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[Brief Report]

Addressing the Need for Asian Critical Language Awareness for Asian American Female Faculty

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Abstract

Non-tenure track faculty is rapidly increasing in American higher education, but there is a dearth of research examining their work lives (Ott et al., 2015). Moreover, there is very little research on the lived experiences of female faculty, with little focus on female faculty of color, but not particularly on Asian Americans. Some researchers hypothesize that there is a synergistic destructive intersection for being a woman, being a minority, and being a junior faculty member (Boyd, 2010). This study draws upon the theory of Critical Language Awareness, which "interrogates the dominating discourse on language and literacy and foregrounds the examination and interconnectedness of identities, ideologies, histories/herstories and the hierarchical nature of power relations between groups" (Alim et al., 2010). The purpose of this research brief is to analyze the challenges and successes of two Asian American faculty women as they individually reimagine their language experiences throughout the trajectory of their K-12 teaching leading into their higher education professional career in literacy and language. By applying a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we position ourselves as participant researchers and provide critical reflections on our language practices in teaching and learning through the lens of Critical Language Awareness. The emerging themes from this study include: (1) Gender: Triple standards placed upon Asian American female faculty, (2) Language: Assumptions of language proficiency equate to lack of leadership skills, (3) Race: Racialized positionality leads to proving oneself to feel competent. With these outcomes, we hope to address the need for Asian Critical Language Awareness for Asian American Female Faculty.

Keywords: Asian American, Critical Language Awareness, Asian Female Faculty

Introduction

Non-tenure track faculty is rapidly increasing in American higher education, but there is a dearth of research examining their work lives (Ott et al., 2015). Moreover, there is very little research on the lived experiences of female non-tenure track faculty, with little focus on female faculty of color, but not particularly on Asian Americans. Some researchers hypothesize that there is a synergistic destructive intersection for being a woman, being a minority, and being a junior faculty member (Boyd, 2010).

The visibility of Asian American female faculty (AAFF) is rapidly increasing in higher education and in the corporate world as surface level diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are made within hiring practices. However, little research exists on examining their lived experiences and complications with what this looks like in practice (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Liang et al., 2018). Further is the need to seek the voices of AAFF as a form of empowerment for those involved in the process of creating critical awareness, while unmasking the humanity that exists within their narrative.

The synergistic destructive intersection for being a woman, being a minority, and being a faculty in academia calls for the need to create an affinity space for empowerment (Showunmi et al., 2016). In fact, in our society, white men are presumed competent while women, particularly Asian females, continue to battle against stereotypes of incompetency, lack of articulateness, obedience, and submissiveness (Hune & Nash, 2000). The Atlanta, Georgia spa shootings on March 16, 2021, attest to gendered racialization and objectification of Asian women based on white male perceptions of Asian females as hypersexualized– that have historically been perpetuated in media and permeated into today's society. The presumed ideations of Asian women as "temptress" led to the unjustified death of six Asian women (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021). These racialized stereotypes Asian females transfer into other workspaces, including language education.

The purpose of this research brief is to analyze the challenges and successes of two Asian American non-tenured faculty women as they individually reimagine their language experiences throughout the trajectory of their K-12 teaching leading into their higher education professional career in literacy and language. By applying a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we position ourselves as participant researchers and provide critical reflections on our language practices in teaching and learning through the lens of Critical Language Awareness, while proposing a new lens called *Asian Critical Language Awareness*. This standpoint from the participant-researchers emerged as a response to the recent social justice movements advocating for anti-racist practices to support the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. The emerging themes from this study include: (a) RACE – Racialized positionality leads to proving oneself to feel competent, (b) GENDER – Triple standards placed upon Asian American female faculty, (c) LANGUAGE – Assumptions of language proficiency equate to lack of leadership skills. Hence, this autoethnographic investigation has delved into the intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and language employing the lens of Asian Critical Language Awareness.

Literature Review

Defining Asian American

The term Asian American was first coined by Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee in 1968 during a period of political movement in northern California for Ethnic Studies. Ichioka founded the Asian American Political Alliance to increase the needs and visibility of Asian American students. The umbrella term began as a collective effort to bridge the three historically largest Asian populations living in California during the 1960s which included Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans (Maeda, 2011). Today the term in the U.S. is often lost within even broader, acronym terms which include AAPI– Asian American Pacific Islander, APIDA- Asian Pacific Islander Desi American, or government created terms such as AANHPI- Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander. While the intention is to be inclusive of Pacific Islanders, Native Hawaiians, and Desi Americans, the specific ethnic groups under each umbrella term are often lost. Asian American in this paper refers to the U.S. Census definition of both ethnicity and national origin stemming from east, south, and southeast Asia (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence, n.d.)

