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“Race was something we didn’t talk about”: Racial Socialization in Asian American Families

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Abstract

Objective: Our goal was to explore racial socialization practices in Asian American families during a time of heightened racial tension.

Background: Asian Americans hold a complex racial position in the United States, made even more complicated by an increase in public protests regarding socioracial injustices in the United States experienced by racial minority groups. Discussions about race and ethnicity occur within Asian American families but often focus on cultural heritage rather than awareness of discrimination and the historical roots of racism.

Method: Our study used an inductive-deductive thematic analysis to collect data from 12 Asian American young adults. Semistructured interviews queried participants’ experiences with racial socialization in their nuclear families and their own racial identity.

Findings: Qualitative analysis revealed the following themes: (a) Participants received limited messages regarding racial issues, (b) participants engaged in “bottom-up” racial socialization and taught their parents about race, and (c) participants felt left out of society’s racial dialogue.

Conclusion: During this time of heightened racial tension, Asian American young adults struggle to find their place, despite wanting to participate in community building.

Implications: Without strong Asian American racial socialization practices in families, young adults must educate themselves and initiate racial meaning-making in their families.

Keywords

Asian American families; intergenerational communication; qualitative research; racial socialization; young adults

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The Asian American population is the fastest growing racial group in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2017), yet Asian American families are often overlooked in research,

clinical outreach, and advocacy efforts. Despite the fact that the Asian population has increased by 72% since 2000, clinical research efforts focused on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander populations have made up only 0.17% of the National Institutes of Health budget since 1992 (Doàn et al., 2019). This population also experiences great heterogeneity in defining what it means to be Asian in America. A person's sense of identity is influenced by socialization processes on multiple systemic levels, from our political systems, to our communities, to our nuclear family and family groups (Burke & Stets, 2009). The socialization of Asian Americans regarding their race, ethnicity, and culture is central to individual and family development, as well as their sense of racial identity (Kiang et al., 2016). Although the familial process of socialization occurs in multiple ways, this article focuses on *racial socialization*, particularly the ways in which parents teach their children about perceptions and experiences as members of a certain racial group, such as the fact that one's racial group may be devalued in society and that one should prepare for challenges due to stereotyping, racism, and racial/ethnic discrimination. Racial socialization is distinct from *ethnic socialization*, which refers to the preservation and transmission of cultural practices, traditions, and history that reflect the ethnic heritage(s) of the family (Hughes et al., 2006; Paasch-Anderson & Lamborn, 2014).

The literature on ethnic and racial socialization has focused predominately on African American families. One review of 46 racial/ethnic socialization studies showed that only seven of the studies included Latino families, three included Asian families, two included mixed-ethnic families, and one included White families (Hughes et al., 2006). Since that review, 21 studies with Asian American parents have been published, indicating a growing interest in this topic (Juang et al., 2017). This process of family communication about race in Asian American families differs from other racial groups and has unique implications for their involvement in political process and exercising their rights as Americans.

Ethnic and racial socialization are often confused or lumped into one category, but for Asian American families, they are distinct. Ethnic socialization research emphasizes the importance of socialization goals, beliefs, and practices that are shaped by heritage cultural contexts and values (Cheah et al., 2013). A smaller body of literature has focused on racial socialization among Asian American families (e.g., Liu & Lau, 2013; Tran & Lee, 2010). These studies focus on how racial constructs in the United States impact the lives and interactions of Asian American parents and their children. There remains a paucity of research regarding whether parents prepare their children for negative and positive experiences regarding race, such as preparing for racial bias or for appreciation of living in a multiracial world.

Research findings comparing racial socialization across minority groups have been mixed, with some studies suggesting that Asian American parents are less likely than African American or Latino parents to engage in racial socialization (Hughes et al., 2008; Phinney & Chavira, 1995), whereas other research suggests that Asian American parents are actively seeking to teach their children about their ethnic heritage. One study found that Korean American immigrant parents engage in more ethnic and racial socialization practices compared with White parents raising internationally adopted Korean American children (Seol et al., 2016). A majority of Chinese American mothers and fathers in another study

reported (sometimes or often) talking to children about how to respond if they experienced discrimination (Benner & Kim, 2009). Other studies suggest that Asian American immigrant parents socialize their children to do better at school in anticipation of unequal opportunities in the mainstream society (Louie, 2004).

