

MALADY OF THE “MODEL MINORITY”:
WHITE RACISM’S ASSAULT ON THE ASIAN AMERICAN PSYCHE

A Thesis

by

ROSALIND SUE CHOU

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2007

Major Subject: Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Malady of the “Model Minority”:

White Racism’s Assault on the Asian American Psyche. (May 2007)

Rosalind Sue Chou, B.S., Florida State University

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My research is a qualitative study about the Asian American experience. Studies have shown that Asian Americans obtain high levels of educational attainment and household income, but these figures are misleading. Asian Americans are getting a lower financial return on their education compared to their white counterparts. They suffer higher rates of suicide and depression than all other racial groups. Little quantitative and no qualitative research exists addressing these issues. My research explores Asian American life experiences with a focus on what role systemic racism plays in their lives and how this connects to the health disparities.

This analysis utilizes thirty-six in-depth interviews to discuss the types and frequency of racist events. Respondents revealed a plethora of discriminatory incidents and shared various coping strategies that they use to deal with the stress of discrimination and to combat future racism. The analysis concludes that the great efforts that Asian Americans go to in order to protect themselves from white racism are costly. Respondents have to combat feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and inferiority.

The analysis also utilizes interview data to discuss the ways in which respondents attempt to conform to the white racial frame in hopes to find relief from discrimination.

By conforming, some adopt negative racial stereotypes about themselves and other people of color. Even after going to great lengths to conform, interviewees still struggled with feeling excluded by whites. Eventually, some respondents became hopeless that they would ever be accepted.

This work also explores alternative methods some Asian Americans are using to combat systemic racism. Some respondents revealed an alternate mindset to those who have chosen to conform to the white racial frame. This group of respondents challenged white racist ideologies, and some even discussed methods in which they actively resist in hopes to improve the racial situation for all Asian Americans.

This work is an attempt to fill the large gaps in research about the unique Asian American experience. There has been no other similar analysis in the past. My data reveal the complexities of the Asian American experience and the need for further research.

For

Luan Wu Wang, Lily Chin, and Iris Chang

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my parents, Li-Hsueh Chou and Chuen Cheng Chou. Almost forty years ago, they made the decision to leave behind their families and all their friends to make new lives in the United States. They struggled with language, homesickness, and the challenges of a new and different culture. They are truly amazing. My sisters have always been two women whom I have admired. They are both brilliant in their own unique ways. I thank Nina and Alice for being patient with the tag-along baby sister, and I am so glad that some of their studiousness has finally rubbed off on me.

I am eternally indebted to the friends that have provided me with security, comfort, and unconditional love. Deborah Long, Charlene Whitney, Kirsén Rostad, and Lynn Player have been my core of support in times that I needed it the most, and have provided honest feedback when I was least willing to hear it. I must also mention Gale Wire as a vital life teacher, Josh Adrian as my go to guy, and Stephanie Dorsey who made sure I always was taking care of myself and having fun.

I am also grateful to the community of scholars in which I am so lucky to be a part. Who knew that College Station, Texas would possess some of the brightest race scholars in the country? Thank you Chris Chambers, Jenni Mueller, Kristen Lavelle, Glenn Bracey, and Lorena Murga for letting me listen in on, and take part in, all the conversations that helped me to deconstruct and make sense of the world in which I live.

I thank Kelly Frazer and Tiffany Hall for knowing the rules of grammar and graciously donating their time to copyedit my lengthy thesis. I owe them, big time.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On October 19, 2001, R.W., a twenty-eight year old Chinese American woman, bludgeoned and strangled her 65-year old mother.¹ While her mother lay dead on the living room floor, R.W. covered her up with towels and called the police, confessing her crime. This high school valedictorian is an accomplished classical pianist who had graduated magna cum laude from her southern university, and had even started her undergraduate education at a prestigious Ivy League school. She barely received mention in the local newspaper for her crime. Only one full-length article was published, and after her indictment she was barely mentioned in an article about local news. This tragic incident hit home to me because I was well acquainted with the family. My own family was the second Chinese family in my hometown, and R.W. was a member of the first. It sent shockwaves through the Asian community of which they were a part. Her failure to stay at her first undergraduate program, which was an elite educational institution, led her to several suicide attempts and eventually to the homicide of her mother. She will now live out the remainder of her years in a mental institution, and the rest of her family and friends are left wondering “why?”

My research seeks to give voice to Asian Americans about their racial experiences in the United States. It is a qualitative study and through in-depth interviews I have collected stories about the Asian American experience – incidents of discrimination, acts of assimilation and conformity, acts of resistance, and ways that

This thesis follows the style of *Social Forces*.

individuals cope with occurrences of racism as individuals, families, communities, and networks. My findings reveal that Asian Americans are suffering at the hands of white racism. My interview data show that even after incredible efforts to conform to the white racial frame and achieve the “American Dream,” Asian Americans still feel isolated and inadequate. Whether Asian Americans experience overt racist acts or not, many passively accept that they must abandon their racial identity to prevent mistreatment. Academic and financial achievements do not effectively shield Asian Americans from white imposed systemic racism.

Whites control the racial continuum and impose behavioral guidelines on Asian Americans that are costly. Prashad (2003) argues that Asian Americans are “lucky” that they do not face the “invisibility” that African Americans face in the US, but I strongly disagree with his statement. The Asian American experience is an untold experience. An untold experience *is* invisibility. My research contends that this invisibility, among other obstacles that are the result of systemic racism, may offer insight on the alarming mental health disparities facing Asian Americans.

My analysis addresses the following research questions: 1) What kind of subtle and overt acts of racism do Asian Americans face in their every day lives – in their neighborhoods, at school, at work, in restaurants, and in shops, 2) What toll does this racism take on Asian Americans physically and mentally, 3) What is role of conformity to the white racist frame in their lives and what are consequences to adopting the frame,

and 4) In what ways are Asian Americans resisting against white racism – overtly, subtly, or even covertly?

Unanswered Questions About Asian American Mental Health

R.W.'s incident steered me toward researching this topic of Asian Americans and mental health. She could just be an example of an individual suffering from mental illness, but I had little knowledge in this area. I was shocked to discover there was so little being done about the subject. Few articles have been written about Asian American suicide rates and use of mental health services. A general mental health study for teens in all racial categories clearly showed that Asian American youth had the highest incidents of teenage depression, well overrepresented than other races, and they make up just over 4 percent of the US population (Center for Medicaid Services 2002). I was alarmed that the article did not pay attention to this detail as a focal point.

In the little research that exists on the cost of the mental health of Asian Americans, the statistical findings are dramatic. One study found that Chinese American elderly women have a suicide rate 10 times higher than their white elderly women counterparts (Browne and Broderick 1994). The Asian American population at Cornell University is 17 percent of the student body, yet, 50 percent of the completed suicides are Asian American students (Harder 2005). Japanese American Nisei men interned during WWII suffered high rates of alcoholism and 40 percent died before reaching age fifty-five (Tanaka 1999). While there is limited research addressing these mental health issues with Asian Americans, cultural factors and pressure to achieve academically are often cited as major reasons for the Asian American mental health problems, not

systemic racism. In this thesis, I argue that omitting systemic racism, brought on by whites, as a probable reason for many such health disparities is a huge oversight, as racism is increasingly recognized in health disparities among African Americans and Latina/os compared to whites (Feagin & McKinney 2003). Whites have given the “model minority” stereotype to Asian Americans, as some of the Asian American ethnic groups are outperforming them in academic and income levels, but the stereotype detracts from the hardships Asian Americans are facing as they try to become socially integrated into US society.

Literature Review

My research is based on Joe R. Feagin’s (2006) theory of *Systemic Racism*. The theory explains that racism is in every nook and cranny of the US society and white racist ideals are being globalized. Feagin focuses his research mainly on white-on-black oppression, but also applies the theory broadly to other people of color. The white racial frame is indicative of systemic racism that is omni-present today. The “model minority” stereotype alienates Asian Americans from whites and all other people of color.

Feagin argues that the racial hierarchy is created and controlled by whites. Whites, as they head toward a minority status in number regarding population, benefit from “recruiting” certain racial groups as allies. Feagin (2006: 290) asserts:

Whites are selecting, or may soon select, *certain* Latin and Asian American groups for a “near white” or “honorary white” status, especially as whites sense the need for political allies or coalitions in a country that will in a few decades have only a statistical minority of whites in the population.

To maintain power and domination over people of color, specifically African Americans, whites must allow other groups of people of color to feel as if they belong. European

immigrants, such as the Irish, Italians, and Germans, are now considered white in the United States. Whites utilize these immigrant groups to maintain power. Now that immigration from European nations is not as prevalent as immigration from Latin and Asian countries, whites push these groups to assimilate to white ways. Feagin (2006: 292) asserts:

Whites are collectively so powerful that they pressure all new immigrant groups, including immigrants of color, to collude in the white-racist system by adopting not only general white ways of doing and speaking, including the English language, but also the white racial frame and its view of racial hierarchy of U.S. society.

By adopting the views of the white racial frame, European immigrants earned a high position on the racial ladder and are now considered white, but this is not the case for darker skinned immigrants from Latin and Asian descent. Even immigrants of African descent quickly learn about American racism and do not have an opportunity to climb the ladder, being placed at the bottom of the hierarchy with African Americans. Asians and Latina/os have a chance at some upward mobility, but are still not awarded full acceptance by whites. Feagin (2006: 290-291) argues:

However, being categorized by whites as nearer the white than the black end of the racial ladder and status continuum will not likely mean that white-chosen Latin or Asian Americans will get the full privileges of whites or that they will even be viewed as “white” by most whites. Americans of color who are courted by whites for a white-dominated political coalition are likely to remain second-class citizens in white eyes and in persisting discriminatory treatment by whites in major institutions.

African Americans have a clear-cut picture of their status in the continuum, but the smoke and mirrors of “white acceptance” blind Asian and Latin Americans (Feagin

2006). According to Feagin, these Americans of color will “remain second-class citizens,” considered to be better than blacks yet still inferior to whites.

The white racist frame is all encompassing and infiltrates the worlds of all people of color. Whites choose which groups get a “promotion” on the racial hierarchical ladder. Rising positions in the ladder are supposed to be a gift from whites to non-whites, but at a price of abandoning cultural and ethnic identity. Asian Americans that gain upward mobility on the ladder do not have the full privileges of being white.

I seek to expand the theory as it applies specifically to Asian Americans. Feagin asserts that people of color rely on social networks and community support to cope with racial discrimination. These networks archive racism to provide a collective memory in which to refer back, but I argue that this is not the case for Asian Americans. There is a dearth of research on Asian Americans from which Feagin or other race scholars can draw evidence for such claims. I seek to provide some insight from my research.

Historical Background for Present Day Context

The research about Asian Americans has focused mainly on Asian assimilation in to the United States and “overachievement” of Asian Americans, which creates the stereotype of the “model minority.” Little has been written in regard to Asian Americans and the impact that white racism has on Asian American individuals, families, networks and communities.

For historical background in the acculturation of Asians into mainstream white society in the United States, assimilation theorists used Asians as examples of proof that the “American dream” exists and is a possibility for immigrants to achieve (Petersen

1966, 1972; Tinker 1982). Researchers cited socioeconomic success as proof that Asian Americans are fully melded into the American “melting pot” (Nee & Sanders, 1985). By “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” Asian American earned the title of “model minority” (Bell 1985). The positive view of mainstream acceptance for Asian Americans because of economic success began to be contested as other researchers found that Asian Americans were still being “othered” and that the “model minority” stereotype was not an altogether complimentary term (Lee 1996; Nishi 1989; Tuan 2003).

Although little qualitative research has been done regarding the direct affects of discrimination on Asian Americans, there have been some books addressing this issue from a historical perspective (Takaki 1994, 1998; Wu 2003). The term “model minority” can be traced back to sociologist William Peterson in 1966. The term pits Asian Americans against other people of color. Asian Americans have been divided from other people of color since the Chinese immigrants were shipped overseas for cheap labor in the railroad industry (Takaki 1998). The preference that white railroad executives had for Chinese workers effectively fueled racial tensions, pitting other minority groups against them, as well as disgruntled, displaced white workers. This trend continues today (Chang 2003; Loewen 1988; Prashad 2003; Takaki 1998; Wu 2003). Although historical texts cover a great deal of the struggle Asians in America have experienced, all fail in dealing with white racism as the root of discrimination against Asians in America. Many of the authors of these texts are Asian American and instead of implicating whites, they talk about large processes, law, government, or society-at-large as agents of racism against Asian Americans.

Qualitative Race Theory Literature

Texts with detailed accounts using in-depth interviews centered on white racism and its effect on African Americans are quite large in number (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 1994, 2001, 2003; Houts-Picca & Feagin 2007). The texts argue that white racism is ever present in everyday life in the United States. Although the Asian American experience is not the focus of these texts, white racism is the common thread that makes them applicable to my research.

Learning racism starts at the onset of socialization (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). Children as young as three years old, and possibly younger, are sophisticated enough to understand the complexities of race matters. White children are fully aware of stereotypes and will use them against children of color to exercise their status atop the racial hierarchy. These incidents of racism accumulate over time, and children of color start their collection very early in life, so that when adulthood is reached, a mass of pain can affect their lives in a detrimental way. One key point that Van Ausdale and Feagin make is that this accumulation is not individualized. These acts of racism are shared and the burden taken on by the community (Feagin & Sikes 1994). It seems that this is true of the African American and Latina/o community, but I argue that it is different for Asian Americans, specifically those isolated in areas where there is no large collective community. The lessons from incidents of racism in this population do not get passed on to others, and the pain is internalized. This internalization creates problems that can go undetected. Asian Americans that deal with racial incidents in such a manner suffer from individual ills that are subtle and go unnoticed, as opposed to collective group

problems that are directly associated with African Americans and Latina/o Americans, such as poverty and high dropout rates. Asian Americans are easy targets because they are silent victims.

African Americans have a community and collectivity that demonstrates public dissent. Asians are caught in between, trying to assimilate, but quietly still suffer the pains of racial discrimination.

In *Living with Racism*, Feagin and Sikes (1994) interview over two hundred black, middle-class Americans, revealing how their climb up the economic ladder does not protect them from the daily onslaught of white racism. This is the same for all people of color that have not been fully accepted amongst the ranks of whites, including Asian Americans. With all the progress made by the black middle class, white racial attitudes remain stagnant. Similarly, many Asian Americans have gained middle class status and have their lives frequently disrupted by white racism.

Racial Hierarchy Literature

Some race scholars explain that whites are in control of the racial order and have the privilege to place other racial groups wherever they wish (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Feagin 2001, 2006; Kim 2003; Wu 2003). Asian Americans, until recently, were placed near the bottom of the racial order but have been “moved up” by whites and placed in an exemplary position to divide them from other people of color. Lumping all Asians together as one group collectively unfairly denies the complexity of the different experiences. Groups such as the Hmong, Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese do not have the same level of educational attainment and material success of the Chinese,

Japanese, and Koreans (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Zhou 2004), and their problems with poverty and lack of education remain largely ignored. The “model minority” stereotype, regardless of ethnic group, creates unrealistic expectations set by whites.

Slightly different from Feagin’s theory of racial hierarchy is Claire Jean Kim’s (2003) theory of “racial triangulation.” Kim highlights how people of color serve as pawns to the oppression put in place by whites. The Black-Korean conflict is an example of the pervasiveness of what Feagin calls “the white racist frame” and how the omnipotent power of it can pit minority groups against each other when so much could be gained from collective action. Kim argues that there is a “racial triangulation” that occurs to keep Koreans and Blacks segregated while, at the same time, subordinating them both to Whites.

The white racial frame prevents such alliance between minority groups from happening. Kim (2003) elaborates on the power that the pre-existing white racism has on existing minority groups, such as African Americans, and incoming immigrant groups, such as Koreans, and how the racist frame factors into the conflicts between the groups. Kim (2003: 16) explains this process of racial order for Asian Americans:

Two types of White discursive practices have operated simultaneously to place and maintain Asian Americans in this distinctive position in the racial order: 1) processes of *relative valorization*, whereby Whites valorize Asian Americans relative to Blacks on cultural and/or racial grounds in a way that reinforces White dominance over both groups; and 2) processes of *civic ostracism*, whereby Whites construct Asian Americans as immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in a way that excludes Asian Americans from civic membership.

Kim’s use of *relative valorization* and *civic ostracism* is similar to Mia Tuan’s (2003) conception that Asian Americans are considered either “forever foreigner” or “honorary

white” by whites. Whites consider Asians as “honorary whites” or exercise *relative valorization* because of success in educational attainment and economic achievement, but only in relation to other minority groups whom have been given fewer opportunities because of perceived inferiority or “dangerous” demeanor. Whites using Asian Americans as a measuring stick for other minority groups is a divisive move, for it pits minority groups against each other and continues to isolate Asians from Whites. Kim (2003: 45) asserts:

By lumping all Asian descent groups together and attributing certain distinctively “Asian” cultural values to them (including, importantly, political passivity or docility), the model minority myth sets Asian Americans apart as a distinct racial-cultural “other.” Asian Americans are making it, the myth tells us, but they remain exotically different from Whites. Beneath the veneer of praise, the model minority myth subtly ostracizes Asian Americans.

It is this “lumping” that aligns all Asians. Yet, Asian Americans have little political clout or influence, as they remain divided and uninvolved with the political process. This lack of involvement is not happening voluntarily; rather, exclusiveness into the political realm by whites has much to do with this lack of representation.

The larger white racist frame infiltrates and affects every bit of life for all who live in the frame. Asian immigrants come in quickly conforming to the frame or else they will face financial and emotional punishment. This racist frame makes it so the actors at the bottom of the racial order are repeatedly ridiculed, compared, and given a minority report card. Fighting for their dignity will sometimes mean that another group will be pushed aside, or set up for failure. In an order or hierarchy, there can only be one at the top. Vying for position in that pre-existing structure or order creates volatility. Minority groups are pitted against each other for the title as “top subordinate.” Whites

remain the dominating oppressor. The only available position whites will be willing to give will always be the position just underneath them.

Another race theory that is applicable to Asian Americans in relation to whites and other minority groups is Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2004) theory of "tri-racial" stratification, wherein whites have the power to classify all other racial groups into a three-tiered system. At the top of the racial order are whites, in the second tier are the "honorary whites," and in the third and bottom tier exist the "collective blacks." With regards to Asians, Bonilla-Silva contends that a few people of Asian origin are considered white, where the majority of Asians lie within the "honorary white" or "collective black" status. Asian Americans in the "honorary white" tier include Japanese, Chinese, Asian Indian, Korean, and Filipino Americans. Asian Americans considered to be "collective blacks" include Laotians, Cambodians, Hmong, and Vietnamese. The reason for this separation into the bottom tiers of the racial stratification is that the Asian American groups in the "honorary whites" tier have high rates of educational attainment, high levels of income compared to the average American, and are mostly voluntary immigrants. The Asian Americans in the "collective blacks" tier have lower than average levels of educational attainment, have high rates of poverty, and many immigrated for political reasons as refugees. A theme in Bonilla-Silva's theory that is similar to the theories discussed earlier is that whites are in the position of agency and control. Whites determine how to place and classify the minority groups, allowing membership and status rewards to those they deem as worthy.

All these theories of racial order have valid points but are all lacking the qualitative data to explain the complex and unique experience of Asian Americans.

“Critical” Asian American Research

In regard to work about Asian Americans and racial identity, some studies assert that Asian Americans are “melting into the diverse American pot” or even “ascending above exclusion” (Zhou 2003). The most widely used identity model is the Asian American Development Theory (Kim 2001). The theory is upfront about white racism affecting Asian identity, but Kim argues that understanding white racism “awakens” Asian Americans, moving them out of a “white identification” stage. My data shows that all of my respondents were aware of racism and very few moved on to new forms of “consciousness” to improve self-concept. Kim also asserted the premise that in order to progress to further stages of development, one must have access to an Asian American community. Applying this theory to all Asian Americans implies that becoming comfortable in ones identity is impossible for those in isolated, white spaces.

There are some authors who argue that Asian Americans do face racism regardless of the “model minority stereotype.” My biggest criticism of their work is that they do not put a face on the perpetrator. The racist actor is nameless and faceless; the scholars skirt around the fact that whites are the main actor in continuing to set the rules of minority advancement.

Similar to my research, one book that delves into this Asian American experience is Mia Tuan’s (2003), *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? : The Asian Ethnic Experience*. Ninety-five Asian Americans were interviewed about their experiences in

the US. What Tuan's analysis revealed is that Asian Americans are caught between feeling perpetually outside as "forever foreigners," and having greater privileges than other people of color as if they were "honorary whites." What was blatantly absent in Tuan's work was an actor imposing this predicament onto Asian Americans. Tuan can name the dilemma, but lacks in her critical look at white racism's role in the marginalization of Asian Americans

Vijay Prashad (2003: 6), in *The Karma of Brown Folk* argues that Asian Americans are "to be the perpetual solution to what is seen as the crisis of black America" and also are "to be a weapon in the war against black America." Prashad fails in identifying who is conducting the "war against black America," never identifying whites as the perpetrators. He also goes on to claim, "Obviously, it is easier to be seen as a solution than as a problem. We don't suffer genocidal poverty and incarceration rates in the United States, nor do we walk in fear and a fog of invisibility." Prashad is evoking the "model minority" stereotype with this statement, but I argue that the stereotype serves as the invisibility cloak that hides the problems that Asian Americans face everyday at the hands of white racism. A useful descriptive term regarding white racism I credit to Prashad is "Orientalism." He uses the term to describe the view that white Americans associate with the East as being "static and unfree," and Western civilization with being "dynamic and free." "Orientalism" is a method the whites use to negatively stereotype Asian Americans as exotic, barbaric, and primitive.

Law professor Frank Wu (2003) addresses Asian American discrimination from a legal perspective. Wu (2003: 91) does much to dispel the "model minority"

stereotype, even explaining the benefits that whites enjoy because of the labeling, but at points he avoids identifying the perpetrator:

With Asian Americans, it is clear that lines that appear to be based on citizenship can cover up lines that are based on race. Once citizenship is defined by race, it becomes convenient to refer to the innocuous lines based on citizenship in lieu of the odious lines based on race. *Non-Asian Americans* can discriminate against Asian Americans by turning us into non-citizens, either officially by prohibiting even legal long-term residents from naturalizing or informally by casting doubt on our status. Our objection to such discriminations is obviated before it is even made, because the discrimination looks legitimate as having been founded on citizenship rather than race. The alien land laws, passed to drive Japanese immigrants out of farming, are the prime example. They mentioned only “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” but everybody knew they were intended to target Japanese immigrants, and they did just that quite effectively because there were no persons but Asians who fit the description. (italics added for emphasis)

The problem with this passage is that Wu is skirting around using the word “whites” as the people doing such discriminating. Instead he uses “Non-Asian Americans” to describe the people who are changing the laws of citizenship. With Wu’s knowledge of the history of law in the United States, he should be well aware that, when these laws were being passed, it certainly was not Mexican or African or Native Americans in Washington making such laws. Wu also makes systemic racism seem non-existent by giving credit to whites:

Other than among a few idealists, as a nation we accept discrimination on the basis of citizenship as necessary. But except among a few extremists, as a society we reject discrimination on the basis of race as immoral. As a consequence, wherever our laws draw lines among people the type of lines determines whether it is acceptable. Lines that distinguish between citizens and aliens are acceptable; lines that distinguish between whites and people of color are not.

Wu’s statement downplays the whites who *do* find it acceptable to have lines drawn by race, but who now find it to be no longer fashionable to share those thoughts publicly.

Documentary Diamond

The research noted in the literature review has assisted in explaining theoretical racial concepts, but none of them accentuate the Asian American experience with a critical eye on white racism and discuss the cost of the discrimination. I seek to do that with my research, but one source that I found extremely helpful on the Japanese American experience specifically was not found in book or article format.

The helpful resource is in the form of the documentary *When You're Smiling* by Janice Tanaka (1999). The documentary is not just a historical piece on the events surrounding WWII Japanese internment camps, but is focused on the psychological effects of internment. The Nisei generation of Japanese Americans forced into the camps had substantial psychological trauma that affected their childrearing practices. The Nisei faced overt racism during and after the war. Tanaka mentions that alcohol abuse was more prevalent in Nisei than white and black men of the same age group during that time period. Drug abuse and suicide were in high proportion for the Sansei—sons and daughters of the Nisei—and were covered up by their families. The Nisei cover up demonstrates the need to fulfill the successful Japanese American image that was created by the “model minority” stereotype.

Tanaka also mentions the “model minority” stereotype in her documentary. The interviewees in her film talk about the pressure to succeed. There is a scene where a woman talks about how obsessed her family and the community was with a newspaper article that would come out each spring. The article would spotlight all the academic scholars in community schools and list where they planned to attend college. Another

interviewee said, “You always went to the good schools. Either Stanford, UC-Berkeley, or out of state.” His statement demonstrates the unwritten expectations that the Japanese community had of their children.

Also applicable in the documentary was how whites and blacks perceived Asian Americans. One quote that Tanaka included was from a newspaper article from the 1960s, “If you scratch a Jap, underneath you will find a WASP.” This clearly highlights the “whitening” of Asian Americans in the eyes of mainstream society. In this time period, studies were being done about Asian assimilation. Socioeconomic achievements were being equated with their successful assimilation into white society. A generation of Asian Americans was completing college and getting good professional jobs. Tanaka highlights a newly forming division between Asians and blacks during this time period. Asian Americans’ economic and professional success began to create preferential treatment by whites. One interviewee shares: “We always lived right next to each other, us and the blacks. One thing I noticed was that when the black kids would play in the street and the cops would drive by, they would stop. The police never bothered us.” This preferential treatment of Asians was new in the 1960s. They had been segregated from the white world during WWII and the 1950s. Asian Americans did not publicly, in numbers, join the Civil Rights Movement. This separated them even more from the Blacks. I argue that the “model minority” stereotype is the root of this separation between blacks and Asian Americans.

The marginalization for Asian Americans became more apparent in this era. Another vignette from the documentary:

I stopped at a McDonald's in Mississippi and there were two lines, one for whites and the other for blacks, well 'coloreds.' I stood there confused about which line to join. I stood there and decided to go in the colored line because there was nobody in it and I could get my food faster. When I got up to the counter the guy told me "hey you can't use this line, get in that other line." The line for whites was long and I had gone about halfway up when this guy says, "Hey, you can't be in this line, get in the other line." I just stood there and thought, 'AHHH WHAT AM I!?'²

The rejection from whites as well other minority groups leaves Asian Americans scratching their heads trying to figure out where they belong in this country. The answer to the question of where Asian Americans fit in the U.S. lies in the complexity of the "model minority" stereotype.

Tanaka's documentary is closer to my research, and seeks to address in how white agency is established and individuals are being given voice. Japanese Americans were given the chance to share their stories, and discrimination was aired out in the open. She linked the discrimination to the drug abuse and suicide rate within the Nisei and Sansei generations. I am broadening the scope to Asian Americans of all ethnic groups and theorize that white racism is a powerfully oppressive factor in the lives of Asian Americans, regardless of their age, gender, ethnic affiliation, geographic region, socioeconomic status, ability to speak English, educational attainment, and professional classification.

Methodology

I used a snowball sampling technique (Hesse-Biber 2003) to collect my data from December 2005 to January 2007. I conducted thirty-six interviews with Asian Americans. The respondents self-identify as: nine Chinese, six Taiwanese, one Filipino, five Asian Indian, two Pakistani, three Korean, two Vietnamese, three Japanese,³ two

Hmong, one Thai, and two as multi-racial Asian.⁴ Twenty-one of the interviewees are women, and fifteen are men. In my attempt to capture diverse Asian American experience, my respondents were selected from different geographical regions. Twelve of my respondents reside in the Southwest, four in the Northeast, seven in the Deep South, eleven in the West Coast (California, Oregon, and Washington), and two from the Midwest. The age range of the respondents was 18 – 69, with an average age of 36. Thirty have college degrees, with eighteen of the thirty holding advanced degrees. Of the five without college degrees, two were currently enrolled in college and one had college experience but did not complete her degree when she immigrated to the US. All but five of my interviewees self-reported as being middle- to upper-class. The first six interview participants were located by word of mouth and through websites for Asian community organizations and student groups in the Southwest. After the completion of those interviews, respondents suggested potential interviewees and passed on their contact information. Meanwhile, to diversify my sample with respondents from other geographic regions in the US, I continued to make contacts via word of mouth, Asian American student group websites, and I posted on the public website, Craigslist,⁵ in three metropolitan cities with a heavily concentrated Asian American population. Candidates were informed by phone, e-mail, or in-person that I was studying Asian Americans and was interested in hearing them talk about their life experiences and memories. Almost everyone I asked was eager to participate in the study. The only hesitancy I encountered involved English skills, as one person I approached thought that I should talk to someone who felt more confident in their conversational skills.

In-person interviews were conducted in Texas, Florida, and North Carolina, at a specific location, date, and time of the respondents' choice. The majority of the in-person interviews were conducted in public meeting areas such as coffee shops, libraries, or restaurants. Five of the interviews occurred at the respondent's workplace. One interview that was a unique experience involved conducting it while tagging along with a director of a community center that started at her place of work, then to Kinko's, back to the community center, to the post office, and finally to a local eatery for some lunch. Sixteen interviews were in-person and the remaining twenty I conducted and recorded over the phone. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and three-and-a-half hours. Before each interview, informed consent and demographic information were collected. All but one interview was audio-taped. The tapes were later transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes. Pseudonyms were given to all respondents to conceal their identity, and some details have been omitted or replaced in quotes to ensure the anonymity of interview participants.

A number of open-ended questions were asked regarding their experiences as Asian Americans.⁶ I asked questions related to memories of racial identity and was especially interested in their thoughts on being accepted into American society and the "model minority" stereotype. I asked each interviewee about mistreatment, discrimination, and to recall specific instances of those events. I also asked the interviewees about their impression of how much progress had been made in the United States in terms of racial relations and their perspectives on the current state of Asian and non-Asian relations.

Summary of Findings

In the following chapter, discrimination in all forms is revealed. Not only are Asian Americans faced with blatant hate crimes from ignorant individuals; they also face racism of a clandestine nature. There is no place that they are safe from discrimination. These acts are occurring in their neighborhoods, at school, in the workplace, at the movie theaters, in retail shops, and on city sidewalks.

Chapter III details the costs of racism and the pressure to meet the expectations of the “model minority.” Psychologically, the interviewees are taxed by the threat of racism and work to defend themselves from the white racist frame, but they do so in an internal fashion. They rarely seek out help from family or friends to deal with racist incidents. When dealing with the burden they turn inward, blocking emotions and deleting memories. First and successive generation Asian Americans both find themselves struggling with their identities. First generation Asian Americans feel particularly isolated from white society. Successive generation respondents feel a part of both white America and Asian America, but sometimes part of neither.

Chapter IV details how conformity to the white racial frame works in two ways for the lives of Asian Americans. In one way, it is used as a method in hopes to prevent white racism. In another, conforming to the white racist frame is a consequence of being a victim of racism. Even if respondents claim that they have never experienced an act of discrimination, white exclusion can be sensed in the air through coded phrases and body language. They go to tremendous lengths to succeed in being the “solution minority”

and “strive for whiteness.” As a result of this conformity, respondents internalize hateful stereotypes about themselves and other people of color.

As revealed in Chapter V, there are Asian Americans in my research that succeeded in resisting against the white racist frame. They do this in overt, subtle, and covert ways. Respondents rarely directly confront perpetrators, and their resistance most often takes the form of rejecting white racist ideology. Rejecting the ideology does not guarantee action, as there is much at stake for people of color when they are outspoken against whites. When action is taken, it usually takes the shape of interviewees attempting to produce tangible and political change for themselves or others. Covertly, Asian Americans must be creative in measures that they take for group survival. To appeal to other Asian Americans, they may play into stereotypes to have the opportunity to educate about the history of Asian American oppression. Finally, respondents resisted in intimately personal ways against ideologies. They did not politicize their act of resistance for a greater good, just for their own peace of mind.

In the final chapter, I summarize my findings by comparing the life paths of two Asian Americans that share the same starting point, run parallel to each other, and then, over time, diverge in opposite directions when they have to decide on a strategy to take when they become face-to-face with the white racist frame. One chooses to conform and continue to whiten in hopes of eventual acceptance and sees white racism as unchangeable. The other decides to fight against individuals and structures, hopeful that her effort will change the world for the better. I also address what areas are in need of further research from the implications that have arisen from my analysis.

Notes

¹ Information taken from a local newspaper that is remaining unnamed to protect the anonymity of two respondents related to R.W. (Bridges 2001)

² Quote text in all capitals indicates that the respondent emphasized this point by raising their voice louder than a conversational tone.

³ One respondent spoke of being a multi-ethnic Japanese as he was half Japanese and half Okinawan. He asked to acknowledge his Okinawan heritage.

⁴ One multi-racial respondent was half Chinese and half Mexican American. The other was one-half Chinese, one-quarter white, and one-quarter Mexican American.

⁵ Craigslist is an online community site, akin to a newspaper's classified section.

⁶ A copy of the interview guide has been included in the Appendix.

CHAPTER II

DISCRIMINATION

On June 19, 1982, Chinese American Vincent Chin was having his bachelor party in a downtown Detroit bar (Tuan 2003). Thinking he was Japanese, two white men who had just recently been laid off at Chrysler, started a fight with Chin and beat him several times with a bat until he was brain dead. He died four days later. The two were fined \$3,000 and ordered to pay \$780 in court fees, but never served a day in jail. Disillusioned with the American legal system, Vincent's mother, Lily Chin, moved back to China after repeated attempts to bring her son's murderers to justice failed. More recently, in 1999, Benjamin Nathaniel Smith went on a shooting spree "hunting" minorities where four of his targets were Asian.¹

After the Civil Rights Movement, academic scholars began to assert that there was a decline in racial discrimination (Wilson 1978). Recent opinion surveys about whether African Americans face a great deal of discrimination and have equal opportunities to whites show great disparities in the answers between whites and African Americans. Feagin and McKinney (2003: 11) contend:

A substantial majority of white Americans are *greatly* out of touch with social reality when it comes to estimations of the difficult health care and economic conditions faced by African Americans. These whites are either ignorant of these disparate and discriminatory conditions or are unwilling to fully acknowledge that they exist.