Asian American Female Faculty

A wealth of literature has developed in the past three years because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing anti-Asian hate. Between 2020-2021, Asian American females were more than two times as likely to report hate incidents than Asian American males (Pillai et al., 2021). In higher education, Asian American female faculty collaboratively published research centering on their voices as motherscholars navigating the complex identities of themselves and their children while grappling aspects of Asianization and acculturation (Wong & Grant, 2016). Other works have centered on building communities and networks for early career Asian female faculty in collectively navigating higher education (Kim et al., 2023).

More specifically, in English language education, Asian American female faculty voice in addressing the complexities of race and language is largely invisible. Asian American female faculty in the English language education field often experience linguicism, which results from racist beliefs tied between one's race and language proficiency (Cho, 2023). Despite one's credentials, experiences, and English proficiency, Asian and Asian American female faculty in English language education may experience negative stereotypes and poorer course ratings by students, peers, and administrators for assumptions that being a non-native English speaker equates to lacking English language proficiency or teaching ability. Along the same lines are biases of native English speakers of Asian descent assumed to be foreigners. These dangerous biases contribute to the academic bamboo ceiling where Asian American female faculty are ignored or passed on for leadership positions based on the stereotyped character assumptions for being submissive or lacking leadership (Cho, 2023; Nguyen, 2016; Valverde & Dariotis, 2020).

Collaborative Autoethnography

Initially, in understanding the lived experiences of Asian female faculty through the lens of Asian Critical Language Awareness (ACLA), the authors utilized autoethnography (Chang, 2008) as an approach to explore individual identities, cultural background, and positionality. As an example, Bourns' (2023) research article describes the researcher's participation and exploration of her experience in a summer language immersion class in Spain, with her multifaceted professional identity as a language teacher, a teacher trainer, and a language learner. Despite this in-depth participation and exploration, autoethnography is an approach to inquiry that addresses the ethical issue of representing, speaking for, and appropriating the voice of others (Lapadat, 2017). Hence, the authors of this research brief preferred to use collaborative autoethnography, a multivocal approach in which two or more researchers work together to share their personal stories, analyze the autoethnographic data, and address ethical issues in a collective manner.

Intersectionality in the Workplace

Race, gender, and language can significantly impact the employment context and can have implications for individuals. It is important to note that these factors should not be used as criteria for hiring and employment decisions. Law and policies are now in place in many countries to ensure equal employment regardless of race, gender, and language as they can lead to discrimination and inequality (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020). Unfortunately, discrimination based on race, gender, and language can still occur. This can be manifested in various forms such as biased hiring practices, unequal pay, limited career advancement, and others. Recognizing and addressing these issues, particularly pertaining to recruitment, promotion, and workplace dynamics is critical for creating a fair and just work environment. In terms of recruitment, unconscious biases may affect hiring decisions as recruiters may unintentionally hire individuals who fit the generally-perceived stereotypes of the job position. In the realm of promotion, preconceived notions of leadership may influence who is considered for advancement. As far as workplace dynamics, employees at the intersection of race, gender, and language, may experience microaggressions, subtle forms of discrimination that may affect their sense of belonging and well-being.

Intersectionality in the Context of Decolonization

The intersectionality of race, gender, and language highlights the historical legacies of colonialism where certain races, genders, and linguistic groups were subjugated to maintain imperial dominance. For example, the United States should be held accountable for its colonization of the Philippines from 1898 to 1941, as well as its occupation and reconstruction of Japan from 1945 to 1952. Consequently, if English is considered a colonial language, its dominance is underscored by its oppressive imperial histories in Asian and other regions. It is imperative then that intersectionality be approached in the context of decolonization where race, gender, and language are not homogenous; they vary globally and are shaped by unique historical and cultural contexts. Decolonization then calls for

the transformation of societal norms to embrace diversity, inclusivity, and respect for all intersecting identities, while being open to discovering new perspectives and viewpoints that will illuminate alternative modes of thinking. In this study, the authors aspire to shed light on a new theoretical framework called *Asian Critical Language Awareness (ACLA)*, as a means to bring into focus the complexities and intersectionality of race, gender, and language.

