

Internalized Oppression and the Culture of Silence

Rethinking the Stereotype of the Quiet Asian-American Student

Keith Osajima

THIS PAPER WAS INSPIRED by what some might think of as an insignificant incident. It was a Tuesday. I was ready to begin the first class meeting of a course on Contemporary Issues in Asian-American Communities at University of California, Santa Cruz. As I walked toward the classroom, the sounds of many conversations drifted out of the door. I could tell that inside, students were excitedly talking about their long winter break,

their holidays, and the classes that they were about to begin.

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fort, and efforts to redirect my attention away to someone else by looking down and writing in their notebooks, thumbing through their notes, or avoiding direct eye contact. I thought about the visible sense of relief I and

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conversations that were so interesting the moment before suddenly stopped, and the students, with no prompting from me, simply turned, and quietly waited for me to utter my first words.

The moment brought back a flood of memories of other teaching experiences with Asian students. I thought about the many discussion sections I led in the Asian-American studies program at University of California, Berkeley, and how often my attempts to generate discussions were greeted with looks of discom-

the other students felt when that silence was broken by the one or two students who generally spoke up.

The moment also raised a number of questions. I wondered why many Asian-American students feel uncomfortable about speaking up in class? I also wondered why many students were silent, not only in words, but also in thought. I had noticed that many were reluctant to take the risk of thinking critically about the inequities in society.

Could it be that Asian students are quiet because they adhere to

“traditional” Asian cultural values? Perhaps, but why then do they only seem to adhere to these values inside the classroom and not in the halls when they are talking with their friends? Could their silence be attributed to a lack of English language ability? Certainly in some cases this is a key factor, but in my experience native English-speaking Asians were as reluctant to talk as their limited English-speaking counterparts.

So how can we understand the quiet Asian student? How can we understand what some have called “situational non-assertiveness”? In this paper, I would like to suggest an analytic perspective that could provide some insights into quiet behavior of Asian-American students. It is a framework that tries to understand the silence of Asian students in relation to the dynamics of oppression they face as students and as members of a racial minority group. I argue that the silent, often unquestioning behavior of the Asian-American student can best be understood as a manifestation of what Erica Sherover-Marcuse calls “internalized oppression.” Let me begin the discussion with an overview of what I mean by this phrase.

ON INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

For those of us who are familiar with or have been involved in progressive social and political movements, we have become familiar with the forms and mechanisms of oppression in society. We recognize the sexism in media images of women; we know that Gay oppression takes many forms; we are aware that racial oppression accounts for the high dropout rates of black and Hispanic students, the high unemployment rates in minority communities, and recent violence against ethnic minorities.

What is not well-known or examined is the impact that these oppressions have on people in the oppressed groups. How do the conditions of inequality and exploitation

affect the subjective development of oppressed people? Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator famous for his literacy work with peasants, says that

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one of the most devastating effects of oppression is that it dehumanizes the oppressed people; that under the objective conditions of oppression people lose their ability to see themselves as individual human beings.

Frantz Fanon, a psychologist who wrote extensively on the effects of colonialism on the colonized people of Algeria, elaborates on the dehumanizing effect of oppression when he says:

“Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: In reality, who am I?”

And how do the oppressed people generally answer this question? According to Albert Memmi,

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Tunisian author of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, the oppressed internalize an identity that mirrors or echoes the images put forth by the dominant group. People come to accept the myths and stereotypes about their group as part of who they naturally

are. This is the phenomenon of internalized oppression. Memmi writes:

“Constantly confronted with this image of himself, set forth and imposed in all institutions and in every human contact, how could the colonized help reacting to his portrait? It cannot leave him indifferent and remain a veneer which, like an insult, blows with the wind. He ends up recognizing it as one would a detested nickname which has become a familiar description. The accusation disturbs him and worries him even more because he admires and fears his powerful accuser. ‘Is he not partially right?’ they mutter. ‘Are we not a little guilty after all? Lazy because we have so many idlers? Timid because we let ourselves be oppressed?’ Willfully created and spread by the colonizer, this mythical and degrading portrait ends up by being accepted and lived with to a certain extent by the colonized.”

The impact of internalized oppression on the attitudes, feelings, and actions of the oppressed is profound. First, it hinders one’s ability to think and reflect. People have difficulty objectifying and perceiving the structural conditions that shape and reshape their lives. Second, oppressed people come to believe that the source of their problems lies, not in the relations within society, but in themselves, in their own inadequacies and inabilities. At the same

time that they feel themselves to be inferior, they see those in the dominant group to be superior. Third, the feelings of inferiority, of uncertainty about one’s identity, lead oppressed people to believe that the solution to their problem is to become like or be

accepted by those in the dominant group. As Freire says,

“At a certain point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction toward the oppressor and his way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressor, to imitate him, to follow him.”

On the flip side of this desire to be like the oppressor is a degree of self-hatred, a belief that who they are is not good enough, smart enough, beautiful enough, strong enough.

ON THE OPPRESSION AND INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION OF ASIAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

How can the general discussion on internalized oppression be applied to the experiences of Asian-American students? I think it is useful to view the behavior of Asian-American students as manifestations of two ways that they have experienced and internalized oppression as students and as members of a racial minority group.

First, as students in this society, Asian-Americans participate in an

obedient, unquestioning, prompt, and attentive. They do well on tests designed by the teacher. They can give the right answer. In return for this behavior, “good” students are rewarded with good grades, praise from teachers, honor rolls, and college entrance. A “bad student”, who is loud, rebellious, defies and questions authority, skips class or comes in late, and doesn’t do the homework, is stigmatized and isolated from the rest.