What may add to this problem is how racism is viewed. White racism in America conjures up images of extremists in white robes and hoods as members of the Ku Klux Klan or militant neo-Nazi skinheads. Images of victims may invoke memories of bodies

left swinging in a tree after a lynching or black Civil Rights protestors being hosed and beaten by “backwards” Southerners. While these blatant forms of overt racism have not ceased, they are more infrequent. Associating these violent images to racism can mislead a person into thinking that racism is a thing of the past. Racism comes in many forms other than overtly violent hate crimes, and people of color suffer everyday. When thinking of racial discrimination, Asian Americans are often absent in the picture as targets of racial oppression. Even in the minds of Asian Americans.

This invisibility is due in part to the misleading financial and academic success of Asian Americans. This “model minority” stereotyping distracts from the discrimination that they face everyday. However, the increasing rate of hate crimes committed against Asians is not public knowledge. In the three months following the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, there were “nearly 250 bias-motivated incidents and two murders targeting Asian Pacific Americans” (NAPALC 2002). Hate crimes against Asian Americans still have not returned to the pre-9-11 level. More than hate crimes, Asian Americans face frequent and regular discrimination in their everyday lives, in school, at work, in their neighborhoods, when patronizing restaurants, and shopping in stores. They are not free from white racism.

These acts of discrimination lead to doubt and uncertainty as to what may really be going on. African Americans hold a collective history and share narratives to pass along to others, as lessons to the next generation or peer group, but the Asian Americans that I spoke with do not possess these collective memories. They lack preparation for discrimination and are ill equipped with how to deal with such events, because they

never considered themselves as potential targets of racism. I have organized the racist incidents from the most overt and blatantly obvious forms, to the dangerously hidden, pervasive events.

Hate Without Question

Of the thirty-six interview participants, I have five accounts from people who have experienced blatant acts of violent hate. The motive is clearly racial by the words and actions of the assailants. Ethan, a Chinese American graduate student who grew up in a mostly white environment was a victim of a hate crime at age twenty-three. Leading up to the day he was assaulted, he never considered himself a minority. He was walking downtown in his Southwest city after a night out on the town. The area is very public, even well into the early morning. Many members of law enforcement are present around this time of night, yet Ethan still experienced:

Around 2:30 am Friday morning, I was heading back to our car along with three friends . . . We stopped outside of a club to say hi to some of our friends . . . As I was waiting, a white SUV pulled up to the intersection and stopped near where I was standing. The driver and passenger shouted several racial epithets toward me including “chink” and I turned around to see where the remarks were coming from. I did not make any attempt to respond to this verbal attack. Fearful of a possible confrontation, I decided to quickly turn around and head back toward my group of friends. The passenger got out of the car and got out and runs at me. I turn around to look at what is happening and he sucker punches me. My front tooth was instantly knocked out, and my mouth began bleeding profusely. The witnesses that were around said that they continued the racial slurs at people in the group. Most of them were Asian, Asian Indian, South Asian, he continued the slurs and was heard saying “This might be a hate crime, but I don’t care.” As I was on the ground, I turned to look towards the car and saw the attacker run back to the car, get in, and speed off. At this point, my mouth was bleeding severely and my lips were swollen and cut from the trauma. Holding the tooth in my hand and unable to get up by myself, my friend helped me up, and someone in the group flagged down a police car that chased down the SUV. As far as this incident, this was on the other spectrum of what I had experienced, this was an extreme occurrence. I was shocked. I was angry. It was a serious injury, the

tooth was knocked out, they weren't sure they could save it, but they did. My gums were lacerated. He was 6' 3", 250lbs. and I am 5'9", 140lbs. I kept my tooth, but there is still long term damage.

Completely unprovoked, a complete stranger got out of his car and randomly selected Ethan as his target. Ethan overheard his attacker saying, "This might be a hate crime, but I don't care." White racism allows for this assailant to be almost carefree about his hate. Throughout US history, whites have been able to avoid consequences of their violence towards people of color (Feagin & Sikes 1994; Feagin 2006). The damage that Ethan endured was not solely delivered from the white man that yelled racial slurs and punched out his tooth, but also from the police that were supposed to serve and protect him from harm. Ethan felt the police left him helpless and he will have to carry the burden of those memories for the entirety of his lifetime:

Police arrived at the scene about 5 minutes later, took my information and called an ambulance. The police pulled them over, talked to the driver but did not make any arrests. They did note that there was blood on the passenger's fist...He did get the driver's license, but they were let go and not arrested. The [city police department] makes arrests all the time for public intoxication, but no arrest for this. The three witnesses who saw the assault positively identified the attacker, but no arrest was made at the scene. I don't know. One reason that I think may be a factor is race. I am not sure. I think it was handled poorly in general. The first step is that it made me lose confidence in the police and D.A. No arrest being made and it was difficult to get the witnesses to I.D. him to issue an arrest warrant. It was extremely difficult to get the witnesses to go to the local police dept. They were all South Asian witnesses. Yet, it was difficult to get them to the police . . . It was very difficult for me to get a warrant. The most important lessons I learned was that when dealing with the justice system they will be very disappointing. I thought this incident would be taken seriously as it was unprovoked and racially motivated. There were no results.

Ethan lost faith in a public agency that he was confident would assist him in time of need. He struggles to call the poor work of the police racist, as he thinks "maybe" his race had something to do with it. People of color are often discriminated against within

the entire legal system and Ethan was no exception (Feagin 2006). Equally baffling to him was the fact that other Asian Americans were unwilling to help him through this event. Ethan assumed that the racially motivated nature of the crime would serve as a motivator for the other Asian American witnesses to help out in the investigation, but this was not the case.

While collective memory that is shared by African Americans can increase racially related stress for individuals, it is also used as a “critical resource” to deal with white racism (Feagin & McKinney 2003). The shared collective memory plays a “central role in the maintenance and development of group pride and community solidarity” (Feagin & McKinney 2003), but Asian Americans lack such a collective memory of racial discrimination. Ethan “expected” the witnesses to understand and empathize with his experience, but they were not eager to help. He even had to call one witness 30 times to try to get him to fill out a statement. Ethan continues:

I am reasonably educated, graduated from [a university]. I can't see how someone without resources or education could handle all of this. My parents were there to help. I was able to see a plastic surgeon the next day. I had all these resources and help to navigate through the criminal justice system. The Multicultural Center director was a big help. I didn't even know that the center existed if that tells you how little I knew about the Asian American community at school I don't know what someone would do if they didn't know where to look and were unaware of the resources. Most people are not aware. It could have been easy to give up...I talked to the assistant D.A. 6 months ago to express my disappointment and nothing has been done, it's been meaningless because they are not actively looking for him. It's been a year. Anything short of a murder, they aren't gonna act. I had to do this work all on my own. My parents couldn't help, even though they came here for graduate school, their English isn't; they can't communicate as effectively as I could have to the D.A. So, I handled all of this myself, my parents provided financial and emotional support. Others couldn't do it. It's horrible. Nothing's been done. He basically got away with it. The boldness of his actions is a signal that something like this will happen again. He could possibly kill someone.

After being the victim of this hate crime, Ethan was re-victimized by the very system in place to help him. Ethan never believed that racism existed before this event, at least “not against Asian Americans.” After this, he questioned whether a white person would experience the same cold response from the police and the district attorney. Ethan brings up a good point that he was able to utilize his middle-class status and his educational attainment to help him navigate through all the bureaucracy and red tape of the legal system. He also had access to community and university resources that many victims of hate crimes do not.

Bari, an Asian Indian international graduate student, who has been in the US since 2000, had a similarly jarring experience while he was riding his bike one evening on his way home from campus. It was his usual route that he takes home along a major road on the edge of campus when two white men drove by and assaulted him:

I was riding my bike until he came in a big white van and hit me with a baseball bat and took off. And he called me names and stuff. They called me “fucking foreigner” and laughed at me and called me other things. And, it changed the way I looked at [name of city] drastically.

Bari was knocked off his bike and suffered cuts and bruises from the fall, and damage to his left ear from the blow from the bat. This is another example of an act of violence that was completely unprovoked. Bari had a Hollywood ideal of the United States before he moved here but that changed when he began his undergraduate degree in the Midwest. It only worsened when he moved to the Southwest for his graduate degree. Already feeling like an outsider, this event has shaped his decision about staying in the US, “I don’t really want to stay here. Not that I wanted to be here before, but it

gives even more reason to leave. And I cannot [stay] with how people view race and the racism and discrimination.”

Bari’s experience has been traumatic. It could be argued that this discriminatory event could be a question of citizenship (Wu 2003), rather than race, but I assert that this event is racialized. The surface level interaction would make it impossible for the attacker to differentiate since he could only see skin color. Citizenship cannot be determined while driving by at forty miles per hour. These events were happening in an area where over a six-month period five Asian international students were victimized and no white international students.

Ginzi, a Chinese American, grew up in a large urban city in New England with a large Asian population and commented, “I didn’t have a lot of friends at all. I’m pretty much isolated here. There’s a lot of racism. Like people threw rocks at me on the street where I lived...and would try and beat me up, jump me on the street.” White racism is often associated with the Deep South, but my interviews proved that regardless of the geographical location, racism was omni-present.

Mr. and Mrs. Suri are a Pakistani couple who shared stories about the community of fellow Pakistanis and also Asian Indians who have seen a dramatic rise in discrimination post 9-11. White assailants cannot tell them apart from the media image they have of a terrorist extremist. Both are practicing Muslims. Mr. Suri shared this story about an acquaintance in his community:

Indian people...they look exactly the same [to whites]. You see them, you can’t tell the difference, but I will know the difference when you look, but color wise you don’t see any difference. And that’s what happened...they wear the turban – as part of the tradition they wear always. Not like Muslims. The Muslims they

do not have to wear it, but they wear it; and, he was killed by someone here in the US because he was wearing it and the person thought he was a Muslim.

Mr. Suri thought that such acts were the product of “American ignorance” and that most citizens were merely poorly informed by the television. His wife added, “They [whites] don’t see it. They don’t think. They see the same color. A lot of people die like this.” It is a costly ignorance, where the price of such lack of information costs human lives. The Suris also added that one of their close friends had his store set on fire, yet, they are still grateful and appreciative to be in the United States. The Suris have a complicated relationship with their new home country and may not see the pervasiveness of white racism, but they feel the hostility. Whether ignorance or racial prejudice is at the root of these events, the threat is real. Mrs. Suri added this story:

After Sept 11th in [the West Coast], somebody left a message on the answering machine, “You Islamic people go back to Islam.” And that was kind of scary, but at the same time kind of funny. Okay, just where is Islam? There you go. People didn’t know that Islam isn’t a place. It’s a religion. So like people didn’t know like should we laugh or should we say...

At this point in the interview, the Suris were “on a roll” to share these experiences of discrimination, yet they continued to come back to the point that they were so glad to be part of the United States. Asian Americans often times feel caught, or marginalized. They benefit financially and educationally from the opportunities of the free market and public education, but may have given up being more financially secure in their homelands. The Suris spoke of being opulently wealthy in Pakistan and had given all that up to be in the United States. Mrs. Suri was especially appreciative of her freedoms as a woman living in the US as opposed to living in Pakistan.

From a young age, Ginzi always felt the sting of racism by being incessantly taunted and harassed, but the other respondents all had faith that they would be protected by the tenets of democracy – freedom, equality, liberty, and justice. Ethan came to realize that even as an American born citizen, his race trumped his citizenship. Bari's American dream ended up as a nightmare. The Suris live in fear and now try to hide their religious affiliation. They may not be as far along as other Asian Americans in terms of racial awareness and identity (Kim 2001) but Bari, Ginzi, and Ethan have reached that point. After being the victim of the hate crime, Ethan said most poignantly, "I learned about how things truly are in the real world."

School: Learning Your Place in the Racial Hierarchy

Asian Americans are synonymous with academic excellence as their scores on standardized tests and college enrollment levels are unparalleled with all other racial groups, including whites (Sue and Zane 1985; Xu et al. 1993). One study found that whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans thought that Asian Americans were perceived superior to whites in college preparedness, motivation, and expectations of future career success (Wong et al. 1998). These perceptions come at a price, as Asian American students are painted as robotic overachievers in the classroom that leave something to be desired on a social level. Their levels of participation in sports, student government, and clubs when compared to their white counterparts may not be as extensive, but that may not be for a lack of trying. All-white spaces may be uninviting or outright hostile, keeping those Asian American students from wanting to participate (Moore 2007). In addition to exclusion, these students have to endure blatant

acts of racism in their schooling environments. Several respondents normalized this racial teasing as a “fact of young or adolescent life.” The language used to describe their school experiences implied that respondents had a standard level of discrimination or racial teasing that they found acceptable, but this incessant barrage of mistreatment drove many of the respondents to choose all or mostly Asian friend groups, but they lacked the language to discuss what may have influenced that decision.

Racism as “Elementary”

Sociologists argue that children are not born racist, but rather they learn racist ideals as they are socialized into a racist society. As children begin daycare and schooling, they are introduced to socialization among peer groups. Children’s behavior is often excused, as they are still developing and often still slip and fall in the realm of social behavior, but the assumption that racist comments are innocuous can be incorrect. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) assert, “Perhaps the strongest evidence of white adults’ conceptual bias is seen in the assumption that children experience life events in some naïve or guileless way.” Children may be re-playing or mimicking adult behavior, but that does not mean they do not understand and use racial insults for power and status. Children “perpetuate and re-create the structures of race and ethnicity not only in society, but also in their social minds and psyches” (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). For Asian American children, when they are the targets of racial insults there is an impression that is left in their minds. Early on, they are learning their place in the racial hierarchy as white children exercise their power from the top. Charlotte was the only

Asian American in her school and dealt with the onslaught of insults everyday from her white classmates:

I remember in 5th grade specifically...I went home every single day in tears because people made fun of me every day. And it probably didn't help that I didn't have siblings. I wasn't particularly tough at all. But, I would go home every day in tears because I just felt different and somebody made fun of me...I felt that I was inadequate and unable to do anything because I was Asian. It was just the little things that kids would say. I can't think of anything specifically, but I know they would say it and I would be well aware of the fact that I was different from them.

Charlotte learned to cope with the treatment in an unhealthy manner discussed in the next chapter, but the taunting was clearly racialized; even though she cannot remember the specific details, the pain of the memories remain. Charlotte even shared that she was cognizant of being at the "bottom of the pecking order" beneath whites, blacks, and Hispanics.

For Helena, a Korean American, she always felt like an outsider because of her race and academic achievement. White classmates made school very hard:

I'm really smart, um I took some IQ tests in kindergarten and they promoted me to first grade. I was actually a year behind everyone, so I was younger. So I felt weird because I was younger . . . I never quite fit in so, everybody had their own friends already and then there was just me and then and you know at least I didn't have a Korean accent, then it would have probably been even worse, and then I was smarter than everyone too. There was a couple times when I was growing up, they would say, and you know they were girls, saying stuff, "You are just too smart. I hate you!" That kind of stuff, but it made an impact over time, when all you hear is the negative instead of the positive, so I always felt like the outsider and I was teased for just being Asian. The pulling the eyes down, they always thought I was Chinese...

When discussing these events, Helena had a difficult time making eye contact. She kept her head down and spoke softly, crying a few times as she recounted these painful memories from over twenty years ago. She was not accepted for being the smart,

overachieving student. Instead, she was ostracized for her intelligence and Asian identity. Helena fit the “model minority” myth because she was a stand out student. Frank Wu (2003: 59) explains that the myth is important because it “is useful, even if it is not true. Its content assuages the conscience and assigns blame, a function that is psychologically needed and socially desired.” Wu never clarifies whom the myth is useful for, as he avoids naming “whites” as the culprit. In Helena’s case, whites used the traits associated with the “model minority” to torment her.

Phan, a Vietnamese American, endured similar ridicule with name-calling from her white classmates daily. Lunchtime became a nerve-wracking affair, as it was something that left her feeling foreign:

The kids were very, I guess they probably thought I was really different. I mean, I remember them making fun of my food. Like all the food I brought from home— my friends wouldn’t eat it. You know, my parents weren’t rich or anything, and they were working class, so my mom would make me this sandwich every day. And it was this pork patty sandwich. Which is just really nasty. It was two pieces of bread, sliced pork, and then onions and hot sauce. Which is a very odd thing for some 5-year-old kid to be eating. Everyone else has PBJ sandwiches and I get like pork patty, meat, and hot sauce. Which really makes your breath smell good, I imagine. I hated it and I had it every single day. And I was the only one. I stopped eating at one point, and my mother was wondering why I did it. Because it made me nauseous, and I got really so [self] conscious that’s all I got to eat.

The power of this discrimination is that a five-year-old is choosing to not eat her lunch for fear of ridicule from her classmates. She makes a reference to her socio-economic class as to a reason that she was given the pork sandwich, but the white children’s peanut butter and jelly is not an expensive grocery menu item. The “strangeness” was rooted in the choice of food that was indicative of her Vietnamese heritage or lack of knowledge in normalized American lunch items, not how much money her parents made.

Eve first identified herself to me as an Asian American. While in the interview she revealed that she was half Chinese, one-quarter white, and one-quarter Mexican American. She grew up in a large metropolitan area that was very diverse. She attributed the problems she faced in school to the fact that she had always been different, but not because of her race. When asked if she could recall racial memories from school she responded:

No...yeah...no, I went to an all white high school. It's a private school and it was fine. Then in middle school, I went to private school and it was all white. I was a loner. I was an awkward kid. Elementary was fine and then middle school. It's been fine. I am awkward and weird and people like me because I'm awkward and weird, that's what I hear.

It was notable that Eve swayed back and forth with her initial response about racial memories, changing her response between "no" and "yes." She just was not sure as to why she was treated differently. She shared that middle school was "rough" and because of this, her mother placed her in private school. When I inquired about what was challenging in middle school, she shared that white students were giving her a hard time.

I was sent there because my mom said I got into too many fights in middle school. She didn't like public school, actually, kids wanted to pick on me because they thought I was some other girl. It was odd, I was walking home one day and someone was like, "Oh do you remember the other day?" And I'd be like, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about!" Then she'd start beating me up and I have all this rage now. It happened another time and I'm like, "I'm not this girl." Everyone thought we looked alike.

Eve was confused with a Mexican American schoolmate. Whites as the dominant race in the United States do not need to take the time to differentiate people of color. Minorities are often plagued with being overlooked by whites that carelessly believe that that they often "all look alike." Eve's classmates could not differentiate a person who

was wholly Mexican American from someone who was one-quarter. Eve's reality is that these events are isolated and circumstantial, with no link to her race. Her comments sounded quite similar to the beliefs that Ethan held dear before he was assaulted.

Alice, a third generation (Sansei) Japanese American from the West Coast had many memories of her schooling from elementary to university level.² The more overt racist acts seemed to happen earlier in life, but she was very cognizant of her place in the racial order throughout her schooling and into her professional career. She discussed elementary school:

Um, well, you know for me personally, I remember, we were – our school, we got bussed. So we paid for a bus to pick us up – I guess my parents did. And they bussed us from all these different parts of [the city]. One time, there were eggs thrown at the bus by some black kids. I think this is like after the riots – maybe '66, '67, somewhere in there. And then another time, which was more dangerous, a bottle was actually was thrown through the bus and the bus driver got very nervous about it. So he kind of stepped through, made sure all the kids were okay. Which we were, and we continued from that.

Alice was in a precarious position as racial tension was at its peak because of the riots.

Race relations were at a boiling point and volatility was widespread. Japanese Americans were being used as a weapon against African Americans (Prashad 2003) and civil rights. Formerly in line with African Americans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy or continuum, Asian Americans were distancing themselves from blacks. These environmental factors pitted African Americans and Asian Americans against each other, where they formerly co-existed peacefully (Tanaka 1999). Alice did not hold any animosity towards the black kids that threw things at her bus, as she understood the complexities of the racial order.

Higher “Hierarchy” Education

As respondents moved from elementary, middle, and high school to college and university education, discrimination did not wane as their white peers developed into adults. The biological maturation process does not create a natural progression to racial equality. In fact, some of the racial stereotyping that respondents experienced in college seemed quite reminiscent of grammar school. Richa, an Asian Indian graduate student, spoke of an incident at her Southwest university:

I've heard from a lot of people, Indian students who are doing engineering, there are sometimes, you know in the architecture department if there's an Indian student who just cooked and then gone to the office and he's smelling like curry, professors have actually singled people out and told them, “why don't you shower?” And “why don't you spray some cologne or something before you come to class because you smell like curry all the time,” and I found that very funny, but at the same time, very demeaning as well. I wasn't aware of this until very recently, about a year ago, when I heard it through somebody that this is how Indians were characterized that we smell like curry. You know, there's no way you can react to that besides saying that it's a very weird stereotype.

Richa wants to laugh at the absurdity of the stereotype, but also recognizes the implicit insult in it. The white professor was able to make a strong impression on his classroom that it was ok to say these things about Asian Indians. Demeaning stereotypes about people of color being dirty and smelly are not new and this professor perpetuated it in his classroom of higher learning.

Alice had difficulty with racial tension with whites since she began school. This trend continued at her university:

It would be really hard to have Caucasian friends because they don't want to have anything to do with you . . . most Caucasians at that time again, because we were so much better than the sororities thing and the fraternity thing, a lot of times I get really resentful, because what they would do to get a ticket in a football game, you had to be in a rush line, and this was before lotteries and anything. And what they

would do is they would save like 1,000 seats even though you get there at the crack of dawn, they would interject the rest of the sorority, and then all of sudden if you were second in line, you would be like 100th because all these people would cut in line ahead of you. And they seemed to have a certain clout and be much more a part of student government and all of that. And you know, I stayed there 6 years. I got my Masters there too. And by the time I got my Masters, I think I had – even the teachers told me, you know, you have a lot to add. You can't be afraid to say what you think. And that was such a novel concept because even in high school – all girl's Catholic school – and so there's a lot of discussion in class and you felt comfortable because it's all girls and we're all sort of in the same boat. But when you get into a white environment, I rarely did anything else like participated in class...because all the previous exposure I had to white people were none too pretty...so it was a point of view of white people.

Alice speaks of a “white environment” that debilitated her when she was in the classroom. White privilege does not force whites to consider what the milieu might be in an all-white environment that may seem hostile to people of color, or whites may purposely want to keep outsiders at bay. When asked to explain why the whites at her university felt as if it were okay to skip them in line she responded:

They knew Asians really wouldn't do anything. I mean now it's different, but back then in the early 70s, 60s, Asians were seen as kind of docile and then it was true. Why would you go and hassle when there's a majority, so, we were taken advantage of, so it was more they just pushed their way in line and you just knew that's what they were going to do, and nothing you could do or say would prevent it, because there was just too many of them. So, like okay, that's the power structure there, and you began to understand that's how it works.

Interestingly, Alice claims that now things are “different,” but throughout the interview she shared of incidents in her present life that still show that she is an outsider. No longer in school, Alice faced and faces discrimination in work and in her very own neighborhood. Also noteworthy is that she uses the past tense, “were” when referring to the Asian stereotype that they are seen as “docile.” This stereotype is alive and well in 2007.

Alice had become adept in reading the “cues” from whites and shared again about her college experience:

The cues were obviously these girls that came from [affluent city] and really wealthy areas of [city in which college lies], they kind of snubbed their nose at people like me, who really were working their way through college and didn't have a lot of money for nice clothes, and you know, they always have the nice designer boutique clothes, and we just had jeans and t-shirts. And actually the Asians, there were a couple of clumps of places in the library where Asians would hang out, and it we knew that the white folks would give us weird looks, but there wasn't any huge confrontation about it. But we know about the rules – sometimes we would hear comment, “Oh, those people, dudududu – those state supported people on scholarship.”

The discrimination is coded and intersected with class. Alice and her other Asian friends were not fooled by the code and knew that the socioeconomic language was just a cover up for racial prejudice. Whites have become incredibly skilled at talking “nasty about minorities without sounding racist” (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Being overly helpful to a minority as if they are incompetent and unable to help themselves is also problematic. Violet, a multi-racial Asian American from the West Coast, was a member of one of the few Asian American families in her town.³ The largest group of minorities in the town is Mexican American. The whites associate the Mexican Americans with performing migrant farming and negatively stereotype them as being “lazy” and on “welfare.” Because Violet was not “awarded” her own racial identity in the town, she felt a great deal of invisibility and was often grouped with the Mexican Americans at her school. The Mexican Americans at her school did not have the reputation of academic achievement. A counselor at her school was attempting to “reach out” and help underserved minorities, but ended up insulting them:

She gave these really condescending spiels about how minorities have a lower, Higher education rate and how she wanted to change that – single handedly, I guess – and it’s really bad. And so we were going to get to spend a whole day, we got to miss school, and it was just really horrible. I was fuming at this point because she made it sound like we didn’t know how to read or write. And then I asked her – I told her, “Are you kidding me? This is ridiculous!” And she goes, “Oh Violet, don’t worry. You’re going to get a free lunch.” And I just got angry. I looked around. I knew another girl in there. She’d gotten into an Ivy League school. We couldn’t believe what she was doing – our dumb counselor. So we got up, left, I was so mad. She was angry that I left and embarrassed her in front of the counselors.

Violet resisted against her white counselor, as she felt insulted to have to go through with the day trip. Her protests were not taken seriously and her counselor honestly did not even realize why Violet, or any of the other students, might be insulted by this “gesture.” The offer of a free meal should have been enough for Violet to shut her mouth and be appreciative. This counselor showed no understanding of the institutional and structural obstacles that the students may be facing.

Violet went on to a large prestigious university and then eventually law school. In law school, she became the president of an Asian law society. Her organization was inclusive of all races. Two of the club members realized student representatives that were being hired were all white. She commented, “...it was especially surprising because law school is really diverse and no one is really blatantly racist at all, or even covertly so.” Violet found it hard to believe that this would happen at her school, showing her naiveté about the existence of systemic racism.

Jessica had a similar experience at her prestigious southern university. She is a member of Asian American student group that wrote a report about the state of Asian Americans on campus. One obvious discrepancy for the university that is almost 20 percent Asian American was that there was no representation in the student government.

After the report was released, the administration and students opposed to the findings contended that the white students represent their interests. About this reply, Jessica commented:

But who says they represent the student body, because they DON'T. I mean, there's been one Asian American president in the whole history of student government. One. Our population is very great. There's a reason why Asian Americans are not represented there, because they don't want to be here. That's just the way it is, right? And, yeah, whatever... I mean then let's break it down by ethnicity and see how well represented we are. I mean, come on, where are the Thai students, where are the Bangladeshi students, where are the Laotian and Cambodian students. Where are they? They're not here, and there's a reason. Why don't we look into that? But we don't, because our failures are masked by the failures of other ethnicities, and it's pathetic that that's what the university shows us. "Look, you know, we're doing our part, we're catering to your community. Look how many students apply and attend this university." Skewed numbers, fuzziness.

Jessica is notably skeptical of what the officials at the university are citing as reasons for the lack of involvement by Asian Americans in student government. Jessica keys in on "white space" as Alice did earlier. The lack of representation in the student government had more to do with an exclusive "white space" and more obvious lack of success of other people of color. She continues to share opinion as to why there is little involvement:

It's not inclusive space, so the students that are in student government, I mean if we break down the students of color that are in student government that actively work within their communities and are a part of their respective communities, it's few and far between those who are stars, it's so commendable, but it shouldn't be that way. It should be that there is a link between student government and students of color, but it's not. It's very hard to find these students, and it's by chance . . . they are traditionally, historically white, privileged groups . . . just running for student government, It requires like thousands of dollars you have to raise. This is ridiculous. This is student organization. This is student agency. Why do they have to raise thousands of dollars to put people into office? That automatically puts people out of the race. I mean, there is so much privilege that comes with being able to run...

Throughout the history of the United States, political structures have been racist and elitist in order to keep the government affluent and white (Feagin 2006). White government officials then have the power to reproduce these same structures of inequality in the schools, making the toll of social inequalities inescapable. White students then benefit from attending schools with more resources, score higher on standardized tests catered to them, move onto more prestigious universities, then enter the workforce earning higher salaries and positions. The cycle of inequality continues, as does the cycle of oppression. Asian Americans are seemingly entering into this white world with high rates of educational attainment, but they are still road blocked as Jessica pointed out.

These narratives about school discrimination vary in severity and type, but all were painful to remember for the respondents. Memories from decades past still evoke heavy emotions that are re-lived in telling the stories. Time is not the remedy to healing these wounds. The collection of racial memories is cumulating at this stage in life only to continue to grow into another phase of life as Asian Americans begin jobs and careers. These places serve as another forum in which to endure racism.

Workplace Discrimination

Another area in which Asians are deemed successful is in professional careers. Not only do Asians perform well in school, they choose lucrative professions such as engineering, law, natural sciences, medicine, and computer sciences. These stereotypes mask the unemployment and poverty rates of Asian Americans that may be Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Bangladeshi, Laotian, or Hmong (US Census 2000). Not only do these

stereotypes hide the socioeconomic hardships of “collective black” Asian Americans, but they also create the assumption that work in the professional realm for “honorary white” Asian Americans is problem free (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The schoolyard “typical kid stuff” of hurling racial insults can no longer be used as the reason that Asian Americans endure racial epithets and oppression, because the mistreatment continues into adulthood. Being surrounded by adults in the workplace does not save Asian Americans from discrimination at work.

Everyday Workplace Racism

Mei, who emigrated in 1978 from Taiwan, has endured a culmination of many years of racism. A cashier at a university health clinic, she was candid and stated with certainty that her white supervisors discriminate against her daily because of her Asian heritage. She has been an employee there for nine years and her supervisors say that her language skills are lacking, but she has been in the US for almost thirty years and if they did not notice her accent when they hired her nine years ago, it could not have gotten worse over time. The students never complain about her English, only her supervisors. Matters of billing often cause conflict for Mei. She will find mistakes in the billing and try to correct them for the customers, but her supervisors snap at her. Mei was very scared to talk to me, believing that her employers would find out and that she would be fired. After I explained that her identity would not be revealed, she became more at ease. Mei discusses her treatment:

It's not really good idea to let people to know the ugly face at the Health Center now. I will be in real trouble now, I don't know how to say it. It's really hard. The first time I got here, it's ok, now, maybe I am foreign...it keeps getting worse and worse and worse and worse. Right now it's really worse. Probably in a

couple, I don't know, I probably will be losing my job pretty soon. When they ask me to do something, they don't really ask me. When they tell me to do something I have a question, "I say this is not really good idea to do it this way." But they say, "Well, if you, you have to listen to the supervisor." You know it's hard to talk to them, they think they are right. They think I am wrong, if I say anything, I am still wrong. No matter what, it's wrong. Even if I do the right thing, they still think I am wrong.

Mei lives in fear that she will be fired at any moment and is constantly stressed out that she cannot do anything right. The energy she is exerting in regards to her hostile work environment cumulates over time and is a cost that minorities must pay at the hands of white racism (Feagin 1998). For months after the interview I continued to receive phone calls from her saying that things at work were unbearable and asking me if there was anything I could do to help her. I directed her to a website that the university had developed for reporting bias and hate on campus.

Henry emigrated from South China in the late 1940s to a major West Coast city. He was 10-years-old and suffered miserably through high school as the only Asian in the school. He was picked on relentlessly and then attempted to join the workforce. It was difficult for him to find suitable work, and he claims that he was turned down just because of his race. When he finally found a menial job, it was not a stable one and he switched trades twenty-eight times. He spoke of his experience with white racism when he was a cabinetmaker:

If you are Asian, they always pick on you. It doesn't matter how good you are. I used to have a boss, and he would come to the shop and make fun of me, like talking in Chinese language. I would just walk away. If you say something, he would say, "I was just joking." I know he wasn't...I think whites get a lot of ideas from the movies they see and they pick that up. A lot of stuff they pick up from the Asian movies. The way Chinese carry the water buckets, the clothes they wear and their long ears. They use this, this is the way they insult you. You don't hear them making fun of the whites, do you? If you make fun of them,

then they will get angry. The whites. Why would a white do that to an Asian? They do that to insult you. Why do they want to make fun of you, because that's the way the culture is, because they want to make fun of Chinese culture because of the movies they see. Take the word "n-word" they banned that word, but they are still calling the Chinese, Chinamen.

Henry uses the word "culture" to describe white racism. Other respondents call it a "fact of life" but Henry frames it in a way that indicates that it is socially ingrained. Henry may be incorrect in the abolition of the "n-word," but he does have a point that it is clearly taboo to use the word that is hateful towards African Americans. His bigger point is that there has been no collective effort to ban the belittlement of Asians in the same vein. He has been ridiculed by both supervisors and co-workers, and has very little trust in whites to treat him as an equal. He eventually opened up his own business and shared, "We used to have a sign shop. I had it for 20 years. Just because you're Asian, they took advantage of you. I have been ripped off left and right. That's the way the world is." Henry is resigned to the fact that white racism is just a factual part of life. Alice's father suffered similar issues with his white boss when he worked in a furniture store.

My dad was reserved to this white guy that he had as a partner, and how that guy was the front guy for all these Asians – Japanese Americans that were building this furniture and the guy owned the furniture sales outlet, which was a storefront. And my dad always felt that the guy had cheated him, always talking about the "patty guy" who had screwed him, and all of that stuff.

Growing up, Alice would hear the stories from her father, but she was always one step removed from the problems with her father's boss. As she entered the workforce, she then found herself up against white racist employers:

We [Asians] were not even part of the equation. If I tried to go get even a secretarial job or an assistant job in the 70s, in fact I did. I went to [large media entertainment

corporation] and they said, "No." They were looking for a videotape librarian and I had worked 6 or 7 years in the LA public library system. And it was strange because they just said, "No." Then everyone tells me about the [company's] culture later. Very conservative and this and that. That's why one of the groups I supported early on and I worked for them as staff for 4 or 5 years of my career was Visual Communications because they were Asian American working to create Asian American media. And I just thought that was so important to do, so here with my Master's degree, I'm going to starve and work with these guys as a non-profit, but it was really a good experience.