Theoretical Framework: Asian Critical Language Awareness

Stemming from language awareness, which is defined as "explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use," this study draws upon Critical Language Awareness (CLA), which adds a critical lens that "interrogates the dominating discourse on language and literacy and foregrounds the examination and interconnectedness of identities, ideologies, histories/herstories and the hierarchical nature of power relations between groups" (Alim et al., 2010; Association for Language Awareness, n.d.; Chang et al., 2020). Oftentimes these power relations described in CLA exist between teachers and students where teachers reinforce language knowledge and expectations. Historically, sociolinguists have examined the debate on the use of "standard" English within Black/African American communities with little to no attention to Asian American communities. In addition, most research studies on Critical Language Awareness focus on settings that promote heritage language in Spanish but not in any Asian language (Gómez García, 2022; Quan, 2021; Ducar, 2022). Further, the positioning of power is teacher-centered, yet CLA from the AAFF perspective raises a need to further develop Asian Critical Language Awareness that distinctly situates and interrogates positionality of AAFF in language education spaces. Hence, there is a research gap that exists in terms of a lack of Asian nature on Critical Language Awareness, where most if not all research studies focused on Spanish speaking settings and Black/African American communities.

The framing in this research brief is to position Asian Critical Language Awareness as a humanizing approach to critically self-reflect upon our perceptions and experiences with English as it relates to gender (i.e., female) and race (i.e., Asian). Figure 1 illustrates the intersectionality of race, gender, and language, overlapping in and through the researcher-participants' collaborative autoethnography, grounded in a much-needed theoretical framework of Asian Critical Language Awareness.

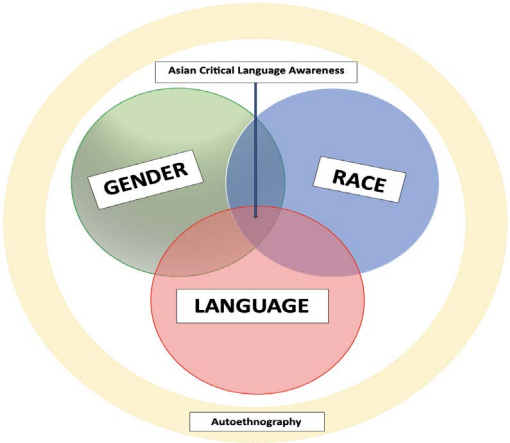

Figure 1: ***Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Language and Addressing the Need for an Asian Critical Language Awareness***

Methods

Collaborative Autoethnographic studies are a distinct approach that allows the authors to investigate and self-analyze the unique and individual experiences that are deeper than an autobiography that reflects a narrative retelling one's life story. Collaborative Autoethnographies incorporate a process of reflection, analysis, and interpretation among two or more researchers. In using this approach for this study, we position ourselves as participant researchers and provide critical reflections on our language practices in teaching and learning. In addition, critical perspectives from the participant-researchers are gathered in response to the recent social justice movements advocating for anti-racist practices to support the AAPI community.

An additional layer to adding the richness of the collaborative autoethnographic work is the interaction with a colleague to share, reflect, analyze, and interpret each other's experiences, and combining them through a reflexive autoethnographic approach to seek the process of meaning making (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). We position ourselves as participant researchers and provide critical reflections on our practices and lived experiences in becoming leaders.

The two authors in this study had previously worked together in a teacher organization and presented at a research conference examining the challenges of non-tenure Asian American female faculty through an AsianCrit lens. Having this previous connection led to the conversation of challenges within the field of multilingual learner education as Asian American female faculty and the need to elevate these stories.

Data

Two data sources were used in this study. For background, the idea for data collection began as two Asian female faculty who did not know one another but noticed each other during an online US-based professional organization meeting during COVID-19 in 2021. As two of the only Asian female representatives in the organization and the noticeable increase of anti-Asian hate being top of mind in the U.S., we were automatically drawn towards one another. We reached out during the meeting via private chat to check-in and ask how we were doing. This turned into exchanging contact information and led to a chat over Zoom. As we began to discuss some of the challenges faced during COVID-19, it also led to a discussion of needing to document our experiences of how gender, race, and language are questioned in our current roles.