With this increase in research attention, however, there is a dearth of research that contextualizes the experiences of Asian American families while discussing racial and sociopolitical issues. The goal of this study was to better understand the intergenerational conversations, practices, and concerns of Asian American young adults regarding race and the politicization of race in the modern age. To do this, we chose a qualitative approach to provide a rich description of a phenomena (i.e., Asian American racial socialization), which does not generalize to an entire heterogeneous population (Levitt et al., 2016). A qualitative approach allowed us to center Asian American young adult voices, using their own words, so that they could define and describe their experiences.

Sociopolitical Context

In the past decade, there has been a sharp increase in communities of color uprising to protest violence and discrimination (Day, 2015). With the rise of awareness regarding police misconduct toward people of color and the discord following the 2016 election, American society has become more divided in recent years, and there has been an outpouring of protest against racism and social injustice (Fisher et al., 2019). Most recently, the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by a White Minneapolis police officer (May 25, 2020) caused an eruption of protests and furthered the Black Lives Matter movement.

It is important to provide historical context to our study because the social and political events shaped our work in the area of race in America. Interviews were conducted in June and July of 2016. During those months the following events occurred: The Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando (June 12, 2016), in which the majority of the 50 victims were racial and/or sexual minorities; Philando Castile, a 32-year-old Black man was shot by police officers in his vehicle (June 6, 2016); five Dallas police officers were shot and killed following a protest of police brutality (July 7, 2016); and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, who was at the center of several ongoing debates regarding racial and religious minorities, became the official Republican presidential nominee (July 19, 2016).

Heightened racial tensions set the context for our study, and it was during this time that we chose to examine how Asian American young adults made sense of their place in the current racial dialogue. We selected the developmental stage of emerging adulthood for this study, defined as the life stage between adolescence and young adulthood, lasting roughly from ages 18 to 25 years (Arnett, 2020). This life stage is appropriate for a study of racial identity and socialization because people in this age range are pondering their personal identity and starting to feel responsible for themselves, but also are still closely tied to their parents and family (Munsey, 2006). In addition to the sociopolitical context, we also set out to examine what racial socialization looks like in Asian American families.

Theoretical Framework

We have integrated aspects of Kim's (1981) Asian American identity development model, as well as family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), to frame and outline this study. The Asian American identity development model describes five stages of identity development: (a) the ethnic awareness stage, (b) the White identification stage, (c) the awakening to sociopolitical consciousness stage, (d) the redirection stage, and (e) the incorporation stage. The Asian American identity development model largely focuses on individual development and lacks guidance regarding the broader sociocultural context of families and communities. Therefore, we draw from tenets of family systems theory, which points to family members' unique contributions to change within a structure as well as for other individuals in the system. Family systems theory posits that families are a system of interrelated members who are in constant interaction with each other and the sociocultural environment that surrounds them rather than a mere collection of individuals in isolation (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Because of this interconnectedness, family members can have a profound impact on one another's thinking and functioning over time.

As noted, heightened racial tensions in the summer of 2016 set the background for our study, and it was during this time that we chose to examine family communication and socialization in Asian American families. In addition to the family context, we also set out to examine how Asian American young adults made sense of their place in the current racial dialogue. The following are the research questions we sought to answer:

Research Question 1.

How does racial socialization occur in Asian American families? Specifically, how do these families talk about specific racial issues including:

- racial experiences during childhood,
- messages regarding race from various contexts (family, neighborhood, school), and
- where they fit in as Asian Americans in the current social dialogue regarding race.

Research Question 2.

How do Asian American young adults make meaning of their racial reality and understand their current position as a racial minority?

Method

Data were collected from a northeastern U.S. public university located in a predominantly African American county. Student enrollment at this university is 45.5% White, 15.3% Asian American, 10.6% African American, 8.1% Latino, and 3.9% multiracial. Inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: young adults between the ages of 18 to 26 years; self-identifying as Asian American, English speaker, being born in the United States or having immigrated to the United States before age 6 years, and having at least one

immigrant parent of Asian heritage. All procedures and interview questions were approved by the institutional review board of the university.

Procedures

Participants were recruited by circulating posters about the study via university email listservs, researchers' personal contacts (such as contacting university networks to search for those who fit study criteria, who then passed on study information to their own networks), and snowball sampling. Once participants expressed an interest in the study via email or phone, they were contacted by a researcher to schedule a one-on-one interview.

