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Commentary: Advancing Our Understanding of Asian American Child Development: History, Context, and Culture as Essential Considerations

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The Special Section will help scholars make informed choices about how to conceptualize developmental processes and assess contextually and culturally relevant variables in future research with Asian American children and youth. It undertakes tasks and addresses challenges that have broad relevance to the study of developmental processes and stands as a reminder of the vital role of interdisciplinary perspectives in the advancement of developmental science.

What content, conceptual, and methodological issues deserve special attention in efforts to advance our understanding of Asian American child development? The Special Section on research on Asian American child development addresses these questions in a trifecta of complementary and exceptionally thoughtful, rich, and lucid articles. The authors deserve plaudits for skillfully negotiating the complexity of daunting issues posed by the vast heterogeneity among Asian Americans—heterogeneity that stems in large measure from differences in country of origin, culture, language, immigration and refugee experiences, family-level socioeconomic status, and a complex of macrolevel historical, political, and economic factors.

Kiang, Tseng, and Yip (this volume) present a compelling analysis of the implications of myriad historical events and circumstances for developmental contexts and processes, focusing on specific Asian American ethnic groups to illustrate these connections. Mistry et al. (this volume) put forward a dynamic and well-reasoned conceptual framework as a guide for future research on Asian American child development, specifying theoretically relevant dimensions of context (i.e., immigration, emigration, social stratification) and developmental domains (i.e., multiple and fluid identities, dimensions of mental health, academic achievement, language brokering) of particular relevance to Asian American children and families. Culture—conceptualized as meaning making, interpretive processes—is viewed as a core mediator between contexts and developmental outcomes. At the same time, in keeping with their view of developmental contexts, developmental outcomes, and culture as interlocking gears, they make a strong case that culture is inseparable from context and that meaning making is "integrally implicated in the developmental process because developmental contexts are interpreted by both socializing agents and children as they act upon and transact with their social and environmental worlds across time." This transactional conception of culture, which draws on ideas from cultural anthropology and a dynamic systems approach to development, is very appealing, compared to static notions of culture, but Mistry et al. (this volume) admit the challenges that scholars will face in operationalizing this concept in research on developmental processes.

Indeed, the authors of all of the articles in the Special Section discern and forthrightly concede the difficulties of addressing many of the issues they raise, but they render the challenges less formidable by their explicit recommendations, cautions, and translation of concepts and processes into researchable questions. Mistry et al. (this volume), for example, very effectively demonstrate ways to instantiate their conception of culture in future research by presenting in Table 1 a series of questions about how contexts (e.g., immigration, emigration, social stratification) are interpreted by socializing agents and children in the developmental process and how socialization processes that are prompted by or otherwise related to these contexts are interpreted and implicated in the developmental process. Yoshikawa, Mistry, and Wang (this volume)

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provide expert, detailed guidance about ways to address and incorporate elements of complexity discussed in the first two articles, including assessing migration-related factors, ethnicity, and national origin, and developing and using culturally and contextually relevant measures. Their lucid illustration of *how* to map methodological choices to a study's conceptualization of immigration, ethnicity, and culture probably will go a long way toward achieving such mapping on a broader scale. In sum because the Special Section masterfully attends to both conceptual and pragmatic issues, there is every reason to expect that, years from now, it will stand as a watershed achievement that prompted an increase in the quantity, quality, and explanatory depth of research on Asian American child development.

That said, it is my hope that the articles will reach a wide audience of developmental scientists, irrespective of whether Asian American children are their primary research focus. Several of the tasks that the authors undertake have broad relevance to the research process—for example, melding and expanding existing developmental frameworks, tailoring conceptual framework through specifications that are informed by theory and highly pertinent to the experiences of children under study, enriching analytic frameworks by crossing disciplinary boundaries, refining concepts of culture, and tightly mapping methodological choices to a study's conceptualization of variables. In addition to informing future research focused on Asian American children and youth, the Special Section recommends practices that hold promise for improving the practice and quality of developmental science as a whole.

