Introduction

- Numerous studies on inequality in the U.S. highlight how historical processes and social locations can influence one’s position in the U.S. social hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).
- While existing studies on perceptions of inequality are useful in illuminating the misunderstandings and misperceptions of inequality, their results tend to focus on women.
- This project explores how ethnic/racial and gender shape the ways in which students form and perceive conceptualizations of inequality and opportunity in the U.S., specifically, as they relate to Chicana/o/x and three pan-ethnic Asian groups, Chinese American, Korean American, and Vietnamese American.
- These students serve as the ideal comparative case study to explore contemporary racial projects that assign representations of race within larger social structures (Omi & Winant, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

- Omi and Winant’s (2014) theory of Racial Formation addresses the limitations of race relations paradigms such as ethnicity and race in highlighting how racialization processes, racial categories, and racial politics are constructed, destroyed, and reproduced within the entanglements of structure and signification.
- Although these concepts have been useful in describing race formation in the U.S., these concepts are not equipped to singularly account for the complex racialization processes experienced by racially “othered” peoples.
- We set out to understand how the racial formation framework operates for Asian American and Chicana/o/x college students’ perspectives of inequality and situated students’ perspectives within a structural to cultural inequality spectrum as the basis to conceptualize contemporary racial projects.

Research Questions

1) How do students explain inequality and opportunity in America?
2) What ethnoracial group do students believe does best in society?
3) What ethnoracial students believe are the consequences of inequality?

Methods

Procedure: Data come from larger study, “The First-Generation College Student Inequality and Opportunity Project” that explores college students’ understanding of factors they perceive as contributing to inequality and opportunity in the U.S. A total of 226 students were interviewed from 2014-2016. This poster concentrates on the 183 responses with Chicana/o/x (54), Korean American (41), and Vietnamese American (48) identified first-generation college students. The students were a select public research-intensive university classified as an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) on the West Coast. The majority of students were between 18 and 28 years of age, and the sample was split nearly evenly on traditional gender categories with roughly 51% female-identified participants and 49% male-identified participants. Most Chicana/o/x students reported being raised in low-income homes. Of the 129 Asian American respondents, Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean American students in the sample tended to self-identify as middle- to upper-income and Vietnamese American students primarily self-identified as lower- to middle-income. Case study methodology was employed because it allows the researcher to focus on the phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2017).

Data Analysis: Interview data were coded into three different waves. First, open coding was conducted to capture the major themes, recurring words, and phrases that were related to the study participants’ perceptions of inequality. Then, the list of open codes was re-coded and collapsed into three significant groups: same opportunity, sources of inequality, and consequences of inequality. Lastly, these three significant groups were further taken apart and coded into thematic responses. Given our interest in racial projects and understandings of inequality, we paid close attention to codes or phrases related to structural and cultural explanations of inequalities based on the Racial Formation Theory. We present findings separately by each ethnoracial group to illustrate these perceptual differences in explanations of inequality as racial projects.

Descriptive Data

- Illustrated are Vietnamese Men, Vietnamese Women, Chinese Men, Chinese Women, Korean Men, Korean Women, Filipino Men, Filipino Women, Chicana/o Men, Chicana/o Women.

Interview Analysis

- “Well, I believe opportunity is almost equal for everyone, and it is up to each individual to take the opportunities to succeed. Also, inequality is the outcome of success of each individual; those who did not take opportunities to succeed will see inequality against them, and those who saw success through opportunity will see inequality favoring them!”
- “The color of my skin affects how much equality I have and also opportunity like jobs and other aspects of life. Unequality always accompanies opportunity, especially when an opportunity is desirable and limited. I don’t think I have the same amount of opportunities as White people do. As an Asian, I still feel excluded from the main society.”
- “The current structure of American society creates inequality. Individuals can be both oppressed and enabled by structures outside, and larger, than themselves. Those that have the most representation have the most power in institutions such as government and media, and therefore control present discourse. Minorities generally do not benefit from their current discourse, and this creates inequality in opportunities in America.”

Discussion

- The Racial Project was employed to understand how students speak race through their perceptions of the sources of inequality among ethnoracial groups.
- Opportunities for Asian American men and women have different conceptualizations of inequality.
- Korean Americans often deploy a cultural understanding of inequality embedded within structural lenses, whereas Chinese, Vietnamese, and Chicana/o/x American respondents employ more sociocultural and structural perspectives.
- Also found that gender further complicates this formulation, as women are likely to draw on structural perspectives to explain inequality compared to their male—particularly among the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Chicana/o/x Americans.
- Disaggregating student experiences through both ethnorace and gender allows us to shed light on how social locations impact how these groups experience and understand the world around them.

This work has direct implications for creating a sense of belonging and validation for first-generation college-going students.

Limitations

- Study was conducted before the 2016 presidential election.
- Study draws upon interviews with students attending a specific HSI on the West Coast, thus like many studies, results are not generalizable to the broader population of First-Generation college going Asian Americans and Chicana/o/x students.
- Future studies should take a closer look at how other identities—sexuality and citizenship—add nuance to conceptualizations of inequality.
- Future work should look at conceptualizations of inequality during Trump presidency.

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References


First-Generation College Going Asian American and Chicana/o/x Students: Understanding Perceptions of Inequality as Racial Projects

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