A study team member explained that the purpose of the study was to learn more about the experiences of being raised Asian American in the United States and family conversations about race. On the day of data collection, participants were given the consent form and had a chance to read the form and ask any questions about the study; when all their questions were answered, those agreeing to participate signed the informed consent form, and the interviews began. The researchers conducted the interviews in person in a location that ensured privacy and confidentiality, and an equal number of interviews were conducted by each of the three researchers. The researchers had received prior training in qualitative methods, and after reading and discussing literature relevant to the study, they developed goals of the study and the interview procedure as a group. The main questions were presented and followed by interviewer probes and follow-up questions. Questioning focused on racial experiences during childhood ("When did you first realize that you were Asian American?"); messages regarding race from home, school, and community contexts ("Growing up, what did you learn about race from home/school/neighborhood?"); as well as perceptions of Asian Americans' place in current dialogue regarding racial discrimination ("What are your thoughts on the current racial climate in the United States?"). The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted in English, and were audio-recorded. The study team met weekly to discuss data collection and findings arising from the interviews. When data saturation was reached, recruitment efforts were concluded.

Analysis

When the interviews were completed, the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim using pseudonyms for participants' names. We applied both inductive and deductive approaches in our thematic analysis, simultaneously using concepts from our theoretical frameworks to guide the coding process while allowing the data to shape the themes that we found (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the three coders open-coded three transcripts individually (one from each interviewer), highlighting what they saw as salient similarities and differences across transcripts. Second, we met and created initial labels representing an excerpt of data, along with short phrases to capture these broader labels to summarize data from each transcript. On the basis of these open codes, initial parent and child codes were discussed and identified.

We then moved to axial coding, in which the initial parent and child codes were discussed as a research group and then categorized into four broad themes: identity, family, community/school, and media/social current events. These themes were created using mainly inductive

reasoning but, once formulated, also closely aligned with our interview questions. Coders went back through each transcript again and identified all excerpts that exemplified the specific codes within each parent code. If there was a disagreement between coders regarding where the interview transcript excerpt fit, the researchers met to compare, discuss, and reach consensus about where the excerpt should be coded.

The first author integrated written memos and used the theoretical frameworks to form main themes from the codes. We used the coded data within each theme to develop subthemes, if appropriate. Subthemes were formed inductively without trying to fit them into a preexisting coding framework. The researchers provided detailed feedback on themes and subthemes by discussing and commenting on multiple drafts and presentations about the overarching ideas represented by the main results.

Researchers' Background and Reflexivity

As three people concerned with the state of racism and racial injustice in the United States, we came together to formulate the study's research questions in an effort to address to a gap in family science literature. Our team of investigators varied by race and ethnicity. Two of the three researchers were of Asian heritage: one was of Chinese/White background, one Korean, and the other researcher was White. The biracial researcher of Chinese/White background was born in the United States and grew up in areas where the Asian American population was small but also lived in an East Asian country for a number of years as an adult. The researcher of Korean ethnicity grew up in the midwestern United States during childhood, followed by a transnational life trajectory spanning from adolescence to adulthood. The third researcher grew up in a large and diverse metropolitan area on the east coast. Thus, our team of investigators varied by race and ethnicity. We engaged in discussions and reflections of our own stances and interpretations at all stages of the project, from conception to analysis and reporting of findings. All three researchers are trained marriage and family therapists. As such, we have had extensive discussions of "self of therapist" and acknowledge that we are not blank slates but possess our own subjective perspectives and biases. We also are experts in amplifying and empowering the perspective of the participant in our research and clinical work. Accordingly, during data analyses group meetings, we advocated for the opinions that our participants shared but also were open about our own interpretive lenses. For this study, we recognized that subjectivity is a useful tool, but we also tried to reduce our subjectivity affecting the results through ongoing group discussion of similarities and differences.

Self of Researcher Statements

Researcher 1.—I had previously conducted research on racial socialization practices in African American families and realized that although that was an area rich in information, when translated to Asian Americans, there was a major gap. In starting this research project, my aim was to address an issue that frequently arose in my own mixed-race family, which was "we talk about culture all the time, but what about race?" While conducting interviews, I found that I identified more with participants who were engaged in racial justice efforts than with participants who expressed views closer to "colorblindness." Despite my biases,

I engaged code-switching skills and worked to pose open, nonjudgmental questions to the participants regarding their family conversations on racial topics.

Researcher 2.—Having had a transnational life trajectory, alternating between life in the United States and South Korea, I am aware of my shift in privilege as a male racial minority in the former and as a male racial/ethnic majority in the latter. I found myself personally relating to the experiences shared by participants on one hand but also understanding why some of the participants' parents would think or respond in certain ways regarding racial dynamics. During interviews, I made an effort not to insert my personal experience or insights while participants shared their experiences.

