

Impact of Media and Internalized Racism on Asian-American Child and Adolescent Ethnic-Racial Development

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Ethnic-racial development (ERD), the dynamic process in which a person forms their own ethnic-racial identity and thinks about the ethnicity-race of others, begins as early as infancy. During this time, children and adolescents analyze and integrate information about ethnicity-race from their environment, which includes images and stories they receive from hours of daily media content. Regardless of ethnicity-race, the quality and frequency of ethnic-racial group portrayals in the media influence all young peoples' awareness of ethnic-racial phenotypes and social patterns, formation of their own ethnic-racial identity and their relationship with their ethnic-racial group, knowledge about ethnic-racial groups in general, as well as how they evaluate and compare themselves to people in other ethnic-racial groups.³

When minority ethnic-racial groups (ERG) are less visible in the media, depicted in derogatory and/or often portrayed in a specific manner, these processes minimize the intersectional complexity and diversity among members of an ERG, further contribute to the development of ethnic-racial stereotypes (ERS), and even dehumanizes members of ERGs. In addition, when the majority of performers on the screen and the people who are creating the media content are from a specific ERG, this makes this specific ERG's way of life, physical appearance, beliefs, traditions and values, significantly more visible compared to minority ERGs. Children and adolescents pick up on these ethnic-racial patterns of who is seen versus not seen, who is respected versus not considered influential, who belongs versus who is an outcast. These have serious implications on how they begin to answer questions about who they are versus should be, what's important to them, where they belong and who they should avoid associating with, how they conceptually organize society including social hierarchies, how they compare their own status to others, how they want to versus what they feel is the acceptable way to externally express themselves, what are they capable of versus what opportunities are off-limits, and what does their future look like?^{1,3}

These factors have been shown to promote further development of ERS, which contributes to more stereotyping that validates the bullying, discrimination, and racism toward minority ERGs. These stereotypes also perpetuate internalized racism and oppression (IR), which occurs when a person internalizes oppressive and biased world-views and perceptions of one's own ERG. This can lead to the often unchallenged and unconscious acceptance of the ideology that a specific ERG's ways, beliefs, and values are superior. In an effort to be less harassed or feel less oppressed, those that internalize these oppressive beliefs may try to assimilate with this ERG at the expense of devaluing one's view of self, own ethnic-racial identity, and own ethnic-racial community as inferior or defective.^{1,3}

In Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, stereotypes about the perpetual foreigner, model minority, specific gender roles, and beauty promote different types of IR. Some

of these include intra-ethnic-racial hierarchies, intra- and inter-ethnic-racial othering, gendered hypersexualization versus emasculation, featurism and colorism. Rather than promoting solidarity, the internalization of these harmful messages by children and adolescents in minority ERGs can negatively impact their perception of their self-worth, capability, appearance, ethnic-racial identity, as well as their relationships with their family, other members of their own ERGs and other ERGs.^{1,3}

For example, stereotype threat or the fear of confirming a stereotype about one's ERG can impact how one does in school and their future careers.⁴ The perpetual foreigner stereotype is rooted in a deep history of AAPIs not being considered American, as well as their cultures and identities being viewed as antithetical to Western society. IR among AAPI children and adolescents can encourage them to renounce aspects of their culture and own ethnic-racial identity to decrease bullying. This can lead to more identity conflict, a decreased sense of belonging to American culture, more acculturative family distancing, and for AAPI children and adolescents to intra-ethnically other or bully those who are less assimilated than they are. Narrow portrayals of AAPIs in the media can signal that only certain types of gender identity and sexual orientation are socially acceptable, that male and female genders have stereotyped characteristics and manners of behavior that can make them more or less desirable as friends or romantic partners to certain ERGs, and that AAPIs with certain physical features that are similar to those of the more visible ERGs in the media have been idealized as the standard for what is beautiful. These have significant implications on children and adolescents' sense of acceptance and inclusion in how they view their bodies, who and what they deem attractive, and how they want to have relationships and with whom, as they develop their intersectional identity.^{1,3}

The model minority myth pools all AAPI communities together, which dismisses the rich diversity among these communities, and masks the presence of derogatory stereotypes about intelligence, sexuality, occupation, criminality and terrorism that are attached to certain AAPI groups more than others. The pressure to meet the expectations of the model minority stereotype can lead to imposter syndrome, depression, anxiety, embarrassment, and decreased appropriate help-seeking behavior. These in turn can have a negative impact on their schoolwork, scope of their aspirations, and possibly even sense of fulfillment in their career in the future. For those who meet the expectations of this stereotype, their accomplishments can be seen to validate ideas like hard work alone equates to success, and that systems of racism and oppression are barriers that do not truly exist. This can result in intra-ethnic-racial othering, as well as the egregious inter-ethnic-racial othering through mechanisms such as racial triangulation, of those who are viewed as inferior or unable to obtain success due to characteristics such as laziness, weak values, or lack of discipline.^{1,2}

While there is great variability on how these factors, and the many types of stereotypes and IR that were not highlighted above, impact individual identity development and perpetuate systems of racism and oppression, they are nonetheless important to consider and continue to explore. Some of the references below contain multilevel frameworks of interventions that may help prevent, dismantle, and heal from these harmful and divisive systems.

References:

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- 3) Rogers, O., Mastro, D., Robb, M. B., & Peebles, A. (2021). *The Inclusion Imperative: Why Media Representation Matters for Kids' Ethnic-Racial Development*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense.
- 4) Trent M, Dooley DG, Dougé J, AAP SECTION ON ADOLESCENT HEALTH, AAP COUNCIL ON COMMUNITY PEDIATRICS, AAP COMMITTEE ON ADOLESCENCE. The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health. *Pediatrics*. 2019;144(2):e20191765