Oxford University Press.

Rodriguez, R. (1994). Horizontal city. In R. Takaki (Ed.), *From different shores: Perspectives on race and ethnicity in America* (2nd ed., pp. 281-282). New York: Oxford University Press.

Rosenberger, N. (Ed.). (1994). *Japanese sense of self*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Ruggiero, K. M., & Taylor, D. M. (1995). Coping with discrimination: How disadvantaged group members perceive the discrimination that confronts them. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*, 826-838.

Schlesinger, A. Jr. (1994). The return to the melting pot. In R. Takaki (Ed.), *From different shores: Perspectives on race and ethnicity in America* (2nd ed., pp. 293-295). New York: Oxford University Press.

Sue, S. (1991). Ethnicity and culture in psychological research and practice. In J. Goodchilds (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on human diversity in America* (pp. 51-85). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Takaki, R. (Ed.). (1994). *From different shores: Perspectives on race and ethnicity in America* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Tinker, J. N. (1973). Intermarriage and ethnic boundaries: The Japanese American case. *Journal of Social Issues, 29*, 49-66.

Tinker, J. N. (1982). Intermarriage and assimilation in a plural society: Japanese-Americans in the United States. *Marriage and Family Review, 5*, 61-74.

Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism.* Boulder, CO: Westview.

Tropman, J. E. (1988). *American values and social welfare: Cultural contradictions in the welfare state.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1992). *1990 census of the population: General population characteristics.* Washington, DC: Author.

U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census. (1993). *We the American . . . Asians.* Washington, DC: Author.

Uyematsu, M. (1971). The emergence of yellow power in America. In A. Tachiki, E. Wong, & F. Odo, with B. Wong (Eds.), *Roots: An Asian American reader: A project of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center* (pp. 9-13). Los Angeles: University of California.