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Racial discrimination has different mental health effects on Asians, study shows

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The first national study of Asians living in the United States shows that for some individuals, strong ties to their ethnicity can guard against the negative effects of racism. For others, strong ties to ethnicity can actually make the negative effects of discrimination worse. And the mental health effects of such discrimination may shift over a lifetime as Asian-Americans continue to examine their ethnic ties, say researchers.

Anti-Asian racism is prevalent in the United States but research into the psychological ramifications of those experiences is scarce, said lead author Tiffany Yip, PhD, of Fordham University. Using the first nationally representative sample of Asian adults in the United States, Yip, Gilbert C. Gee, PhD, of the University of California Los Angeles, and David T. Takeuchi, PhD, of the University of Washington, examined whether ethnic identity protected a person against the negative effects of discrimination and whether age and birthplace also played a role.

These findings are published in the May issue of *Developmental Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association.

Data came from the National Latino and Asian American Study, a household survey conducted between 2002 and 2003 that included 2,047 Asian adults 18-75 years old. The interviews were conducted at the participants' homes in a variety of languages, including Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog and Vietnamese.

The participants were questioned about any negative feelings they may have had in the previous 30 days. Participants were also asked about their perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination. They were asked how often they felt discriminated against because of their race and how close they felt their ideas and feelings were to other people of the same racial and ethnic descent.

The researchers controlled for socioeconomic status, gender, age at immigration and where the participants lived. Overall, the researchers found that discrimination was associated with psychological distress; respondents said they felt depressed more often if they had been discriminated against.

The analysis uncovered an unexpected result when the researchers looked at age and whether the participant was born in the United States. For those born outside the United States, embracing one's ethnic identity did not guard against the negative effects of discrimination on psychological wellness. However, for Asians born in the United States, ethnic attachment did affect whether discrimination made people feel more distressed, and its effect varied by age. "Among adults in their 40s, feeling strongly about their own background can counteract the negative effects of discrimination," said Yip.

Surprisingly, more analysis showed that U.S.-born participants in their 30s and those above the age of 50 who described themselves as having a strong ethnic identity had more mental distress from discrimination than those participants with a weaker ethnic attachment. "This may be because people in their forties, who are entering middle age, cope more effectively with stress and are better able to deal with emotional reactions to negative events, such as racism," said Yip. However, research has suggested that as people enter their 50s, they are actively trying to maximize happiness and minimize unhappiness, so experiencing discrimination during this time may be especially harmful

for people who have a strong sense of connection to their ethnic background.

The researchers acknowledge that much more work needs to be done to understand how discrimination influences psychological well-being. “A better understanding of these issues could help us create resources that can protect against racial discrimination in this country, especially for those who are not born in the United States,” said Yip.

Source: American Psychological Association