We agreed upon meeting weekly for one to one and a half hours and began to record and transcribe our meetings via Zoom. After the first meeting, we were interested in learning more about one another and documented this through writing a personal narrative independently, centering on our educational upbringings and experiences, how we parent our children through education, and professional journeys as Asian female faculty. At the next meeting, we took time to read and annotate one another's narratives, asking questions for clarification or interest in expanding on parts of the narrative. Then, we met to discuss the annotations with questions we had for one another. Combined, these responses were transferred into an Excel spreadsheet where we hand-coded for emerging themes between our two responses. This is the first data source which sparked the idea for centering the paper on critical language awareness. We noticed how language emerged as a point of conversation, often tied to our phenotype, and through the analysis process, conversations turned to language and issues as Asian American female faculty. ACLA is then employed in this data collection. The transcripts highlighted in this study centered on the role and interaction of language exposure and proficiency in our lives.

The second data source is a table of self-reflective questions, author responses, and author reactions as Asian American female faculty in leadership roles. Over the course of four weeks, the two authors began to meet bi-weekly via Zoom, beginning in Week 1 with an outline of guiding questions centered on leadership. In Week 2, the guided conversation was recorded, and notes were created in a table with space to write reactions to one another's responses in the moment. In Week 3, the authors met to review the recorded conversation and reflected on the written responses. In Week 4, the responses were hand-coded for emerging themes based on the recorded response, in-the-moment reactions, and reflections. Upon reading, reflecting, and conversing about the results within the two data sources, the authors identified emerging themes.

Results

The emerging themes from this reflexive collaborative autoethnographic study include the following and clearly apply the lens of Asian Critical Language Awareness in interrogating the power relations and triple standards placed upon Asian American female faculty. Both authors described their professional experiences as characterized by the following: (1) GENDER –stereotypes, expectations, and assumptions based on the intersection of race and gender, (2) LANGUAGE – assumptions of limited language proficiency based on racialized stereotypes of being perceived as a forever foreigner that equate to lack of knowledge and/or leadership skills (3) RACE – centering positionality which leads to the need to prove oneself to feel competent.

1. GENDER – The stereotype of Asian American females marked as incapable of taking on a leadership role and lacking the capacity to speak up are evident in the disparity between the high levels of educational attainment and lower percentages of Asian American females receiving promotions and senior management positions, representing less than 1% (Chui et al., 2022). Compared to their White female counterparts, Asian female faculty were not given the voice to express their thoughts and ideas. In addition, the need to constantly prove one's value and ability to combat these stereotypes were reflected in the responses.

The first author took the initiative to write a statement on behalf of a language educator-serving organization. Unfortunately, some members did not participate in contributing to the narrative. Instead, they critiqued what the first author did and handpicked what was valued or not. The first author wondered if this was a question of apathy, indifference, or ignorance on the part of the critics.

The second author was confronted and questioned of her abilities at a conference by a white female concerning a competing language position. Upon discovering that the author was selected for the position, the white female began to verbally question whether she had abilities, background, and experiences to take on the position and compared it verbally against her own. The author felt that the tone of the confrontation required her to stand her ground and explicitly state all the roles and competencies she carried that exceeded the position requirements. Would this same type of questioning occur if the author was white?

2. LANGUAGE – Assumptions of Language Proficiency Equate to Lack of Leadership Skills
The leadership skills of the two AAFF authors were challenged based on racialized assumptions of their language proficiency that stereotyped them into lacking leadership skills (Varghese et al., 2016). These assumptions led into occasional feelings of inadequacy, self-questioning one's own abilities, and whether their voices were valued or not in the professional spaces that these authors are involved in. Further are instances of exceptionalizing stereotypes, which are a form of microaggression that perpetuates a racial stereotype while seemingly appearing "well-intentioned" by casting a positive stereotype on a group. For AAFF this can appear in experiences tied to one's professional role and language proficiency as shared below (Tran & Lee, 2014).

The first author came here to the United States years ago as a first-generation immigrant from the Philippines. She has a distinct accent in Tagalog (Filipino) and people from various backgrounds always mistake her to be in the medical field (i.e., nursing, medicine, etc.). Although she does not possess the typical Filipino phenotype (i.e., dark-skinned, flat nose, short, etc.), her Tagalog accent distinctively identifies her as a full-blooded Filipina. Once she starts speaking in a professional meeting, people misconstrue her differently, as someone lacking in English proficiency and leadership skills.

The second author is an American born Japanese and has presented and trained language educators remotely and in-person in English. Her experience spans regionally in the United States and abroad in Asia, where she often receives compliments on her English pronunciation. It is often assumed that English is her second language and because of her race, she must know or speak an Asian language fluently.