Researcher 3.—Our team was aided by a mix of etic and emic perspectives. In my case, it was helpful to lean on my outsider status to be able to come to the experiences of the participants from a curious, “not-knowing” stance. I have done qualitative research and facilitated groups with several groups of which I am not a part (incarcerated fathers, Latino immigrants, Orthodox Jewish gay men). These experiences and my role as a therapist have helped me hone my style as an independent interviewer while I continue to interrogate my own beliefs shaped by my socialization as a White woman.

Results

Participants

The participants included 12 Asian American young adults (eight women and four men) aged 18 to 26 years (see Table 1). The participants' families originated from seven Asian countries. Participants identified as Filipino ($n = 2$), Korean ($n = 2$), Vietnamese ($n = 2$), Indian ($n = 2$), Pakistani ($n = 2$), Taiwanese ($n = 1$), and Cambodian-Chinese ($n = 1$; see Table 1). Participants were born in the United States ($n = 8$), arrived before age 2 years ($n = 2$), or arrived between ages 3 and 6 years ($n = 2$). None of the participants were married or had children. All participants, except for one who recently graduated, were undergraduate students. Although we did not explicitly inquire about religious beliefs, half of the participants volunteered that they belonged to one of four religious groups: Muslim ($n = 2$), Hindu ($n = 1$), Catholic ($n = 1$), and Sikh ($n = 1$).

The findings of this study are organized into three main racial socialization themes reported by Asian American young adults. The first two focus on racial socialization in the home, and the third centered on how these racial socialization practices connect to broader conversations about race. Two main themes emerged in response to our first research question regarding racial socialization in families. Theme 1, “Family Messages About Race,” covers three specific examples of messages that young adults received from their parents. Theme 2, “Bottom-Up Racial Socialization—Teaching Parents about Race,” describes a novel communication style used by young adults to initiate conversations with their parents. Theme 3 answers the second research question: “Where do Asians Fit In? Feeling Left Out of Society’s Racial Dialogue” by describing how participants felt left out of society’s racial dialogue.

Theme 1: Family Messages About Race

Subtheme 1a: “We didn’t talk about it”.—One of the most prominent findings of this study was when we asked participants how their parents talked to them about race and found that these conversations often did not happen. Kathy, age 23 years said it plainly: “Race was something we didn’t talk about.” Lauren, age 21 years, was left without a clear definition of what race meant and how her parents understood the concept: “We never specifically talked about race necessarily. My parents never specifically defined it for me.”

Although many participants echoed this sentiment, it was unclear whether parents did not prioritize conversations about race in America, or if this was a function of indirect communication in Asian American families in general. Adam, age 19 years, explained, “It [race] was never really a topic that came up. Social issues in general I don’t think we ever really discussed.” Similarly, Ava, age 20, described the broader communication style that her Korean American family engaged in:

Yeah, I don’t think there ever was a direct thing. That’s another thing I’ve noticed from Korean parents, I feel like they never talk to you about issues directly, like I never had like “the talk” with my parents; it was just sort of implied in a conversation once and I guess that was it and then we moved on.

From these experiences and lack of communication regarding race, participants did not view their parents as “educators” regarding sensitive issues and were not approached by their parents about how to talk about racial (or sexual) topics.

Subtheme 1b: Treat people equally.—More than half of our sample said that their parents did not talk directly to them about race, but a small portion said that their parents gave them explicit messages about equality and treating others the same as you would want to be treated.

My mom was the one that really taught me to, like, never judge someone based on their race. I think race was something my mom never wanted me to focus too much on it. She was like, “focus more on the individual. Don’t really focus on if they’re White, they’re Black, they’re Chinese, they’re Korean.” She’s like, “that doesn’t matter unless you think it matters.”

(Kathy, age 23)

Kathy’s mother impressed upon her the importance of looking beyond race and developing empathy for others.

Other participants explained that their views on race and racial groups were formed as part of their socialization in religious groups. Our sample included two participants who were Muslim, one Catholic, one Sikh, and one Hindu. The Muslim participants described multiple instances of discrimination, and the participants from Hindu and Sikh backgrounds faced similar discrimination because they were believed to be Muslim. Participants described how growing up in religious families was accompanied by lessons on race:

My parents are really religious, and so one of the first lessons that I was taught on race, we have this story on Adam, back when God created Adam, and we have a

story of how the first act of racism was committed by Satan because he thought he was better than Adam because he was made of fire and Adam was made of clay ... my parents would say you can't judge somebody by the color of their skin and what they're made of. And I think I became more aware of race even more aware of race because I was in a diverse group.