Viewed in a broader context, the Special Section is a significant milestone in efforts to advance the study of ethnic minority children more generally. Among the processes involved in this advancement is disassembling monolithic and stereotypic characterizations of ethnic minority groups. As noted in the Introduction to the Special Section, research on Asian American children has been situated within a different historical context than research on African American and Latino children —the former distinguished by an idealized orientation captured in the notion of Asian Americans as a "model minority" and the latter too often anchored by a deficit orientation. Yet, critics of these hegemonic research traditions sound similar themes —that the groups are not monolithic and that documenting sources of within-group heterogeneity in developmental outcomes and explicating the processes that produce this heterogeneity are important priorities (e.g., McLoyd, 2006).

It is noteworthy and much appreciated that Kiang et al. call attention to the subtext of invidious comparisons often made between African Americans and Asian Americans. These comparisons, which emerged during the 1960s and are quite commonplace still, constitute a kind of racial stratification that ignores the profound differences in the histories of these two panethnic groups. It bears repeating that at the time the comparisons first appeared in the popular press, Asian American activists pointed out that the success of Asian Americans was overstated deliberately and that the comparisons were intended to discredit African American's demands for social and economic justice, and to advance the ideology that individual deficits and failure to internalize mainstream cultural values (e.g., hard work, family, value for education), not discriminatory societal structures, accounted for racial inequality (Suzuki, 1977).

Kiang et al. (this volume) point out that the positive stereotype of Asian Americans is problematic on several additional counts. It has fostered strong content and interpretational biases in research with Asian American youth (i.e., extensive study of academic achievement and limited attention to social and emotional development, extensive focus on cultural values and negligible focus on structural factors as influences on development), obscured the developmental challenges and risks that some Asian American children experience, and created difficulties for Asian American youth who struggle to live up to the positive stereotype. Furthermore, as Kiang et al. point out, it has promoted tension between Asian American youth and ethnic minority youth who carry the burden of racial and ethnic stigma (e.g., African Americans, Mexican Americans), and contributed to high rates of bullying and violence against Asian American youth, stimulated in part by differential treatment in school settings. These dynamics underscore the importance of a vigorous response to Kiang et al.'s call for research that examines how children simultaneously develop a sense of their own ethnic and racial identity, an understanding of other racial and ethnic groups, and how these social cognitions influence their peer relationships.

Responses to Kiang et al.'s (this volume) call need to be built on and pursued in light of an extensive body of evidence that young children are developmentally prone to in-group preferences and racial bias, rely on visible attributes to arrive at these preferences, and show a strong preference for people who resemble themselves (e.g., Katz, 2003; Katz &

Kofkin, 1997; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Under some circumstances, explicit discussions about race and ethnicity can be an antidote against early racial and ethnic bias (Katz, 2003) and facilitate the process of helping children understand other ethnic groups and develop a value for racial and ethnic diversity. Some school-based antibias interventions have been shown to improve interracial and interethnic attitudes and relations among children and youth over the short term (e.g., Aboud & Levy, 2000; Bigler, 1999; Cooper, McLoyd, Wood, & Hardaway, 2008). However, many questions remain, making this a very fertile area for future research. More interventions adapted to the rapidly changing face of America's children and youth need to be developed and tested, and additional research is needed to determine whether existing interventions are effective for a broader range of racial and ethnic groups, including various Asian American ethnic groups. Ideally, these efforts will include strategies for dealing with barriers that threaten the adoption and implementation of effective antibias interventions in schools, including those posed by teachers, communities, and structural factors within schools (e.g., tracking). The rapid growth of new immigrant communities in the Midwest and South (Kiang et al., this volume), away from traditional gateway communities for immigrants (e.g., New York, Los Angeles), offer opportunities for a growing number of developmental scientists to study these issues.