3. RACE – Racialized Positionality Leads to Proving Oneself to Feel Competent

As language proficiency and gendered stereotypes lead to challenging competency, racialization also adds another layer to feelings of inadequacy and lack of voice and agency, even when in administrative or leadership positions. These negative experiences and perceptions can be combated by persistence and pursuing leadership roles to dismantle racial and gender stereotypes.

As a beginning classroom teacher in her 4th year of teaching, the first author blindly took on the role of a Technology Site Coordinator. Although she knew little to nothing about technology at that time, she felt compelled to assume this role because she was the only Filipino classroom teacher. This somehow was a racialized positionality which led her to prove herself to feel competent. She exerted herself to learn everything there is to know (at least most of it) about technology to subconsciously prove to her fellow classroom teachers that she was capable of being a competent leader. From that experience, she felt that she needed to take advantage of some leadership opportunities that earned the respect of fellow educators. For example, she recently served as co-chair for an annual conference, sponsored by a language-teacher-serving organization.

The second author agrees that movement towards leadership starts with an opportunity. She was an adjunct instructor for seven years before being hired full time at a university. It was then that someone in a leadership position noticed her strong curriculum vitae. She was then acknowledged and uplifted due to this recognition. This experience led her to reflect on the need to advocate for herself to prove her competence and worthiness. Being in previous professional spaces where there was no room for opportunities for growth or leadership, especially for those who are racially minoritized often meant that there was no presence of a mentor, a coach, nor a supervisor willing to acknowledge or advocate for junior faculty. She intentionally sought out organizations that explicitly acknowledged and addressed issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity, as well as spaces where dialogue is encouraged prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, she serves on organizational boards and continues to seek and serve in positions that allow her to uplift other voices.

Discussion

Emerging themes utilizing ACLA include: (1) Gender – triple standards (Asian American female faculty in academia), (2) Language – assumptions of language proficiency equate to lack of leadership skills, (3) Race – racialized positionality leads to proving oneself to feel competent. As we, the authors experienced the successes and encountered the challenges in the areas of triple standards, assumptions of language proficiency, and racialized positionality, we realize that they may be a result of society's "enacting Whiteness and subscribing to an ideology of linguistic supremacy (elevating one particular language variety over all others) within a system of daily cultural combat" (Fought, 2006). In other words, our language background and experiences as Asian American female faculty may not necessarily be associated with power, prestige, and upward mobility based on the *Whiteness* standards (Park, 2015). As AAFF, we take part in preparing future language educators and leaders. How can we continue to address ACLA within educational programs to prevent biases of not only our students, but also our colleagues?

In an effort to bring a practical application to a theoretically oriented concept of Asian Critical Language Awareness (ACLA) principles, we decided to systematically analyze our language experiences through a Collaborative Autoethnography where we encouraged each other to share specific events in our lives that point to our journey as Asian American female faculty. As we shared our lived experiences, we also notated our feedback on each other based on what we thought and felt about the similarities and differences of what we both went through. Through this exercise, we are inspired to realize that our interactions with each other supported our endeavor to investigate and interrogate the existing power relations. We hope to enlighten and elevate awareness of intersectionality among race, gender, language to inform the theoretical and pedagogical teaching practices of PK-20 educators.

As we examine our own successes and challenges as Asian American female faculty, we urge educators to work together to revise pedagogies, not only to take our language experiences into account, but also to see the interconnectedness of language with our diverse identities that play a huge role in who we are, what we believe in, and what we act upon. As we discover this interconnectedness, we then confront the tensions surrounding language through the lens of Critical Language Awareness – "... a growing area of specialization in sociolinguistics, which takes a critical, reflexive look at making connections between race, gender, sexuality, and language use" (Alim, 2007).

Conclusion

Addressing the need for an Asian Critical Language Awareness while reimagining language education through this emerging conceptual framework for Asian American female faculty is an aspiration to most if not all educators, especially those who are passionate about achieving equity, justice, and inclusivity in society. It is a daunting endeavor because it is not only difficult but also an impossible feat to achieve with only one person reimagining

in an isolated effort. It does take two or more people to begin the task. We, the authors, are grateful for the space we have allotted to create a dialogue on how we can best enhance the language experiences of our students and fellow educators, as we all navigate through the interconnectedness of race, gender, and language. This prompts the need for further exploration on Asian Critical Language Awareness as a viable framework in elevating the work of Asian American female faculty.

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