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Author

Smith, Esther Jieun

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Asian American Perceptions of Affirmative Action

Esther Smith

Introduction

Confusion regarding affirmative action programs combined with ambiguous and secretive college admission processes have generated a growing resentment amongst the Asian American community specifically in the ways that they view other racial and ethnic minorities. Although affirmative action is popularly believed to disadvantage Asian Americans, this paper will make the case that the false narrative of affirmative action is more harmful to Asian Americans than affirmative action programs themselves because of how these misconceptions generate intense divisions within the Asian American community. After a brief personal preface, this paper will first establish the historical origins of the affirmative action myth as well as introduce research that shows how negative portrayals of affirmative action are misleading. After discussing the current consequences of repealing affirmative action in college admissions, the second part of this paper will investigate contemporary views of affirmative action from both students and parents who identify as Asian American. Lastly, this paper will discuss applications of the research findings to modern Asian American movements towards self-determination.

Personal Importance and Relevance of Affirmative Action

This essay will follow an ethnic studies research paper format, which emphasizes the importance of incorporating personal elements and remaining transparent in my research process and findings. The purpose of sharing my personal background is for the reader to be aware of

potential self biases in my analysis of the issue in order to obtain a truly objective understanding of the relationship between affirmative action and Asian American intraracial diversity.

Affirmative action is a deeply contested issue within the Asian American community because it specifically addresses many of the intraracial and class divisions while forcing the question of whether or not Asian Americans should be considered a minority in need of federal or state assistance. Having been raised in both predominantly white communities as well as majority minority districts, I believe my personal experiences provide me with a unique perspective of the Asian American experience. While I can attest to the egregious social discriminations Asian Americans face due to “perpetual foreigner” stereotypes, I also understand how Asians can be perceived as being exempt from facing discrimination in settings where they are surrounded by a majority Asian population and thus aren’t confronted with “outsider” notions. On the other hand, however, like many first and second generation Asian Americans, I have witnessed my family struggle with language and educational barriers that present severe economic obstacles and particular vulnerability to exploitative labor conditions and low wages. Ultimately, my personal experiences are a testament to the fact that the attitudes Asian American have in regards to experiencing discrimination are heavily dependent on the racial, economic and immigrant contexts of their upbringing and community environment.

Part 1: Historical Formulations of Affirmative Action and Contemporary Consequences

History of the Affirmative Action Myth

The narrative that affirmative action hurts Asian Americans is an unfortunate, but compelling myth created by white conservatives as part of a backlash response to the Civil Rights Era. As Poon and Sihite write on page 508, “affirmative action programs and policies

have threatened centuries-old systems and practices that substantially privilege white men in wealth and accumulation,” and initiated misinformation campaigns in an effort to protect their wealth by directly attributing existing discrimination against Asian applicants in college or employment admissions as the consequence of affirmative action *rather than* as the result of historical Asian American marginalization and oppression. Consequently, the narrative that Asian Americans and whites must compete against the special considerations given to other racial minorities eventuated in heightened anxiety within the Asian community and growing fears that their members were losing admission seats to seemingly lower status racial groups.

Due to growing Asian and white criticism of affirmative action policies, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights conducted a federal investigation in 1990, which resulted in findings that implicated “admissions preferences of children of alumni and student athletes, two groups that are overwhelmingly white, for the higher rates of acceptance of white applicants,” (Nakanishi 273). Although the affirmative action narrative was used to portray an Asian American disadvantage due to the favorability of other racial minorities, the federal report dispels this myth by stating that racial groups *including Asians*, are admitted in comparably lower numbers in order to maintain high enrollment standards for white applicants.

Asian American Discrimination Without Affirmative Action

After the passage of Proposition 209 in 1998, which banned affirmative action in admissions of public universities in California, Asian Americans found themselves being discriminated against at higher levels despite prevailing beliefs that repealing affirmative action would benefit their progress for community justice. In a report, satirically titled “Affirmative Action Benefits Asian Americans,” the Asian Americans Advancing Justice non-profit group

aggregated admissions data from California's public universities and found that Asian American admissions dropped in five of eight UC schools in 1998 with continuing decreases in Asian admissions throughout the next decade. Particularly shocking statistics include a 32% drop in Asian American enrollment at UCLA. Additionally, after Prop 209, Filipino Americans and other South Asians were "zeroed out" of admissions due to "race-blind" policies in Berkeley's Law School (Guerrero 171).