(Lily, age 23 years)

The message of equality and treating others how you would like to be treated was frequently mentioned in the context of religious teaching. The intersection of race and religion was not part of the interview questions but important for the identity formation of several participants. One participant even went so far as to explain that she identifies first as Muslim American, second Pakistani American, and third Asian American (Kathy, age 23).

Subtheme 1c: Racial stereotyping.—Although race was not discussed directly by many families, parents often communicated racial stereotypes to the participants. This stigma could be held toward other racial minorities, other Asian American ethnic groups, or even those within their own Asian American ethnic group. For a few participants, their parents were very open to talking about racial issues but frequently held fixed views that contradicted their liberal opinions. Carson provided two examples: the first was of prejudice toward other groups, and the second of stereotyping toward people of the same Indian culture:

My parents are very vocal about race. They recognize the different types of struggles and issues that are involved with different types of races. However, they are very willing to say very racist things at times. It was kinda this weird disconnect, like everybody nicely, like everybody has suffered from their own problems, like you gotta understand that. But then sometimes they would just like drink coffee and they'd say something really racist.

(Carson, age 19)

Carson expressed surprise at the disconnect he experienced from having parents who were both champions of racial issues and also expressed racist viewpoints. He saw this in his parents both with members of the same racial group and other racial groups. His parents used stereotypes of different groups both to discriminate and to promote what they viewed as positive or negative attributes.

Yeah my parents tried to tell me like don't be racist, don't be stereotypical, like don't use stereotypes but they do also use stereotypes as like jokes, conversation. Um, and they sometimes take pride in stereotypes, an Indian stereotype is you're a doctor, lawyer, engineer, and my mom will be like "yeah that's true, we're very hardworking, you need to become like this, you need to become one of the three."

(Carson, age 19)

A small group of participants were warned by their parents that they might encounter racism and that they should have a heightened sense of awareness and their surroundings, especially in heavily White communities:

So there's a really White part of town and I asked my mom like, "Can I go over Sarah's dad's house, he has a pool" and she was like okay honey, but like be careful. And I guess I didn't really understand like the magnitude of what she was saying. Um, and looking back now yeah like because people are like really racist in a lot of parts of [that town] and my parents say the be careful thing a lot and that's definitely an awareness, that like, a lot of my White friends didn't really have to have, they could kinda just be really carefree.

(Jaidyn, age 22)

Jaidyn described building more awareness through adolescence on some of the subtle messages on race provided by parents. Kathy's, age 23 years, mother gave her specific ways of coping with racist remarks: "She's like 'If you ever feel like that's what's being done to you, speak up about it.'" In our data, Kathy was an outlier. Most participants rarely described this type of direct feedback from parents and mentioned that they were not given specific skills or ways of coping with racism. Their parents often faced discrimination themselves, which the participants witnessed and yet did not have clear modeled behavior for how to challenge derogatory behavior.

Theme 2: Bottom-Up Racial Socialization—Teaching Parents About Race

Whereas racial socialization is typically studied in terms of parents teaching children, we found that the young adults in our study were often doing the educating of their parents on topics of race. They intentionally challenged their parents' negative messages about other races or the stereotypes that they were taught during childhood. They also felt an obligation to educate their family members and dialogue with their parents using information often obtained from high school or college classes and discussions. Many young adults underwent identity development and exploration upon entering university and becoming more involved in cultural activities and activism on campus.

It's hard because sometimes my mom is a little quick to judge. My brother and I particularly, every time we hear my parents talk a specific way, or are quick to stereotype people, we try to go against that because it doesn't really sound right, can you really say that about another person without really knowing them?

(Lauren, age 21)

Lauren asserted the importance of taking a stand when she hears racial stereotypes from her parents. Carson took this a step further, explaining how he could make a difference in the current climate by educating family members about racial issues. Several participants took on this lens, seeing activism as starting within their own homes.

One thing I can do is help Asian Americans understand a lot of the political and social issues that are going on. And when I mean Asian Americans we're not talking about college students, I mean like our parents and their relatives.

(Carson, age 19)

These last quotes point to the intersection of age and immigration status (i.e., first vs. second generation) as it related to a person's understanding of race and racial issues. Participants who were raised in the United States had a different understanding of political

and social issues than their parents, as well as a different language for discussion these topics. Their more recent education was centered in an American school system, which differed drastically to their immigrant parents.