Alice was unable to find work at a white owned and operated company and had to take a meager salary to find a workplace where she would be accepted. She went on to get her Ph.D. and began to teach at the university level, but even in academia she faced a new set of obstacles:

Being a female professor that is Asian, I think there is some statistic that they have a bias against you because you are women. You don't even need to open your mouth. There are some really good teachers out there, but because you're Asian, you're inscrutable, you don't joke around, you have your own style. It wasn't an easy way – an easy journey at all. And it's hard to find community. So, where do I go for food? Most of these small towns have no – Chinese food, but it's really bad. They don't have Korean food and they don't have Thai food.

In Alice's teaching experience, the "Dragon Lady" stereotype was evoked (Coughlin 1997). She could not be received as just another professor, but as an "inscrutable" one. A false assumption is that places of higher education will protect Asian Americans professors from racism (Lee 2003). Unfortunately for Alice, she had to get jobs in other parts of the country far from her West Coast home where she felt even more isolated. She was hard pressed to find adequate food to eat, and after a few years she gave up teaching to move back home.

The Suris own a computer business and Mr. Suri discussed how they were harassed because of their race:

It was still scary like anybody can come to us. A car would pull up, these people are going to think something and people can arrest you. That's scary also. Before, that was not happening. It was not like this. But, you know, it happened for a while. Sept 11th we were a business; we were dealing with business people making software. And you if you don't make good software, say your software is not working. And he [a customer] wrote an e-mail, "Oh, I'm going to tell the police you are terrorist, you are those people." I said, "Go ahead, do it. We are here legally. We are not here illegally. We came through proper channels. We are doing a business here. We are not stealing money here. So go ahead, go do it." That's what happened. That's people taking advantage of these things.

These so-called "business people" were using serious threats because they were dissatisfied with computer software. During the time period following September 11th, actual people were being rounded up and placed in prison, so this threat was very real to the Suris, regardless of their legal immigration status. Additionally, Mr. Suri had a friend that could not even get a job at the time. He commented, "But like, some jobs, I heard from a friend, he was telling me about them. His name is Mohammad. And before 9/11, he had a good job. After that, he applied many, many times, never got one. He changed his name to Mo – same week he got a job." What continued to amaze me was that after sharing all of these incidents with me, the Suris still found it difficult to call these acts racism.

The "Glass Ceiling"

Mylene, a Filipino American in the West Coast, had a difficult time calling incidents of mistreatment racism. Early on she disclosed that she also had rocks thrown at her school bus like Alice did, but has a strong sense of patriotism and claims to have not ever been discriminated against racially. As the interview continued and we discussed the career world, she changed her tune:

Uh, I hate to say it, but I think there is some prejudice against minorities in general by the Caucasian class. It's not organized, but I noticed that, all the presidents and all the top CEOs and executives are Caucasians. And that runs a big gamut. Caucasian can be Jews, German, Canada, so that's a big field. You say Caucasian and that could mean anything. I feel that many of us Asians and minorities in general, are held back at a certain level because there's this thing called, "Good 'ole Boys Club." They will keep their people, in, and keep whoever's not their kind, out. And that's a fact even though that's not written in stone. That still happens. And even though I'm happy to be an American no matter what, I still feel that when they say "Equal Opportunity for All," it's not necessarily true...I've seen it, I see it, I know it. And sometimes when you go interview, and sometimes you feel like, "do I even have a chance against all these other smart, these other Caucasians and what not?" But still, the higher jobs will go to the Caucasians. Nothing against them, but...you can have a coach who is a minority, but somebody on top will be a Caucasian. Nothing that I would have, but that's the way it is. I guess if you were in another country like China, then [the CEO] will be Chinese. If you were in Africa, the CEO will be African, Philippines, the CEO will be Filipino. So, I guess when you get to America, there's just more American – Caucasians, which is natural, you will have Caucasian. But I guess a lot of people just don't see that. They think it's still racial prejudice. That's just my opinion. I like to read a lot. I see it. But it doesn't matter to me. I got my job and I'm happy helping family.

Mylene was nervous to speak openly about the "glass ceiling" as she "hated" to share her thoughts about whites, but she becomes confident enough to claim a racial disparity, but then works hard to excuse the lack of representation of minorities. Even more interesting that while she is explaining that other countries have natives as CEOs of their corporations, she equates Americans with Caucasians, discounting her own citizenship and the existence of other people of color that are also American, but are not represented in the CEO ranks.

Frank, a Korean American in the tech industry had similar thoughts similar to Mylene's. He began the interview praising his ability to conform to the white racial frame, touting that he "thinks white" and denying any racial injustices. Just as Mylene changed her tune, so did Frank:

Once when I was at the lower management area and I kept on climbing to upper management. At the time, I reached the vice-president position, and I was competing with a white person. I felt something, but I kind of discounted it. And also I accept my Asian heritage as a handicap. I accepted it as a fact of life. I didn't look at it as any other issue. As you go up the corporate level, and when you get to the vice-president level, the number of people who occupy that position of CEO or DOO or CCO level, I find is mostly white people, and I was the only one – Asian guy – who's occupying one of those positions. Also another experience I had was when I went on a business trip to [Midwestern City], I was working for what they call an industrial company . . . and I went over there representing a division [for a West Coast City], and I was wearing a normal suit with white shirt with a tie on it, and I went to the cafeteria, and I was shocked because almost 99% were white people and a sprinkle of African Americans. And I was lining up to get some food. I was the only Oriental guy with a white shirt and neck tie on the line. And everyone was, I thought was looking at me. They treated me very, very nice, but I did feel something. Then I knew the Midwest was very different. And when I started my own venture company, and I went to meet people on the East Coast –[corporation name] people over there, they – city in [Midwest]– when I went in there I felt the same thing. Almost every upper position was occupied by a white person.

Frank noticed the novelty of his position in upper management and standing out in the quote is his use of the word “handicap” to describe his Asian heritage. This handicap does not leave him many hopeful options to change his situation. He also used geography as a variable, saying that the East Coast and Midwest were quite different as he seemed to be the one and only Asian employee, but geography could not be used to explain the upper management problem that was also an issue in the West Coast. What did become more apparent in the Midwest was the absence of employees that were people of color. When asked what he thought might be the cause of the lack of Asian Americans in management positions, he responded:

I think the main thing is that even whether you are very capable or very well educated, there is always a white person who is equally as well educated and what I call capable. And it seems like Asians have to do a little more than a white person does. They have to have a little different more edge to become, to get that kind of decision-making process position.

Frank identified the need for minorities to be standout performers in order to obtain a position by default (Feagin & Sikes 1994). Asian Americans are seeing a “lower returns” on their educational attainment than whites controlling for “language problems,”⁴ and there is “no consensus on the reason for, or explanation of, the barriers” (Woo 2000). Frank commented that it is the lack of representation of Asian Americans in the public eye that explains the disparity. He reasoned that Asian women on television made it only because “they appeal to white male. Sex appeal.” Frank is keen on the fact that Asian women serve the sexual fantasies of white men, and thus are strategically placed in the media (Coughlin 1997).

Amrita, an Asian Indian American, was successful in reaching an upper level management job at a large tech corporation. She was caught in an emotional jam when outsourcing of tech support jobs from her corporation were moved to India. Problems had begun to arise with the change and many meetings were held to address the issue.

Amrita discussed the process:

We had moved a lot of our call center work to India, and we were having some problems. This has been published in the newspapers and stuff like that. And, where, you know, being employees, their language, the way they talked, people were not able to understand them, a lot of satisfaction issues. But what was interesting to me was that a lot of the decisions and the key strategies and the leadership was here in [city in the Southwest]. We had some leaders in India, but you know pretty much looking from direction of [the city] because of protocol central. And I was part of a lot of the discussions and meetings and things like that. I remember being the only Indian person in the room, right? I think what was interesting was that we were talking about India and Indians and I have to say it’s hard when you’re talking about personal attributes, personally their language is not well understood, or whatever it is, I have to say that I did feel like, maybe there should be more Indian people in the room. Similar to when we are doing business in China, you just feel like, why am I the only Indian person? Maybe there needs to be an Indian voice. More Indian people kind of saying hey what’s going from their end? And I know that [the

corporation] has come a long way and changed a lot of facts, but I think there's a big opportunity – just my perspective – to companies in general...to make sure they have a good mix of people or their customers in their own groups, that they're going to, you know, if they're doing business in China, it's a good idea to have a good mix of Chinese executives and managers and employees, right, to give you the right perspectives.

To help with this lack of representation, Amrita joined a task force to diversify the leadership ranks and encourage Asian Americans in the company to pursue management positions. Unfortunately, task forces such as these may look like concerted effort on the surface, but that may not change hiring practices (Woo 2000).

As we have seen in these vignettes, discrimination does not only come in the form of direct confrontation, but by barriers being instituted in “good old boy” networks that keep Asian Americans from managerial positions. Whites maintain their positions of power. Lin, a Chinese American, does an excellent job explaining why Asian Americans are halted by the “glass ceiling:”

The environment still, we still see Asian, even no matter how high they are, even professor, we still do not see provost, vice presidents, or president, representing the executives. At the executive level, at the policy making level. Yeah, we are good enough to be engineers, scientists, but we are not good enough to be policymakers. [What do you think is the cause?] Well, I think that there are many, many reasons and I can talk about some of them. First of all, the environment was created, we are still foreign, because we look different, many of the Asian immigrants speak with an Asian accent, an Asian accent is not acceptable, but Italian and French accent, they're sexy, right? People want you to talk like the European accent, the English accent is supposed to be the blue blood, right?

Lin can see right through the façade. Asian Americans will always be seen as foreign and that the rules of foreignness are coded. Foreignness is acceptable, as long as you are a white.

Public Degradation

Away from home, school, and work, public accommodations are another arena where Asian Americans live their lives. Being out in public does not protect them from a racist incident. These respondents were simply trying to lead normal lives while they were out in their community. Unfortunately, for people of color, white racism never takes a break.

Shopping and Shopkeeping While Asian

People of color are often racially profiled in the criminal justice system. Whites are the majority of shoplifters (Feagin & Sikes 1994), but white clerks will still be more cautious and fearful of minorities. Joel is a Hmong American who lives on the West Coast. In his hometown, people of Hmong are negatively viewed and are considered “collective blacks” (Bonilla-Silva 2003). He manages daily discrimination and also deals with his own internalized racism, often trying to distance himself from his own “Hmongness,” which will be discussed in Chapter IV. Joel shares his experience in a store:

There are so many incidences...one was during my senior year in high school. I went to [drug store] and, like I said, [the city] has this negative perception of the Hmong people. So I went to [drug store] and, I guess, I went shopping and I looked and I saw that someone – like someone who works there, one of the employees was there. So I walked into another aisle and that individual was walking behind me. And I so I knew that they were basically profiling me, saying that, “Oh, he’s going to steal something.” Or something like...So I went to test that theory, because I was kind of like, maybe they had to put something away, or something. I walked to the next aisle and I realized they were following me. And I could see that they were looking at me like, “Oh is he going to take that” or so. But, I think that was definitely a huge point in my life where I realized that was definitely going on. Often times we think that it doesn’t exist, and people will be treated equally, but then the whole notion of profiling exists. And that was one of the prominent incidences.

Joel found this event as an enlightening experience that increased his awareness of racial inequalities. Previously, he had expended most of his energy to conform to the white racial frame, but this experience began to steer him to his current major of Ethnic Studies at a prominent West Coast university. He shared another incident that stuck out involving a white sales clerk:

Another incident was when I was transitioning to college and I needed to buy a desk in general. We went to Staples, and it was my parents and I, and we were walking and we asked a representative if we could have some assistance because we had some inquiries about an adapter. He said that he couldn't help us, but he could find a representative to help usBut then the representatives came by us and just passed us to the white folks who were behind us. So we were thinking, wait, what was going on. We asked him to find someone to help us. Why would this person just pass us to go to the white folks. So it was kind of like that instance was like, what's wrong with this picture. We asked for assistance. They didn't ask for assistance. And I turned around and looked at them. I think he asked them if they needed assistance and they said no. So it was like, what the hell was going on here...So, I guess he just thought that these people were just Hmong people and they are probably just looking, they're probably not going to buy anything. So, it was kind of like, I just got very irritated with that and just told my parents that we needed to leave because that was totally wrong.

Other respondents chalk up these events as mistakes made by ignorant individuals and use excusatory language for their oppressors actions, but Joel has developed a sense of justice and fairness that now drives him to pursue a role as a leader in an Asian American student group and is raising awareness about racism. He was certain that he was being racially profiled in the store by the employees and left in protest.

Lin is a Chinese American who is the director of an Asian American community center. She opened the center to help the Asians and Asian Americans in her Southwest city find necessary resources and promote a sense of community. She has been a vocal

and outspoken member of the city and even ran for city council. She discusses an incident with a staff member of hers:

One of my staff went to a car dealer intending to buy a car for his wife. [My staff] is an Asian immigrant and is not fluent in English. The salesman persuaded him to put down \$2,500 as the down payment for the car and asked him to sign the papers for the transaction. He didn't know any better so he signed the paper and saw 16.95% interest rate at the bottom of the page. He was supposed to come back the next day to pick up the car after the loan was processed. He came back to the office and talked to me about the interest rate. I have never heard of a 16.95% interest rate for a car loan, have you ever heard of a rate like that? That sounded ridiculous to me. I was very skeptical, that's not an *honest deal* and so I advised him to get his money, not to buy a car from this place and withdraw his loan application, and to look somewhere else for a car. I thought something wasn't right, like this was not an *honest deal*. Someone is trying to take advantage of him. I called the salesman to ask him about the high interest rate, and I told him I was sending my staff to pick up his down payment check. When [my staff] member came back from picking up his check he looked terribly upset. His face was pale. I asked him if they had given him back his check. Do you know what he told me? I was shocked! He walked into the door and the salesman was on the phone. When the salesman got off the phone, [my staff] asked for his check back, the salesman just looked at him and said nothing, crumbled something up and threw it on the floor at my staff member. [My staff] did not know what it was, thought the salesman was throwing a piece of trash and ignored it. He did not pick it up. The salesman waited a while and got angry. He walked over asked [my staff], "Why didn't you pick this up?" The salesman picked up the crumbled paper and handed it over to [my staff]. He realized that it was his check that was crumbled and thrown to the ground. [My staff] was *so* humiliated. He was so angry and was choked up with tears and he had to run out of the salesman's office. I was also choked up and so angry, all my staff at the Center was upset as well. That salesman targeted him because he is Asian, because he looked and spoke like an immigrant from Asia!

Lin was touched by the story and called the salesman's supervisor, the general manager of the car dealership. The supervisor apologized profusely and took responsibility for the behavior of his salesman. He promised to speak to the salesman, but there was no promise of disciplinary action. This was enough for Lin, she was "touched" by the general manager's "integrity" when he said that "It is my responsibility and I have failed

my staff. I did not train them well. I will talk to them.” To think that this occurrence was about a *training issue* and not a *racist issue* is notable. In the position of influence that Lin holds as the director of the center, she could have called for a boycott as members asked or brought this event to the attention of the Asian American community, but she was satisfied with the general manager’s response.

Helena is a second generation Korean American. Her father was an engineer privately contracted through the military, so she moved every two years. Her family settled in a Western state.

I never really faced any overt racism, well once I did, and it really bothered me. When I was in high school and it was Christmas time and I was shopping for Christmas gifts, so I went into one of those, they sell the sausage and the cheeses...they were seasonal. So I went in and I was laughing at their meat, meat popsicles, they have these meat...like a lollipop size, it’s like a smoke sausage on a stick that they just sell for like 50 cents and I was just laughing at it and I had my little brother, who was like 5 with me and then I noticed that the woman who was this, you know, rich, well dressed older woman was like aghast that I was in the store and then I saw her turn her back. She was white, yeah, I saw her go on the phone and I turned around again a little while later and there was a security guard standing there, just like staring at me, and so I was looking around in the store but I felt so uncomfortable with him *obviously* watching me. So, I left the store and then I saw her go, “[sigh] Oh, thank you” to the police officer, security guard guy, and I was just so pissed, like, “Yeah I’m gonna bring my five-year-old brother and we are gonna rob you or something.” I didn’t know what to think. That was in [Western state], I was 15 or so. I didn’t have like gang signs or you know, I was just going Christmas shopping and I was laughing at the meat, the meat things, I don’t know. So needless to say I didn’t shop there. That was really the most overt racism.

Helena calls this incident the “most overt racism” she endured. She does not consider the years of racial slurs while she was in school as overt acts. Asian Americans have a threshold and tolerance for children acting in a racist fashion, but when adults become perpetrators, it is reasoned that behavior is now inexcusable. Racism in children is

formulated and the children understand that their actions are wrong, but Helena deems this incident as more overtly racist (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001). White children “get away with” these acts and grow into adults that continue these behaviors and feel a sense of entitlement atop the racial hierarchy (Van Ausdale & Feagin 2001).

Mei’s parents opened a restaurant when they emigrated from Taiwan and dealt with white customers and neighbors that felt that sense of entitlement:

Sometimes a customer, because they thought they have a right to ask for anything without paying, you know? Otherwise, sometimes, a couple times they aren’t customer they just talking to you in a public place just doing without asking you to do it, or sometimes they cut your flowers without asking you! [laughter] You already know it, if you are Asian, if your parents have a business in the United States, you probably know those things. Asian people say, “Well don’t say it, we’ll be fine.” You know...don’t ask them to leave or just give [it to] them and they will go.

Mei’s parents taught her that ignoring and being non-confrontational in these situations will produce the desired outcome. Her family allowed their customers and neighbors to take what they want, and then everything will be “fine.” As has been seen with Japanese internment, white Americans take whatever they please. Japanese Americans put up little or no protest and in their blind faith with the government, lives were lost and permanently altered. Being caught in whether to trust the intentions of whites, or to follow your gut is a constant battle for people of color (Feagin & Sikes 1994).

Ming Huei is a Chinese American with both an engineering and law degree. She resides in a Southern metropolis and grew up in a large Asian American community. She attended racially diverse schools and had positive things to say regarding her experience. She was yet another respondent who initially dismissed the existence of

racial prejudice towards Asian Americans but eventually shared this account that was questionable to her:

It's hard to be sure. I went to a car dealership with my parents to buy a car and the salesman on the lot was extremely rude to us. He was noticeably trying to rush us and seemed annoyed to have to serve us. When he was dealing with us, he looked disinterested and was saying, "Well, are you going to buy the car or not?" And I don't know exactly know if it was about race or about me. And I actually saw my parents get upset. So I don't know what it is about us, but that's a time when you can't be sure. I needed help on my water heater a couple of months ago and had a similar experience with the repairman and I don't know what's what. So I don't know if that could be when I am being discriminated against or I could be oversensitive or maybe it's prejudice, I don't know.

People of color can never be sure if they are being discriminated against. African Americans are often accused of "pulling the race card" when they have legitimate complaints about mistreatment (Feagin & Sikes 1994).

Minorities at the Movies

The discrimination can come from institutions and individuals. Those individuals can come in the form of strangers, or mere acquaintances, but they can also be friends and loved ones. Charlotte was in an interracial relationship, and the fact that her white boyfriend had made the decision to date an Asian American woman did not guarantee that he would be free of biases and stereotypes. She discusses her experience at a movie theater:

When I was a college student, I had a boyfriend that I was dating at one point and time who was white. And I remember going to the movies with him, and a bunch of people who were Chinese were standing behind us in the theater in the movie line, and they were speaking Chinese to each other. And he was just getting really upset with the fact that they weren't speaking English because they lived in America. In which I promptly told him that I thought that was kind of a silly point of view, because if he went to Europe and was there with a bunch of Americans, he certainly wouldn't be speaking German to them. So I thought that was really silly.

Charlotte dismisses his statement as “silly” but he felt comfortable enough in stating his opinion about these Chinese students, and overlooks that Charlotte’s parents’ first language is Chinese. The message here being sent by this white man is that Asians are tolerable, as long as they assimilate and speak only English when they are in America. His girlfriend, Charlotte, was an “acceptable” Asian, where the Chinese students were “unacceptable.” Charlotte also shared that this boyfriend would often get upset in her home when her parents spoke in Chinese. He was afraid that her parents were talking about him and he would constantly ask for a translation. Charlotte married a Mexican American and found that, even though their families spoke different languages, there was no paranoia about what their families were talking about. Another incident at a movie theater happened to Lena, a Taiwanese American:

We were at the movie theater and we were paying at the box office and one of the African American employees said something to me and I went straight to his manager and said, “You need to talk about your employee, such and such person, about the racial slur that he just directed at us.” I don’t think that young man was employed there later. I just basically let the behavior, it doesn’t bother me because I know it’s their problem, but I also don’t let things, if there is something I can do about it. In the case that it was a business, I will let that person’s boss know.

In this case, another minority was using racial epithets against an Asian American. Lena avoided direct confrontation and went through proper channels to address the issue, but these incidents can be even more baffling for Asian Americans to deal with, when another person of color is prejudiced. White racism has set up the racial hierarchy in a manner that isolates racial groups from each other. As a “model minority,” Lena appears as a threat to an African American. Wu (2003: 70) contends:

The model minority myth does more than cover up racial discrimination; it instigates racial discrimination as retribution. The hyperbole about Asian American affluence can lead to jealousy on the part of non-Asian Americans, who may suspect that Asian Americans are too comfortable or who are convinced...Asian American gains are their losses. Through the justification of the myth, the humiliation of Asian Americans or even physical attacks directed against Asian Americans become compensation or retaliation.

African Americans have been the targets of white racism for generations and the “success” of Asian Americans is used as further fuels white criticism. Asian Americans are then targets for retaliation. This retaliation is not just the acted out by other people of color, as whites can also feel threatened by the exaggerated ideal image of the Asian American. This racial triangulation will be further discussed in Chapter IV.

Racism in the Everyday

Racism can be around any corner. These next statements are from respondents who experienced racism while walking home, frequenting a pub, riding public transportation, or just walking on campus. Henry struggled with the English language when he moved almost sixty years ago and was incessantly harassed by whites. His experience just walking through his neighborhood:

It was rough because I didn't know any English. They always laughed at you. Because I was Asian, they made fun of you. They picked at you when you were going home. They tried to make fun of you. They made faces and pretended that they were Chinese. I get in fights with them, and get angry.

Henry would retaliate when he was a youngster in middle and high school, but as he aged he eventually stopped resorting to blows. I asked if his physical retaliation waned because his white peers were treating him better, and he replied:

I would say, not that much. They pretend on the outside to look pretty good, but underneath, it's still the same. I go into the bar, like a pub, and they will still

make fun of you, because you are Asian. There is not much I can do, what am I going to do, start a fight? I can't. I just have to turn and walk away.

Henry is almost seventy-years-old and fighting has now become out of the question. His attitude is resigned to the fact that he is powerless in ending the discrimination. People of color often times become hopeless that anything can be done to improve their situation (Feagin & McKinney 2003).

Ginzi and his friends experience similar resignation on public transport in his Northeastern metropolitan city:

Like, I know a lot of people like will make fun of us – a single Asian on a train. A lot of the Asian people I know get groped on the train...Because, people assume that they will not do anything about it. They will not speak out because they were raised with that Asian, like don't say anything, too shameful view. Just be private about it. And that's true because none of my friends that got groped and stuff, none of them spoke out.

The assaults become commonplace, and Asian Americans continue to sit in silence.

Most of the respondents were hesitant to speak up against racist acts in any manner, especially not directly. By remaining quiet, Ginzi's friends show a passive acceptance of the incessant harassment on the train.

Similarly, Eve accepts the dangers in her city. In her Southwest college town, assaults against Asians had more than doubled in two years.⁵ Eve lives in the neighborhood where five assaults against Asian international students had taken place in a six-month time period. Still, she does not believe that race will be the factor for her when worrying for her safety:

This is a backwards town, everything is reinforced. I was concerned because, and not necessarily because I look like a minority, but because I just look different in general and someone would be like, "What the fuck is that girl." So, I wasn't necessarily concerned, because I live right where it happened, and all

my neighbors are actually Asian international students. Like everyone who lives around me is, and but at night, I do, at night I am kind of cautious, but it's really not because I'm Asian or any minority because I feel like people look at me different anyways. Because I'm just different, because people stare. Yeah, people stare all the time. They don't say anything to me, because I look like I will kick their ass. Most people tell me, "No one wants to talk to you because you look like you're gonna hit them in the face." People stare, people look and I'm like, "Do you have a staring problem?"

Local and campus police have refused to file any of the assaults as hate crimes, even though racial epithets were being thrown at the victims along with fists. All of the assaults were unprovoked where the victims were walking to or from the university and these assaults were all against Asians, committed by whites. To Eve, it won't be her race that makes her stick out, she does have a visible piercing and a few tattoos, but those physical characteristics did not fit the profile of any of the students assaulted.

White racists will not be able to differentiate her from her Asian international student neighbors. They will not take the time to ask her where she was born before committing their heinous acts.

When Eve was asked about her thoughts on how Asian Americans are treated in the US she stated:

I think they are the most accepted minority, because of their stereotypical work ethics and what they've achieved and blah, blah, blah. As far as being equals, no. Because I don't think anyone thinks they're as equal in this country except for people that are completely white. I guess there's no true, completely white, but if they look white, I guess.

She is able to identify and articulate inequality and preferential treatment of whites, but labels all her hardships as acts against her because of her uniqueness in appearance. This demonstrates the complexity of each respondent. There are moments of racial awareness and admission of the existence of white racism. In another instant

there can be internalized racism and oppression, self-blame, and straight up denial. The Asian American experience cannot be explained away in an identity model, where they can all be put in nice and neat boxes (Kim 1997). One thing is clear, not enough research has been done to even try.

Conclusion

The numerous accounts of discrimination in this chapter show the reality that Asian Americans face. Academic degrees and high paying jobs do not equate to fair and humane treatment. Asian immigrants pay in humiliation and degradation for their “American Dream” to come true, as opposed to white immigrant counterparts. From their earliest years of development, Asian Americans are experiencing white racism. Before school even starts, they know that they are different and fear ridicule. Respondents excused childhood teasing as a matter of maturity or a rite of passage through grammar school. As they continued their education, respondents continued to feel like outcasts through high school and college. Whether an interviewee had a college degree or not, advancement was out of reach. In their everyday life at the grocery store or movies, there is still no solace. Even in their neighborhoods, Asian Americans are causing “The New White Flight,” where areas with heavy Asian concentration are causing whites to move away for fear that their children will not be able to compete academically against “model minority” students (Hwang 2005), but are also pushing away whites with the “old white flight” as they worry about an “invasion” of people of color.

These incidents add up, and, unlike African American communities that share the burden of this accumulation (Feagin & Sikes 1994), Asian Americans do not so readily and healthily cope with these racist events. For African Americans, “the collective memory of past incidents of racism, both those suffered by the family and larger community, is passed along family and friendship networks and across the generations, and thus become a force into the present day” (Feagin & Sikes 1994).

In the next chapter, I will discuss the costs of discrimination. African Americans’ collective memory of racial events goes back fourteen or fifteen generations, whereas the majority of Asians in the US are recent immigrants post-Civil Rights Movement. They lack the knowledge and experience with white racism and are not equipped with learned methods of resistance. Discrimination becomes a personal and internal matter. This individual battle with discrimination takes a toll on the respondents as they erase memories, cut off emotions, and are pushed to their limits with stress. Asian Americans must exert an immense amount of energy to combat the residual consequences of white racism.

Notes

¹ For more information regarding all the victims, you can review the CNN timeline at: <http://www.cnn.com/US/9907/05/illinois.shooting.timeline/index.html>

² First generation Japanese Americans are called Issei, second generation are Nisei.

³ Violet is half Chinese and half Mexican American.

⁴ “Language Problems” are defined, in this case, as difficulty that an Asian employee may have in speaking “white associated accented English” causing problems for co-workers or supervisors to understand their Asian accented English.

⁵ Statistic was taken from a meeting at the county police department in 2005.

CHAPTER III

THE COST OF DISCRIMINATION

As noted in Chapter I, compared to all other racial groups, Asian Americans are plagued with higher rates of depression and suicide, but little research is being done. Asian Americans are not collectively vocalizing these disparities and are hiding behind a wall of silence. Systemic racism is at the root of this problem. Feagin (2003) argues:

Racial inequalities in health and health care have lasted for centuries because of systemic racism –which includes both racial antipathy and active discrimination – is systemic and generates major barriers to the full health and well-being of African Americans, as well as of other Americans of color. This systemic racism has serious, negative consequences for the health of society as a whole.

As we have seen in the many accounts of racism that were experienced by the respondents in the previous chapter, systemic racism abounds. Asian Americans are not free from incessant racial discrimination. Extended exposure to racism is stressful and burdensome.

In this chapter, I delve into the psychological costs of racism for Asian Americans. There are instances in which my respondents have gotten angry about the racist event, but they are rare. Instead, the respondents tend to manage the incidents internally and individually. This personal battle with racism leads to feelings of isolation, sadness, loneliness, disillusionment, and hopelessness. Consequences from these emotions are drug and alcohol use, withdrawal, and memory suppression. Seeking out professional counseling and assistance was virtually non-existent with my respondents, and when the few respondents did ask for help they did not know where to turn and were misunderstood.

Asian Americans struggling with their identity became a reoccurring theme in my data. They are caught between two worlds – at times they feel at home with their Asian heritage, rarely so, with their American heritage, and sometimes are part stranger to both. I will discuss the complexities of identity and feelings of foreignness.

Psychological Costs

The “model minority” stereotype is pervasive and dangerous, forcing unrealistic, unobtainable expectations upon Asian Americans. To understand one root of the pressures that Asian Americans face, one must understand how this stereotype came to be. William Peterson coined the phrase in 1966 because of the amazing achievements of Japanese Americans during that era (Tanaka 1999). Japanese Americans had been on the West Coast for two generations when Internment took place from 1942-1946 and at that point they were not catching the attention of academic researchers and scholars. Academic achievement became a survival response to the racism that the Japanese experienced from the Internment (Tanaka 1999). The Nisei wanted to protect their children from blatant racism by having them become model students.

Exhausting Academic Excellence

Alice, a Japanese American, grew up in that era. She made a film about her family history, which began as a class project that exposed the suicide, substance abuse, and psychological damage that was a result of Japanese internment during WWII. Alice uncovered that not only were the interned Nisei generation affected, but their children, the Sansei, were as well. Alice explains:

I really was aware of this drug problem that was happening with all of these suicides with all of these drugs that came out, and I happened to go to school

with this [Japanese American] girl that became really well known for sending out a lot of messages that she's going to commit suicide. Because she tried like 4 or 5 times and nobody paid attention to her, and then all of a sudden she became successful at it. So, that's what started the thought about, we talk about internment in terms of what did it do for the Issei and Nisei. But what did that particular incident in history do as a legacy for generations? You know, you study psychology in college and the way the Nisei operated after the war had a huge impact on how we operated in the world. Meaning okay, we were interned because we lacked the education or there was something wrong with us. So we [Nisei] are going to make sure that our next generation has a perfect world that they go into. So expectations were really high. It was really high and it was really hard for Japanese Americans to live up to the standards.

Alice noticed a new protective strategy in how the Nisei raised their children after internment. Academic achievement would be the shield protecting this generation of Japanese Americans from mistreatment, but her research found that the pressures were too great and that her peers suffered. The use of drugs and suicide as coping mechanisms to deal with white racism was not a new occurrence with the Japanese Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. It was not uncommon for Chinese Americans to abuse drugs and throw themselves into the San Francisco bay in the late 1800s and early 1900s because of ill treatment and living in poor conditions (Takaki 1998). Today, the mistreatment is usually less overt and immense pressure to succeed and overlook mistreatment fuel the anxiety and stress.

These pressures are not reserved for just Sansei Japanese Americans. The “model minority” myth is synonymous with an Asian face. A stereotype, in this case racial, will influence a person to meet the expectation, whether that expectation is positive or negative (Burke 1991). Frank shares a similar experience within his Korean American community:

Where I live, because of the competition is so intense, I live about 4 blocks from a high school, which is one of the top rated high schools in [West Coast state]. Every year, there is one Oriental kid that kills themselves. They hang themselves on the street or kill themselves in the house. Or something. If you consider the background, I found out it on the news, they got straight As from junior high school all the way, they somehow got one B, and they could not take it so they kill themselves.

Academic performance, that was to act as a buffer from pain and suffering, creates such anxiety that some Asian Americans have mental breakdowns. Many Asian Americans believe that education serves as the great equalizer. John, a Chinese American computer scientist, had this to say about academic achievement:

Academia is important because if they don't like you because of the color of your skin, you're never going to have the social networks. At some level there are some people who are never going to like you. But, in academia, right, okay, I get a 100 on this test, you get a 95, I mean the rules are clear. In order to achieve in academia, or in order to get good grades, you study these things. You pass the test. Once you pass the test, then good stuff – people say nice things about you. And the fact that in order to advance that way, there are clear rules, they're fairly objective, there's very little room – okay you spell this right, you spell this wrong. There is not very much argument.

John readily admits he is achievement oriented and that he appears to be a “model minority.” The work he puts into achievement causes him stress. In fact, he used the word “stress” fourteen times in his one-and-a-half hour interview. Explaining his anxiety:

You can lose everything. I don't want lose everything. What can I do? And that's an incredible amount of stress. And you lose hope sometimes. You see, I think that is part of the thing about America, the model of minority myth . . . I would say there's a cost of opportunity for the most part. . . . I think I haven't done too badly. But people see just that people going to Harvard, MIT, but there is a huge back story behind that. It's a unique back story. If you don't understand the back story, you don't understand that the amount of – you don't understand how stressed out I am usually.