The root of discrimination against Asian Americans in college admissions processes lies in the subtle stereotypes and model minority myths that downplay unique and individualistic features of Asian applicants. In her article for the *New Yorker*, Harvard Law professor Jeannie Suk Gersen writes that the "sub-rosa deployment of racial balancing...keeps the number of Asians so artificially low *relative to whites* who are less strong on academic measures." According to Gersen, Asians are not denied enrollment due to affirmative action policies but rather because they are seen as "look[ing] alike" and difficult to differentiate as individual applicants. The myth that all Asians are alike directly stems from the model minority narrative that portrays a singular image of Asian American students as hardworking and academically studious yet incapable of possessing leadership capabilities. In the case of college admissions, Asian applicants who portray their academic strengths are dismissed because of model minority standards that implicate all Asians as studious; furthermore, the model minority myth burdens Asian applicants to provide exceptionally clear evidence against unspoken allegations of non-leadership stereotypes in order for them to "differentiate" themselves from other Asians.

Part 2: Interviewing Asian Americans on Affirmative Action Views

_____Despite overwhelming evidence that shows affirmative action to be beneficial to racial minorities *including* Asians, many Asian American students remain divisive on the issue. After conducting seven interviews with Southeast Asian undergraduates at UC Berkeley through Google Forms (in lieu of COVID-19 social distancing restrictions), this research paper concludes that awareness of affirmative action programs as well as generational and class differences serve as indicating factors that shape the opinions of Asian American students on the issue of affirmative action.

The Set Up of My Interview

Using Google Forms, I created two parts to my interview: the first consisting of five questions relating to affirmative action, and the second asking for information about the participant. I designed the interview questions based off of my knowledge of the interviewees as either my friends or members of a predominantly Southeast Asian Christian fellowship at UC Berkeley. In order to respect their privacy and encourage a safe and open environment, I created the option for my participants to be anonymous to both myself and others. Additionally, in order to establish mutual trust, I gave my participants the option to have access to the final product of this research paper as a way of communicating my intention to uphold the integrity of their opinions regardless of my personal beliefs. The questions were either multiple choice, allowing people to choose from a list of statements they identified with the most, or formatted as a free response to my more open ended questions. Lastly, I gave the option for people to skip questions if desired in order to limit random or unmeaningful answers.

The Interviewees

A total of seven people participated in my interview. Although I do not know the specific details of each interviewee due to the fact that five out of seven chose to remain anonymous, I do know that overall my participants were either friends or classmates that I have sent the Google Form to or members of a Christian facebook page. All of my participants self-identified as Asian or Asian American. I would like to note that this survey did not include South Asians or Pacific Islanders, two groups that are especially vulnerable to social and economic discrimination and have very different experiences from Southeast Asians.

Results of the Interview

The table below summarizes the general findings of the first part of my interview:

Question	Response
M.C: How familiar are you on the topic of affirmative action? (Multiple choice)	Four students responded “well aware” and three responded “somewhat aware.”
F.W: Do you think Asian Americans benefit from affirmative action?	Three students responded no (although each had a different reason), three students responded yes, and one person stated they were unsure.
M.C: Do you think college admissions should use affirmative action to determine class enrollment?	Three responded unsure, one student said yes and that Asians should be included, another responded yes but that Asians should not be included, and two stated that it wasn’t fair for everyone.
M.C: What do your parent(s) think about affirmative action?	One parent responded it does benefit Asian Americans, three parents stated it does <i>not</i> benefit Asian Americans, three other parents responded they don’t like the idea of it, and one respondent’s parent said they were unsure.
F.W: Question 4: What are your thoughts on affirmative action?	The responses were quite different with no two participants saying the same thing!

*Note: M.C stands for multiple choice and F.W is short for free write.