Theme 3: Where Do Asians Fit In? Feeling Left Out of Society's Racial Dialogue

Many participants brought up the challenges of having to balance two cultures, typically their parents' culture and American culture. They discussed different ways that they managed these identities and strategies for integration. Often, there existed tension between the dominant, White culture, and one's Asian American identity.

I remember like my sisters used to make fun of me 'cause they thought that I was so ... whitewashed. And they're like you're just so Americanized like you have no culture in you, I think that was like a really hard thing to deal with growing up because I was constantly trying to kinda keep in touch with that culture ... but then also I wanted to fit in with my friends.

(Jaidyn, age 22)

As Jaidyn expresses, this tension often led participants to have to balance racial messages from family members and their peers. Typically, in one context one was seen as fitting in, while in the other, standing out. She goes on to explain how growing up in a predominantly White area made her closer to her siblings. Although she still felt tension between maintaining her identity and fitting in with her friends, she knew that her siblings could empathize with some of the struggles that she faced. Jaidyn, age 22, said,

Growing up, being non-White in a White area, I feel like made my family a lot closer, like as far as my siblings were concerned ... our thought process with it is like, no one else really understands what we're going through.

Our participants also received mixed messages from their parents regarding how they fit into society at large. Many of them described the challenges of having to navigate both Asian and American identities. Participants talked about how their parents simultaneously encouraged them to assimilate to mainstream American culture but also stressed the importance of retaining cultural traditions and values.

My mom tried to assimilate us. When we were going to school she would pack us sandwiches, try to see what the others' parents were doing and incorporate that into our school life. But when we were home, my mom would just cook us anything, she would speak to [my sister] in Khmer, Cambodian. They only spoke English around me, they made sure that people only spoke English around me, so I wouldn't have the same speaking issues as my sister.

(Holly, age 22)

This form of socialization was not overt but more subtle in how Holly was raised differently from her sister. Once our participants reached young adulthood, the uncertainty about their role in society grew even more ambiguous, especially given the current racial dialogue in the country. Most participants felt passionately about racial issues, yet were unsure about where they fit in as Asian Americans in the racial dialogue, which they believed focused more on Black-White racial tension. Sam, age 26, stated, "Our voices are not heard as much.

And people have preconceived notions ... like people think that because Asian Americans are well off in society we [don't] suffer from similar problems." This participant expresses the commonly held trope of the model minority and how this sometimes excludes Asian Americans from fully participating in a racial dialogue as minorities. Jaidyn, age 22 years, echoed this sentiment, stating: "Yeah, I think it's an incredibly unique position because we're not quite White but we're not quite like POCs, people of color." Participants shared similar notions about not quite knowing where they fit in and having their voices lost in discussions of race in 2016. Adam, age 19, went as far to say that although Asians can be allies, they will not be the focus of discussions on race.

Honestly, I don't think Asians have much place in the racial dialogue. Particularly because of the overall focus on the Black-White dynamic. Asians can be allies but at most that's all they can be—they're never going to be the focus.

(Adam, age 19)

There was variation among our sample regarding their exposure to discussions of race with friends and family members. While some participants were actively working on integrating their experiences as Asian Americans with their education at a public university by taking courses in Asian American studies, other participants rarely talked about their own racial identity. Dillan, age 19 years, explained how being part of this study was novel for him: "This [interview] is a new experience for me. I don't really talk about race, too much—maybe recently, but my own race, not so much."

Despite these challenges in understanding the role of Asian Americans in racial dialogue, the young adults in this study showed active engagement in racial meaning-making and expressed the need to be more involved in supporting other racial minorities. Carson, age 19, said, "I feel like my job is to help others have this dialogue with their parents." Carson not only wanted to engage his parents in racial education, he also wanted to serve as a model to other young adults who struggled to find the words to talk with their parents about these issues.

Discussion

This study examined the lived experiences of Asian American emerging adults, with an emphasis on family racial socialization. We integrated two theoretical frameworks, the Asian American identity development model and family systems theory, to develop research questions and ground our findings in the broader literature. The findings of this study contextualized these theories in current sociopolitical events. Specifically, participants' stories exemplified several stages of the Asian American identity development model—namely Stage 3, "awakening to social political consciousness," and Stage 4, "redirection," to focus on personal and Asian American experiences. These interviews revealed variation regarding consciousness of the implications of being a racial minority and a wide range of involvement in the Asian American community experience. This variation in development may be due to a lack of guidance regarding racial identity formation from Asian parents, who have a very different lived experience from their children and are unfamiliar with talking about race.