John is in a constant state of worry that he could lose everything because he is a “foreigner” even though he was born in West Virginia. He is always on the defensive, preparing for the worst. His life has been difficult, as he is the brother of R.W., the woman who murdered her mother. When he comments that there is a “unique back story” to tell about reaching such a level of success, he is serious. His family was always touted in his community for their academic achievements, and there was much shame to endure when his younger sister was unable to follow in his footsteps at the Ivy League school.

Like John and his siblings, many Asian Americans attempt to achieve academic success at a high cost. Asian Americans may have a harder time getting the services necessary when dealing with the amount of stress involved with academia. Indira, an Asian Indian American professor describes an incident with one her Asian American students:

I had a student who was trying to seek phone counseling, she was struggling with the pressure, you know she’s like 16 years old and an undergrad, so she’s really a junior in high school, but is a junior in college... a [counselor] on the phone started asking, “How’d you manage that?” She’s called to say that she’s suicidal and this person is asking her, “How’d that happen?”

This stress and anxiety to perform can be overwhelming, and white counselors that do not understand the pressure may fail miserably in helping an Asian American who is in need of help. Indira worked closely with school administrators to hire an Asian American counselor at the student health center, but to no avail. The school still has not hired an Asian American counselor, but Indira has been holding trainings for faculty and spoke about her experience:

To me it's shocking. I did a training college of liberal arts faculty because 20% of incoming class was to be Asian. How do you deal with a student who has this mental breakdown in front of you and they are suicidal because they want to change majors from chemistry to English? And you are looking at them like it's gonna be ok. I am not a counselor but I believe this, anytime someone tells you that they are suicidal you believe them, number one. Number two, just because you don't understand the pressure doesn't mean that it doesn't exist, just because it's as simple as a [college] major thing for you doesn't mean that's what it is to them.

She went on to explain the immense pressure that she and other Asian American students may face in hopes to succeed academically:

Understand that we aren't coming to schools as "you and your success", yes that's a part of it, but what you carry. Like for me, and I told this to my mother, the day that I left for college my mother said to me "I know that I will be able to die in peace, my daughter is going to become a doctor now." Can you imagine every time I tried to tell my mother that I didn't want to be a doctor, those were the words that haunted me. My mother will not be able to die. My mother will die because I am a failure. When she dies, she will carry that, that disappointment with her, to her grave. That is HUGE, you know.

The question is why are so many hopes and dreams riding on the success of successive generations for Asian Americans? White racism is the obstacle that has been put in the way of the parents of these students that are being pushed to succeed. Min, a first generation Taiwanese American discusses why she pushes her children so hard:

It's hard to separate from the old world and that's why I push, push my children so hard. I want my children to be better than me, to do better than I did. My life here, it wasn't supposed to be like this, I wasn't supposed to come here and work so hard for this long. My husband came to get his Ph.D., not have a restaurant. I worked, I worked in that hot kitchen three days before [my youngest daughter] was born and had to go back, had to work three days after. I was still bleeding [begins to cry]! I, I am a *failure* here. I have a bachelor's degree in math, I was a teacher before I came here, now I am nothing. I did the best I could, but it wasn't supposed to be like this.

Min hopes for her children to be materially successful because she and her husband were unsuccessful in their bid of achieving the "American Dream." Her husband struggled

with graduate school for seven years, but was unable to finish because his English was not adequate enough for him to finish his dissertation. Instead of a prestigious career as a science professor, he had to open up a restaurant and both of them are at retirement age with no end of work in sight. She and her husband have very few friends as they spend most of their time working their service jobs. She blames herself for being a “failure” and wants so much more for her children. Second generation Asian Americans have the hopes of their parents riding on their shoulders and this adds to the stress and anxiety that they already feel as Asian Americans.

A common response that my respondents used to deal with acts of discrimination is internally and privately managing the event. Lacking in the collective memory of oppression that African Americans possess of generations of racism, Asian Americans do not have a frame of reference from which to compare. The majority of Asian Americans have immigrated to the US after the Civil Rights Movement as opposed to the several hundred years that African Americans have been in this country. This personal struggle with discrimination can be overwhelming.

Memory Suppression

Instead of confronting acts of discrimination head on with confrontation or attempts to overachieve, Charlotte dealt with the pain of racism with is memory suppression. In the earlier chapter we discussed how she would come home crying everyday because of the racism she endured at school. Finally, she made a change:

In fifth grade, my mother and my teacher told me that I just needed to keep a stiff upper lip and I really couldn't go home every day in tears and I couldn't just cry all the time because it just didn't work. So I stopped crying. Um that, unfortunately, psychologically, probably damaged me until I was much older,

until I was probably an adult, but I didn't know that. And it was probably a survival technique that I probably really did need to have at that time, I'm just not sure that that was the best way of handling it. In order for me to stop crying every day, I just cut off all of my emotions. And so as a result, I had a very difficult time relating to the fact that I had any emotions, and that that was not a very healthy way of surviving either.

Charlotte describes her solution to discrimination as simply cutting herself off from human emotion. Nonchalantly, she states that she "probably" damaged herself psychologically for quite sometime. This sounds as if she still keeps herself removed from the emotion. Rejecting the "model minority" stereotype and resisting the wishes of her parents, Charlotte put no effort into school. She discusses that decision and compared her experience to her friends that perpetuated the stereotype:

I tried my very hardest to flunk out of school. That's my rebellion to try not to be Asian is that I was insistent that I was dumber than a box and that I was going to make sure that everyone else knew that I was dumber than a box by flunking out or by barely succeeding, and I did that well. But that's how I kept the pressure off of me with the grades. On the other hand, when I turn around and look at a lot of friends. And, I've got to have the highest percentage friends who are all doctors and attorneys who are all Asian and all did extremely well in their class no matter what, and the amount of pressure that's put on there, and does that mean there's any joy or happiness in their lives? I really don't know. And now that we're all adults, nobody seems any more happy or satisfied with their lives. With the paths of their lives, they're all still struggling to find themselves.

Charlotte sees her friends that followed the academic track no better off than anyone else and even "struggling" to find themselves. The restrictions of the "model minority" label do not allow for free thinking and chosen identity. Many Asian Americans in my sample believe that if they prescribe to the stereotypes that they will be happy and successful, but Charlotte's friends who have worked to fit the stereotypes are not any happier than she is.

Like Charlotte, Michel, a Chinese American, was matter-of-fact about how he and his family blocked out memories of racism. This was the exchange after he said he remembered that, “whenever we’re outside and my parents don’t understand something, [other people will] make fun of them or something.”

Interviewer: So in those cases, when someone would make fun of them, what was the reaction after that?

Michel: Mostly, we just ignore it.

Interviewer: You personally, did you ever experience anything?

Michel: If I did, I ignored it too.

Interviewer: So you don’t remember anything in particular?

Michel: Not exactly. I tend to like wipe things like that.

Michel was noticeably uncomfortable discussing his personal matters and throughout the interview he kept trying to give me the “right answer.” When I asked him a question, about his life he would respond, “I don’t know, what do you think?” He was another respondent that talked positively about his experiences growing up free from mistreatment, then admitted later on that he had only Asian friends because he felt more comfortable with them. In fact, he would refer to himself as if he were not American at all with this statement about his work in the tech industry:

With the growing emphasis from China – the jobs, the market, the way we’re heading, the key – like I was talking to our VP the other day and they said, one of the most important languages in our time will be Mandarin and English. And with a lot of these jobs moving over there or the growing power of China, maybe the American view of the Chinese are different. Maybe they are worried about us taking their jobs.... I don’t know.

Michel uses the pronoun “us” in aligning himself with the Chinese when he discussed his worries about the future of his career. Although Michel never articulated feeling outcast by whites, this statement seemed to give an indication of with whom he identifies. Yet, he has “wiped” away the events that may have influenced his decision.

John also learned to block out painful memories. As the very first Chinese family in the town, there was quite a bit of solitude. He was the first person with Asian heritage to attend the schools. His memory is a little fuzzy regarding the discrimination because he has attempted to forget. He shares:

My mother always talked about the fact that they found out the milkman charged us more. I don't know, because I was so young, I can't identify specifically, but there was a sense – oh there were specific things. I mean, people making fun of being Chinese. It's actually a painful memory, but we just probably suppressed it, people making fun of the fact that we were Chinese and telling us to go back to China...And that was part of the survival strategy.

John uses the strong word of “survival” to describe the strategy he used to suppress memories of discrimination as a child. Throughout the interview, John was talking a mile a minute, but when asked about these events, he slowed. At one point, he closed and squinted his eyes, placed his head in his hands, lifted his head and shook it as if he were trying to shake the memories away. Contrastingly, he remembers the exact date that another Chinese family moved into the city in 1975. The arrival of the other family was a relief to John, thus his clear memory of that event. John explains why it was so important for the other Chinese family to move to his hometown:

And I think that goes with the fear that you are 5 in a group of 50,000. What you need to do is make sure you are not 5 vs. 50,000, you're in some group, some subgroup that you're seen, that you can *survive* and for me it feels like a life or death issue. If I'm seen as nobody or just neither part of the community, then that feels like I'm just *finished*. And so a lot of how I handle things is to make sure I never get into the situation where I'm the only one against everybody else.

In John's adult life, he expends energy to protect himself from being outnumbered. His words indicate the seriousness of his fear that if he is in the minority, he will be killed or overtaken by a mob of the majority. He referenced how difficult it was growing up and

feeling out of place and said that when he looks back at his childhood he is using “filters” to look at the past. When I asked him to explain what he meant by “filters,” I got an incoherent response that “so anything I say may have absolutely no relation to what actually happened, so I’m absolutely uncertain what happened then.” I was baffled by his response and asked him again to explain and his answer was:

I mean, okay, one of things that was kind of interesting the history of.... There are lots of things that... Well, first the idea of the minority, right. That one of the things that was, I felt growing up is that we were different. And one of the things that I actually kind of learned over the time period... But, one of the things that later sort of deconstructed the idea of minority was is that how come I thought of myself – we did think of ourselves as separate and minorities, just different, right? And how did that come about because the more you think about it is... One thing that really was a part of my life and still is, is the idea that you can’t be ordinary. You can’t just blend into the crowd because the crowd will always consider you different. The other thing is that – and this was certainly drilled into me – and it was actually a source of *exclusivity* – if you fail, all right, there’s no safety net. You have to achieve well because if you don’t sort of stay with yourself, then there is no family around, and so at some level there was a fortress mentality – that there was us and them...

I never really learned what it meant for him to filter his past memories of mistreatment, but I did get an indication of how difficult it is for John to look back on his past. What remains are these ideas that shape his present reality – exclusivity, idea of the minority, being different, fortress mentality, and us vs. them. John’s statements correlate to my research questions. Here is a man that feels outside and a dynamic of “us vs. them” is his way to describe “people of color vs. whites.” White racism is “exclusivity” and “being different.” The cost of the discrimination that he experiences is his realization that he is a minority and that he develops a “fortress mentality.” He was then able to share a lesson that his mother shared with him that left a lasting impression:

I remember when somebody was complaining against mixed race dating and they were talking black and white and it was just... and the fact that they were just able to spout – and I heard people say just awful, awful things about African Americans. And I think this is one of the good things that my mother – I think she actually mentioned once. We were talking about women in the neighborhood. Somebody that we knew said just these awful how lazy blah, blah, blah and how uppity they were – how they liked to make waves and just make trouble. And I think my mother at some level said, “You know, all those things that they are saying about African Americans, once your back is turned, they will say that about you.” So, I mean that was one thing that really depressed me.

John’s mother passed on a rare lesson about white racism, and it was a hard pill for him to swallow. African Americans promote group survival by passing on lessons of white racism to their children (Feagin & Sikes 1994) but John was the only respondent with such a lesson. His mother saw through the façade of the whites she encountered, whether she learned from firsthand experience or not, she was not fooled. To combat the racism, both of his parents pushed him and his siblings to be excellent students. In his house were wall scrolls that said, “The scholar is everything.” For years, the high school history teacher would tell each class about John’s family commitment to academics. The children were under intense pressure to succeed and never even learned to ride bikes.

Alex, a Korean American, had some light to shed on Asian family pressure:

Oh yeah, huge impact. I think that families – the older members of the families. That’s what they preach when they growing up. That’s what they always say. Do well in school so you let our family be proud. And then, don’t, whatever you do, don’t bring shame to our family regardless of your happiness. That’s what they’re preaching, right? Don’t bring shame to our family regardless of your happiness. And then, by the way, whether it’s shameful or not, you don’t decide. I decide. That’s the whole thing about the Asian family that makes the children growing up here so hard.

I argue that this pressure to succeed is based entirely on cultural factors of the Asian family. Systemic racism puts a lot on the line for the first generation Asian American because of their treatment as “forever foreign” (Tuan 2003). Understanding that you are at the bottom of the totem pole creates motivation to move up. To a voluntary immigrant, upward mobility seems plausible because of the lack of collective memory of racial oppression. Common among my first generation respondents is that the longer they have been in the US, the less they believe in the American dream. Successive generations can find themselves buying into the possibility of making it and are shocked when they experience a racist event.

Privately Coping with Hate

From the previous chapter, Ethan was one of the interviewees that had suffered a blatant act of racist violence. Up until that point, Ethan had not even identified as an Asian American. He was a high achieving graduate student, but this event changed his life forever. Physically, Ethan is healing but he discusses his internal turmoil “Psychologically...not a day goes by that I don’t have to make sure that my tooth is still in, it’s a constant reminder everyday about what happened to me. Not a day goes by that I don’t think about it. It was senseless, stupid and unprovoked and he is still out there.” Ethan has made a paradigm shift in how he views the world and how he lives in it:

I am more cautious now when I am out at night. I am much more vigilant and I am always looking at the environment...I am lucky that this was not more serious. I am definitely more aware, watching and avoiding situations...Also, I am definitely more aware of race. I now know that discrimination is more prevalent than I noticed before. I didn’t assume it happened, but now I do. My mindset has swung the other way. I realize now that racism is a lot more prevalent than most people think and I am more aware of that. Sometimes I worry that I see things when they are not there, thinking it has to do with race. I

never thought that way before. I always thought those kind of things would never happen to me at least not to an *Asian American*.

Ethan's worldview was changed in an instant. For twenty-two years he had never realized that he was a racial minority and that such a heinous crime would ever happen to him. Up until this point in his life, Ethan believed he was fully accepted by whites. He thought that being Asian American would protect him from hate crimes that may be experienced by African Americans or Latina/os, but Ethan has no control over the racial order. He chose to deal with the trauma privately, leaning only on his parents for support:

Part of it, as a victim is finding a balance between seeking justice versus the amount of exposure that you want. It's difficult to say you've been a victim of a hate crime, but I didn't feel comfortable going public. I talked about it with my family. I could have gone to the papers or the television stations, but I wanted to move on with my life. I was still in school and I wanted to move past it, I didn't want it to hold me back in anyways...It would be a distraction. I want to be Ethan, not Ethan the victim of a hate crime. You are perceived differently when something like this happens and I didn't want to be treated any differently. I was not seeking sympathy. I think it might be that way because of my race. Particularly, my parents were not as willing and did not want me to pursue talking with the D.A. They wanted me to move on from this.

Here is another example of an Asian American taking on discrimination singularly. By not passing on his experience, Ethan does not help other Asian Americans prepare themselves for dealing with white racism. Like the Nisei internees, Ethan's parents want him to move on and forget about the brutality of the incident.

Second and third generation respondents find themselves confused about their identity, as they are further removed from their Asian ancestry. Regardless, as discussed in the following chapter, all of the generations have attempted to conform to the white norm and, in differing degrees, have even adopted the white racial frame and

internalized racism. Next, I will discuss this struggle with identity. For Asian Americans there is a strong sense of needing to prove oneself as a legitimate citizen and they go to great length to become the ideal American, but whites are privileged in making and changing the requirements.

Identity

Some of the respondents had experienced either very traumatic discrimination or endured a lengthy amount of mistreatment, and all interviewees admitted that Asian Americans are not seen as equals to white in the United States. This has caused some of them to give up on the idea of ever being considered an “American.” This differs by generation. I begin with the words of the first generation and their thoughts on identity, acceptance, and citizenship. Then I compare and contrast that with the successive generations.

First Generation – “Forever Foreign”

A common belief shared among first generation Asian American respondents was that America was a welcoming place, where opportunities and riches were there for the taking. These new Americans were full of hopes and aspirations that the United States would be a new, wonderful home. Unfortunately, it has not been as easy as they anticipated before they made the long journey across the Pacific. In Henry’s interview he remarked, “What can I complain about? Even if I complained, it wouldn’t do any good. If you are Asian in this country, you are the minority. You don’t think about Asians here.” Henry has been in the US for almost sixty years and his comments demonstrate his frustration with how he has been treated for so long.

Mei, who works at a health center, has felt the chill of white racism's cold shoulder for almost thirty years. When asked her feelings about being in the US she responded, "I'm getting more frustrated. Why am I here? There is nothing really acceptable because you are alien. You know? Usually I don't have that kind of feeling. Now I kind of accept I am really not supposed to be in here."

Whites have the luxury of control atop the racial order. Whites have the power to decide who will be treated as equal and who will be left out. Mei, along with many of my other respondents, has resigned herself to the fact that she will never be accepted fully as an American. Mei came to this discovery over a length of time, whereas Bari felt the exclusion as soon as he moved to the US:

Um... it was, I thought I won't have culture shock, but then I realize I did go through culture shock, not because it [college] was too advanced or anything, but mainly because this college was too backwards in many ways – the culture of [the college town]. I got quite a shock from it, because the media portrayed the American culture to be quite liberal and welcoming and wild and what not. And it didn't follow through in [this college town's] case. That was the problem...I was treated well, but you could also say that it was, no, it was not patronizing, but you can clearly tell that they treat you differently because they think that you don't know how to get on the internet...

Albeit with good intentions, the whites that initially tried to help Bari prescribe to the idea that because Bari is an international student, he must not know how to use such advanced technological inventions such as the internet. Asian Americans have to deal with stereotypes driven by exoticism and Orientalism (Prashad 2003).¹ These stereotypes fuel the white imagination that these International students live in developing countries that are decades behind the United States. Bari continued:

I will never be part of this culture and I'll always be made an outsider. I really think I want to go back as soon as I can. One thing I would tell another

international student is...not to think that here is what the media says it is, like most the television series like “Friends” or the “OC” or “Desperate Housewives” all set in California...I used to think that’s how the entire US was. And that’s such a wrong portrayal of the culture and the lifestyle...It’s very hard to close the cultural barriers. So that’s the other thing that I would caution them about – that relationships can be pretty tough. And I think that I would ask them – I would tell them to look at – feel that sense of isolation – and that it takes some getting used to the solitary life.

Bari felt targeted and alone in this foreign country, even after being here for several years. He attributed most of the negative characteristics of his college town to geographical location. However, as I have shown with my respondents, white racism is everywhere. Alex lives on the West Coast:

So I got into this disagreement with one of my coworkers because we have this person, she’s rather old. She’s from Cambodia. She is an assembler, so all she does is she comes to work for 8 hours, she assembles some stuff. She goes home. Um, because her English is poor, he wouldn’t say she’s American. I say she has American citizenship, she pays American taxes, you know, she does everything to be qualified to be American citizen. His argument is that she doesn’t speak the language that well. I tried to tell him that in America, being an American, is – that’s just unfair because she did everything the American government asked her to obtain American citizenship. Now somebody said she’s not American. So I started thinking what is American then? I always thought American the culture, American by itself doesn’t have much culture in my opinion, rather it’s the mixture of other cultures is the American culture. If someone is going to say, “Well, that’s not American” then I don’t know what American really is. A lot of people, I think, still have that kind of mentality in their minds that, “You don’t speak the language, I don’t care what you are doing. You are not American.” I wouldn’t say the government is actually taking care – or they don’t care for Asians that much.

Alex was yet another respondent who initially said that he faced no racial discrimination. As the interview continued, he was able to describe how he feels foreign and uncared for by the US government. His conversation with his co-worker enlightened him that even if someone is an American citizen, they may not be considered “legitimate” Americans to whites. Alex then explained that he feels more comfortable with friends of Asian

decent but did not directly connect this choice with the exclusion he feels. Many respondents also chose friend groups that understand their racial position in society. Alex's friends were, "Mostly immigrants. I did make some other friends – Caucasian different people. My closest friends are mostly Asians – Asian Americans. Like some Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Chinese, and so on." These friends are chosen because there is a feeling of comfort and inclusion.

Also feeling excluded by whites, while in his college town, Bari says he "always feels like an outsider." People he met in his university were not genuine in their attempts to get to know him and he explained:

I realized that I made such emotional friendships in India. And, certain friendships [in the US] when they would say, "Hi, how are you," it was just a greeting. But in India, when they ask you how are you, they mean it. And the [American] people talk and smile and talk insignificance. Like why don't they just – the way they approach you makes you feel like they really like you and they want to spend more time with you, but cannot. That's all they are. But then they approach others and show that interest. And that's part of cultural fabric – how they approach people. In India, if you don't make a friend, you don't really go and say hello or how are you or anything. So it took some time to get used to it.

Bari has not felt that the students he has met at his primarily white school have any genuine interest in getting to know him. Thus he lives his "solitary life." Jessica has seen this long-term solitude affect her parents who are first generation Vietnamese Americans. Her parents were initially part of a Vietnamese community in her Southwestern hometown, but she explained that the racial demographics of her neighborhood have changed dramatically over the past twenty years. She explains:

When we were little, my parents had very strong connection to the Vietnamese community. They went to temple a lot and all of the aunts and uncles, or the aunties and uncles that you pick up that aren't really aunties and uncles, and they

all had babies together and so that created this great support network for me, but as we get older, they drifted apart and move to other suburbs and they get to create, opportunities and careers and stuff. And so they don't always get together. They don't work in the same factory. They don't sew together any more. So, I think it's hard for her because she doesn't have all these friends to bond with and she's lonely. And she has her clients, you know, that she does nails for. She has like two friends And I feel bad for her. And like my dad, he doesn't really have that many friends either. They live very different lives and my dad's much more privileged than my mom and he has a lot more money. He has more stable job and he has a wife. He lives in a real nice area, nice cars. Um, but still he doesn't have a lot of friends. Like he has tons of acquaintances. And they're both very social people, but they don't have that connection to anybody. Like, if they got up and moved, who would miss them and who would be missed? It's us – that's all they've got - their kids.

Jessica's parents, especially her father, are immigrants that have "made good." They were political refugees that have now adopted American lifestyles and are working in careers, yet they are alone. Their hopes and dreams are now to be carried on the backs of their children. They both abandoned their lower class lifestyle which lead to them to lose contact with their Vietnamese friends. A middle class lifestyle has not awarded them inclusion into white spaces.

Ming Huei also talked about this exclusionary factor at her university. She attempted to explain why immigrants might feel left out:

For instance, in college, predominantly white colleges, I don't know if people are as accepting. Not in general, "Oh, Asians are great." So, I don't know. Because at [her southern university], it was predominantly white. I had Asian friends and stuff, but they weren't accepted. I mean, one in particular, and he was immigrant himself – he wasn't born here. Because he was kind of more Asian, than, say, us. He didn't have as much to talk about – football and things like that. He wouldn't consider any white people his friends because he didn't have anything to talk about.

Who knew that football was the quintessential subject to appeal to white Americans?

The work that Asian Americans do to justify white racism is extensive. To Ming Huei,

her friend's inability to converse about American sports and pop culture was the reason for his alienation. Whites deem Asian Americans unacceptable Americans because they eat strange food, should not walk along or ride their bikes on the street, do not speak unaccented English, practice different religions, have strange names, are too smart, are on state scholarships, are too quiet, and because of these reasons they are discriminated against. Regardless of these roadblocks, Asian Americans demonstrate resilience and some become very successful, but in Lin's case, she was too successful.

Lin, a Chinese American in her fifties, is a director of an Asian American community center. She had worked in social services in her city and was overburdened with other social workers requesting her help with Asian clients. Lin decided to open a community center to help all the Asian and Asian Americans in need of services. She wrote a proposal to city council and discusses how the "model minority" stereotype and high achievement of her husband, a university professor, prevented her from getting the approval of the council:

It was, about 10 years ago, I went to the city council, I made a proposal. I wanted to set up an office for Asian Americans in town and I ask just for 500 square feet of space and...the words came back to me from the city council, one of the council members is a friend and she actually told me when they looked at my proposal a Hispanic city council member actually looked at the proposal and looked at where I live, being a professor's wife I do live in an affluent part of town and it is known to people as "Eagle Mountain." He actually told the other council members, "Look at where she lives, she lives on "Eagle Mountain" and they don't need our help." I have never forgotten that. I have not resolved that because for another minority to do this to another minority group, so I don't think...they're saying just words... at where she lives", don't you think that's some racial undertone? That I'm not supposed to live there? "If she lives there then she doesn't need our help." I think there are some racial undertones there and that the person who said that may not know that. That is so engrained, so engrained, so insidious.

Asian Americans are used as “weapons” against African Americans and Latina/os (Feagin 2001, Prashad 2003, Kim 2003). Academic and professional achievement of Asian Americans earns them “honorary white” status (Bonilla-Silva 2003, Tuan 2003). In Lin’s situation, she is looking to reach out to Asians and Asian Americans in need, but it is assumed that she is not worthy of governmental support because she lives in a nice neighborhood. White racism splinters minority groups by favoring one minority and demonizing another. Building coalitions are difficult as Asian Americans conform to white norms, adopt the white racist frame as their own, and isolate themselves from other people of color.

First generation Asian Americans are bombarded with a slew of reasons why they are not good enough to be American. Despite the energy they put forth to be model citizens, they are still confronted with rejection. The Exclusion that this generation faces explains why the stakes are so high for successive generations as they hope that their children will eventually be accepted through their hard work.

Successive Generations – “Yep, still foreign, but not authentically.”

Successive generation Asian Americans have a complex, multi-faceted American experience (Zhou 2005). What differentiates successive generations of Asian Americans from the first is that the later generations feel caught between worlds. They may feel absolutely no tie to their Asian heritage but still have the physical characteristics of new Asian immigrant and be treated as such by strangers. My respondents feel lost, and unsure of what world in which they fit. If they are “Americanized,” and do not even speak the language of their parents or grandparents, other Asians may expect them to be

able to communicate in their assumed native tongue. Whites may be “surprised” by their grasp of the English language, assuming that they are immigrants. This marginalized position creates identity confusion.

Roots with No Soil

Helena always felt rejected by whites, but she also never felt accepted by Koreans. She is not really sure where she fits in and has struggled with this her whole life. Complicating her attempts to fit in was the fact that her father worked for the military and was given a new assignment every two years. This made it very difficult for Helena to make friends. One of her father’s assignments was on an American military base in Korea. Where some respondents felt more at home when they were in Asian countries, Helena was rejected again. Helena and her sister had this experience:

Yeah, some of the other Koreans, this other girl, I don’t know why she was going to the American school too, but she was in a similar situation, but her family knew, they all spoke Korean, and her mother actually said that she was not to hang out with us and be friends with us because we didn’t speak Korean. She would spy out of her apartment, cause they had these tall apartment buildings in Korea and so you could see pretty far and she would watch when we were walking home from school, and so the girl got in trouble because she would walk home from school, anyway with us, that’s where we all knew each other, so it’s kinda sad so there’s this point where we would turn and it’s like, at this point this mother can see me from the building, so now she would cross the street and walk on the other side of the street from us. So, you know? That affected me.

These incidents with rejection continued to culminate for Helena. She was not Korean enough for native Koreans in their homeland, but she also felt a strain with her own family in the United States. Her parents decided it was unimportant for her and her sister to learn to speak Korean, but it always made Helena feel like an outsider:

It always made me sad because I always felt apart. All my cousins, *everyone* in my family, *all* the kids my age, some older, slightly older, they *all* knew Korean,

in my *entire family*, it was just us. So, it was really hard and we didn't have a lot of family reunions, but when we did, it's like "ahhh everybody would be speaking Korean." Me and my sister would sit there I had nothing to do, nobody to talk to so I just, I never grew up with a close family bond which I regret but I don't think there was anything I could do about it, really, so...Actually, it was kind of difficult too because all my uncles and aunts, there English was usually not that good. They worked, a lot of my uncles worked and they spoke English, but there English still was not that good so they chose to speak Korean when they were there at home and around and so I used to think for the longest time that they didn't like me, but I realized much, much later that, oh they just can't really communicate with me, so they kind of ignored me. So, I...I think that affected me too, because I never felt like part of the family.

Helena could not even find a place of comfort with her own extended family. She went on to marry a white man and had a child. There is not a large community where she lives to expose her son to Korean experiences, but she is hopeful that he can eventually be exposed to this part of his identity. At the end of the interview, I asked her how much she thinks about her racial identity, and she replied:

I think I think about it at least everyday. I do feel, I really need to learn Korean, I feel that, so anytime I see another, especially a Korean and they try to talk to me in Korean, and I'm just like, "Sorry, I don't speak Korean." Or, I have, I guess a Chinese look about me, so I get a lot of Chinese people coming up to me to talk to me and at least I can be like, "I'm not Chinese." It's hard enough getting people to go out with me to eat Korean food. I can't even get my husband to go.

Everyday, Helena is reminded of the pain and hurt tied to her racial identity. Helena wants to be more connected to her heritage and regrets that she does not speak Korean. She is alone. Simple things that make her feel at home in her identity, such as partaking in eating a Korean meal, are a chore in which her own husband refuses to be a part. As isolated incidents, Helena's experience with racism may seem benign, but she has over thirty years of incidents that have accumulated into a stockpile of painful memories.

People of color are expected to carry this burden of racism they have amassed as if they are unhindered.

Mixed Up and in the Middle

John admitted that when he was growing up, he often felt like an outsider because he is Chinese American. He is terrified of that feeling of exclusion and puts forth a great effort to fit in any way he can. Like Helena, John is similarly divided with his personal identity, but as opposed to feeling part of neither, he feels part of both his American and Chinese heritage:

I hope that I've always been able to do, and for a very large part, be both Chinese and both American. The fear that sort of underlies it is that I am neither. Because if I'm both then when I am in China I am with the majority, in the United States I'm with the majority...okay, I can be a weird umm... I don't like the word non-mainstream, but that I'm white in a certain context, in another context I'm Chinese

Being part American to John is being “white” in a certain context. John fears not being “authentic” and has worked hard to master the Chinese language so that he can “pass” for Chinese when he is visiting family on the mainland. He attempts to fit in both cultures as he never wants to be the “minority, because if you are a permanent minority, you are always going to get the short end of the stick again.” His fear of minority status is why he chooses for “whiteness” to equate to American. He does not want to be discriminated against by the majority power. When he encounters a racist act, he believes those discriminating against him are not “true Americans.” He rationalizes that the laws protect him as a citizen of the United States:

There are people who think that you're American because you salute the flag, you obey the Constitution, you – what does it mean to be American? I am willing to credit this country. I am willing to support Constitution, I believe in

rule of law, I believe in democracy, I believing in saluting the American flag, I am willing to learn enough English to survive, I am willing to participate in the political process. And it's a civic definition of America. Okay, given I am willing to do these things, it doesn't matter that I've got black hair or that I speak Chinese to my kids...This is why I care a lot about law and rule because I associate, okay, as long as people believe that I am an American citizen simply because of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. I cannot be stripped of my American citizenship because of the Supreme Court rulings. As long as people obey the Constitution and listen to the Supreme Court and have a system of rule of law and a due process, I'm fine. And that's how I deal insecurity. That makes it really tough with all those people in Guantanamo Bay; that really scares me, because I can imagine myself in one of those prisons. There are idiots in any society. We were treated well enough by enough people that it's not our problem. It's the problem of the idiots that are treating us badly. They are not the Americans. I mean, it sort of turns the tables. So we are the true Americans. They are just pretending to be.

John goes through his own chain of logic that because he is an American he is protected by the law, but as he dialogues he comes to the realization that he is not necessarily secure because he has seen this very same government break the laws at will. The law helps him sleep at night and feel secure, yet he is frightened that he could “lose everything” in an instant and believes that racist acts are just the doings of individual “idiots.” However, Feagin (2006: 292) asserts:

The United States has long stood, especially in white minds, as a symbol of liberty and justice for the world community. The conventional phrase “liberty and justice for all” is asserted millions of times each week, especially by U.S. schoolchildren, even though it is far from the societal reality. For most white Americans, this conventional phrase is interpreted to be what currently exists – the weakly democratic, strongly hierarchical, white-dominated institutions of U.S. society...The white elite that has led the United States for its entire history has mostly been composed of people who are not committed to the practice to full liberty and social justice for all Americans.

John is happy to have his dual identity as both Chinese and American. To him, being “white” American “awards” him the liberties given to citizens of the United States.

Being Chinese offers him solace from white exclusion, but he is always on edge,

stressed that he is neither Chinese or white enough. There is no fusion of identities for him. He never comfortable describes that he can be Chinese American; it is either one or the other.

Instead of having a foot in either identity, Violet sees herself in the margins. Her hometown consisted of whites and Mexican Americans so, “You would see a lot of racial tension...but because there were not that many Asian families there – we were probably one of the only ones – we were kind of caught in the middle, so it was like we didn’t really have an identity.” She was even able to articulate the complexities of her position in the racial hierarchy:

I feel like we’re sometimes stuck in the middle sometimes because with the whole model minority thing, I know that other minorities look at us and say, “Oh, they’re pretty much close to Caucasian anyway and they have it way better than the rest of us.” And then what Caucasians – they see a big difference, “Well they are minorities, so they are with the other group.” Sometimes I feel like we are caught in the middle, and maybe there isn’t a middle, but there are higher expectations. I think a lot. When you get the whole, “Oh your Asian, you must be good at math.” Or, “You play the violin,” or you have a teriyaki place or your dry cleaning, or what not. So, in the whole US, so we’re kind of in the middle. We don’t have a gigantic group. Sometimes I don’t think we’re the minority, and sometimes I do. It’s odd.