The mixed results of my interview affirm the different points of contestation regarding questions of whether or not Asian Americans self-identify as minorities, specifically

disadvantaged minorities, and the extent to which historical and current discriminations can be remedied by affirmative action policies. In response to the first point, whether Asians should count as minorities under an affirmative action framework, responses have ranged from “I think Asian Americans have been oppressed in the past, [but] we are still doing fairly well in society because of the model minority stereotype” to “I don’t think Asians/Asian Americans are considered a minority.” One participant implicitly asserted Asians are racial minorities who do not benefit from affirmative action “since not a lot of people talk about rights for Asian Americans.” Another respondent expressed, “Asian American populations that may come from underserved backgrounds” should be considered as minorities because they have a history of “neglect in higher education institutions due to racial and socioeconomic and educational factors.”

In response to the second theme of whether or not affirmative action should be instituted, the results were again split based on socioeconomic class. Respondents who were against affirmative action identified as upper class (with one exception of an individual identifying as low-income and against the policy), and respondents who supported affirmative action all self-identified as low-income. Interestingly, everyone who stated they were from a middle class household indicated that they were unsure on how to feel about affirmative action.

The reasonings behind the participants’ views of affirmative action, however, were completely individualistic. While one person asserted that “instead of having [affirmative action] be based upon race, it would be more fair to have it based upon income,” another believed affirmative action “could be helpful to a lot of under privileged minority groups if done right” but that current “loopholes” due to the lack of “proper structure or guidelines to what ‘disadvantaged’ means” allows for “minority groups that aren’t actually too disadvantaged” to

benefit from affirmative action. One of the interviewees advocated for reinstating affirmative action through Prop 16, while another person provided a particularly interesting policy resolution to “improve the education fairness” in primary schools rather than attempting to compensate later on through attempts to make higher education more accessible. Although each person’s view of affirmative action was unique, there seemed to be an overarching consensus of the overall need for equitable access to affordable and quality education.

When analyzing environmental factors, parental values played an integral role in shaping their children’s policy preferences of affirmative action. Although I had hypothesized that parents against affirmative action would correlate with their children also opposing affirmative action, the results of my interview showed otherwise. Rather than children agreeing with their parents, my findings indicated a generational gap between the large majority of Asian parents expressing their dislike of affirmative action programs versus their children who were mostly either in support of or unsure of affirmative action.

Because I provided a set of statements for parent participants to choose from, I decided to conduct a second interview with my mother in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the generational gap.¹ Growing up in a rural village in South Korea, my mother immigrated to the United States “for a better life” in which she envisioned her children obtaining a higher standard of living through an American education. For my mother, affirmative action is seen as one of the rampant forms of discrimination against Asian Americans that impedes Asian children from entering elite institutions of higher education. Like many other Asian parents who associate quality of life with educational background, affirmative action is a sensitive topic that is negatively seen as a barrier to achieving the American Dream.

¹ Because I interviewed my mother in Korean, I have paraphrased her responses in English.

Part 3: Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

This paper shows supporting evidence that discrimination against Asian American applicants remain prevalent in college admissions; however, as this paper argues, placing the blame of discriminatory practices on affirmative action programs is both misleading and harmful to Asian Americans. Despite false narratives from the post-Civil Rights Era that constructed an image of Asian Americans as victims of reverse racism (which is itself misleading), these misconceptions still persist today as shown through my personal interviews with Asian American students and their parents. Although the range of Asian identifying students' opinions regarding affirmative action can be partially explained by their financial status, my interviews also emphasize the disparate views Asian Americans have regarding issues of racial status and the specific ways in which affirmative action either advantages or disadvantages Asian applicants.

In order for Asian Americans to improve their conditions as racial minorities in the United States, model minority and affirmative action myths must be dispelled because of their harmful impacts on the treatment of other races by Asian Americans and vice versa. In our current era of acknowledging Asian American complacency and anti-Black prejudices via the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, this paper highlights the importance of including conversations of affirmative action (despite its taboo nature) to existing discussions on the harmful myth of Asians as model minorities. Because conversations on Asian American communities and race relations are difficult to navigate due to prevailing beliefs and biases, this paper suggests reiterating the compelling point that Asian Americans are not competing against other racial minorities for access to higher education. Rather the Asian American community should stand up for racial and ethnic solidarity to actively fight discriminatory practices that disadvantage *all* applicants of color. Lastly, reconceiving the narrative of affirmative action is not

only necessary with Proposition 16 on the 2020 ballot, but ultimately a fundamental first step towards strengthening the intra and inter racial solidarity among the Asian American community.

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