STASH, Vol. 19(5) – White male masculine ideals and their effect on Asian American males

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Editor's Note: *Today's review is part of our month-long Special Series on Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) Addiction Research. Throughout May, The BASIS is examining forms of addiction among AAPI communities.*

Some Asian American males may feel pressure to conform to masculine norms and stereotypes created and perpetuated by White American males. Those who do not achieve this masculine ideal might experience gendered racism that can lead to a perceived negative body image and culturally reinforced shame, resulting in risky substance use to cope with these negative feelings and/or modify their bodies through the use of steroids and alcohol, respectively. This week, as part of our Special Series on Asian American and Pacific Islander Addiction Research, STASH reviews a study by Brian TaeHyuk Keum and colleagues that applied a culturally modified objectification framework to explain the link between gendered racism against Asian American males (both early generation and later generation immigrants) and risky substance use.

What were the research questions?

(1) Does gendered racism predict substance use among Asian American men, (2) are there any mediating factors within this pathway, and (3) does pathway differ across generations?

What did the researchers do?

Using the objectification framework, researchers surveyed 424 Asian American men to identify potential pathways to substance use. This survey measured perceived gendered racism (e.g., "Because I am an Asian American man, others expect me to be physically weak"), internalization of Western muscularity ideals, body shame, interpersonal shame, drive for muscularity, and substance use (combined across alcohol use and steroid use). The researchers created a structural equation model to identify pathways to substance use. To further explore these pathways across different generations, researchers separated this sample into two groups: early generations (i.e., those who immigrated to the U.S.

after the age of 5) and later generations (i.e., those who immigrated to the U.S. before the age of 5, were born in the U.S., or also have parents who immigrated and/or were born in the U.S.).

What did they find?

Overall, as predicted, Asian American men who reported experiencing gendered racism more frequently also tended to report higher substance use. However, there were indirect pathways from gendered racism to substance use: the internalization pathway and shame pathway, both mediated by a drive for muscularity (see Figure). There were some notable generational differences. The internalization pathway was supported in both generational groups. However, the shame pathway was only evident among the early generation group, who came to the U.S. later in life (see Figure).

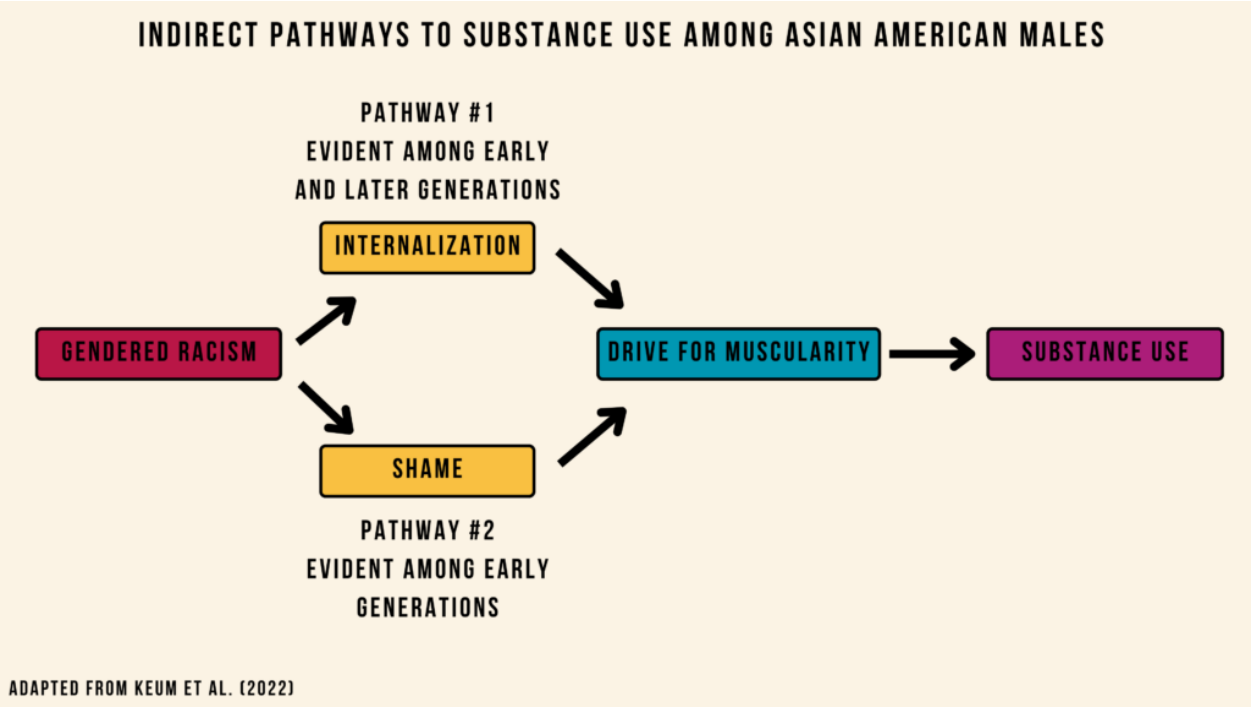


Figure. This Figure depicts statistically significant indirect pathways to substance use among Asian American male respondents. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

These findings suggest that Asian American men might be significantly impacted by feelings of pressure to conform to the White masculine ideals of attractiveness, which in turn, invalidates Asian masculinity and appearance. Shame and internalization of the White male culture might contribute to substance misuse and discourage Asian American men from seeking mental health or substance use services. This is particularly important for earlier generations, as they may hold

more traditional Asian values and might be less immersed in American culture compared to later generations, making them more at risk for feelings of shame and internalized self-negativity if they do not conform to the dominant White male ideals of attractiveness. Clinicians should consider these findings when providing treatment to Asian American male populations and assist them in exploring and redefining their ideas of attractiveness in an effort to reduce substance use and improve overall self-confidence.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?
Due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, it can not be determined whether, and to what extent, gendered racism increases substance use. The sample size was also too small to be able to examine differences across demographics (e.g., differences among East Asian and Southeast Asian individuals). Additionally, this study is based on self-report, so recall bias and/or social desirability might have had an impact on survey responses, and therefore, the study's findings.

For more information:
The National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIMHA) emphasizes the important role that mental health plays in promoting positive health and well-being among Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities. If you are worried that you or someone you know is experiencing addiction, the SAMHSA National Helpline is a free treatment and information service available 24/7. For more details about addiction, visit our Addiction Resources page.

— Nakita Sconsoni, MSW

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