caught in-between
RACISM AND BEING EAST-ASIAN

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caught.inbetween Before we jump right into the rest of our post, here is a little friendly reminder: “Let’s resist the temptation of trying to solve complex systemic issues with flippant, binary, virtue signalling Instagram post… and let’s approach this issue with nuance, a fundamental faith in humanity” - adapted from @steven.
We are students in the MScPT program. We are middle-class Chinese raised by educated immigrant parents in Canada. We are not White, not Black.

The Social, Political, Ethical and Cultural Dimensions of Health and Healthcare Theme in our MScPT curriculum encouraged us to think critically about our social positions, in light of everything happening in the world...

HERE ARE SOME THINGS WE LEARNED ALONG THE WAY...

caught.inbetween Hello and welcome! We are Ingrid and Bethany, and we put together this post as part of our SPEC curriculum. A lot has happened this past year including the Covid-19 pandemic/quarantine, the Black Lives Matters movement, and recent violence against Asians in the news. We tried to navigate what it means to be Chinese Canadians in our current society, we discussed a lot about race, and a lot about what unearned advantages and disadvantages our identities bring. We are trying to reflect critically, and we know there will always be more to learn. We wanted to share these few snippets of what we have learned so far. :}
MODEL MINORITY MYTH

A concept developed in the 1960s by a white male sociologist

It **falsely conveys** that all Asians are
- Educated
- Wealthy
- Polite
- Law-abiding
- Achieves a higher level of success through their hardworking immigrant attitude

However:
- It **overlooks** that Asians also suffer from poverty, homelessness and mental illness
- It **homogenized experiences** of the diverse Asian communities
- It **minimizes** the role of racism in persistent struggles of other racial minority groups

(Chow, 2017)

captured.inbetween The myth of ‘Model Minority’ is a form of stereotyping that is often used to minimize the role of racism in the struggles of racial/ethnic minority groups. Asian-North Americans have been viewed as educated, wealthy, polite, hard-working, law-abiding citizens that never complained and proved themselves “worthy” of the current socioeconomic affluence most attained. This is used as the societal portrayal of a “success story” of assimilation. However, it overlooks that Asians also suffer from poverty, homelessness and mental illness. It homogenized experiences of the diverse Asian communities. It minimizes the role of racism in persistent struggles of other racial minority groups. It downplays the historical discrimination against Asian North Americans (The Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese Internment, sexual fetishizing, and more recently hate violence against Asian elders). Further, it denounces the existence of white privilege, perpetuates anti-Blackness and wedges us against other racialized groups. This myth was created by a white sociologist to justify and reinforce systemic racism (Yi & Museus, 2015).
caught.inbetween One way we’ve learned about systems of inequality is through the Coin Model of Privilege and Critical Allyship (Nixon, 2019). The coin itself is the system of inequality which produces and maintains inequality, in essence, any “-ism” (ie. racism, ableism, ageism). The people on the top of the coin are those with privilege, meaning they have unearned advantage while the people on bottom are those who face oppression and have unearned disadvantages. In either situation, people find themselves in their position based on “who they happen to be”. Being on the top or the bottom of the coin is not based on merit or a person’s character, rather it is unearned. The coin we are focusing on for this post is racism, those on the top of the coin are white, and those on the bottom are racialized.
As East-Asians, we are uniquely positioned: we are on the bottom of the racial coin and we are near the top of the racialized gradient. We benefit from Anti-Black and Anti-Indigenous racism because of our proximity to whiteness.

Where do East-Asians fit?

caught.inbetween However, within the bottom of the coin, there is a racialized gradient, where East-Asians are uniquely positioned. Although East-Asians are on the bottom of the coin of racism, we happen to be on the top of the bottom of the coin due to our proximity to whiteness. For example, East-Asians can be harmed from racism but are also in a position to perpetuate anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism if we uphold white supremacy.
What now?

“A starting point for resistance is naming and discussing privilege with others on the top of [the] coin to diminish oblivion and collectively build capacity for change”

Nixon, 2019

Here are a few questions we have been reflecting on:

- In what ways have I based my value on my proximity to Whiteness?
- How have I been socialized to feel unsafe around Black people?
- In what ways am I still ashamed of my Asian identity?
- How can I celebrate what I love about being Chinese Canadian?
- How have I been taught to hate or look down upon other groups within the Asian Canadian diaspora?
- Whose stories can I listen to and build compassion?

caught.inbetween East-Asians have a unique position, but the question is: what now? Before we jump into action, there are many steps we have to work through before we can instigate change. The first is to bring awareness to the Model Minority Myth and our place in racism in relation to others who are in the same position. For us, that means naming and discussing the privilege and simultaneous oppression we face with fellow Chinese Canadians.

Many East-Asian millennials may reprimand racist comments from our elders, and passionately speak about how to be allies with the Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities, but do we hold these internalized biases too? Our aunts and uncles may say them out loud, but do we secretly think them? Before we can correct our elders/aunties/uncles, we must first reflect on our internalized biases and how they affect our thoughts, actions, and words. These are just a few questions that got us thinking about our unique position. They may make you feel uncomfortable, but don’t push this feeling away, sit with it, ponder why it makes you upset/angry/convicted/frustrated/whatever-else-you-might-be-feeling. Dig deep. You can also find a friend that is willing to navigate with you! When we first read these questions, it was unsettling, so we talked and shared and ranted together, it makes a world of a difference to know there is someone else showing solidarity.
HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO PT?

Each individual’s experience with racism is uniquely different.

Even as a racial/ethnic minority PT, it does not always mean we will understand another racial/ethnic minority’s experience. Through this, we recognize our proximity to Whiteness does not always mean that we will understand another racial/ethnic minority’s experience. Through this, we want to listen to each patient’s individual story better and to understand biopsychosocial factors affect each person differently.

caught.inbetween One of the most important lessons learned from our MScPT faculty is to consider each patient’s unique story and determine an individualized management plan. We are trying not to let our racial experience influence our interpretation of other’s stories. It is close to impossible to assume we know what another group experiences, so we are learning to be more empathic listeners and to unlearn socialized racist preconceptions.
Take it one step further...

HOW DO WE EVEN START AN INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATION?

“I was taught to honour and respect my elders, not challenge their deeply rooted beliefs and biases...”

“I can’t imagine talking to my Asian parents about racism...”

Try anyway and let them surprise you!

Approach them with an attitude to learn and to understand, instead of holding anger and impatience for not seeing eye to eye.

caught.inbetween For us, the most difficult conversations surrounding race are probably around the dinner table. It can be hard to discuss race with our parents and grandparents and it may feel like it always creates more tension. We found it important to remember their experience with discrimination is drastically different than ours, so listen to where they are coming from before condemning their view. They may have been convinced by the white-dominant society to take pride in being model minorities, that’s okay, be forgiving as we share our experience and our view. They patiently taught us how to eat and how to walk, so we owe it to them to be patient as we learn to unlearn our internalized biases together. Remember it’s not us versus them, it’s the system of oppression that we are up against together.
References

Instagram posts by:
@steven @eeewhysee:https://www.instagram.com/p/CAyEvoeHJlH/?igshid=12u29y2xLw6qw @deepkimpact:https://www.instagram.com/p/CBODYRXjbqs/?igshid=1xtggxi3du3j2

Additional Resources:

Acknowledgements:
In addition to the references above, the teaching resource was refined through discussions with classmates, friends, family; feedback from Sudhir Daya and Martine Quesnel during the SPEC Gallery Walk; SPEC curriculum from Dr. Barbara Gibson and many SOS sessions with Dr. Stephanie Nixon. Thank you.