Violet could feel the predicament that she was in as an Asian American; awarded some privileges, but also burdened with unrealistic expectations and racial stereotypes. Kim’s (2001) Asian identity model asserts that further along in the model, Asian Americans will become more racially aware of their outside racial position. Violet may not yet understand, but there are other Asian Americans that do. Jessica is aware of her internalized racism and is working to remedy some painful experiences of the past. She

describes the process of realizing she was different and finding comfort in her Asian American identity:

To me, overt racism was few and far between in my own personal experiences. You know there are times when people call you like a chink or a call you a gook, and you don't know what to do you're so angry, but at the same time there are those little things where your "friends" make fun of you. Like, "Oh, you know you and your little Asian gang," "Or your Mama likes..." you know those little jabs that are suppose to be funny, but you just internalize all those things and you know that you're different and you want to be a certain way and not – and when I was in middle school I seriously considered becoming Christian because a lot of my friends were and I just hate that and I know it's a little bit different because they don't necessarily go hand in hand, but that religious privilege is very much like that racial privilege where you see it all the time.

Jessica, like many of my respondents, demonstrates a tolerance level for playground racial slurs. Being those called those names does not qualify as overt. It seems as if those words are not connected to a long history of discrimination and Asian Americans are numb to the sting, but exclusion is still felt. Jessica's desire to become a Christian, is an intersection of race and religion. The majority of the Asian community in which she grew up were Buddhists, so religion was just another way she was different from whites, as well as minorities seen as more "American." Jessica continued:

You know what people think is beautiful and you don't know how to be that. I didn't know how to put on eye shadow right, because they only teach you how to put on eye shadow if you only have a certain shape of eye in a magazine, and if you don't have that eye, how do you put on eye shadow? And you try to look for models in the magazine that have your eyes so you can do it like them, and none of them have your eye. It was like great, and none of the make-up looks right on your skin and so it's nothing that one student does. It's that you know how different you are from them and it's hard to reconcile it...I guess like for a long time I didn't see myself as a person of color, because I didn't know what it meant to be a person of color. I knew that I wasn't white. I knew that it would be nice to be white. It's so much simpler. You don't have to deal with like your mother rubbing you with this oil on you when you are sick and coming to school smelling funny. Or like your mom packing French bread sandwiches for you when you really want a Lunchable and that's all you really want. It's like, "can

you please buy me a Lunchable?" And she gives you soymilk and you don't know what to do. It's like, "Please, please let me fit in mom," and not being able to do it because she didn't understand what that meant to fit in...when I found those Asian American students, we were just like attracted to one another. It's just like, even though, like we were all Southeast Asian – Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai, very different, but it didn't matter because *you got it!* You are Asian, you *get it* that Ramen is not Asian food and that thank goodness there is someone who is like me, that understands why my parents are the way they are. Because those are the things that you think of when you're little. Those are the things that bother you. Like, "Why are your parents like this?" Not like, "Who am I?" and "What am I going to do with my life." And "How does this affect me?" but "Why? Why can't I fit in?"

Jessica poignantly describes her struggle in adolescence. She felt different and outside, but finding solace in friends that could understand her Asian American experience served as a coping mechanism that lead Jessica to begin to feel comfortable in her identity. She is now proud of her heritage and who she is, and so do her friends. They "get it," what it means to be Asian American. Those friends helped her get to this level of awareness because they understood her plight. Assisting further in her identity development was the Asian American student group that she joined in college. She has concerns for her younger siblings, as they do not have the same advantage of making Asian American friends:

But it's weird because my younger siblings have a completely different experience than me. They don't really understand who we are. They don't understand that we are Vietnamese American. They don't understand that ... I mean for awhile, my little brother thought that he was Mexican American because everybody in his class that was a person of color was Mexican American, and he knew that he was not white, but he didn't really... he knew that his house didn't speak English, but he didn't know what it was. He just that thought we were speaking Spanish and that we were Mexican American, which is really hilarious, 'cause my mom said something to him like, "Throw away the trash," and he's like, "Mom, I don't speak Spanish." And she was like, "What!?!?" So, yeah, but they get it now kind of. They don't understand what it means exactly, but they know that it is different.

Jessica's parents were not open about their life experiences and rarely talked about what life was like in Vietnam and as refugees. Jessica's siblings have little to no understanding about where they come from and what sacrifices were made to be in the United States. Even though they do not understand their ancestry, it is noted that they can tell that they are not like other people. They have an idea that they are a minority because they are treated as such. The lack of collective memory of racial oppression prevents her siblings from a source of racial understanding. Jessica says that Asian Americans' lack of education of their history is:

Where the biggest problem lies, I think, that if we were educated about our history, they wouldn't feel that way. If we knew oppression started and how it affects us every day, and how Asian Americans even came to be in this country, then I think that they would feel differently about what we say. A lot of them, they only see their own personal history. They only see what their parents came here and they're like, "No." Maybe not even when their parents came here, depending on the circumstances from which their parents came here. Like my mom and dad never talk about, like, their journey here. So, you only see what happens in your life, and it's a short period of time in the history of Asian people in this country. I mean, if you are East Asian and you have no concept of the South Asian community, then you understand the oppressions they face every day. Every day! Especially Post 9-11 – like the hate crimes for Asian Americans have increased a ridiculous amount, like 500% since 9-11, and I completely believe that. So I think that divide definitely comes from ignorance. That can be remedied, but it's still present, educating people about what that means.

Jessica's suggestion of educating Asian Americans is a way to build a collective memory. Respondents that were cognizant of racial inequality all stressed the importance of understanding the history of Asian Americans. This historical knowledge served as a turning point in their lives. School history curricula have been white ethnocentric and even incorrect (Loewen 1996), but things are changing. Even when whites are trying to make an attempt at being inclusive and sensitive to cultural matters,

they can fail miserably at being progressive and instead perpetuate stereotypes they were trying to dispel.

“Oriental is Alive”

Multiculturalism has become a staple in school curriculums and workplace training plans around the country. In order to promote ideas of diversity, educational institutes have offices dedicated to multi-culturalism. Ethnic student organizations and corporate diversity teams are popping up on campuses from coast to coast. Yet, these efforts may actually just showcase white ineptitude in trying to promote diversity. Indira shared:

I worked with a diversity consulting company and I was reviewing the curriculum...but I noticed certain things. I was looking at all the pictures, so all the pictures. This is a curriculum for a company that does corporate diversity training, so I'm looking at pictures and all the white people in the pictures are wearing suits all the black people are wearing suits, and I say brown, because brown could be South Asian or Latinos, sometimes you can't tell, but you could tell you know I will tell you why because even the Latinos what I call brown, I know that's problematic but I will use it for now, and anybody of Asian descent is wearing "ethnic clothing." This is corporate diversity training. Now why is that? And they thought that they were being diverse, I'm like, "It's exotifying." It's not like we are talking about global culture here, you are talking about corporate culture. So if everybody else is wearing a suit, I need to do one of two things, have everyone in suits throughout these pictures or...I don't see white men in kilts in these pictures, you know. I don't see Conan the Destroyer in these pictures, why do I see a man who is half naked who looks like Buddhist priest in these pictures, why? They're inconsistent. Things like that and it shows kind of how people, just Oriental is alive and well and people don't even see it when they are performing it, so to speak.

Even at the university at which she works, she deals with being the perpetual foreigner:

So the university has what they call 'cultural rooms' for each racial and ethnic group on campus. The funny thing is that the African American room is really nicely decorated; it's modern with some contemporary art with a picture of MLK on the wall. The Latino room is the same with these portraits of these great Latino leaders like Cesar Chavez. The Asian room, when you walk in you see

pictures of pandas, geishas, and religious figures, like a Hindu god. It's ridiculous! Here we are supposed to have a cultural room and the African American and Latino room are decorated like that and we are exoticized and tokenized!

The white administrators who are planning these diversity trainings and creating these "cultural rooms" do not "get it." They perpetuate stereotypes while they are trying to be inclusive. It is this ineptitude that adds to the feelings of abnormality and ostracism. Asian American students on campus have complained to the administration about these offensive depictions, and years later, the room remains clad with pandas and Geishas. The students feel the robustness of the "Orientalism" on campus that adds to identity confusion and isolation. It was common for interviewees to have friendships mainly with other Asian Americans if they had access to them because of exclusion and ostracism by whites.

Adam, a multi-racial Asian American student, discussed the change in the makeup of his friend groups:

I did take an Asian American course in college – mostly historical. It's like learning the history of Asians, which I found was not largely in my textbook literature when I was growing up, other than maybe, the Chinese, like, on the railroads or whatever, you know, in Hawaii. But, I learned a lot. I only know that after that I identified even more, but I think as time went on, I just – I felt more at home among Asian Americans or Asians. I just feel, like, more comfortable being around them, which is strange because I spent most of my life growing up with non-Asian friends. Then, I felt, you know, I didn't feel any different, but now, suddenly I do feel a little different. Even though I live in America, but when I go and visit Asia, whether or not it's Chinese or Japanese country, I still feel like I'm among- I feel like I'm home there, even though I've never lived there - I feel at home... Maybe it's some of the cultural values and the mannerisms, or may it's something as simple as everyone looks kind of similar to me, although not all the same. But, I mean, I wouldn't say it's like any one particular thing. Maybe it's just where I identify myself now. And even though those people, like over Asia – they're not Asian American – so, obviously I would have a more difficult time communicating with them, I still feel like I'm

– that I would be more accepted there than I would here, at least just at face value.

Just as Jessica was aided by education to reach a new level of racial awareness, learning about the history of Asian Americans brought Adam to a new consciousness as well.

Adam honestly shares that he would feel more comfortable with Asians that he cannot communicate with more than white Americans. The key to his statement is that he would feel more “accepted” by Asians that “look similar” to him, even if they are foreign to him. He had a difficult time identifying specific incidents of racial discrimination, but as he has gotten older he continues to weed out contact with whites.

He was not exposed to Asian American history in his high school curriculum, so the new information in college helped him piece together the subordinate role that Asian Americans have served in the US.

Seriously lacking for Asian Americans is a tradition of passing on their history. African Americans have a great oral tradition, and share a collective memory (Feagin & Sikes 1994), but it is not the case for Asian Americans. This lack of knowledge leads to a great identity struggle. The history of Asian Americans puts their modern day treatment into context. Without the history, many respondents do not understand why they are mistreated and isolated.

Conclusion

There are a myriad of ways that Asian Americans choose to deal with the discrimination that they withstand. For some, the stress becomes so great that they self-destruct by turning to drugs and alcohol or physically harming themselves. Others internalize the pain and damage themselves psychologically. However, attempts to erase

memories of the past do not protect them from future racist events. As subordinates to whites, understanding racial identity is elusive and very few respondents have gotten themselves to a comfortable place of peace. First generation Asian Americans feel overwhelming feelings of isolation and exclusion. Successive generations still feel exclusion, but also are challenged with figuring out where they “fit.” Other Asians may treat them as inauthentic and whites will treat them as foreigners. In efforts to celebrate diversity, Asian Americans also find themselves continually “Orientalized.” Much of the identity confusion is caused by the lack of collective memory of racial oppression for Asian Americans. Many do not understand the racist past of the United States and are surprised by racist incidents. Finding where they fit in a black-white binary world is troublesome for Asian Americans (Wu 2003) and will remain complex in a white racial frame.

As noted in an earlier chapter, Ginzi was teased and beaten up regularly growing up. He is still grappling with, and is in conflict with, his identity. He attempted to find answers with Asian friends but has yet to feel like he fits. In describing his search for his place, he asks an important question that will be addressed in the following chapter:

I guess, at that time I looked for more Asian friends because eventually they come because like in middle school, towards the end of middle school I started meeting other Asian people. But I didn't know what to think of it. I thought it sucked that people picked on me...so I had a really restricted social life for a long time and I didn't like, I mean, I didn't not like being Asian, it's just *damn*, what am I going to do about it?

Chapter IV addresses exactly what ways Asian Americans attempt to gain acceptance, conformity to the white racial frame – by changing outward appearances, choosing social networks, and “whitening” the mind. In a binary racial world, Asian Americans

are forced to “pick sides” (Wu 2003). Respondents “distance themselves from blackness” in hopes to gain acceptance into the white world by buying into the notion of “model minority” (Wu 2003). Adopting the white racial frame leads Asian Americans to internalize racism and adopt negative stereotypes about other people of color. The drive to conform is an attempt to combat the constant threat of being the target of white racism.

Notes

¹ The Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said defined “Orientalism” as referring to the dominant approach to study the 'Orient' as it has been based on assumptions underpinning the western domination, superiority and self-justified power over the Middle East region. He argues that the western description of the Orient has been biased. It is based on a predominant shared dogma supporting the political, economic and intellectual superiority of the West over the East.

CHAPTER IV

CONFORMING TO THE WHITE RACIAL FRAME

The white racist frame is powerful. Feagin (2006: 25) describes the frame as, “an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate” that “generates closely associated, recurring, and habitual discriminatory actions.” As demonstrated in earlier chapters, Asian Americans experience racism in all areas of their everyday lives. The frame creates a context in which Asian Americans are ridiculed, humiliated, and dismissed. This treatment as “second-class citizens” forces Asian Americans to form survival strategies and coping skills to deal with the pain of racism. In order to protect themselves from racism, many Asian Americans “strive for whiteness.” Another unfortunate consequence of living in the white racial frame is that Asian Americans adopt racial stereotypes into their own lives.

Adopting the white racial frame is multi-faceted. In addition to “whitening,” Asian Americans will embrace the stereotypes created by whites about other racial minorities, as well as, the white racist notions about themselves. My interviewees have conformed to white norms by attempting to change characteristics in the physical world – giving up their Asian name, changing style of dress, and entering white social networks – and in the psychological realm by adopting “white thinking.” This “white thinking” brings about internalized racism and oppression, along with prejudice against other racial minorities.

Striving for “Whiteness”

Asian Americans have gained some acceptance into the white world because of assimilation and conformity to white norms. Because of this, a privileged title is given to many Asian Americans as an “honorary white” or “model minority.” Seemingly the title “model minority” is a compliment, but “positive” stereotyping of Asian Americans is in fact oppressive and damaging. The damage is multi-layered: 1) the stereotype is used as an insult to other minority groups, like a yardstick or minority report card, to wrongly reinforce inferiority of other minority groups for not attaining equally high status educational achievement and career levels, 2) The stereotype is another method in which the white majority can reinforce “othering” and differentiate themselves from the minority groups, 3) On a personal level, it creates a stressful and unrealistic expectation, both self-imposed and external, that Asian Americans should succeed in fitting the stereotype or be deemed a failure, and 4) The stereotype creates unrealistic expectations both within the Asian American community and outside of it that negatively impacts individual Asian Americans.

As we have seen in previous chapters, Asian Americans often feel like outsiders. To fit in, some interviewees put in extensive effort to be the all-American student, co-worker, and citizen. This “assimilation gratifies the ego of whites who are assimilated toward...” and is seen as an entry ticket into the world of prosperity for Asian Americans (Wu 2003). To Asian Americans, the ideal image of success has a white face.

Lena – More than a Model Citizen, a Model for White Racism

Lena, a Taiwanese American woman who owns her own firm, grew up in a Southern town. I spend a whole section of this chapter on Lena because she exemplifies the multi-dimensional nuances of conforming to the white racist frame. Her story shows her efforts to conform to gain acceptance. Her academic and economic success reinforced the white racist frame. She then adopts the frame and uses it, as a reference in her own hiring practices, but still faces discrimination that she rationalizes as isolated incidents of ignorance. Lena serves as an opening example because her experience typifies the experiences of other respondents.

Lena commented that she was “quite lucky” to never have endured an overt act of racism. Although she did not initially share in the interview, racism was always a perpetual threat. In order to combat the threat, Lena chose to overachieve. Instead of avoiding those spaces that were unwelcoming by whites, Lena made it a point to conform to the white ways as much as possible, believing that her hard work would be rewarded with white acceptance. She discusses her high school experience:

I was in Mu Alpha Theta, the math club, and in JCL, the Latin club, and VICA the vocational club . . . I was also a varsity cheerleader . . . I was the only Asian; there were no African American cheerleaders in my group that I can recall. Um, so basically of a squad of let's say a squad of 16 it was all white and 1 Asian . . . That would give me choices and nobody would have anything on me, no one would say “Well hey, well you know what, Asian Americans can't be cheerleaders because they are too geeky or” I just figured there's never a disadvantage to joining everything. [laughter] I have tried so hard to assimilate...

Lena initially stated that her drive to assimilate was just her competitive “nature” to want to achieve and be “the best” in everything. Later, she admitted that her over-involvement in school activities was protective measure:

I mean if nobody can say “well that person’s less smart than me, or that person is less successful than me or, um, you know, less socially adept than me or somehow nerdier than me” then they can’t say that, then what can they say negative about the race? It was a defense tactic.

The goals in what she is trying to obtain coincide with the “model minority” stereotype as she wanted to be smarter and more successful, but it is also mixed with desire to be socially integrated and not too nerdy, exemplifying whiteness. She is putting forth so much effort to meet both the white standard of Asian-ness and the white standard of whiteness. Shortly after making this statement, Lena went on to say that if she were raised in Taiwan, she would have done the same things, but the race issue would be lost in that case. When asked for further explanation about what she was trying to defend herself against, Lena replied:

A defense from the potential that there could be a race issue, it’s not like I’ve never had a racial slur. And maybe I have a low tolerance for that type of aggravation or degradation and so I knew that that was a potential and I tried to minimize it. I don’t think it’s that I didn’t recognize the potential was there I just wanted to make sure I was ready. Generally, I try not to be reactive. I try to say, let me get ready, I know what could happen and so I am just going to prepare so that life goes the way I want it and not how it is forced upon me by other people’s actions or thoughts.

Like other respondents, Lena eventually shared that she had experienced mistreatment because of her race and those experiences motivate her to excel. Lena has worked her whole life to overachieve to feel in control of her life. She was the high school valedictorian, top student in her engineering class, and opened her own engineering firm

by her mid-30s. All of these accomplishments were used as a defense tactic in racially harsh white world. However, even with financial success, white racism takes a toll.

Feagin (2006: 21) argues:

In the process of this oppression, whites attempt to force Americans of color to act as whites would have them act, and thus often to act against their individual and group interests. Thus whites have created social arrangements where those who are oppressed lose substantial control over their lives and livelihoods. They are generally separated and alienated from their oppressors. They are, to varying degrees, alienated from control over their own bodies as well as from an ability to make decisions about many aspects of their lives. Systemic racism at its core involves separating, distancing, and alienating social relationships.

Lena is not in control. Her “choice” to prepare herself for racism by being an overachiever is a survival technique she uses to combat white racism. She also distanced herself from other Asian Americans at her school, separating and distancing herself from them. She described them as “outsiders” who did not “fit in” as well as she did.

Although Lena clearly articulates the purpose of her defense tactic, which is protection from discrimination, she says she has not been affected by racial prejudices:

I just haven’t been very traumatized by race differences. Again, part of it may just be me, the opposite side of me, you know ignoring issues and always just trying to be *better* than the people around me so that they didn’t, so that they didn’t have anything over me. There was nothing they could say, “Oh well she’s Asian, so she’s therefore less because of such and such.” I never gave anybody, or I tried not to give anybody the opportunity to say anything like that.

Lena truly believes she possesses control over her life. As long as she works hard enough, she will be accepted into society and will achieve the American dream. In reality, she is forced into meeting standards set by whites. Lena works so hard to assimilate to the “model minority” standard that she is unaware of the fact that her choices are not really her own. Feagin (2006: 47) asserts:

Those who are not white, whether recent immigrants or long-term residents, are under great pressure, in the language of much social science and policy analysis, “to assimilate” to the white-determined folkways. The word “assimilate,” however, does not capture the everyday reality of the pressure-cooker-type demands on individuals to conform to that white environment and white folkways. There is often no choice for those who are not white but to more or less accept, mostly emulate, and even parrot the prevailing white folkways, including the white-generated negative images of racial outgroups, usually including one’s own group. People of color constantly resist these pressures to conformity, but most have to accept and adapt to some extent just to survive in a white-controlled society.

Lena’s goal to protect herself from discrimination by being deemed near white may seem a favorable place on the racial hierarchy, but no matter how much they achieve, Asian Americans will still be second-class citizens (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2006; Tuan 2003). Lena is still deceived by whites that someday she will be accepted into their world. When she was in high school, she attempted three years in a row to join a highly selective social club that consisted of all white girls. These were the most popular girls in school and the only qualifications were academic records. As valedictorian of her class, Lena should have been a shoe in for the club. When asked about reasons why she may have never been accepted, Lena cited personality differences and her inability to have a “connection” with the club members.

Lena has so committed to the idea of assimilation that she admitted that when she looks to hire people at her engineering firm, there is a certain profile of a new employee that she desires. Even though her own father had difficulty with the English language and was denied career opportunities because of it, Lena asserts:

If you do not speak English well, which I was given the opportunity to do, if they don’t speak English well, there is probably a *ton* of discrimination. Because even myself, when I am thinking about hiring someone if they have an accent or if

they don't speak English fluently, that affects my thought process as far as selecting them.

To most Americans, discrimination in the name of citizenship seems rational and acceptable compared to discrimination based on race (Wu 2003). In the white racist frame, white accented English is thought to be the desirable norm and Lena agrees even though she has felt the brunt of playground insults regarding this matter. She has used her grasp of the English language and "excellent diction" to defend against peers using racial slurs or comments. This incident happened in elementary school:

One time, I don't remember who it was. It was just some random kid and he saw me and said something, you know pretending to speak Chinese, kind of mocking, and I just looked back at him in the eyes and said, "Hey, I bet I read and speak English a lot better than you do. So you may as well just cut it out."

Lena's mastery of the English language in her mind elevates her status over the white child that was teasing her in grade school. She does not empathize with newer Americans that may have not mastered the language. If she could do it, why couldn't they? Feagin (2006: 292) argues:

Whites are collectively so powerful that they pressure all new immigrant groups, including immigrants of color, to collude in the white-racist system by adopting not only general white ways of doing and speaking, including the English language, but also the white racial frame and its view of racial hierarchy of U.S. society

Lena believes her entrance into the white world has been awarded to her because of all her hard work, not because she adopted the white ways. She did not befriend the other Asian Americans in her school and she viewed herself differently from them. They were not as involved with school activities as she was and were "loners." When asked why she thought they were on the outside, she responded, "They may have felt more isolated.

Again, I did my defensive tactic. Get involved with as many things as you can, just for the heck of it regardless of whether you know why you are doing it or not and try to fit in as socially well as possible. With all her work to fit in, Lena still faces racial incidents. When she experiences racial discrimination she deals with the person head on and makes rationalizations in her head. To combat those comments when she was a child:

I just wrote it off as ignorance. You know. I think I just thought, well they may, they are clearly stupider than me if they are going to act like that so therefore I'll just make it up by being their boss when we're both 30. [laughter] That's just how I wrote it off as if "you know what they can continue to have those attitudes and they are stupid enough to act like that then they are just not going to succeed" and I will just let time tell the difference, I think.

Lena has experienced white racism in her past even if she has written off the events, and her last words in her statement show some uncertainty that her efforts will actually pay off. Lena thought time would tell the difference, that she would someday be her assailant's boss or achieve more than he would throughout her life course. She shared that she had a vivid memory of an incident that happened a couple of years ago. Two kids at the grocery store were mocking her just as peers did when she was in grade school. Can she keep telling herself that her achievement will curb the discrimination when successive generations of whites still treat her with the same disdain they did 30 years ago? Systemic racism persists and Lena achievement will not be enough to dispel all the racist notions in the white racial frame.

Crowd of Conformers

Pressures to assimilate into American culture, and specifically to conform to white normatives, are intense for new immigrants. Asian Americans are awarded some privileges that are still elusive to other people of color and because of this, they may maintain a status as the “darlings of whites” (Wu 2003). It takes enormous work to be placed in “pet” status; Prashad (2003: 123) discusses the system of pressure:

Bifurcation assumes that the territory of the United States is already a homogeneous fabric. This puts enormous pressure on migrants, who seek to “assimilate” but find themselves confronted with a forbidding racism. This leads them in at least two directions, either into the shell of “national culture” (that is retreating from an abandoned “outside society”) or else into an intensified desire to “assimilate” and gain acceptance (that is, to seeing the earlier attempt as insufficient, as having made mistakes that need to be remedied for a successful assimilation). Many of those born in the new land first try to assimilate in a one-dimensional way) to become “American”), discover the resilience of their own “pasts” as well as of racism’s present, and then recover the resources within “national cultures” in a process that we may name “reverse assimilation.”

Two choices are given to Asian Americans as they attempt to become equal citizens. In this section, I will discuss the first option to Asian Americans that Prashad says is “to assimilate in a one-dimensional way.” The second option of “reverse assimilation” will be discussed in the following chapter.

Power of Psychological Discrimination

Asian Americans have “*additional, often high, levels of stress beyond those faced by white people* in the same or similar social settings – added stress that, in its turn, creates or aggravates psychological and physical problems” (Feagin & McKinney 2003: 32) The following respondents all had to expend mental energy to absorb a racist event

or to strategize how to defend themselves from the threat. This psychological workout translates into a kind of psychological discrimination for people of color.

Phan is a Vietnamese American graphic artist who grew up in the Mid-Atlantic and now lives in New England. She recalled early attempts at conformity:

I remember when my dad took me to school, the first day of school, this Catholic school, you know, the teacher asked, "Oh, what's your daughter's name?" And my dad was like "Fat" because it's the closest to my name in Vietnamese. I remember I was like 5 or something. I was like, "My name is Phan." I didn't want to be called Phat because I already knew what fat meant. I was like, "No I don't want to be called 'Phat' and they can make weight jokes and all that stuff, you know? So I was like 5 years old, like "Don't call me Phat!" And then they called me "Fang" and all this stuff and made jokes about me being Chinese and Vietnamese.

At age five, Phan understood the ridicule that she would endure because of her Vietnamese name. Racial teasing at school was "just part of life" for many respondents, but even before entering school, Phan had fears and reservations. Children begin to pick up and learn about racial concepts earlier than entering elementary school, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001: 127) assert:

Still, in the contemporary United States the social standards and interactive frameworks imposed by the dominant white group continue to create and reinforce de facto racial separation and oppression. Many white adults still harbor deeply racist images and stereotypes and practice racial discrimination in settings they traverse in their daily lives. Not surprisingly, children are not protected from the reality and pain of this racist context, and their activities often reproduce and experiment with what they observe and understand about that racist society.

Children do not live in a protective bubble that keeps them from learning about racial stereotypes. If the frame in which they grow and flourish is racist, they will pick up on those tendencies. White children will exercise their power and children of color will learn their subordinate positions. Phan changed her own name at age five as she had a

better understanding of the racial hierarchy than her own father. She worked to save embarrassment for her younger sister as well:

I know I was 6, because that's when my sister was about to be born. So maybe I was 5 ½ or something. I was at school, and I remember telling my teacher, "Oh, I'm about to have a sister." And you know, the teacher was like, "Oh, that's great. You know, what's your sister's name going to be?" And you know, it's funny because looking back I don't like to embellish and come up with a story or anything about it, but I mean it was obvious that I told her that my sister's name was going to be Jennifer. I knew my sister's name was not going to be Jennifer. I knew my sister's name was going to be Quy. I remember telling – I don't remember why it came out of my mouth – I told my teacher, "No her name's going to be Jennifer." So she wrote like the certificate to my parents – you know, like a congratulations or something like that certificate. I don't know what it said or anything, but just basically said Jennifer [last name]. And then she sent it to my parents. So my parents, of course, were highly upset about it, because they were like, "Why did you tell them your sister was going to be Jennifer.?" I was like, "I don't know, I want my new sister to be Jennifer. You don't call her an American name." I remember thinking it's going to be awful. They're going to name her Quy and make fun of her.

At such a young age, Phan could not explain to her parents why she chose to change the name of her younger sister. To her parents, she looked like an obstinate child embarrassed of her heritage. Phan understood the nefarious nature of being outcast and different, but her parents did not appear to have understood why she did it. Similarly, Jessica's parents emigrated from Vietnam and did not understand white racism, but over time, they became well acquainted with it. The change was difficult for Jessica to watch:

You know it's really hard that my parents don't get it. We're foreign. We're on welfare, and so, I guess for me my ethnicity has always been ridiculously intertwined with my class and I can't separate the two because, to me, that's a specific experience being from a Vietnamese immigrant family that's poor. I know it's hard for them. People gave her dirty looks. My mom dirty looks because of the few things that she used combined with the fact that she didn't know English. So it was like, oh immigrants come in here, taking our money. That's exactly what that is. And it was really hard for her. It was embarrassing

that she had to use her children to translate for her, and that's why she learned English. She became a citizen, and when she became a citizen she changed her name to Christine. But the reason she did that is because they couldn't say her name and they would never remember it. Right? If they can't say it, why bother to remember it. Yeah. And it's weird watching them assimilate.

After being victims of terrible treatment, Jessica's parents are conforming to the society that has assaulted them. Many immigrants go through this process to protect themselves from racism and Jessica admits that it makes sense that her parents would choose to assimilate, but it is still unnerving to her. I asked Jessica what was "weird" about watching the change in her parents and she replied:

Because it's such a delayed reaction to their own children growing up and having success and seeing that success and wanting to be part of that. And, you know, dressing differently and buying different cars and learning English and watching the shows that we watch and buying things that we buy. And.... I don't know how I feel about that. I guess it just feels weird to me, because I'm in a stage of my life where I'm working through that internalized oppression. And working through who I am and what I think about myself, and watching my parents go through what I went through when I was younger and in school. And seeing them just try to fit in and having American friends and having white friends specifically and [laughter], it's weird! And my mom, she's been here for so long now, you know she's 43. It seems so long, and so, even she doesn't feel that comfortable in her Vietnamese identity any more. She feels that she is a Vietnamese American. When people say that I'm first generation, and they count me as a first generation, they completely discount my mother, who's been here for 20 years. I think she counts as an American in this country. How do you discount that? Like 27 years here – that's older than I am. So, come on, that's more than my life that she's been here. And so, I can't blame her for wanting to change and grow. And it's not like they're teenagers.

Jessica is well aware of the pervasiveness of systemic racism, but in regards to her mother she "can't blame her for wanting to change and grow." Describing conformity to the white racial frame as *growth* is an example of internalized racism at work, as it implies that Jessica's mother's changes mimicking whiteness is progression or development. As if her mother was an adolescent going through puberty, the discomfort

she feels in her Vietnamese identity demonstrates the powerful imposition of the white racial frame on people of color. In a way it seems as if Jessica realizes that her mother will never be accepted if she does not make choices to fit the white norms, so it is for her mother's own good to "Americanize." The psychological discrimination that Asian Americans experience with white racism is like an abusive relationship, because they must succumb to any and all requests of whites yet never have a healthy, equal footing with each other. Whites remain in the position of power to dictate the lives of and control people of color.

Dissociation from being a person of color is a way of conforming to the white racist frame. Some respondents recalled that during school years, they would yearn to look different and were less than thrilled with having Asian friends. Charlotte recounts a high school experience:

I remember in high school, when we moved to a different part of town, meeting one girl who was Chinese. And her mother was giving me a ride home because it turned out she lived very close to me, and her mother said, "Oh, look, she's Chinese too. Maybe you could be friends." And she and I respectively rolled our eyes, I think, wherever we were sitting in the car, not at each other, and it was nothing personal, and we didn't take it personally. It was just annoying that – oh somebody else is Chinese – maybe you can be friends with them...I think that it was just – you know, her situation – as mine was – was that we were, I guess 1st generation or 2nd generation – but we were the first ones that were born and raised in this country, and they [the parents] just didn't want to lose the cultural identity. I understand that a lot more now as an adult, then I did as a kid growing up. Where, assimilation was the name of the game. I remember she and I talked about, and all she wanted to have was blonde hair and blue eyes and to be named – I don't know – Chris, or something like that. And all I wanted to have was *regular* brown hair and *regular* brown eyes and be named Janet. And so, we would just talk about how all we wanted to do was be like everybody else.

In Charlotte's description, her desire to be like "everybody else" specifically means to be like a white American deeming the desirable characteristics as "regular" or normative.

Charlotte and her friend share an understanding of what it means to be different from “everyone else”, but while other respondents found comfort in that understanding with other Asian Americans, initially Charlotte did not want to befriend the other Asian American. White racism fuels the two women’s aspirations to change their physical appearance. When Charlotte was in school in the early 80s, plastic surgery was not decently affordable and frequent. Today, the most frequent Asian and Asian American plastic surgeries are procedures to Anglicize their facial features. Liposuction and breast implants are the most frequent for white women. For Asian and Asian American women, the most popular are nose bridge implants and eyelid surgery (Kaw 1993). White women are using plastic surgery for cosmetic enhancement, but Asian and Asian American women are using it to look more like whites.

Ripening “Bananas”

Many respondents spoke of going through a process of leaving Asian-ness. Those who chose to make the effort to leave Asian-ness did so to further their success. They felt that the process would help them achieve or gain them acceptance. Like Jessica, Joel, a Hmong American, felt the double burden of the intersection of class and race. The Hmong in his hometown assume a “collective black” social position (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Joel wanted to overcome negative stereotypes about his people:

I guess because the fact the Hmong people were a new cohort of immigrants into the US during that time period, there was a more negative perception of them...there is the whole notion that the Hmong people are on welfare and that they’re taking tax payer money, etc., so I think from my perception, there’s a negative perception of the Hmong people because they’re new immigrants and more likely that they weren’t getting a junior high education. I chose to associate more with the white individuals so I can internalize their expectations and also go in the same route that they are going...I got straight As and then I was one of the

valedictorians for our junior high. But then at the same time, I kind of like, I knew that I wouldn't associate with the Hmong people as much, because it was kind of like, they're not doing so well and I was doing better because this is where my parents want me to go and this is also where most of the individuals in my class are going. So, I kind of turned my "Hmongness" off and I kind of more associated with like white individuals or those individuals who were doing academically better.

Just as many other Asian Americans have chosen to do, Joel worked to distance himself from his own heritage because he thought it was what he needed to do in order to succeed (Wu 2003). He later became aware of white racism and the insidious nature of conformity, but May Ia, another Hmong American from the Midwest has not reached that level of awareness. She shared her experience with adopting white ways:

Because growing up, I chose to follow more of the prosperity of the Caucasian culture, the White culture. Therefore, a lot of my thoughts, my attitudes, are more of an American culture...[Caucasian mindset] pretty much means individualized, be independent...