We found that few of our participants described conversations about race and clear messaging from their parents about how to deal with current racial tensions in the United States. Contrary to other studies, few participants reported family conversations about how to respond to discrimination or prepare for biased treatment from others (Benner & Kim, 2009). This may be due to first-generation immigrant parents being unfamiliar with the idea of racial dynamics in the United States because many Asian countries are quite homogenous in terms of race.

We found that familial racial socialization in Asian American families was bidirectional. Racial socialization is typically studied in the context of top-down messages from parent to child, but we found that young adults were often educating their parents about racial topics. This illustrates the reciprocal interactions described in family systems theory, in which children can also influence their parents. Although the participants uniformly stated that Asian Americans should be part of the racial dialogue that occurs in society, there were some who struggled to understand where exactly they fit into a racial dialogue focused on the Black versus White dynamic, Latino migrants, or Muslim Americans. This may be due to the perception of Asian Americans as a “perpetual foreigner” in the United States rather than a racial group that is integral to American history and social dynamics (Huynh et al., 2011). These findings come from only 12 participants, but they represent a diverse range of cultural identities.

Some participants described the phenomenon of “model minority” status in that they did not perceive racial discrimination to affect them. The invisibility of Asian Americans is in part due to this myth—that they have achieved success solely through hard work and education (Hsu, 2017). This stereotype does not capture the large amount of heterogeneity of Asian subgroups and instead creates a divide among racial minorities by downplaying the role of racism in inequities of American society. It has proven to have negative social implications for Asian Americans, such as Asians being unfairly held to unrealistic standards of performance and a related high prevalence of mental health issues (Smedley et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). At the same time, Asian Americans have benefitted in terms of social desirability from the model minority myth because they are viewed as harder working, more successful, and less threatening than other groups (Leong & Grand, 2008). Thus, the model minority myth allows some Asian American to assimilate into Whiteness and bypass some of the systematic and institutionalized racism faced by other communities of color.

Participants shared that their parents sometimes emphasized idealistic values of equality. Other participants frequently described their personal and family members’ experiences of racial discrimination, but parental education regarding how to confront discrimination was lacking and only reported by two participants. Although there were some implicit messages about discrimination, most parents did not explicitly discuss their definitions of race or racial tension in the United States with participants. Not engaging in family racial socialization practices is a luxury that African American families do not share due to extreme forms of racial discrimination and violence, and conversations regarding race are viewed as necessary survival tools for African American children (Bowman & Howard, 1985).

Given the lack of discussion regarding race in their families, participants felt an obligation to educate their family members and dialogue with their parents. This sense of responsibility is reflected in larger societal movements such as the Asian American Letters for Black Lives (Letters for Black Lives, 2016), in which young adults explain frankly to their parents about why the movement is important to them. The letter opens thus:

Mom, Dad, Uncle, Auntie, Grandfather, Grandmother: We need to talk.

You may not have grown up around people who are Black, but I have. Black people are a fundamental part of my life: they are my friends, my classmates and teammates, my roommates, my family. Today, I am scared for them.

The letter goes on to describe statistics and examples of African American men who were killed by law enforcement agents, outlines the history of African slavery, and explains the importance of Asian Americans vocally opposing police violence toward African Americans. The letter has been translated into more than 30 languages and is an appeal to older generations for empathy and support. This multilingual tool can be used by younger generations hoping to effect positive change toward racial justice and shared broadly with their parents, who may sometimes harbor racist perspectives. The sentiments written about in this letter are strongly aligned with the motivations of our participants.

The findings of this study point to the complex and intersectional nature of identifying as “Asian American.” The term “Asian” itself points to both a race and an ethnicity in the United States, but also it encapsulates an enormous amount of variety of immigration experiences, religions, and family dynamics. One example of this diversity arose when Asian American participants who identified as Muslim shared unique experiences regarding racial discrimination compared to non-Muslim Asian Americans. Muslim Asian Americans commonly mentioned how their religion feels more like their race, indicating racialization of certain religions in the U.S. (Joshi, 2006). Two participants who come from Hindu and Sikh religious backgrounds also described facing discrimination because they were perceived to be Muslim. It was clear from our sample that both racial/ethnic and religious discrimination was part of their lived reality and shaped views on the current racial dialogue in the United States.