As intimated earlier, the Special Section is yet another reminder of how crucial interdisciplinary perspectives are to the advancement of developmental science. As Kiang et al.'s (this volume) article so clearly demonstrates, Elder's (1998) life course perspective, which brings together ideas from sociology, history, developmental psychology, and other disciplines, is extraordinarily well suited as a framework to analyze how historical events and macrostructural forces (e.g., colonialism, immigration laws, wars) have shaped Asian American children's proximal social contexts and development. Numerous studies of children and youth have produced findings consistent with Elder's tenets of timing in lives (the principle that the impact of life transitions is conditional on when they occur in a person's life), linked lives, and human agency. Chetty, Hendren, and Katz's (2016) study of the effects of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment provides a recent and particularly notable example of the influence of timing in lives, in keeping with Mistry et al.'s emphasis on dimensions of social stratification as developmental contexts. The MTO experiment offered randomly selected families living in high-poverty housing projects housing vouchers to move to lower poverty neighborhoods (experimental group). Chetty et al.'s comparison of the experimental and control groups indicated that moving to a lower poverty neighborhood significantly improved college attendance rates and earnings for children who were below age 13 when their families moved. The children also lived in better neighborhoods themselves as adults and were less likely to become single parents (for females). In contrast, the same moves had no effects, in some cases, slightly negative long-term effects, on children who were more than 13 years old when their families move. Chetty et al. speculate that negative effects may be due to the disruption in adolescents' social networks caused by their move to a different environment.

Studies of child and youth development have given far less attention to Elder's second dimension of temporality, that is, historical time and place. Even so, it is surprising that so little research on Asian American child development has meaningfully incorporated historical perspectives because several major sociohistorical events that are highly significant to Asian Americans and that could be expected to shape proximal processes through cascading impacts on contextual factors have occurred in relatively recent times. This scarce acknowledgment and consideration of historical influences, also evident in research on African American and Latino child development, is likely to persist without, among other things, an increase in the number of graduate training programs in developmental psychology that are deliberately structured to foster interdisciplinary scholarship involving other social sciences such as history, sociology, economics, and anthropology (e.g., joint programs).

Interdisciplinary scholarship might also advance developmental psychologists' approach to specifying cultural contexts. Goodnow (2014) pointed out that although analyses of cultural contexts and development can benefit from attention to history, literature, and other fields, "anthropology and sociology are still the main sources for both descriptions of contexts and observations on the shape and the course of development" (p. 5). She identifies three common ways of specifying cultural contexts that focus on content (i.e., ideologies, values, norms; practices, activities, routines; paths, routes, opportunities available to people). A fourth way emphasizes the extent to which a context is marked by homogeneity or heterogeneity, that is, by uniformity or by competition/contest among diverse ways of thinking or acting. Mistry et al.'s conceptualization of culture

encompasses all of these specifications but gives special attention to the fourth. Goodnow (2014) observes that developmental psychologists have infrequently specified cultural contexts in terms of heterogeneity/homogeneity. This latter specification prompts a range of interesting questions, including questions about (a) the effects on children of receiving the same message from several sources and the effects of like-minded others when a competing message tempts one to go "off track," (b) strategies parents use to prepare their children for competing messages (e.g., "prearming" African American children for racially prejudiced encounters by making them aware and proud of their group's history or teaching them ways to respond to such encounters [Hughes & Chen, 1999]; or "cocooning" children within an enclave of like-minded people), and (c) children's perceptions of the extent to which they can navigate boundaries between groups, bridge multiple worlds, or claim membership in a group defined by ethnic, racial, or other characteristics different than their own. Mistry et al. (this volume), mindful of Goodnow's (2014) analysis, underscore how developmental psychologists' conceptual frameworks for studying Asian American child development can be enriched by forays into other disciplines that offer a panoply of ways to specify cultural context, including less common ones that emphasize heterogeneity, multiplicity, and contest.

Programs in developmental psychology are indeed becoming more interdisciplinary, but this shift is driven by the rise of cognitive and social neuroscience and intense interest in how neurobiological systems interact with environmental factors to influence cognitive and social development. The Special Section underscores the potential benefits that developmental psychology might reap from deliberate and vigorous promotion of interdisciplinary training and research collaborations across various social science disciplines as well.

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