May Ia associates her own people with hardship, and whiteness with success. She is not taking into account unjust enrichment that white Americans have enjoyed by exploiting people of color since colonialism (Feagin 2006).

May Ia's own people have been exploited by whites as they were used by the CIA to wage a secret war against the Communists during the Vietnam War (Lindsay 2002). The Hmong involvement in helping the Americans made them targets after the US withdrew from the region. The Laotian government retaliated against the Hmong, and those who were unable to hide in small pockets of the mountains were placed in refugee or "re-education" camps (Lindsay 2002). Beyond the borders of the United States, whites continue to exploit and force unjust impoverishment onto people of color.

May Ia blames her own people for their failures and credits white attitudes for success; her opinions are the result of lessons from the white racist frame.

Frank, the Korean American tech industry worker, has also adopted the “white mindset.” He was a respondent that claimed that there was no racial discrimination, but discussed the “glass ceiling” that prevents Asian American advancement at length in Chapter II. Frank shares his thoughts:

I didn't feel like I was a minority because they [whites] treated me just like one of them. And also, I assimilate to the US very quickly. At that time, I had a younger brother who was 6 years old. And he got assimilated even faster. So we became just like they did. Even today, a lot – I have a lot of Korean friends who call me “banana” now. I look Oriental - Asian in the face, but inside is pure white...I look like all Asian outside. I am Asian. But inside, and the way I think, and the way I behave, way I approach the problem, the way I approach the government, or whatever, I act exactly like white Americans. I do everything correctly, do step-by-step as the government requires, which cause far less problems...I am a conservative and a republican. And the way I look at it is I know that most white people I know – I don't know the exact political affiliations – when I talk to them, we are talking the same thing, the same language, and the same subject, and we both agree on it, so I assume he and I are both same.

Frank's language that he uses to describe his actions when he mimics whites as, doing things “correctly” implies that white actions are “right,” and any other actions are “wrong.” To Frank, “white thinking” consists of conservative Republican thinking, even though many whites are liberal Democrats. Conservatism is associated with whiteness because some of the ideals and policies exclude the interests of people of color. This would make sense of Frank's political standpoint as he celebrates his “banana” identity.

At root of these adaptations to “white thinking” is that white is correct and normal, but everything else is not. People of color must protect themselves by adopting these ways. Tanaka (1999) demonstrated in her documentary that the Nisei wanted to

adopt white-think because they were terribly mistreated during the internment process.

Brian, a Sansei university administrator, shares a similar experience about his father who

was an internee:

It was passed down to us in regards to being raised in an assimilationist household. There's a piece of us was reinforced from the rest of the culture, but there was also a strong push for us to assimilate, to raised to conformist status and to be as white in America as possible...In an essence, he's telling me implicitly that when he was 20, he didn't have that opportunity. There's too much racist policies and mobs and attitudes and so one of the only things available to him was gardening. So he did gardening. I have a lot more options. So that's what I chose. But going back to where I am, he would do anything to help me assimilate. So, from not learning the language enough – you know, I'd learn baby words, but doing that, learning baby words, and then being involved much like our current millennials, being involved in soccer, little league, and then not learning the language, but still having little cultural pride by knowing some stuff, so it wasn't a total conformist upbringing, but I don't think it was really a childhood by pushing the bi-racial in regards to knowing and honoring the Japanese side and the white and American cultural side.

Brian uses “bi-racial” to attempt to describe loosely what his father was trying to do during his formative years, but Brian is not half white and half Japanese. He is of Japanese and Okinawan descent. To compare the adoption of the white racial frame to biological term for race shows just how powerful white racism is to be likened to a “natural” process instead of one that is socially imposed. This also relates to the “one-dimensional” direction in which assimilation works (Prashad 2003). Brian's dad wanted him to have opportunity that he was never privy to, and to his father that means only one thing, moving towards whiteness. Brian's father did not want all of the Japanese heritage to be lost, but offered no other solution to his children as ways they may still be successful without having to conform.

Lin, a Chinese American director of a community center made this remark to explain the phenomenon of why Asian Americans who conform to the white racial frame do not take part in fighting for social justice issues:

So many people, so many people in the past have worked to make this a great nation, but we have to really, Asian Americans, have to really take that responsibility and go beyond just to have comfortable homes, two cars, have good children that grow to be knowledgeable. But to really understand the struggle of single moms, the struggle of affordable housing, the struggle of affordable health care, all the basic needs for all people. I think there is not enough discussion in the Asian American community about all the other social issues. It could be because we don't think that we have the power to change it because after all we are disempowered and maybe it is because we are so consumed by the busy pace, the fast pace of life and I think it's also because we are not being treated as American citizens we don't think that we are allowed to contribute to the social issues.

Lin referred to the middle class comforts that many Asian Americans enjoy as “crumbs” that have been “tossed” to them from whites. These “crumbs” keep the Asian Americans fed. Whites become idolized and, in keeping with Newton's third law, “with every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction,” people of color become vilified. Race matters may not adequately be compared to the laws of physics, but Asian Americans that adopt the white racial frame cannot escape the system that reinforces the ideals of the racial hierarchy.

Internalized Racism

Asian American conformity to the white racist frame, in and of itself, is a form of internalized racism. In this section I want to go a level further in explaining Asian American internalized racism. It comes in the form of anti-Asian sentiment that may include: opposition to choosing an Asian partner, denying a job to an Asian American, discouraging Asian Americans that challenge the racial status quo, perpetuating negative

or positive Asian American stereotypes, wanting to change physical characteristics to appear white, and denying Asian heritage.

Searching for My “White Prince Charming”

Asian American women are the group most likely to marry outside of their racial group (Nemoto 2006). Equally significant is that, overall, men outmarry more than women (Lee and Yamanaka 1990). So, Asian American women outmarry the most for people of color and more than their Asian American male counterparts. The white racial frame intersects with the sexualization of Asian American women. Asian American women find white men more appealing because their beauty standards are based on white norms and the potential to enter into white middle class. White men are drawn to Asian American women’s exoticized sensuality and their stereotyped characteristics of being submissive and docile (Nemoto 2006). Before the large increase in Asian immigration prior to the Civil Rights Movement, the Asian American men always outnumbered Asian American women (Loewen 1988). In the late 1800s, many of them Asian women who emigrated were forced into prostitution (Takaki 1998). Since 1960s, the population of Asian American women has grown and they outnumber Asian American men (US Census 2000). The argument could be used that, based on sheer number, these women must outmarry, but they are choosing a disproportionate number of white men because the white racist frame creates a racial hierarchy of potential partners to which these women abide.

Of my twenty-one female respondents, four were married before they immigrated to the US, seven are single, and ten formed relationships in the US either after their

arrival here or are a natural born citizen. Of the ten that formed their relationships in the US, six are with white men, three with Asian American, and one with a Mexican American. Sixty percent of the women these relationships have partnered with white men, and none with black men. For the men in my sample, four are partnered with Asian or Asian American women and one with a Persian woman. None have partnered with white women. My sample is reflective of the high outmarriage rates of Asian American women and low rate for Asian American men.

Alice is very distressed by all the outmarriage and plans doing her next project about the subject. She discusses the “whitening” of her Sansei generation:

Why it is that Asian women are dating white men 3 to 1 over Asian men? And you know, so Japanese Americans, that outmarriage started in the 60s where 50% were out marriage, but now amongst all Asian American women, the statistics is 3 to 1. Ironically we have 3 couples that are very good friends and they are all Asian women and white guys and they are all having children this year. So it's like, oh my God, it's true. But it's a strange phenomenon and like I keep talking with the Asian men and they get more and more mad as time goes on . . . So it's a very strange racial thing that is happening. And now we have a lot of “halfa” kids.¹ And what are their lives going to be like? You know, there going to be a lot of women with the half Asian – like Tiger Woods. And in reality, mothers have much more influence over things like culture, over things like values because they spend more time naturally with their kids. But, who knows. I think it's really a dilemma that we're facing.

Alice can see the shift in her community and calls the threat of future generations whitening as a “dilemma.” There is an implicit undertone of fear for these “halfa kids” that they will lose their culture. She sounds a bit hopeful that the Asian American mothers will help them retain a sense of culture, but Alice is not certain. Historically, Asian men have been stereotyped as mongrels and oversexed (Takaki 1998), but there has been a shift that coincides with the emergence of the “model minority” stereotype

and they are now feminized and emasculated (Espiritu 1998). The emasculation does not fit with Alice's experience. Her friends have an opposite view of Asian men, but either way, white men are the desired partners:

You know, a lot of Asian women say from their point of view that you know Asian men raised by Asian mothers have a lot of macho expectations, especially if they are from China or from Korea or from India, wherever...So...Asian men, well...some of them are really angry...It's an interesting dilemma to me, because I see the seething Asian man. You have the angry Asian man, and they are so outspoken about why, and so enraged about why? But nobody ever comes to any conclusions except that it's just happening.

Alice's friends believe that they will be treated as an equal with a white man and be granted more liberties. There is no empirical evidence to support their claims, and the dynamics of social inequalities at play in these relationships make Asian women "particularly vulnerable to mistreatment" with white men (Pyke and Johnson 2003). I argue that the white racist frame makes white men the desirable partner to these women. They are bombarded with messages of white superiority and the desirability of whiteness, and it is hard to combat those powerful lessons.

Lee's story illustrates the power and pervasiveness of the white racist frame promoting white male desirability. She emigrated from Thailand over ten years ago. Before she moved to the US, she was working in what she called a "secret American factory" making "forty times" less money than she does now. She said that everyone she knew in Thailand loved Americans and wanted to move here to the US. She was sponsored by her brother and was able to find work at a factory in a Southern state. She met a white man at the factory and, "I married him, white guy, everybody just thinks I am so lucky for that, too. Like I said, I always think I like American people. I think

they look wonderful. I always like them. Thai love American people.” I wanted to clarify with Lee what she meant by “Americans” and I asked her if she meant white Americans or all Americans, so I asked her if that affinity is for black Americans as well. Her response was interesting, “Yes. White and black. [long pause] Because [pause] I don't know. Uh, maybe white more than black. [another long pause] I don't know, but I think so. [pause] Yes. I think white, more white.” Lee’s initial answer was definitive, but as she thought about what I had asked and began to reply, she realized that blacks were not held in such high regard as whites. She transitioned from definitive, then hesitant, to unsure, then to a completely different certainty.

Lee has a young daughter who is half white and half Asian American. Like so many of my respondents, Lee claimed to not experience any racism here, but as the interview continued she mentioned that she was “so worried” for her daughter. I asked what she was worried about, if she has never experienced mistreatment. She then revealed that she had, in fact, been a target of racism quite frequently with former white co-workers. She owns her own business now and her white customers also treat her rudely. She then revealed that she wants to go back to Thailand as soon as she can and wants to take her daughter with her. She said that she would rather work for the “secret American company” than stay here. Marrying a white man has not protected her from racism from other whites, but she believes that it will raise her status if she goes back home. She commented, “Thai people like American people. I don't know if they like us, but we like themYou know what I mean? My people love American people. That's why I want her to go back home and they going to treat her wonderful...here, it makes

me worry.” Interestingly, Lee wants to move back home so that her daughter will receive excellent treatment from the Thai because of her half white American heritage. Lee is concerned that her daughter will be mistreatment in the US because she is half Thai, yet she avoids making any claim that she is treated poorly here.

Two themes arising from these accounts are that white men are the ideal chosen partner for these Asian American women, but there is great fear for their half Asian children. These women may gain acceptance and hope for respite from racism by forming relationships with these white men. However, they fear that they might not be able to protect their children from the same discrimination that they faced.

Asian-on-Asian Oppression

Both Asian Americans who do, and do not, understand the racial continuum participate in Asian-on-Asian oppression. This oppression comes in the form of attributing negative attributes to Asians as “natural,” and may take form as: denying people of Asian heritage jobs, self-damaging or self-hating ideals, and attacking Asian Americans that have critical racial views. Scientific studies that link genetic factors to racial inequalities dangerously reinforce racist beliefs (Gould 1996). Interviewees similarly attributed “natural” traits to explain why Asian Americans are not being promoted to upper managerial positions, are limited in their interactions with whites, and are uninterested in voting. These forms of Asian-on-Asian oppression serve only the interests of whites and continue to subordinate people of color.

“Natural” Inferiority

As mentioned in previous chapters, Bari was a victim of a hate crime biking home from his university. He was the first victim of a string of attacks on international students, all of Asian descent. Bari’s incident came up when I spoke to David, another international student, who serves as president of the Chinese student association that represents 1,000 Chinese students. He was asked by the international graduate student association to alert the students in his organization, but had done nothing to warn the members about the recent attacks. He did not find it useful to the students in his organization because he assumed that all the students being attacked were South Asians.² His own stereotypes about Asians exempted East Asians from mistreatment and rationalized the attacks on South Asians:

I know the people that got beat around that area, they are from India. Maybe for the Chinese, they don’t really get into trouble. Maybe because they don’t speak very good English, so they kind of get away from the trouble, get away, the Chinese students. But Indian students, they speak better English. They want to argue [laughter].

When it was explained that the attacks were unprovoked and that it included East Asian international students, he simply said, “Oh, really, that’s really bad.” Still he did not appear concerned about informing the students in his organization. At first he claimed to have not received any complaints from the students that he represented, but after further discussion he was able to cite many instances that students have shared feeling unwelcome at the university office for international students. After further questioning, he had this to say about how students at the school feel about international students:

I am not sure but people say they don’t really care or interact with international students, but still I can feel there is a barrier between international students and

American students. They hang around American students, but I don't think many international students interact with that many American students. It depends; maybe it's our problem. We are probably too conservative.

When David refers to "Americans" he means whites. The term is often interchangeable to Asians and first generation Asian Americans (Zhou 2004). David blames the divide between Asian Americans and whites on the "natural" tendencies of Asian Americans, but Bari, who is a self-proclaimed "outgoing" person, said he felt an immediate chill from American students that made it impossible for him to make new friends.

Alex also believes that Asians should take blame for their lack of political involvement. He notices that the government pays little attention to Asian issues, but he does not critically look at why Asian Americans may not want to be involved:

I wouldn't say the government is actually taking care – or they don't care for Asians that much. But at the same time, the Asians aren't very good about coming forward with political issues, I think. So lots of times you watch TV, or listen to the radio. When they talk about minorities, they're usually talking about African Americans. They hardly mention Asian Americans. And that's because I think that we as Asians are not very good about putting up the issues in American government, or maybe other Americans, they don't look at it being an issue, even when we actually do. So actually I think it goes both ways. For example, when I go to Costco, and sometimes there are people, they are collecting signatures to make into law or whatever they are doing. I would observe those people, and most of the time they won't bother to ask Asians. Because, I think, we have a poor voting rate.

Asian Americans do have the lowest voter turnout of all the racial groups in the US (US Census 2000). His statement assigns responsibility to Asian Americans for the low voting rate, but he is not using a critical eye to explore why that might be. Prashad (2003: 102) explains lack of Asian American political involvement happens because, "[t]he feeling of being socially detached from U.S. life justifies withdrawing even further from the social and political life of the United States."

Taking Asian-on-Asian oppression a step further, Frank thinks from the perspective of the white racist frame, and he also applies the principles in his hiring practices. He is cognizant of the fact that he chooses to hire whites over Asian Americans because he knows that whites are the majority and would rather buy from a white salesperson. He explains:

I have my own company, I use an American white female and I send her out to sell, and then I send the Oriental girl out there, I found that the white American females consistently have a higher sales. So as a business owner, let's say I'm a business owner, of course I'm going to lean toward the white American girl. She's bringing more money for me. It's a simple fact of life. And you know, I don't think you can force that issue. At the end of the day, who's writing a check to your company, right, and if I send the white girl out there and she gets more money for me, I'll be using her. Not because of race, just as a fact of life. I wouldn't say that it's fair or not fair. Nothing in life is fair. I look at it this way: life is not fair from the beginning to end. If you try to make everything fair, it won't work. If I was born as Brad Pitt, it would be great, but I'm not. Brad Pitt may be making a couple movies, making a hundred million dollars, but since I'm not, I make less than \$150,000. Am I unhappy? Of course I'm happy. I'm happy. It's a fact of life.

Notice Frank's use of the word "Oriental." He is using the term that whites have used to insult and denigrate Asian Americans. This is just another example of his acceptance of the white racial frame that he was very honest about adopting. Complicating the issue, Frank is adamant that life is just "not fair" so he must just accept it and do what he can to live as well as he can. He can identify that racial preference exists for whites, but living a comfortable middle-class lifestyle is more important to him than fighting against an oppressive system. He sees no point in trying to change the system, and has conceded to white racist frame.

Mutiny on the “Rocked Boat”

The majority of my respondents refrained from protesting racial incidents for fear of worse mistreatment. Remaining silent or acquiescing was a survival technique they would use. Parents passed down these methods to their children while also encouraging conformity. This adaptation to white racism, posed problems for Asian Americans that chose to challenge white racism. Asian American activists found themselves alone when standing up against a discriminatory incident. Activists were often accused of “rocking the boat” and would feel the brunt of criticism from their own community that they were attempting to serve.

Jessica’s Asian American student group published a report about Asian Americans at her university in hopes to make some institutional changes. The group was making demands for better Asian Americans student representation in the government and for an Asian American mental health counselor. The university has an Asian American student population approaching 20 percent. The report was released and the administration claimed to be open to the findings of the report and planned meetings to discuss the issues. Jessica was shocked at the reaction from the Asian Americans in the university community because when word got to those students, “the shit really hit the fan:”

But the students, that was the most hurtful because a lot of the criticism came from our own community. And I can see it. And it’s like watching a video about the model minority being perpetuated. You know, it’s like here it is. This is how the model minority is perpetuated, and then just look at it. I mean people were saying, “Why do you have to rock the boat?” People saying, “Why are you looking for trouble? Why are you seeing things that aren’t there? I’ve never experienced racism. It must not exist.” It was ridiculous, and people were personally attacking the women of [the organization].... and it was so hurtful for

her, and it was really hard for me to see it. In Asian American Studies classes, people would say, "That's ridiculous," where I would think the most progressive Asian Americans would see. People saying that, "This is crap", and like "This doesn't exist."

The criticism from Asian Americans to those who published the report resorted to personal insult when the intent of the report was to provide better representation and support for the entire Asian American population on campus. Fareena, a Bangladeshi American, was the female director of the student organization at the time. She discussed the backlash she received after the report was released:

There was a lot of hate mail from Asia American males. A lot of them were Asian Studies majors saying, "Why are you causing a ruckus? You're making us look bad." I remember taking an Asian American studies class at that time. The women in that class hated me. I would get nasty little notes on my desk, "You're just doing this for your resume." I thought, "If I was doing this for my resume, I would get better grades. I wouldn't be messing up my classes" because that's what I was doing. One of them had said that I just "needed to take a Midol and cool down. These issues aren't that big of a deal." I thought the Midol reference was very interesting. I talked to her about it and she just said, "It's a pain killer." These are all Asian American females, saying, "why are you making Asian Americans look bad? Why are you saying that?" Because we were asked to defend the backlash. No group likes it when someone's rocking the boat. People think differently in terms of belonging to an imagined community or not. Some people are very defensive of it, and some are not. They were saying, "This groups just wants attention and the group was renamed Fareena's Political Agenda Committee."

Fareena took the brunt of the criticism from the very community she was working to serve. She was quickly labeled an agitator and many Asian Americans on campus worked to distance themselves from being associated with the "trouble seekers" in the Asian American organization. She continued:

I've had a lot of nice e-mails and messages from people, but they were primarily people of color that were not Asian American. Or Asian Americans would send it in, but they would remain anonymous. I thought that was weird. I remember that it was a *really bad semester* for me. For me in the beginning I was like, "I'm

ready to take it! I'm ready to take it! I don't care. If I believe in these issues and I made this report, I have to be responsible for whatever consequences come. I will learn from it. It will be an opportunity." But, I had to seek counseling. I really did. I felt like because a lot of our members weren't expecting this big of a backlash from Asian Americans. One member quit because he felt like he was going to lose his friends and he felt like he shouldn't have to defend our organization to them...some of the members were questioning, "did we go about this the right way? Should we have made this report? Should we have kept it quiet?" Which is what the person who quit had advocated for.... Now that I think about it, I think we did do the right thing. But back then I felt silenced and I think I took it a little harder and I didn't tell people, and people didn't realize because I was quoted so much. I was also in Asian American studies classes at the time, the other people were not. I stopped going to that one class. I failed it. [long pause] I never explained it to the professor, who was the advisor for Asian American studies. I liked her and I didn't want her to think I was skipping her class because it was boring or just because I didn't care, because I cared. It was just hard and if it was hard to tell her, because the class would have discussions about it everyday in the beginning. They would say things out loud very passive aggressively to me or by even saying my name. Me being the person I am, I would want to say, "actually, you have that wrong because this is what happened." The professor would shut me down. I don't think she realized she was shutting *me* down but she saw that it was becoming a back and forth argument. She was afraid of a back and forth and she wanted class to start, which I can completely respect. But it felt like every time she was shutting it down it was when I was speaking up. I stopped going to that class and I failed it.

Fareena stepped down from the co-director position of the organization. To this day, fellow students in her Asian American studies courses make "snide" remarks to her when there is news of a racial incident discussed. They question whether she will go and "run to write a report about it" even though over a year ago Fareena removed herself from the position to "take care of herself." Jessica reasoned why so many Asian Americans reacted viscerally:

It happens because we internalize that racism and that oppression. You know, it goes back to, you know, when you are little and all you want to do is fit in. And if you feel like you fit in and someone else is making a racket... I mean like SHUT UP, you know, Stop being such a thumb! You know, STOP! I think that's part of what it is. And part of it is 'cause the Asian American community is very diverse and, I mean some people may have not experienced that kind of

discrimination. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. I mean, it does, and maybe you just weren't aware of the discrimination that you experienced because it's everywhere. It's pervasive. It's the little things and you can't deny the numbers when you talk about the professional world, and how many people you have – just look at the university – how many Asian Americans there are and how many of them are high ranking. So, I mean, it's undeniable it exists, but when we don't learn about our history and we don't learn about our role here in this country and we're not even seen as Americans, I mean, we internalize all of that and we don't see it. A lot of times – Asian Americans don't consider themselves people of color and other people don't consider them people of color either. So they don't understand it, they don't get it. Or they say, well yeah, I guess you're right, but it's not as bad as, you know, the black community or the Latino community, so we should shut up.

Asian Americans that do not see themselves as people of color can be a distressing burden for others who see and understand the racial hierarchy. Compared to other racial minorities, Asian Americans have remained largely silent about inequalities, or they see that their situation is “not so bad.” This makes it quite difficult for Asian American activists like Jessica and Fareena to mobilize large numbers for their causes. To explain the reluctance of their classmates, Tuan (2003: 8) argues:

Interestingly, some Asians Americans have embraced the model minority label, and see it as their ultimate ticket into gaining social acceptance...youth were convinced that with hard work, patience, and a little help from the model minority stereotype, they would someday gain the full approval of white Americans. They wrote off repeated incidents involving racism or discrimination as the acts of ignorant individuals, isolated experiences that they did not take seriously.

Fareena and Jessica's classmates are hoping that her actions do not “ruin it for the rest of them” as they are still hopeful that their hard work will pay off with success and white acceptance. In addition to remaining silent about victimization and attempting to silence those who do speak out, Asian Americans are also parroting the stereotypes that are associated with other people of color.

An Undercover Asian American

On the opposite end of the spectrum of Asian Americans who yearn for white acceptance and privileges, is Eve, who could not care less. She agrees that her Asian Americans heritage makes her appear privileged with her “honorary white” status. She is anti-mainstream and anti-establishment, and this is why she chooses to distance herself from her Asian-ness. She is deciding to deny her Asian American ancestry because they are seen “too highly” in this society, but this rejection may be due in part to her feelings of her and her family’s inability to meet the expectations of the “model minority” stereotype. The only time she stuttered in the interview was when she was asked about her father’s profession. He works in the service industry and she was nervous to share that detail. Eve discussed her self-identification:

Yeah, yeah, I will say I am Asian but I guess like, I don’t know, I am not Gung Ho, I’m gonna do Asian things, people ask me and I’m like, oh I am Chinese and Mexican. I usually don’t say that I am white, cause there’s too many white people. Actually, I say Mexican for the most part. I think it’s because, cause usually people look at Mexicans differently, but I am just like, whatever, I am Mexican and my mom won’t identify with that, even though she is.

Eve understands the privileged position that Asian Americans are awarded compared to other people of color. Eve professes to be a member of “counter culture,” and prefers to be associated with her Mexican heritage. She does this in order to gauge the “reactions” she gets from people she meets and to “challenge” their notions of Mexicans. Eve’s own mother promotes internalized racism or is protecting her daughter from further discrimination, as she does not allow her daughter to date Mexicans, even though Eve’s own maternal grandfather is full-blooded Mexican.

From Victims, to Perpetrators

Frank Wu (2003: 30) contests that Asian American's role in racial discrimination is complex as it mutates from situation to situation:

When considering Asian Americans it is easier to realize that people can be both perpetrators and victims of racial discrimination. We can simultaneously play both roles, inferior to one, superior to the other. Asian Americans can feel ostracized by whites and terrorized by blacks. Asian Americans can even simultaneously play both roles in relation to the same group, regarding either blacks or whites with contempt only to have the favor returned.

One point that Wu fails to address is that the white racist frame provides the stereotypes that people of color adopt about their own and other racial groups. He skirts around white agency even though he asserts that Asian Americans gain their favored position "by disparaging other people of color." Wu attributes this process to the personal choices made by those individuals, but people of color, "collude to the white racist system" which includes the "frame and its view of racial hierarchy of U.S. society" (Feagin 2006). New Asian American immigrants enter the country with preconceived notions about African and Latina/o Americans because of the globalization of the white racist frame.

Asian American – Black Conflict

American racism is not restricted to the confines of geographical borders. The economic power of the United States makes it central to the global economy. We are not only in the business of exporting goods, but ideals as well. American media sources perpetuate white racist notions and those images are absorbed around the globe. Asians receive racialized messages about other US minorities before they even step on American soil. After immigrating, their children grow up and live in the white racist

frame and learn the rules. Because of this, Asian Americans may hold the same racial stereotypes that are promoted by whites. Kim (2003: 45) studied the Korean-Black conflict during the 1990 Red Apple Boycott in New York. She asserts, “By celebrating Asian American ‘success,’ White opinionmakers implicitly assert that nothing is standing in the way of other non-white groups except their own bad habits or cultural deficiencies.” Unfortunately, the way these opportunities are distributed by whites, Koreans, as with other Asian American groups, may buy into the idea of being superior to African Americans. Alex, a Korean American engineer discusses his family:

It’s interesting because my grandparents – my grandfather passed away and my grandmother’s still around – they just wouldn’t like African Americans. For no particular reason. I don’t know. They don’t think – they don’t change their minds...my grandpa, all the time he would like always, for whatever reason, he wouldn’t like African Americans. And then they never really gave me any clear reason when I, “What did they do to you?” Nothing. So that’s pretty disappointing. But that’s the way things are, I guess...I think that in LA, those riots going on, and there’s a big conflict between Koreans and blacks. And I think that has something to do with it. Their interaction with African Americans is almost nothing. They go to church; they’re in the Korean community, ‘cause understandably they don’t speak the language, so they just stay in the Korean community. And what they know is what they see in the newspaper, and the newspaper – they read the Korean newspaper and I don’t know what the content areas, but I would guess the only time they get a mention is when some kind of crime happens.

Alex is able to pinpoint the newspaper and the 1994 LA riots as the source of these racist notions, but his grandparent’s anti-black sentiment preceded ’94 riots. Koreans already have a pre-conceived notion about blacks before immigrating because of the exportation of the white racist frame through media sources (Feagin 2006). Korean-black conflict has only worsened the perceptions that Koreans have of African

Americans. Kim (2003:11) argues that racial power created by the systemic racism is a basis for such conflict:

Racial power 1) helps to generate Black-Korean conflict by reproducing a racial order that juxtaposes the two groups and renders conflict between them highly probable; 2) shapes the form of Black collective action against Korean merchants by defining both the ideational and physical parameters within which such action unfolds; and 3) manages Black resistance by delegitimizing and even criminalizing it with reference to the dominant racial discourse.

Kim is able to look at the big picture when dissecting the race relations between Koreans and African Americans.

Asian American – black conflict is not new phenomenon. Since the arrival of the Mississippi Chinese during Reconstruction, Asian immigrants have been used to undercut the cost of labor of other people of color. In Mississippi, these all-male immigrants were used to harvest the crops on plantations after the “end” of slavery. The venture was not as advantageous as white plantation owners had hoped, so the remaining Chinese found a demand in opening grocery stores that catered to blacks because they were shut out of white business circles and had to find an untouched financial niche (Loewen 1988). White beliefs in racial superiority made them refuse to cater to African Americans, and left this area of opportunity wide open for Asian Americans (Loewen 1988). Even though Mississippi Chinese and Korean merchants are able to climb into the middle class, it is whites who are primarily in control. Asian Americans have continued to find ways to be prosperous by providing services to African Americans, like Korean grocery merchants today. Whites in power grant these opportunities to Koreans. Without options, Koreans must accept what they are given. Kim (2003: 41) asserts:

Korean immigrants find themselves in a disadvantaged position relative to Whites but in an advantaged position relative to Blacks. It is in this way that the very economic opportunities that are closed to Blacks become the ticket to upward mobility for Korean immigrants. To the degree that Korean immigrants also buy into the racial constructions that underwrite the racial order – that is, to the degree that they accept that Blacks deserve their lowly status because they are lazy, unintelligent, undisciplined, etc. – they become further implicated in American racial dynamics.

With this “pressure cooker” situation, racial conflict is inevitable and whites are safe spectators on the sidelines.

The “Solution Minorities” Talk About the “Problem Minorities”

These racial tensions are not reserved for just Asian Americans and blacks; other minority groups become part of the mix as well. Many respondents parroted the negative stereotypes used to describe other people of color. Frank, a Korean American tech industry worker remarked:

I noticed that Koreans tend to discriminate a lot more than any other race. Yeah, they tend to make nasty comments about Mexican Americans and black Americans...I think that the main damage of the movie media, every Mexican you see in the media is usually drug dealer or crazed killer, or a sexual predator. Or some very, very, nasty role. Every movie you go and see, a drug dealer is usually a South American driving a Rolls Royce with a 3 feet long cigar in his mouth. But that’s going keep every Korean in their head that every Mexican must be like that. Then on the news, every news you hear some Mexican group is killing people you know for no reason. But a lot of people think they MUST be like that. Every one of them. I told them, they are not. Believe me, they are not. You know. The African American too.

Like Alex, Frank can identify the media as a source of negatively typecasting people like Mexican and African Americans. Frank presents himself as someone who understands the misrepresentation, but he also possesses problematic white racist notions:

The main problem seems to be education. They do not have a concept of education and one thing I noticed – I don’t know whether this be true or not – they are truly much better at this element than Asians do – but you know, I count

the 15 or 16 or 17, they are fully grown, mature physically, but mentally they're not. So also another thing I noticed about Mexican Americans is that when I didn't have a contact with them, I could have a bad news, bad things about them, you know what they do and all that stuff. But once I got to know them, I found most of them are very hard working, most of them are very honest. There's a very few – one in a hundred – which make every Mexican American look bad. They do some crazy things, you know, crazy, crazy things that I just cannot comprehend. But, because I saw them for about two years, I talked to them, and I do find out that Mexican Americans need are good role models, and then someone to really get on the podium and tell them to get education... You know, if I was an African American and I was a leader, I would tell all African Americans one way, one thing, two things: One, It doesn't matter how much political pull you have if your group does not have economic power. And I'd tell the Mexican American too. The Mexican American are going to vote for, you know, people into the city hall and all that stuff, and I told them, "So what? So what?" Let's say, for instance, I go to Salinas, CA. In that town 85% of the east side is Mexican American. 85% of the population. They all work for somebody. You know what I found out? 100% of the land is owned by white Americans. And then they think they have political power. I told them, you got nothing. Political power means equals you have to have a dollar sign behind there. You guys don't have it. And African Americans too.

Frank was not done with his suggestions for what would help these other minority groups:

And one thing I like to tell African American is they got to stop saying about the racism from now on because they've been here long time, almost 200 years. See, the Chinese and Koreans and Indians can come over here and then they can become a multi, multi millionaire within one generation, why couldn't they do it? And then one thing that I'd like to tell them is they've got to have all those black kids into the school. You know, I mean, the old Romans said, you've got to pick up a stick and beat the hell out of them to get it straight, you know. I think African American; I don't think they have a right now even to say racism is holding them back. I don't think so. I really don't think so. As a matter of fact, if you take a look at the government program, like I know the company...all of those companies set aside over 15% of the proposition to the minority, specifically for African Americans, and they can not fill it, because there is not enough candidates. I just tell – would like to tell those African Americans, US government is giving you every opportunity to get ahead, but you are not taking it. And if you go over to that school, everybody is busy, every students is busy, because they are trying to catch up with homework, or whatever. But I want to go to [name of schools], where there are lot of Filipino. Most kids are not doing anything inside the classroom. They're joking around, they're playing around.

They're not reading. That's why they are not getting ahead. Also, it's a chance to improve. I don't think, from here on, I don't think anybody would say it's racism that is holding them back. That it's absolutely not true. Maybe 5% true and 95% not.

