

'Racial uplifts' aid Asian American well-being, finds research

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Extensive scholarship has established racism and discrimination as sources of chronic stress posing health risks to minority youth.

Cornell-led research introduces a new concept—"racial uplifts"—to advance a less explored frontier in psychology, examining how positive everyday racial encounters can benefit well-being and potentially counteract negative experiences.

In a study, Asian American college students who reported racial uplifts—positive experiences likely to occur in [daily life](#), such as bonding over ethnic music or food, or sharing one's culture with another group—exhibited reduced negative feelings, increased positive feelings and higher self-esteem.

"Findings from the present study highlight the important—but often overlooked—contribution of everyday forms of cultural intimacy and affirmation in the lives of Asian American youth," the authors wrote. "The data complement a growing body of research on the health benefits of positive events in daily life, while also underscoring the need for richer, more differentiated formulations of racial flourishing."

Anthony Ong, professor of psychology in the College of Human Ecology and professor of gerontology in medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine, is the lead author of "Racial Uplifts and the Asian American Experience," published recently in *American Psychologist*.

Previous studies have found associations between positive experiences and daily well-being, but the research team believes it is the first to link positive race-related events to well-being among Asian Americans.

Ong, who directs the Center for Integrative Developmental Science and Human Health Labs at Cornell, said perspectives acknowledging the positive health implications of race and ethnicity provided a critical counterweight to the one-dimensional "model minority" stereotype of Asian Americans as hardworking and docile, addressing what the author Viet Thanh Nguyen has called a state of "narrative scarcity." In addition,

he said, racial uplifts' potential as a protective coping resource has gained importance amid a sharp increase in discrimination and violence against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study began with focus groups whose participants identified six broad themes of racial [uplift](#): ethnic bonding; overcoming obstacles; bicultural competence; cultural bridging; globalism; and outgroup regard.

Dozens of daily events were refined to nearly 20 best representing the themes. Ethnic bonding, for example, could be experienced when cooking an Asian meal or attending a social event hosted by Asians or Asian Americans. Cultural bridging occurred when sharing one's culture with a member of another group. Outgroup regard involved seeing positive portrayals of Asian American politicians, athletes and entertainers in mainstream U.S. media.

Racial uplifts can be nuanced, acknowledging race-related challenges and negative emotions, the researchers said. The theme of "overcoming obstacles," for example, emphasizes ideas of strength and perseverance through adversity.

"Several participants expressed how discriminatory events related to the immigrant experience can serve to hone purpose and growth," the authors wrote. "Collectively, Asian American youths' richly detailed descriptions of positive racial encounters provide a window into the very essence of racial flourishing."

In a follow-up study, more than 150 Asian American college students kept daily diaries over two weeks, recording the frequency of uplifting events and rating their moods and self-esteem.

Analysis showed that at least one racial uplift event occurred on two-thirds of the diary days, with multiple events occurring on more than

40% of the days. Ethnic bonding and cultural bridging were the primary sources of racial uplift, together accounting for nearly 70% of the events.

In addition, the research team found that study participants who experienced more racial uplifts on average reported fewer [negative feelings](#), more positive feelings and greater self-esteem, compared to their baseline.

The researchers said future studies should further explore the mechanisms underlying those processes.

"The current results," they concluded, "suggest that it may be fruitful to consider the everyday ways in which Asian Americans enact and affirm, in both private and public settings, a sense of collective self-worth and racial identity."

More information: Anthony D. Ong et al, Racial uplifts and the Asian American experience., *American Psychologist* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/amp0001115](#)

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