For many of us, these messages are so strong that they become a natural, internalized indicator of our self-worth. We come to believe that our abilities and our intelligence are best measured by our grades, or by the opinions and praise we receive from our teachers. This creates a tremendous pull to adhere to the image of a “good” student. At the same time those rewards become a means to control students, for in the process we lose sight of the fact that we are smart enough to think and figure many things out ourselves, and we also lose sight of our critical, reflective abilities that allow us to question the ways that schooling may be oppressive.

I think for Asian students, the pull to be “good” students becomes even stronger when we place that student oppression in the context of the way Asians have responded to racial oppression in this country. For many Asian-Americans, silence and education lies at the heart of how we have dealt with racial oppression. As Colin Watanabe and Ben Tong argued in the early 1970’s, Asian-Americans often adopted a passive, quiet, conforming behavior as a means to survive racial hostilities. It was deemed safer not to rock the boat than to call attention to oneself and risk oppression. Many of us learned these lessons from our parents as we were growing up, internalized them, and came to believe that we too might be in danger if we speak out, or call attention to ourselves. Thus, even when the situation may not be threat-

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The overall impact of internalized oppression is that the oppressed become resigned to their situation and do not look critically at it. They feel powerless to change it, and fearful of taking the risks to make change. In this way, the status quo is not questioned nor challenged. Freire writes:

“As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their conditions, they fatalistically accept their exploitation. Further, they are apt to react in a passive and alienated manner when confronted with the necessity to struggle for their freedom and self-affirmation.”

They live in what Freire calls a “culture of silence,” where the oppressed believe and feel that they do not have a voice in determining the conditions of their world. The important outcome is that internalized oppression makes it difficult for the oppressed to take action to transform their world. It serves to perpetuate oppression, without necessarily resorting to overt forms of violence and force. The oppressed become unwitting participants in their own oppression.

educational system that is often structured in an oppressive manner; a system that does not consistently encourage the development of people’s natural intelligence, and joy for learning, but instead forces students to comply to a form of instruction that is severely limiting and disempowering. Again, Freire provides a useful analytical framework. He argues that much of formal schooling follows the “banking system” of instruction. In this mode, teachers are seen as the legitimate holders of knowledge. It is their role and their power to disseminate that knowledge, mainly through lectures, and “deposit” it into the empty receptacle—the student. Students are primarily passive recipients. Their role is to listen, and to replay the information in the form that it was given. In this mode, students are rarely encouraged to think, question, analyze, or synthesize.

One of the ways that the structures of this banking system are held in place is through clearly-defined images of what it means to be a “good student.” A good student is quiet,

ening, the internalized oppression often makes us feel that we need to be quiet in order to be safe.

On another front, Asian-Americans have long identified education as a strategy to deal with racial

being the successful quiet student. It is understandable, then, why they often carry these feelings, perspectives, and actions into every classroom situation, and have difficulty breaking with familiar patterns and

asures and constraints; that encourages and makes it safe for Asian students to take some risks and to critically examine their lives in relation to societal oppressions.

I tried to structure these contradictions into the class I just completed. 1) To move away from the banking system, I tried to limit the amount of time I lectured. In a 2-hour meeting, I never talked for more than half the period. I also tried to lecture in a way that elicited as much interactive thinking as possible. 2) To encourage each student to take some risks and think about issues, I had them regularly do "dyads" where I would have students pair off and each take a few minutes to think, for themselves, about a question or issue that was being presented. These dyads usually preceded the general discussion, and helped students to prepare and organize their thoughts before presenting them in the larger group. 3) I made it clear that each student's contribution would be listened to respectfully, and that each student would get a chance to participate. To accomplish this, I made sure that no one, including myself, could "trash," ridicule, or harshly criticize another student's viewpoint. I also did not allow any one or two students to dominate discussions. I made it clear to them that I wanted to give other people a chance to talk before they got another chance.

All of these techniques seemed to work well. Students participated in discussions, and began to grapple with questions that they had rarely been asked before. The experience provided me with hope that the educational process can do more than reproduce a compliant work force, but can be a vehicle for liberation. I invite you to join the struggle. ■

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discrimination. Education has been seen as a way to gain social and economic mobility and to fend off racism. The result has been a tremendous pressure on Asian students to do well in school, which in many respects has been realized. This success, in turn, has been institutionalized as another stereotype in the media's portrayal of Asians as the model minority.

It is here that student and racial oppression merge and reinforce each other. On the one hand, Asian students believe that education is the key to overcoming racial oppression. Many of us are also told that being quiet, conforming, and invisible is a good way to avoid being the target of racism. We take these internalized messages to school where they meld neatly into the way that students have been oppressed. Recall that being quiet and conforming is encouraged and rewarded in schools, for it is a central facet of the banking system of education. Thus, we have a situation where the oppressive features of the educational system work to reinforce the ways that Asians have dealt with racial oppression. Young Asian-Americans often internalize these images and come to believe that their identity and self-image hinge upon

feelings to answer questions in our classes.

CONCLUSION

As teachers of Asian students, how can understanding the nature of internalized oppression help us in practice? I think the value of the perspective is that it locates an important impetus of individual behavior in the oppressive structures and practices in society. It is not the unchanging nature or static culture of Asian-American students that accounts for their quiet behavior. Rather, it is the internalizing of student and racial oppression that makes Asian students feel that the best way to get through is to be quiet or makes them believe that they can be nothing other than the quiet student. The key implication here is that Asian students should not be blamed nor chastised if they exhibit this behavior. It is not their fault that societal structures and oppression conveyed messages that this is the way to behave.

As teachers, the notion of internalized oppression should help us to see how the pressures of being an Asian-American student can often be limiting and constraining. Our job is to create a learning environment that contradicts those pres-