Frank recited too many racial stereotypes to count. He is perpetuating the real-life stereotypes that whites use to disparage African, Mexican, and Filipino Americans. He has personal experience with white racism, but he completely embraced the “bootstraps”³ ideology and cannot understand why African Americans cannot just “get it together” as Asian Americans have. He believes that both African and Mexican Americans just need that one role model to get up on the podium and tell them to get an education, and then everything will be okay. His statements do not indicate that he recognizes structure and the role of systemic racism, and even though he openly admits that there is a “glass ceiling” preventing upward mobility for Asian Americans, he cannot relate that to barriers for these other racial groups. Wu (2003) asserts:

Telling African Americans they ought to be like Asian Americans does a favor for neither group. On the contrary, it only aggravates racial tensions among African Americans and Asian Americans. It is a paternalistic suggestion, as if whites were the elders telling the older siblings, African Americans, that they should be more like the younger ones, Asian Americans.

Vijay Prashad (2003: 6) eloquently articulates his role as an Asian American in the racial hierarchy:

I am to be the perpetual solution to what is seen as the crisis of black America. I am to be the weapon in the war against black American. Meanwhile, white Americans can take its seat, comfortable in its liberal principles, surrounded by state selected Asians, certain that the culpability for black poverty and oppression must be laid at the door of black America

Because Asian Americans are used as “weapons” against blacks while whites rest comfortably atop the hierarchy, it is unsurprising that respondents such as Mylene, a Filipina American, also parroted white racist statements about African Americans:

The thing in the news is there’s racial profiling by the police, but I’m not really familiar with that. I don’t see any correlation because if you are committing the crime, you are committing the crime. It doesn’t matter what race you are. It’s excuses, you know what I mean? If you are that race and you commit a crime, don’t say you’re targeted because they caught you. You know what I mean? I don’t know where that racial profiling, where they get that, doesn’t make sense... Yeah, that they always study hard and what not. But also, African American, a lot of them into sports and they make millions of dollars and they are more richer than lots of Asians. Sport Figures, like Shaq and Kobe, all these sports figures. And family and friends and there are some rap singers. They make millions more. Lots of millions more than a lot of Asians, because they are not into sports. So it can be equalized in that way money wise.

Mylene believes that the small proportion of millionaire pro-athletes and entertainers levels the economic playing field for African Americans compared to Asian Americans, but income statistics for African Americans indicate that they lag behind Asian Americans and Whites (US Census 2000). She has been misinformed and will pass on this misinformation to others as well.

Katherine, a first generation Chinese American, is a retired but substitute teacher from time-to-time. In her efforts to help race relations with students at the school she manages to perpetuate white superiority:

You know, I teach middle school here. I substitute teach here, and I also take care of kids with broken families, and they are in middle school age now, 12, 13, and this little girl that I've been caring for, ever since she was eight, she started telling me, she said, you know in the cafeteria they sit in groups now, [she’s] Hispanic, she would play with just any kids, and now she said they kind of sit together now, the black kids together. I said...you know, you and I both know that, especially the black kids, a lot of them are not black. They're half black, half white. It's just that the white kids don't want to claim them because their skin color is darker, and they think they are black. They're not black, you know,

and there are some Hispanic kids that are not Hispanic, and there are some Asian kids that are not Asian. I mean, they are half Asian and half white, so I told my students that in class.

Katherine is trying to distance black kids from blackness, and similarly trying to distance other minority groups from their non-white heritage. She can pinpoint that white children are segregating themselves from kids of color, but she is trying to reassure the white children that they are not authentically people of color, but white just like them so they should be accepted. Also interesting is Katherine's insistence that being half white will gain entrance into "whiteness" when, historically, the "one-drop" rule has kept Americans that appear phenotypically white categorized as black, even if the fraction of their black heritage is merely 1/32. The white racist frame is powerful and pervasive.

Ginzi's take on race relations is that Asian Americans get mistreated by all the other races, but especially by other people of color:

Are we treated on the same level as everybody in this country? More or less. Like, I think – I think – let me not say anything stupid. Hmm...By the white population, we're treated pretty fairly. From other minority groups we get more shit than from white people.

Ginzi is carefully choosing his words so that he does not say anything too offensive against other people of color. This shows that he has feelings about the issue he is unwilling to share. He wants to preserve a "politically correct" presentation in the interview. Ginzi never vocalized that he understood the role of white racism in creating dissonance between people of color, but his lack of awareness does not dismiss the feelings that result from his resentment.

Henry has been ridiculed and even physically harmed by whites all his life, but still he has exaggerated views about African Americans without any personal incidents

to reference. He discussed a major difference between Chinese and African Americans in how they respond to racism:

The Chinese don't complain about it. The Chinese culture is not like black. If they do something they don't like, they either attack you, or frighten you, or even kill you. How many Asians got the guts to do that? We should try to get them to ban the word "Chinaman."⁴ I think we need Chinese people to get together, just like the blacks do. I think a lot of things should change.

Henry's statement about African Americans is not based on any personal experience that he has had in his life. Wu (2003) explains this phenomenon; "Many whites and Asian Americans do not have enough contact with African Americans to have formed a sense of any individual African American as a human being." Since slavery, the white racist frame has criminalized African Americans and this continues to be perpetuated in the system (Feagin 2006). Many of my respondents adopted these racist stereotypes about African Americans and vocalized them with little reservation in the interviews.

Conclusion

The interview responses showcased in this chapter show the depth in which white racism can root itself into the lives of Asian Americans. Amazing effort is put forth by some of the respondents to excel and mimic white norms. Respondents took measures to protect themselves from future racism by conforming to white norms and trying to enter white spaces. In the process of "whitening" she began to adopt racial stereotypes of the frame, but still was faced with being treated as a minority.

The power of psychological discrimination forced interviewees to take measures to protect themselves by changing names and social networks, adopting what they deem as white "values" or political stance, and choosing white partners. Even at very young

ages, respondents understood the pressure to fit in and worked hard to be accepted into “whiteness.” Some respondents no longer really thought of themselves or chose not to identify as Asian American.

The white racist frame is so powerful that interviewees adopted negative stereotypes about themselves and other people of color. Asian Americans see the subordinate position of African Americans and “benefit just by not being black...it may be that the ability of Asian Americans to pass into whiteness depends on their ability to distance themselves from blackness” (Wu 2003). Asian Americans are working hard to distance themselves from blackness and going to great lengths and measures to capture whiteness. Their own authentic identities remain muddled in how the white racist frame dictates who they should, and should not be. Respondents learned the lessons of white racism and blame themselves for exclusion because of “natural” proclivities.

In the next chapter, I will share how some of the interviewees have chosen to fight against the white racist frame. All of the respondents were able to recognize that they were facing racism. Not all of them see it as a structural problem, but some view incidents as individual acts of ignorance. Their resistance is sometimes showcased publicly by direct confrontation, but more often dealt with internally by challenging white racist ideologies. As they challenge the ideologies, some respondents take action to produce tangible and political change for themselves or others. Some became Asian American political activists and use covert methods of resistance for group survival to recruit other to the cause. When Asian Americans resist they take great risks and are endure immense criticism for not behaving like the “model minority.

Notes

¹ Alice refers to children who are half-white and half-Japanese as “halfa” kids.

² Three of the five victims were South Asian; the other two were East Asian.

³ The “bootstraps” ideology is used to describe the ability of a person to use one’s own initiative and work without reliance on outside help to succeed. It is a phrase used towards immigrant groups that have assimilated and are seen as “successful” citizens. It is used to criticize minority groups who still struggle economically and educationally.

⁴ Earlier in the interview, Henry remarked that African Americans were successful in “banning the n-word,” but the use of “Chinaman” was still frequently used.

CHAPTER V

RESISTANCE

I am saddened that of all the chapters for my thesis, this one is smallest. I have incidents of resistance to share, but from less than one-third of my interviewees. I may even have an overrepresentation of resistance as my snowball sampling technique may have given me a particularly high percentage of Asian American activists. As discussed in previous chapters, white racism is daunting to combat because of the power and strength of the white racist system. Racism is pervasive and its constant presence makes sense of why so few respondents have decided to fight against it. Many choose to suffer independently as they cope with racism on their own. In order to protect themselves, Asian Americans go to great lengths to conform to the white racial frame, but still feel exclusion from whites.

Like racism, resistance comes in many different forms. The definition I am using for resistance is not just direct physical or verbal confrontation. I use Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) conceptualization of resistance and the different forms it takes. It can also come in the form of rejecting ideology of white supremacy, producing tangible or political changes for self and others, and by creating self-definitions and self-valuations (Collins 1990).

Direct confrontation can be dangerous and costly for people of color. Challenging white racism can result in the loss of a resistor's livelihood, security, dignity, and even one's own life (Feagin & Sikes 1994; Feagin 2006). My interviewees that actively resist demonstrate incredible bravery when fighting for respect and human

dignity, but their resistance can go unnoticed. Much of the resistance I discuss is psychological resistance to the white racist frame, but transformation of thought does not necessarily take the form of action. I do share instances in which my interviewees attempt to produce tangible or political changes for self and others, but this is not a guaranteed reaction to discrimination.

Overt Strategies – Direct Confrontation

Few respondents feel confident enough to directly confront their perpetrators because of fear or belief that it would only worsen a situation, so it was a rare occurrence in my interviews. I was shocked to find only three examples from my interview data. There are historical examples of Asian American resistance, but they are hard to come by in American history books used in general curriculums. Chinese railroad workers went on massive strike in 1867, but, when white employers cut them off from all resources, those who did not die of cold and starvation were forced to reconvene their work (Takaki 1998).

Resistance in the form of direct confrontation is the most dangerous. Respondents most often opted out of directly confronting their perpetrator because they were frightened and outnumbered. In the three cases I have to present, all three respondents addressed the issue in public places. Overtly blatant racism has become a more or less unacceptable social behavior (Bonilla-Silva 2003). If an Asian American is confronting a racist incident in public, then a white perpetrator is less likely to retaliate against them. Whites will continue to commit racist acts whether in public or private, but if confronted about it public, they may be more hesitant to continue.

Lena, a Taiwanese American engineer, discusses a recent incident at a grocery store:

Just a couple of years ago, I went into a grocery store and these kids they must have been 8 and 10. They were two brothers. They looked at me and pretended to speak Chinese and kind of mocked me. I just looked at them and said, "You need to stop or I am going to tell your mom and dad." And um, I just went about my shopping and I thinking "you know what, those little kids actually pissed me off." So when I got to the check out register, I saw the kids with their mom and dad and I told them "I am sure your young boys are fine gentlemen, but you need to talk to them about the racial slur they just directed at me." They looked at me and said, "What happened?" I said, "You can ask them, they are old enough to tell you what they did." And I just left. I didn't follow up to see or anything like that, but I wanted them to know that their sons were doing that.

People of color often must deal with emotions such as anger when dealing with discrimination and Lena was one of very few respondents that openly spoke about having such an emotional response to mistreatment. Her first reaction was to contain and control herself, but when she allowed herself to replay the incident she was "pissed off". For minorities that experience recurrent racism, feeling anger is "reasonable for sentient beings . . . to survive, one must find a way to control, yet not totally suppress one's anger" (Feagin & McKinney 2003). It is a fine balancing act for Asian Americans to control their anger, but prevent it from harming them physically and psychologically because of suppression.

Lena's response, although direct, may seem mildly angry. She is awarding faith in the parental disciplinary process as she assumes that the boys' parents may be disappointed that their sons behaved that way toward her, but it was important for her to make sure that she did what she could to deal with the incident.

As mentioned in Chapter III, Charlotte learned to block her emotions. That emotional disconnect process enabled her to begin to take an aggressive approach when dealing with racial comments:

What I developed was this really killer look that I use, so that if anyone started saying anything I would just turn around and look at them. And I remember specifically in high school one time, and I was at some party. Some person started making a Viet Kong type joke. And I turned around and looked. He stopped dead in the middle of joke and apologized to me for having said anything. So I think that's just what I developed was just a sort of demeanor that would actually stop people dead in their tracks and they would just not go there.

Charlotte was not only disconnected from feelings, but also likely came off to others as frighteningly serious. That is a consequence that people of color face when they address racial joking, whites label them as humorless because they “can’t take a joke.” They may be pressured to go along with offensive racial joking and their oppositional reaction may put them at risk of being “ostracized or labeled” (Feagin & Sikes 1994). In any case, Charlotte has developed a very effective method in which to protect herself from white racism, because she conveyed to her perpetrators that she was a not to be belittled.

Ginzi faced constant harassment from white classmates, as well as other classmates of color because he is Asian American. Eventually, he learned to defend himself and resorted to blows:

When I was a little kid I got picked on more, but then, I don’t know, I started being more of a punk and people stopped picking on me. It doesn’t matter if you are Asian, it doesn’t matter if you are smaller. If you aren’t going to stand up for yourself, people are going to pick on you. And, people are saying that it’s because they are Asian that they get picked on. Well, it might well be, but you got to do something about it yourself. You can’t just blame it on your race or your size. People will be small. What can you do about it but say something. If you can’t you can’t. Just get yourself out of the situation...If we don’t take crap from people and we don’t take shit when they see things happening. That’s what you should do. But a lot of people are raised so conservative from their Asian

parents that they don't mouth it, they don't think it's worth the risk....People give me shit, but I fight back now.

Ginzi has learned the value of standing up for himself and, luckily, he has not been in a situation where his resistance could have caused him to be seriously injured or even killed. He insightfully notes that other Asian Americans are discouraged by their parents to speak out and fight against discrimination. The racial status quo is maintained because the silence and lack of resistance keeps whites effectively in control of Asian Americans, and other people of color, because of this lack of resistance. African Americans have a long history of resistance to white racism, but even still they are psychologically discouraged to take the risks. Asian Americans have not consistently and publicly had a dissenting voice against white racism.

Arguably, resistance can take form in hiding true feelings from whites to avoid harm (Feagin 2006). Many African Americans have had to use subtle or covert techniques to appear obedient to whites, but were fully aware of what they were doing (Feagin 2006). I want to acknowledge that a majority of my respondents use this technique of masking feelings, and thus resist against the white racial frame, but this method is not the focus for this chapter.

I was in disbelief about the infrequency of direct confrontation. The lack of direct resistance is closely tied to a theme that came up in several interviews that "there's no point" in combating racism and that it is just "a fact of life." Asian Americans are fearful to "rock the boat," and if discrimination is just ignored, it will go away. I have collected many incidents of discrimination that my respondents collectively gave me, and only three mentioned direct confrontation. I wanted to include other quotes when I

was first putting this chapter together, but after a more careful reading, I realized that, instead, interviewees were “protesting through proper channels;” going to the supervisor of a biased worker, or writing an e-mail to an executive about their company (Feagin 2003). From reading these incidents, I now believe that the respondents were still avoiding direct confrontation with the actual perpetrators.

Rejecting the White Racist Frame

The most frequent form of resistance from my respondents was a rejection of the white racial frame. Interviewees had a conceptual grasp of the insidious nature of white racism, but, for some, that did not translate into action. Regardless of what action these respondents have taken to deal with white racism, all of them have begun to attempt to re-frame their worlds. They battle trying to no longer buy into the stereotypes that whites have prescribed to people of color.

Learning to be Angry

Indira is one of five individuals in my sample who did decide to become an activist. Today she works at a multi-cultural center, but she was not always so critical. She professed that she formerly believed in the “model minority” myth and that people just needed to pull themselves up by their “bootstraps.” That changed when she took a summer job as an orientation leader in college, and she learned about systemic racism. She earned the reputation of being the spokesperson for diversity, but said that she still lacked a critical view of race relations. She discusses her progression to “angry”:

I started my master’s program and one of the very first classes you take in a higher ed. program is called “the student.” To understand the diverse types of college students that exist, so this is [mid-90s] I had no background in Asian American issues and research. That’s huge, talk about shifting your

consciousness, and there was [Asian American research] in the mid-90s, but enough and there were books and so there were things that I could have found . . . our final paper for the class, was to do a paper and a presentation on “sub-cultures.” You know what? [Many] years later, in 2006, they still do this. I hated that phrase then and I hate it now because “sub” assumes that white is normal and that everything else is not. That’s common sense to anybody, so why wouldn’t you change that? We had a list of things to pick from, athletes, something on title 9, so that would be women’s athletics or just women’s programs in general. You could do African Americans, Latinos. Asian Americans were not listed on that thing. I didn’t notice because I didn’t identify as an Asian American back then, I don’t think. I don’t remember. But I did ask the question, “can I do a project on me and my people?” I remember that much. I think I identified as Asian then, or with lack of the words. My instructor was like, “Oh yeah, I mean definitely that fits under international.” So I did an entire paper on the needs of international students somehow confused as to, “But that doesn’t really apply to me...but I guess it does, cause maybe that’s what I am...” And I was just really very, very confused and it wasn’t until later on that I was like, “Whoa, there is a whole world of like Asian and this is NOT it.”

Indira’s instructor was discounting her identity when he recommended that she do a report of what he *assumed* were her people, International students. When she is actually a third generation Asian American. Indira, without protest, continued on with the assignment. She was confused in her own identity like other respondents in this research. Asian Americans are sometimes privileged to refrain from identifying as a person of color, as they earn an “honorary white” status. Indira goes back and forth trying to remember if she identified as Asian American when she was a college student. Other people of color may not be able to overlook their minority identity for that long. Some Asian Americans have been lucky to navigate through their lives without an incident that they would deem discriminatory. Some of my respondents claim to have not experienced a racial incident when they are young, so they accept some racially motivated behaviors by whites as the price paid for acceptance. Indira continues to explain her transition to anger:

It made me very angry because I feel like in higher ed. program they should know better. In a higher ed. program, they should be current, that shouldn't of happened to me. It makes me very angry that that happened to me and that I didn't know what to research or to where to find it. And the fact that my own instructor who, is the one who heads the master's program, is not even current on this literature himself. So, that's when I became angry [laughter]. That's where my commitment became more than this "oh commitment, diversity is important."

Indira was not forced to think about her Asian American identity until she was excluded by her class project. When her white professor overlooked her identity, this was a turning point for her. It was then that she able to see through the façade of her "honorary," almost white status. Feagin (2006: 290-291) asserts:

However, being categorized by whites as nearer the white than the black end of the racial ladder and status continuum will not likely mean that white-chosen Latin or Asian Americans will get the full privileges of whites or that they will even be viewed as "white" by most whites. Americans of color who are courted by whites for a white-dominated political coalition are likely to remain second-class citizens in white eyes and in persisting discriminatory treatment by whites in major institutions.

Indira may have gone throughout her life without overtly racist incident, but she would never be awarded full acceptance. This shift in consciousness was a turning point for Indira. She began challenging the white racial frame and became committed to furthering her awareness. Because of her change in attitude and the fact that she was vocal about racism, there was as a major shift in how people perceived her:

I was really appreciated when I did, "oh diversity, I am diverse, you're diverse, how can we be diverse together?!" But it really shifted when I started saying, "No, you are not seeing me and this is your problem and this is a white people's problem. When my consciousness started to change, my demeanor started to change, when my demeanor started to change all of the sudden people were like, "What's wrong with Indira? She used to be so cool before and now, you know." I think a lot of that is so interesting, this is not fair but I feel like I need to bring this up as a point of comparison. If I would argue, I am not saying this is truth, but let's speculates. I can't say this is always true, but if I were African American, or Latina, like it would be expected that an African American person

might be angry about race issues, right? I don't think that's a good thing, but the reaction to me being angry, I feel was, much more extreme than one who'd be African American and angry. Because all the sudden I didn't fit my stereotype anymore, I wasn't shy and quiet and happy go lucky and my good basic female, meek woman anymore. I was angry and all of a sudden I went from the model minority to the problem minority. It's like I jumped ship almost. Like, "Wait, you were one of the good ones and what happened to you?" I feel like I was treated probably more, not treated, but reacted to in a much more unforgiving way because I didn't act like and I still get that I feel like I get that now I feel like I can't say things or do things in ways, it's very unfair.

Indira was previously valued for her promotion of diversity, as long as she stayed within the guidelines of a "well behaved" minority who's behavior should be followed by those "angry and complaining" African Americans. She went against the Asian American stereotype and became that "angry" minority. Prashad (2003: 6) argues that whites have deemed Asian Americans as the "solution" to the minority ills in this country, but "to be the solution has its problems too. When one is typecast as a success, one's abilities cease to be the measure of one's capacity. A young Asian child now, like a pet animal, performs his or her brilliance." Asian Americans are "pets" and "darlings" because they listen to commands and do as they are told. A "pet" is kept on a leash and it punished when bad. Indira, with her change in consciousness, became that pet turned bad. She had mutinied against her master.

Indira continues on her journey of awareness and each day strengthens her commitment to social justice. A recent incident infuriated her:

Newsweek, I wrote this nasty e-mail. I am on this social justice listserv and I was disgusted when someone sent me this link, because the Newsweek edition, it was March 8, 2006. I was so angry I remembered everything because I know I am going to be able to quote it when I'm older, my only regret is that I don't have the official hard copy, I should have got it at the time. The edition was called "India Rising," What happens when you put people on a pedestal, right? You would think, ok well it's India, and basically the question posed in this entire

series of articles of Newsweek was “How exciting the world’s messiest democracy is partnering with the world’s richest democracy.” In this edition it has stuff on *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle*,¹ I’m like, “What does this have to do with India?” NOTHING! Nothing, right? What does that have to do with us? NOTHING, yet it was all lumped together, what does that do? It perpetuates the perpetual foreigner. Two things, it perpetuates both the relationship of the perpetual foreigner and the model minority stereotypes together and that’s what these articles have always done. It couples those two. You can’t talk about one without talking about the other because they are always coupled.

In challenging white racist ideology, Indira is identifying that “coupling” of the two prominent stereotypes about Asian Americans, the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner.” The magazine cover indicates that India is this rising force, but is then watered down with irrelevant information such as a movie that belittles Asian Americans. In complimenting Asian Americans, the news articles actually insulted Indira. In challenging the article, she is challenging the white racist ideology. Indira believes the article serves as a threat to Asian Americans because of the mixed portrayal. Indira continues:

My theory and my point of rage in my angry e-mail, I said to my peers, consider, I was like “What happens, once a giant rises? It has to fall. How long before now India becomes a threat because we have already been exoticized as this rising giant, so once the giant rises it has to fall.” You know? India and China are compared in those articles as well. We set ourselves up. Many of the authors were South Asians from what you could gather from their names so we participate in our own oppression in that way. To me it shows it’s not that I don’t want to hear wonderful things, I read those articles with a feeling of a bittersweet emotion. On the one hand, I want to be proud of what my people do, but not at the expense of my citizenship in terms of my perceived citizenship. I guess that’s a better way of saying it.

Indira is able to recognize the internalized oppression on the part of the South Asian authors. Their participation in the news articles exemplifies the complicated racial positioning of Asian Americans. In order to achieve mainstream representation in the

media, Asian Americans writers and actors must adhere to the guidelines of white perpetuated stereotypes of the “model minority” or “perpetual foreigner.” Indira’s rejection of the white racial frame allows her freedom from when she blindly bought into the uncomplimentary media portrayals of Asians. She no longer believes the model minority stereotype. Her words emulate Wu’s (2003: 49) assertion that the “...the myth is abused both to deny that Asian Americans experience racial discrimination and to turn Asian Americans into a racial threat.” Indira recognized these underlying messages in the article and is constantly embattled against the white racist frame in her everyday life.

Constructing a New Frame

Many of the respondents that actively resisted against racism did so by resisting against white racist ideologies. They worked to construct new ideals about people of color in contrast to racist stereotypes. Jessica, a Vietnamese American student, actively works to dispel the “model minority” myth in her Asian American student group, but is honest in discussing the difficulty staying committed to the task:

I can see in the African American community, somebody that wouldn’t [fight the stereotype] – would be called an Uncle Tom, but in our community they would just be called practical. Don’t you see? Like our parents would just call them smart. Not rocking the boat, not causing trouble. And I think that it’s just minority myths that we perpetuate within ourselves. And I mean even me, it’s hard to think sometimes, “Why do I have to stop everything and just concentrate on school and not worry about this because it doesn’t have to do with me, it just has to do with other people who come after me. Why does it even matter.” And I could totally get by and not fight. Totally get by and be mildly content...

Conformity in the Asian American community is constructed as a positive choice. The collective memory for Asian Americans includes the myth that conformity will award success. That is why the white racist frame is so difficult to combat because respondents

know that they can be “mildly content” if they accept their subordinate position. Even though Jessica is aware of systemic racism, she can be exhausted by the efforts and isolated from her own community that does not recognize the importance in her cause. People who publicly challenge white racism, whether a person of color or not, are isolated and attempts are made to make them believe that they are irrational for choosing to fight. Jessica has to weigh what is more important, acceptance or justice. Although the task is daunting she continues:

But I don't want that [to stop fighting]. I think that so many of us do that. I mean, we fight because the [majority of] the population does not. And it's hard because you see it. We do it for them, but they don't appreciate it. And I think that some do. They see what we do and they commend us for it and the change that we enact...The ones that are vocal I think are the most scared. Like, that divides. The ones that say that we are doing the wrong thing, that we're ignorant, that we are the racists – they are just scared and they just don't know the facts. And that's where the biggest problem lies, I think, that if we were educated about our history, they wouldn't feel that way. If we knew how oppression started and how it affects us every day, and how Asian Americans even came to be in this country, then I think that they would feel differently about what we say. A lot of them, they only see their own personal history. They only see what their parents came here and they're like, "No." Maybe not even when their parents came here...

Jessica identifies a key point – there is a lack of awareness and a shared collective memory of white racism in the Asian American community. Asian Americans are missing pieces of the story and make decisions based on an incomplete history. The majority of the respondents had never heard of Vincent Chin. Many of the respondents were uncomfortable calling events racialized and would become even more uncomfortable if the issue was confronted. Even in the present, many Asian Americans are unaware or choose to ignore the pressing issues affecting them as a survival tactic.

Joel, a Hmong American who has also worked to reject the white racial frame, comments on what activists must focus on:

I think that one of the main priorities is getting people of Asian American and non-Asian American individuals aware that a lot of injustice is going on. And how we refer to the model minority myth. Often times that idea creates an illusion that the Asian American community is doing exceptionally well and we don't need any assistance. But at the same time, within the Asian American category, there are so many groups within that classification that we still need to assist the Southeast Asians and the Hmong population. Not only that, but recent Chinese immigrants, recent Filipinos, etc. So, it's kind of like we need more awareness that this is going on and just because there's that notion that Asians are the model minority, we still need assistance, government funding, a lot of resources. There's this – Asian Americans are not the model minority because we are still fighting for social justice.

Joel may have had an easier time seeing the social injustices since, he grew up in a community that negatively stereotyped Hmong and he experienced a number of racist events. He was able to identify events throughout his life that were unjust, but other respondents were not so quick to label things as such. Educating them about the past would assist in creating reference points for Asian American collective memory. Developing the collective memory could then serve as a resource for even the newest Asian Americans to combat racism.

Like all the other activists in my sample, Brian became committed to Asian American issues because he was educated about their history. Brian says he did not experience much overt racism while growing up, but entered a higher education curriculum in college that enlightened him to the racial power structure. He shares:

I think for me, Asian Americans – I think the model minority myth wasn't something I understood until I got to college. Stereotypes about being good at math, and all that, it challenged me to break through some of those stereotypes. Because there was a time I was really strong at math, but I didn't focus in that area at all. I took like the minimum amount of math in college and said, "Forget

it, I'm done with that." And just resisted the stereotype. And I think I was being intentional by it. To the point that as an adult, I see Black Lava that has that t-shirt out that says, "I suck at math!"² And heck yeah, I'm going to buy that shirt, wear that shirt proudly and today it causes great conversation in regards to continuing to break the stereotypes and why not do it on a shirt that starts conversation. So I think it started back in college when I took these courses. It [racial stereotyping] continues on in grad school...another African American classmate, who didn't understand how the model minority myth was detrimental. That was one of the toughest conversations I had because here was a person of color who didn't understand how "positive" could be detrimental to Asian Americans. That was one of toughest conversations about race.

Brian began to reject the imposed stereotypes after he became educated. He exemplifies the transitions that all the activists made who were all once bought into the white racial frame. Brian uses a humorous method to open up a serious conversation about race. He would not have been able to do that if he had not been educated about racial stereotypes which led him to challenging the white racist frame. He found it most difficult to explain to an African American peer in his program. Similar to when Ethan assumed that other Asian Americans would help him when he was a victim of a hate crime, Brian assumed that his black colleague would understand the danger in racial stereotyping, whether it was positive or negative. One powerful aspect of the white racial frame is that racial minorities will adopt the racial stereotypes about themselves and others.

Not only did my respondents that challenge the white racist frame question stereotypes about Asian Americans, they also began to analyze their stereotypes of other people of color as well. John, a Taiwanese American, is able to empathize with other people of color and sees the intersection of race and class. He knows that mostly whites are at the helm of the economic motor. It is his ability to empathize that allows him to challenge white racist ideologies:

There's a huge amount of effort to blame blacks that they are lazy, or Hispanics are lazy. Once you actually look at the poor, it's just amazing how much they are working and what table scraps they are getting, and it's not fair. And the reason why I feel sympathy for that is because . . . I don't think it is a shame to wait tables, I don't think it's a shame to go across the border because you do what you have to do to survive.

John identifies prominent race and class stereotypes that people use about African and Latina/o Americans, but he has re-framed them. Instead of looking down on people working difficult jobs or immigrating to fill those jobs, he describes the efforts that people of color make as hard work necessary to survive. He implies an understanding of an economic system that necessitates the work, but also keeps those workers subordinate. Lin, a Chinese American, also sees the structural barriers:

Well, like I said before you know the system is set up not to encourage our group and to our detriment. When people give you enough scraps they accept it as essentially [adequate]. As a scientist, you get comfortable with that livelihood. You must struggle, as far as the basic needs but to have a higher aspiration to really bring the community along.

Both John and Lin refer to “scraps” as what people of color receive from whites. John is referring to a more literal meaning of scraps, but the “scraps” that Lin is referring to in reference to Asian Americans may appear to come in the form of middle-class, gourmet “scraps.” To her, they are still the leftover morsels unfit for white consumption, and it alarms her that most Asian Americans are content accepting them.

Producing Tangible and Political Change for Self and Others

Some interviewees that were able to challenge the white racist ideologies decide to do so because they have experienced discrimination in the white racist system. Their experiences led them to channel their energy into producing tangible and political change for themselves and others. Others produced tangible or political change without

challenging the ideals of the white racist frame. One respondent felt inclined to suggest to a white restaurant owner that they put up better lighting in the parking lot because a Chinese man was assaulted outside. She was not aware of the pervasiveness of the white racist frame as she thought this was an isolated incident by ignorant individuals, but she took it upon herself to attempt to make a change for the better. Other respondents have chosen institutional methods to create change through education, by joining organizations, and providing services to the community.

Alice shares what her Sansei generation is doing to educate:

I see them a lot at the Japanese American Museum and some of the things that Japanese Americans have done is to really make sure, there's so many people committed to making sure that the story's not lost. I think they turned their anger into a more productive, educational mode. Everybody's written a lot of films and books and so we are sort of over the psychological hump. Because the Nisei are like retiring or dying to a certain degree, it's really the time now where the captain of the mantle is going to the Sansei. And many Sansei, they are making sure with the museums and supporting all these activities. Especially the recordings of the WWII veterans, and things like that. The story's not lost, and I don't think Nisei are angry anymore because there have been so many overtures by the government to offer the camps as historical sites and grants and reparations. You know the whole educational thing.

It is ironic that Alice interprets the efforts of the Nisei to educate and share the pains of Internment as getting "over the psychological hump." Her remarks imply that the Nisei are using these techniques to heal from the pain of past discrimination, instead of trying to build a collective memory to impress upon future generations to be wary or prepared to combat racism in the future. The Nisei seem incredibly invested in educating future generation and not just on their own personal healing. Alice has also become invested in educating future generations with her work.

Lin opened up a community center to provide services to Asian Americans. As was mentioned in Chapter II, she was denied funding, but that did not stop her. She describes what motivated her to open up the center:

I used to work at the [city] Rape Crisis center and I was the director of public education and I got a lot of phone calls from different non-profits or public agencies like the health department once they found out that there's actually and Asian working in the social services. I got a lot of phone calls about being an interpreter, that made me realize that these are the people that come forward to ask for help and usually not even meet their help, meet their needs, there are so many that may not even know the system to come forward to ask for help. Why don't they know about it? I feel like we need a place that we can call home that people will feel comfortable to come home and talk about it. So at that time I only have a very humble request for 500 square feet and I will volunteer my service for people to come and ask, because I feel like I understand the system I can direct people to different places to ask for help, but people have to know where to find me, I cannot have it in my home, right? So that's why I asked for that but since I didn't get it, so I feel like "well, then I have to create." They don't want to help me, then, I have to help myself, because this needs to be done. So, if I don't get it this way, then I will get it some other way. So, I got it through private...you know, contributions.

Lin still holds onto the memory of her request being rejected, but she was resilient and accomplished her goal unfettered. The reality is that people of color are often met with financial and real estate obstacles when they want to open their own business (Feagin & Sikes 1994). Even more difficult for Lin was that another person of color ultimately decided that she should not get help in opening the center. The Hispanic council member who rejected her request had used the "model minority" stereotype against her, but Lin struggles against it in hopes to better the world. She explained why she works so hard for Asian Americans:

I really think if we truly believe that we have our rightful place here because of our ancestors have put down their lives here for us. They helped to build the railroad. They helped to really develop the economy and the future of this country. They have already our rightful space here in this country. It is up to us

to take it. In the past they cannot do it, because they were not protected by the law. You know, like the Chinese Exclusion Act and all of that, is utterly racist, especially against us. But we have to thank the brothers, the black brothers and sisters and all the people that were in the Civil Rights Movement that they also claimed by, claiming their space by working on fairness and justice of this nation, they also claimed the space for us. So, it's really up to us, to move into our rightful place.

Lin is genuinely appreciative of the African American struggle and feels indebted to them. It helps her to remain hopeful that her work will pay off. Lin's statement draws on the history of Asian Americans and other people of color in the United States. Again, this highlights a key part that a collective memory of racial oppression has in assisting people of color in resisting white racist ideologies.