In this time of increased racial tension, racial identity development has become a more challenging process to navigate. Asian American young adults must integrate messages regarding their race from their families, schools, communities, and the media. Many of the participants’ examples of race relations education occurred in school, either in high school or college courses in Asian American studies. The young adults in this study were actively engaged in racial conversations with peers and involved in social justice efforts on campus.

Our study demonstrates how Asian American racial socialization happens on multiple levels and in different environments. The intergenerational households that were described revealed unexpected patterns of indirect and direct communication between parents and children, where racial identity was not a frequent topic of discussion, especially as it related to people of other races in the United States, but participants claimed that it played an integral role in their identity formation.

Strengths and Limitations

This is one of the few studies exploring racial socialization in Asian American families from the young adult perspective. Especially given the timing of the study, many issues of race and racial identity were at the forefront of participants' minds. The findings of this study are not generalizable to other populations due to the small sample size; however, there was representation of Asian American cultures with participants from East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Additionally, the experiences of Asian Americans vary by geographic location and density of Asian American communities across the country. Thus, our sample of Asian Americans living on the East Coast may not be representative of the experiences of Asian Americans in other parts of the United States. Our sample had multiple participants that were pursuing a minor in Asian American studies or participating in Asian American student groups, which may have biased toward the perspective of young adults who were more engaged in diversity and inclusion efforts on campus. Thus, their insights into social issues may differ from other young adult Asian Americans who do not commonly engage in racial activism and education.

Implications

Family practitioners working with Asian American families can apply the findings of this study in a number of ways. First, family researchers should advocate for the inclusion of Asian Americans in more research and writing on racial justice so that these conversations are more intersectional across racial groups. Second, educators and community outreach leaders can develop educational materials that outline the negative impacts of racial discrimination and provide trainings for how Asian American families can have constructive conversations about race. Third, family therapists have a unique opportunity to facilitate family dialogues across generations of Asian immigrants that take into account the unspoken role that racial politics plays in identity formation for young adults. Lastly, the young adults in this study integrated messages they received early on about race and then took it upon themselves to educate their parents about these issues. This bottom-up form of racial education may be a unique communication framework for academic researchers, educators, and clinicians working with Asian American communities.

Future Directions

Future research must address the specific developmental and social needs regarding racial socialization for young Asian Americans. This includes sensitivity to cultural differences related to religion, culture of origin, family tradition, and immigration history. Additionally, because many of our participants said that their religion informed their identity development, more in-depth research is needed to address how socialization occurs along both racial and religious lines in Asian American young adults. Our future research plans include interviews with more Asian American young adults, as well as family interviews with different generations of Asian immigrants, such as parents and grandparents. It is our belief that facilitation of these conversations through parental racial socialization may help buffer Asian Americans from the negative effects of discrimination and help young Asian American develop a strong sense of racial identity.

Conclusion

It is critical to understand how Asian American families navigate this complex, fluid, multilevel, and intersectional system of race and racism because it will have important consequences for development of individuals, families, and their communities. This study illuminates an opening for discussions of race and racial injustice in Asian American families. Strengthening racial socialization practices in these families can help foster positive racial identity development in emerging young adults and empower Asian American families to communicate about racial justice in the United States.

Since the time that this study was conducted, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted underlying racist attitudes about Asian Americans, with a high incidence rate of verbal harassment and physical assaults toward Asian Americans during the initial months of the pandemic (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020). Even as we keep anti-Asian sentiment in mind, it is the responsibility of Asian Americans to address the role that this community has played a role in perpetuating anti-Blackness. The invisibility of Asian Americans is due in part to broader exclusions but is also partially due to Asian Americans being unwilling to partake in difficult conversations. Asian American families' lived experiences of the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner stereotype have systemic impacts across generations but have not previously been well studied in families.

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Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (years)	Asian culture of origin	Religious background ^a
Lily	F	23	Pakistani	Muslim
Lauren	F	21	Vietnamese	—
Danielle	F	21	Taiwanese	None
Ava	F	20	Korean	None
Kathy	F	23	Pakistani	Muslim
Holly	F	22	Chinese-Cambodian	Catholic
Adam	M	19	Filipino	—
Sam	M	26	Vietnamese	—
Jaidyn	F	22	Korean	—
Carson	M	19	Indian	Hindu
Dillan	M	19	Indian	Sikh
Ashly	F	21	Filipino	—

^a *Note.* Dash indicates that the participants did not disclose their religious background.