Katherine, a retired Chinese American, immigrated to the US in 1963. She was the only Asian student at her undergraduate university in the Southwest and always felt welcomed there. Katherine realized that her presence was novel, and she would take any opportunity to teach classmates and teachers about her homeland. She even had her parents ship her slides so that she could make a presentation about China. She enjoyed the celebrity, but as time progressed she realized, "They treated me very well, very, very well. You know why? I came to the conclusion that if you are just one of very, very few, you are not a threat." Her mindset has changed as she has seen that the population growth for Asian Americans has become more of a "problem" for white Americans.

She now volunteers with a national Chinese political organization. This group works to mobilize Chinese American to vote in a bloc so that politicians will take notice. The organization also works as a watchdog organization for hate crimes and negative

Asian representation in the media. She was happy to share in a successful campaign against Asian defamation:

Abercrombie and Fitch that one time with that t-shirt.³ They came out with this t-shirt that was racially derogatory, . . . And so, our president called them right away and said that if you don't take that and issue an apology, we'll mass email out to our one million plus email list, and then we will boycott your product, and they pulled it.

Katherine is proud to be part of a group that exists solely to promote Asian Americans interests. The fact that the organization has over one million members dispels the myth that Asian Americans are politically apathetic, and, when necessary, they will take action. In Katherine's opinion, the increase in the number of Asian Americans over the past several decades has been the cause of such anti-Asian sentiment because "we are a threat" and non-Asians are "jealous." She is working to maintain a fair representation of Asians Americans in the US society.

After Indira gained her "angry" voice, she quickly moved into action mode as well. She was unapologetic in her fight for visibility:

I became the advisor of the Indian [student group], Indian [cultural organization] those were groups that naturally gravitated towards me. The [Asian] Greek scene had emerged. And Greek life had also realized that we need somebody and I had relationships with people. I was able to do pretty obnoxious things like, "No I'm not meeting with the Asian American students up there, they don't feel comfortable in the dean of students office, they are meeting with me down here because they are students of color and they need to know!" It was so funny because I think at that point I'd also developed a reputation that I was telling that no one could say "no" to me, and I knew that, and I wanted that. It doesn't matter, you have to use the power that you have. So, I take it very seriously and I do use the power that I have. I wanted Asian Americans to circulate. Any time I had training with any kind of Asian American group, I would make them do it here in the middle of the room because we are in a fishbowl. And what happened was this space, it's almost been a perceived as a space for just certain populations, just African American or Latino populations but that was never true.

If people don't know that they could frequent the space then they don't, right?
So I had changed that.

Indira had to develop an intimidating persona that was seen as “atypical” for an Asian American woman in order to have the power to make change happen. Indira would not be able to be so influential in changing the racial climate for Asian Americans at her university without breaking free from the docile stereotype of Asian women. She worked hard to promote the visibility of Asian American students, building up organizations and alliances. Indira made sure to stick out and stand up. Her aggressive and upfront approach awarded her access opportunities and resources that she formerly never had. In the struggle for humane treatment, people of color have found it difficult to be awarded such fairness by being polite and peaceful. Indira found that being polite was not the most effective way to make gains for Asian Americans at her university. Similarly, during the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) found that their peaceful tactics were not sufficient in bringing about necessary change. Rod Bush (1999: 163) asserted that:

They [SNCC] also drew the lesson that patient suffering was not sufficient to bring about federal intervention... activists learned that the sporadic acts of nonviolent resistance were not enough. More was needed to dismantle the enduring structures of racism in the Deep South.

Non-violent groups during the Civil Rights Movement realized that “patient suffering” would not necessarily appeal to the masses and they had to reconsider other tactics. For Indira, “patient suffering” was not an option, but for Ethan, he remained silent even after he was a victim of a hate crime. His actions after the incident do not match his words. He wants to take steps for the betterment of Asian Americans and criticizes the lack of

visibility of Asian Americans. He discusses his views about Asian American political involvement and how his life has been forever changed:

I am not ok with that [Asian political apathy]. This event has made me willing to be involved now. That's why I wanted to make sure I talked to you about how important it is. You know, some of my Asian American friends think this was just an isolated experience. I don't. I am optimistic to see the change in terms of Asian American activists. I will be one of them. Growing up here and being educated here, I want to get rid of the "don't rock the boat" mentality. I have no problem doing it. I am ok letting people know... You know if an incident like this happened in the African American community they would be enraged, but because it was an Asian American, "oh, it's not that bad." If the same incident happened to an African American they would have Jesse Jackson there. The NAACP would be boycotting. There would be a huge response from the community in support. With the Asian American community there was no response and none that I could see in the media, anyways.

Earlier in the interview, Ethan admitted to staying out of the spotlight on purpose. He did seek out help from visible community leaders, but he assumed that they would be responsible for publicizing the issue, just as he hopes that I may assist by telling his story in my work. Ethan is an excellent example of just how powerful white racism is in controlling his life. He was unaware of his minority status, led to his self-discovery by his assault, remained in hiding, desires to be active, but is still hidden and reminded daily of the event.

Covert Strategies for Group Survival

In Indira's quest for justice, she wanted to recruit a new generation of activists. In order to do that she had to utilize tactics that accommodate Asian American focus on achievement. The pressures of success are complicated. They are a result of white racism and the constant threat of discrimination pushes Asian American parents to apply

more pressure because so much is on the line for them as “New Americans.” Indira had to find a way to get in the door to appeal to other Asian Americans:

This started two years ago, we were having struggles with recruiting Asian American students to be student directors for [the Asian student organization], mainly because again Asian American consciousness, and the diversity of our groups. African American student population and the same case for the Latino population, they come to the table, so what was different? I think it was, what it did for me is “What’s in it for me? What do we get out of this?” I didn’t approach it from the issue of race, I approached from the issue of “This is your space and you deserve to be here just like all of our students deserve to be here.” I also tapped into... “How do we benefit, how does our community benefit.”

Indira talks about the “Asian American consciousness” as an obstacle to finding leaders for her Asian American organization. This seems to be either a lack of consciousness about Asian American issues or a consciousness that is defined by conforming to white norms. To recruit future Asian American campus leaders, Indira chose to be covert about her strategy. She purposely avoided approaching race, in hopes that the students would eventually get a place where she could be forthright and honest about these issues.

Indira had to appeal to the achievement and success side of the students she was looking to recruit. She continues:

So, I developed an Asian American [leadership program] because I know our community will come to things that are leadership driven, or you get something out of it. So the [program] was a 7-8 week institute where you met once a week and you did things on public speaking, fundraising, programming, you are really here to get something out of it, professional development, and your role is to plan an Asian American conference for Asian American students. At the end of this institute, you get a letter of recommendation that documents everything that you did. It will always be on file and you can always use it for whatever you need we’ll change it for whatever you need it. But of course you get to know these students over the [length of the program] so it’s not very hard to, right? Through that, that became almost an underhanded recruitment process because it also got Asian American students comfortable in this space. Because they were planning programs that they had to frequent, using the resources here and when you’re

here you start hearing these conversations, you start joining them, you start hanging out, that then becomes that perpetuating, “Oh, ok I belong here.”

Indira will not appeal to Asian American students by “coming on too strong” about racial inequality at the beginning. In essence, she has to promote the use of the “model minority” stereotype to get the Asian American students in the door. Her new identity is assertive and politically active, but she chooses to conceal it in her recruitment for the benefit of Asian Americans. When she facilitates conversations about race with the participants of her leadership program, she is hoping that she is creating a safe place for participants to share their stories with discrimination. By being able to share their experiences, these students are building and sharing a collective memory of racial oppression.

Creating Self-Definition and Self-Valuation

Traditionally, creating self-definition and self-valuation is a method of resistance in reference to African American women as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and others. This method of resistance involves an African American woman personally re-framing the definition and value placed on her by the white racist society. She resists by giving herself new meaning and values in contrast to how she is negatively stereotyped. I found this method to be applicable to some of my own respondents.

This final method of resistance I discuss develops privately, but may evolve into a public form of resistance. Respondents chose to resist against white racism and the stereotypes applied to them in an individual and personal way. Creating self-definition and self-valuation does not require an understanding of the white racist frame. It requires a strong desire for self-preservation. Charlotte discusses her path:

And I guess this all stems back to what I went through in 5th grade, when I turned off my emotions. That it was good and it was bad. The good part was that I stopped crying everyday. The bad part was that I lost track of my emotions. But the other good part was I really had a good way of being able to divorce myself with what was going on. And saying, “You know, it’s your loss. You don’t want to get know me? Weird, because I don’t fit your model? It’s tough, but I have a lot of talents that I can add to you. And if you’ve got issues that you’ve got to overcome, that’s your problem, not mine.” So in that respect, I think it gave me a lot of confidence.

By “divorcing” herself from desire for approval from others, Charlotte gained self-esteem and self-confidence. She is now a strong, independent woman and credits her character building to the coping mechanism she used to deal with daily discrimination. After developing this form of resistance, Charlotte was no longer the subject of ridicule by her classmates as she evoked fear in them with her “killer look.”

Indira utilizes a subtle, yet public form of resistance in honor of her mother:

The reason I started to wear Indian clothes is because my mother. My mother used to wear Indian clothes when I was a little girl and I used to always be like, “Wow, I wish I could be like her.” This was after I was in college my mother stopped wearing Indian clothing in public. To Indian things social circles, that’s fine, but she wouldn’t elsewhere. I asked her “You know I don’t see you wearing [Indian] stuff to work anymore.” She was like, “Yeah I feel like a cartoon.” [very long pause] “I feel primitive.” That just made me so angry. That I was like, “That will not happen.” That is a legacy that I will carry with myself. She feels like a cartoon, definitely in any space whenever I am ever present in public where I speak in public, I will always honor this identity, because of what she felt.

Attempts at promoting multiculturalism have continued to reinforce “orientalism” (Prashad 2003). Asian American children who are pushed to conform to white norms only possess an “encyclopedic notion” of their heritage as it is shared for show-and-tell at school. Indira’s mother was tired of being an exhibit at a museum or a sideshow at the circus, as whites continue to use the Asian exoticism to demonstrate their advanced,

sophisticated superiority (Prashad 2003). Her mother's confession about feeling like a "cartoon" affected Indira internally. When she was re-telling the story, her emotions seemed heightened and the long pauses provided an opportunity for her to keep from getting more upset. Her eyes became wider and her breath heavier as she was slow and deliberate in her delivery of this story about a personal moment with her mother that has changed how she presents herself in public speaking engagements.

Conclusion

There is a lot at stake for people of color when they resist white racism and many choose to remain silent. Whites have used various methods – violent, subtle, and covert – to keep people of color under control and compliant. Even though the threat persists, a brave proportion of Asian Americans have chosen to fight back, with their fists, minds, and hearts. Very few feel confident enough to be direct, and many have grappled with the white racist frame and are continuing to attempt to re-frame the stereotypes stored in their own minds.

Respondents who have chosen to take action are trying to produce tangible and political change for themselves and others. They are joining political groups, working to educate others, creating their own organizations, and doing what they can to increase Asian American visibility. One activist is using creative techniques to educate other Asian Americans about the issues, but must conceal her views to appeal to them in a non-threatening manner. Finally, interviewees choose their own individual practices that resist against white racism and increase their own self-worth.

In the final chapter, I synthesize the themes in this analysis by using the stories of two Asian Americans that share similarities in many ways, but have chosen dramatically different ways to deal with systemic racism. One respondent has chosen to “whiten” himself as much as possible in hopes to lead a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, even if he must remain subordinate to whites. The other respondent believes that she has a rightful place in this country and wants to use her freedom and liberty to fight for something better. I close the chapter with discussion of the implications of my research and areas that are in need of further research.

Notes

¹ A film by New Line Cinema made in 2004 that perpetuates Asian American stereotypes.

² Black Lava is a clothing company that makes apparel to appeal to Asian Americans and uses humor in retorting the “model minority” stereotype.

³ In 2002, the Abercrombie and Fitch clothing stores ran a line of t-shirts that mocked Asian Americans with racially offensive cartoon drawings with captions such as “Wong Brothers Laundry Service, Two Wongs Can Make It White” as well as others making light of rickshaw’s and Buddha.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Asian Americans cannot be neatly placed in boxes that accurately portray their uniqueness and diversity. The “model minority” stereotype is an attempt by whites to do just that, and “honorary whiteness” is an illusion to keep Asian Americans subservient. I conclude my analysis with a tale of two different Asian American experiences that share in the pain of discrimination, but vary drastically in how they choose to deal with the white racist frame. Their comparison is representative of the confusing and broken identity that Asian Americans struggle with, in a world that whites work to prevent them from making their own. Some respondents have lost faith in ever being accepted by whites, others still have faith, but have opposing views in how to obtain it. Conformity to the white racial frame was the most commonly used method to gain white acceptance, but there are a few who have chosen to put up a fight.

A Tale of Two Asian Americans

Lin and Frank have been in the US for thirty-four and thirty-three years, respectively. Both have spent all their time in America living in large metropolitan cities – Lin immigrated first to the East Coast then to the Southwest, Frank to the West Coast. Both have been fortunate enough to avoid being targets of any sort of violent, overt form of racism, and both see the lack of power that Asian Americans have in the corporate and political world. That is where their similarities end. Frank has chosen to “whiten” himself as much as possible on the inside so that whites may accept him, regardless of his outer appearance. Lin has chosen to reject the white racist frame and fight.

“Whiteness” as His Personal Creed

Frank was in junior high school when he immigrated and was the one and only Asian student at his school. Upon Frank’s arrival to the US, “the first thing I noticed immediately is that one, I couldn’t speak English, and two, you couldn’t find the rice.”

He immediately began to change what he could control:

At that time it was very, very difficult to assimilate, but I learned English very, very quickly. At that time it was very difficult to make friends with Mexican Americans or white Americans or African Americans. As a matter of fact, when I got here, there were almost no African Americans and Spanish Americans and Mexican Americans too. Mostly white...But I had to start making friends, mostly white friends. And, I didn’t have any oriental friends.

Living isolated in a racially homogenous community gave him no options as who to befriend in school. He presented a problem-free picture of all his years in school. Frank being the solitary Asian American relates to the comment from an earlier respondent that, “if you are just one of very, very few, you are not a threat.” As was mentioned in an earlier chapter, Frank happily describes himself as a “banana” that is “Asian in the face, but inside is pure white.” Moving into the professional realm after school, Frank’s rose-colored glasses view of whites began to be challenged. When I asked him if he felt “accepted in the white world,” he first answered, “Yes I do, yes I am.” As soon as he tried to elaborate, his demeanor and tone changed:

Frank: Number one is that when I... could you repeat the question again? I didn’t get the context.

Interviewer: If you’ve been accepted by whites, you know, as an equal?

Frank: One thing. Once when I was at the lower management area and I kept on climbing to upper management, at the time I reached the vice-president position, and I was competing with a white person, I felt something, but I kind of discounted it. And also I accept my Asian heritage as one of the handicapped. I accepted it as a fact of life. I didn’t look at it as any other issue.... It’s changing a little bit, but large American corporations it’s still the same thing. The glass

ceiling is still there. That's why a lot of smart, really well educated and really well connected Asians are starting their own companies, because they can't go through that glass barrier.

I want to make note of Frank's change in answer. At first he definitively answered, without hesitation, that he was *certainly* accepted into the white world. When he went on to explain how he felt accepted, he began to find it hard to find words and asked me to repeat the question. After I repeated the question, his answer was much different from his "Yes I do, yes, I am." Frank then discussed his feelings and experiences that indicate that no matter what; Asian Americans are at a disadvantage to whites. A large majority of my respondents would respond similarly to Frank, insisting that they faced no discrimination in their lives and then painted an opposite picture as the interview continued.

As noted in Chapter IV, Frank is a vocal proponent of education and believes that other minority groups, including certain Asian Americans, should follow in his footsteps. Yet, he professes here that it is a "fact of life" that his Asian heritage is a "handicap." This "handicap" affects other educated Asian Americans as well. The white racist frame forces Frank to hold these contradictory notions as absolute truths – 1) That education is the great equalizer, and 2) No matter how educated they become, Asian Americans will be disadvantaged because of their "heritage." Frank must exert mental energy to reconcile these antithetical beliefs, just as many of my respondents do.

With his belief that education serves as the great equalizer, he has accepted white racist stereotypes that African Americans and Latina/o Americans are financially insecure because of their lack of educational effort, and Asian Americans do well

because of their academic achievement. His psychological inner workings are complex because of the contradictory truth he holds that whites will still get the positions of power, regardless. He does believe that with more effort and by following white norms, Asian Americans will still have a shot at gaining some success. He comments:

So you just have to know the rules, and then just follow the rules, you know. I think that's the best way of you becoming successful here. Just follow the rules. Knowing the rule is needing education. Because whites are not going to teach you - teaching you that kind of rule is expensive.

Frank's language is coded. The "rules" that he has followed to become successful have involved conforming to the white ways and embracing white ideologies. Teaching the "rules" of the racial frame is not expensive to whites, but to people of color. Whites benefit from Frank's idea of rules because they keep the racial order intact. Failing to teach those "rules" to people of color is expensive to whites, not necessarily in just a financial sense, but also in terms of power and privilege that they would have to relinquish if people of color challenged them. Frank is convinced that his white beliefs keep him in good standing with whites as the "model minority." Even still, he knows his access to the white world has its limits:

Let's say I have a white friend and I go out [to a restaurant]. We try to be fair. Most customers are white Americans. [Your white friend] did not want to be there with you because you're Asian. It's like this. Koreans have this saying: if you make a fist with your hand, it goes one way. It doesn't go the other way. I learned that from my parents. You try to make a fist right here, right? Your hand only goes towards the way you make a fist, which means let's say I raise my hand, try to make a fist, all my fingers will go toward left. It's just like that. It's just a thing you just cannot change it.

The Korean saying that Frank is referencing accentuates that our fingers curl "naturally" inward towards our palms when we make a fist. Our fingers do not curl backwards

toward the backs of our hands. It is something that moves in one direction and cannot be changed. Conformity to whiteness moves in one direction, just like making a fist. Frank is resigned to be a subordinate to whites. He believes that white racism is a “fact of life” and that he is powerless to change it.

“Crumbs” do not Satisfy Her Appetite

Lin, similarly to Frank, has lived a life free of overt racism and felt that she was treated well while she attended school. Unlike Frank, her education in the US was solely at the collegiate level, so she did not receive the playground taunts that plagued many of my respondents. Even without childhood experiences, she was able to understand that Asian Americans were outsiders. Lin did not set out to become an Asian American activist, but there were specific events in her life that raised her awareness of inequality. They served as turning points in her life that steered her to a life of service. The death of Vincent Chin, the feminist movement, and working with rape victims were all events that opened her eyes to social inequality. The Chinese American community center director, has this view of where she stands as an Asian American in eyes of whites:

So we are good enough to be gangs, goons, geeks,¹ and all of them. But we are not good enough to be president, senators, Supreme Court justices, all of them, because we are just not good enough. They [whites] don't see us as good enough because of our look. Now if you are Jewish, you know the anti-Semitism in the old days, but you don't *look* different. If you don't tell people you are a Jew, people cannot tell you are a Jew. You can *pass*. You can get by, and then when you get by, you get to the place where you can make policy. You will change it and we cannot even do that! With this face? With these eyes? This nose? This cheekbone? You know? We cannot even pass that. You know some of the blacks, sadly, some of the blacks they are so fair, they can pass as white. It is sad in a different sense, but at least when they get there, they get a chance to get there. For us, that is not even possible. Now, there is strength in that too. Because I can't change this, I might as well be who I am.

Similarly to Frank, Lin sees the “glass ceiling” and acknowledges the difficulty Asian Americans have in breaking those barriers simply because they cannot physically pass as white, but that is where the similarities end. Lin uses white exclusion as a source of strength. It motivates her to be her own person. She states that for Jewish and African Americans, they may reach the higher levels of influence if they can disguise their heritage and *pass* into whiteness, but she knows that is an impossible task for Asian Americans. With this fact, Lin decided to be herself and ignore any pressures to conform to the white stereotyped idea of an Asian American woman. Her goals in life are not wed to mimicking or pleasing whites.

Lin believes that her efforts can make a difference in the fight for social justice. She is not afraid to take action. In Chapter II, she shared a story of assisting one of her staff members at the center who faced discrimination at a car dealership. When dealing with the general manager of the business, other Asian Americans pressured her to ask for a new car as monetary retribution. Instead, she said that the direction she took to deal with the manager was “relational.” She wrote a report of this incident to the Chinese American political association of which she is a member, not demanding any retribution. She stood firm with her own decision on how to deal with the car dealership, in hopes to make a greater impact for the entire community:

I want us to stand on high moral ground. The reason why I bring it to his attention, is first, he [car dealership general manager] is a policy maker. He can make changes. Secondly, the reason why we sent out this report because we expect people to be better, that’s the high moral ground.

Lin recognizes the position of power that the general manager holds. She made sure to address the racial incident that happened at his business, but she does not want to

“cheapen” the incident by demanding a car or money. Lin is using a form of resistance that is a covert strategy for group survival. She wants to remain principled and wants to build a relationship with a white in power. Lin hopes that if she appeals to his humanity by standing on “high moral ground” and that he will either want to make changes at his car dealership because it is the “right thing to do” or feel pressured to change because of the potential for lost business. She also believes that asking for a car is letting the dealership off too easily. By accepting a car from him, she believes that will just “ease his conscience” about the racist event. To explain why she fights in this manner:

I am not prepared to ease his conscience, but you see how many people do that? Do you see the practical thinking of some people? I think if people throw you some crumbs, or some goal, or give you a car then that makes it okay? Then we have lost our cause. So this is again, I have this driving, sitting on my integrity and this comes from the woman’s movement, coming from watching all these great women in the past fighting for voting rights fighting for all of these, I am standing on their shoulders.

Lin spoke with incredible conviction when she was recounting her experiences to me. She has seen change happen when combating terrible injustices in the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements. She remains confident that her efforts will help bring about change for Asian Americans.

She was not always so confident. In addition to being educated about the issues, Lin needed just a bit of encouragement to move from awareness of social inequalities to becoming a vocal activist. A graduate professor helped her out of her shell by assuring her that whatever she had to say was worthy of listening:

One of my turning points, I have to tell you, in college, is really from my Jewish professor. Coming from Hong Kong, you are not even encouraged to speak up, I was not like this. We were trained to look at the notebook, take whatever teachers are telling you and don’t question. I didn’t even know how to formulate

a question. Then in college I had to take a seminar course. Fifty percent of your grade was depending on your participation on your speaking out, on presentation. So, halfway through the class, I could not. I didn't know how to speak up. So my professor, a Jewish woman, talked to me in her office and said, "Lin, I have been observing you, you haven't really spoken." I said, "Yes, I know I am in trouble." She said, "You know Lin, I just want you to know, that you're experience is just as important as everyone in this class. Without your participation, this class will not be the same." First of all she held a space for me to step in, that I am just as important. Then she gave me my responsibility that this class will not be the same if I don't speak up. This was very powerful. It was motivation and empowerment. The rest is history and I haven't stopped talking [laughter].

Lin certainly has not stopped speaking up against injustice. This event was vital to her development into an outspoken activist because she was encouraged that what she had to say was important. She realized that her silence was a hindrance to herself and others. The white racist frame is set up to discourage any dissonance, but in this case, Lin got the push that she needed to start fighting against racism. All the respondents who have chosen to actively combat white racism got to that point by first being educated about the pervasiveness of racial inequality, and then being encouraged that they could make a difference.

A collective memory is re-shaped when Asian Americans begin to be educated about their history and are given a chance to share their stories and listen to others who have shared similar experiences. All five activists mentioned in their interviews that educating Asian Americans about racist events of the past was key to awareness and understanding. Respondents like Frank do not have a historical reference for their mistreatment and only see their experiences in a present context. Seeing race and racism only in the present context adds to the isolating and confusing experiences of Asian

Americans because they cannot make sense of why they are treated as both a “perpetual foreigner” and a “model minority.”

As many other respondents shared, Lin feels indebted to United States for providing her with opportunities of freedom that were not readily available in her home country. Asian Americans have a painfully complex relationship with the white-dominated United States. Whereas other interview participants have resigned themselves to accept the racial status quo, Lin frames her situation so she remains hopeful that she can make changes for the better:

In Honk Kong it was a British colony. We don't have that many non-profit grass root organizations. I was not even given a chance to vote in Hong Kong. I never voted in Hong Kong. Not until I came here is when I got to vote. So, how can this not be my home? It has given me all the privileges, but it is still not fair, but I have more privileges when I am over here, than as a British second-class citizen, right? So I chose this to be my home. And I want to make this, a better home.

Like Frank, Lin realizes that life is not fair in the United States. As opposed to Frank, she plans to use the privileges she has been awarded to play by her own “rules” so that she can make life better for herself and other Asian Americans.

Like other Asian Americans, Frank and Lin's situations are unique and complex. Their stories are exemplary of the divergent paths that Asian Americans may take in their lives when dealing with systemic racism. Their choices are complicated as both want to live as comfortably as possible in this country. Frank has chosen to take what he can get and to ignore injustice. By working hard and playing by the “rules” he says that he is happy with his life as a person “handicapped” by his Asian heritage. However, Lin believes that addressing racism will lead to a better future. The Asian American

experience is not easily explained with statistical studies and stereotypes. Behind the figures, tables, and “model minority” labels representing Asian Americans, you will find a distinctive, unique, and complex individual.

Implications and Future Research

There were many implications that arose from my analysis. My respondents revealed that the “model minority” stereotype does not save them from racial discrimination. The long-term exposure to white racism over their life courses is physically and mentally costly. My respondents also discussed a number of methods they use to protect themselves from discrimination such as emotional disconnect and conformity. A handful of Asian Americans in my research choose to resist the white racist frame, but they rarely do so in directly confrontational ways.

This analysis raises new questions in need of research. There has been little qualitative documentation of Asian Americans dealing with systemic racism. Misleading reports on the educational and financial success of Asian Americans cover up the painful discrimination they face everyday. This analysis demonstrates that no matter how educated or wealthy, Asian Americans are mistreated in all areas of their lives. The most urgent question raised from my research is, how much are Asian Americans suffering both physically and mentally from white racism? There has been very little attention paid to Asian American health disparities. Suffering and loss of human lives due to racism is not new, yet, no quantitative or qualitative studies have been done documenting the effects of everyday racism on the lives of Asian Americans.

Whitening of Asian Americans is rampant. The analysis showed how candid and forthright respondents were about their efforts to conform and what they hoped to obtain by whitening. First generation immigrants assumed that conforming would gain them acceptance into the white world, but then discovered that they still faced barriers. Parents who faced discrimination put immense pressure on their children to conform in hopes that it would protect them from future mistreatment. While conforming, respondents inherited racist notions and stereotypes about themselves and other people of color.

The analysis demonstrated that confrontational resistance is infrequent, and mental resistance to the white racist frame was most common among the interviewees. Many respondents feared that confronting a racist event would only worsen a situation. They adapted their behavior to accept racial teasing and acts of entitlement from whites, i.e. taking things without asking and butting ahead in lines. The few respondents that became activists, who outwardly challenged the white racist frame, received much criticism from other Asian Americans. Other Asian Americans were uncomfortable with the activists because they felt like they were “rocking the boat” and might “ruin” the opportunities and reputations of Asian Americans. Future research should further explore this fear of resistance and how it relates to Asian Americans placement in the racial hierarchy.

A recurring theme that needs further investigation is the collective memory of racial discrimination, or lack thereof, for Asian Americans. The large majority of Asian Americans have immigrated after 1967 and their understanding of the white racist past is

minimal. Research should address how Asian Americans pass on lessons to family and peer groups about race and racism. Many respondents spoke of being taught by parents that they should assimilate and conform as much as possible. The roots of the parental pressure to conform are in need of more in-depth investigation.

Further qualitative research should compare and contrast the Asian American whitening process to other ethnic groups that have been accepted into whiteness, such as the Irish and Italians, and those who have not, like African Americans and Latina/os. Research should also investigate how different Asian ethnicities and social classes may shape one's view of racism, conformity, and resistance. The way in which resistance takes shape among Asian Americans is also an area in need of further investigation.

Feagin (2006: 321) asserts that white attitudes will change if ties in the micro level change into what would lead to a shift in the macro level of society:

Until whites recognize that they have been raised in a racist society and harbor its hidden influence even when they deny it, until whites recognize that they too must take action to deal with personal and societal racism, no matter how subtle, and to eradicate it, the racial situation in the United States will only worsen. Once most recognize that they and the system their ancestors created are deeply racist, then most black Americans will doubtless be willing to cooperate and be patient as real programs to eradicate racism are created. This task of educating white Americans will not be easy, but it is possible. Once the problem is admitted, the solutions can be at least envisioned and implemented.

People of color will remain in a subordinate position to whites until whites first admit the existence of inequality and injustice. As long as they deny that Asian Americans face racism there can be no work toward addressing these issues of suicide, substance abuse, and depression. Asian Americans will continue to be "countless" and

invisible people. Whites will continue to use Asian Americans to enforce whiteness, while continuing to alienate and exclude them.

Asian Americans are battling this exclusion. Respondents like Lin and Indira have decided to dedicate their lives to educating and inspiring future generations of Asian Americans. As seen in the Civil Rights and Feminist movements, social movements arising out of aggrieved people have altered the power structure. The activists in my study are working to re-frame the Asian American collective memory, passing on the facts of America's harsh racist past and present. The Nisei generation is making sure they are not lost and forgotten, and they exemplify human resiliency. New Asian American leaders continue to emerge fighting against the white racist frame and challenging Asian American conformists.

Notes

¹ Interviewee is referencing an article she read by Helen Zia published in *Ms. Magazine*

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. What I would like to do is ask you some questions regarding your childhood experiences with race relations, your familial expectations, school experiences, feelings regarding being Asian American and your daily affairs today that deal with race issues. Remember that your involvement in this interview is completely voluntary and that you can decline to answer a question or even end the interview if you choose to do so. However, also keep in mind that every effort will be made to keep your identity confidential. I am interested in learning about the experiences of Asian Americans, and I really appreciate you spending some time to chat with me about your own experiences.

First, would you mind if I start out by asking you some questions about your family and your childhood?

1. Growing up, did you have any close friends of other races and ethnicities?
(If yes): Can you describe this/these friendships to me?
2. Could you tell me how the racial atmosphere in your community shaped your daily activities as a child?
3. Now I'd like to talk about your family. Growing up, do you remember hearing anyone in your family talking about expectations for you as an Asian American?
(If yes): Could you explain to any specific examples of things that were discussed?
4. Do you remember hearing anyone in your family talking about race and racial issues?
(If yes): Could you explain to any specific examples of things that were discussed?
5. Can you tell me any lessons your family members tried to teach you about being an Asian American? Examples could be things like school performance or career path.
6. When you were a child, did you parents share any personal stories or accounts of racism or discrimination?
(If yes): Could you give me specific examples of the stories that your parents shared?
(If no): What do you think are the reasons your family did not share these experiences?

7. When you were a child, did your family talk to you about how to deal with racism and discrimination?
(If yes): Could you give me a specific example of how your family tried to prepare you for dealing with racism?
8. Have you ever heard of the term “model minority?”
(If yes): Have you had any experiences with being labeled with this term and can you give me specific examples?
(If no): I will explain the term and then ask for experiences
9. Overall, do you feel that dealing with race issues was a big part of your life growing up?
(Whether yes or no): Can you give me an example of a significant thing that happened in your childhood regarding race that affected you on a very deep level?

Now, would you mind if we talk about your experiences in school and in your career?

10. What was school like for you? Did you feel that you were accepted? Please be specific.
11. How involved were your parents in your schooling? Did they have expectations of you as a student? Please discuss specific examples.
12. What were you friends like? How did they treat you?
13. What were the expectations your family had of you regarding college?
14. What was your experience in choosing your career path? What factors came into play when choosing?
15. How have your career experiences been?
16. Do you ever experience any mistreatment at work? Please be specific.
17. How do you think the “model minority” stereotype affects the expectations society has for Asian Americans in terms of academic performance?
18. How do you think the “model minority” stereotype affects the expectations society has for Asian Americans?
19. How has this stereotype affected how you feel about yourself as an Asian American? Please be specific.

Lastly, can we talk about today? I would like to discuss your current daily life.

20. What is your understanding of the current state of race relations in the United States regarding Asian Americans?
 Do you think things have gotten better? (If yes): Which things do you feel have improved?
 Do you think things have gotten worse? (If yes): In your opinion, which things have gotten worse?
21. Do you feel that there are race problems in the United States?
 (Probe if unsure): Maybe you haven't experienced any problems personally, but have you heard things through conversations or in the local news that make you think there may be race problems?
 (If yes): Could you give me an example of something you remember happening recently that you feel indicates current problems with race?
22. Do you feel that you or your family faces discrimination?
 What about in schooling?
 Do you feel that you face discrimination in your occupation?
 (If no): Would you mind if I read you some statistics regarding Asian American's mental health?
 Would you mind telling me what your reaction is to these statistics?
23. Can you tell me how many close friends do you have today who are white?
 (If any): Could you describe this/these friendship(s), like what type of things you do together and what things you like to talk about?
24. How many close friends do you have today whom are African American?
 (If any): Could you describe this/these friendship(s), like the types of things you do together and what you like to talk about?
28. Can you tell me how many close friends do you have today who are Latino?
 (If any): Could you describe this/these friendship(s), like what type of things you do together and what things you like to talk about?
25. In your daily life today, how much would you say you think about your race?
 Or, do you find that you are often reminded through your daily interactions and experiences that you are Asian American?
 (If yes): Could you tell me how you think this may affect how you live your life and how you treat others?
26. Can you think of any personal experiences with race issues you have had lately that stand out to you as being particularly significant?

(Probe if unsure): Within the last month or so, maybe something touched you, or made you mad, or perhaps changed - or strengthened - your ideas about race a little bit.

(If yes): Would you describe this/these experience(s) to me?

27. Is there anything else you would like to mention or talk about – maybe something you feel is important but that I didn't think to ask you about?

Thank you so much for talking with me about your experiences. If you think of anything else you would like to discuss or clarify, don't hesitate to contact me/Rosalind Chou

VITA

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