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Racial Glass Ceilings, Gendered Responses: Taiwanese American Professionals’ Experiences of Otherness

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This article examines Taiwanese American professionals’ interpretations of the glass ceiling to illuminate the manifestations of structural inequality at the micro-level of social life. Data are based on 40 in-depth interviews in the Chicago metropolitan area. Findings suggest that racial inequalities are experienced through race relations. Ethnic cultures construct relational fences along racial lines that designate the place of each group in the racial hierarchy. Although frustrated and alienated by their marginalized position, women and men use different strategies to negotiate the meaning of being an “other.” Women act confrontationally to transgress social boundaries, while men adopt acquiescent and coalitional approaches to dwell in their designated territories. I argue that race intersects with gender and citizenship in shaping the salience of individuals’ social identities, which affects their responses to racial inequality in the white-collar workplace.

“It’s very normal that whites don’t promote Asians. We are Asian anyway.”
Li-Ming, 49, male, PhD, scientist at IT company

“Whites think Asian women are submissive, but I’m not. You can’t overlook my ability and bypass me for promotion opportunities. I’m gonna fight with you.”
Wan-Jen, 52, female, MA, manager at insurance company

“We don’t play golf. That’s why,” Li-Ming said to explain why he felt alienated in the workplace. As a department manager for a large technology corporation, Li-Ming seems to have everything: high levels of education, income, and professional status. Nevertheless, Li-Ming is frustrated with his work situation because of his Asian American cultural background. Unable to relate to his white bosses and co-workers, Li-Ming feels that he has lost many opportunities to climb the corporate ladder. In his interpretation, a major obstacle is the fact that he does not play golf, a hobby he believes important in the mainstream white lifestyle. From Li-Ming’s perspective, a relational fence built along racial lines separates him from his white colleagues. Like the glass ceiling that hinders minorities’ socioeconomic achievements, racialized relational fences segregate Taiwanese American professionals from the majority white culture and assign them a status of “others” in the white-collar workplace.

Li-Ming is not alone. Many Taiwanese Americans recognize prominent cultural differences between them and their white co-workers, which they consider major obstacles for career enhancement. Interestingly, men and women use different strategies to negotiate their “othered”
status as Asian Americans. As revealed in the two interview excerpts at the beginning of this article, men tend to accept their designated positions in the racial hierarchy and normalize inequality, whereas women challenge unfair treatment and pursue equality. To understand these gendered experiences, I examine how Taiwanese American professionals interpret their glass-ceiling experiences in the white-collar workplace and discuss how gender shapes individual reactions.

Racial minorities are both visible and invisible in predominantly white institutions. They are visible, and sometimes hypervisible, because they are perceived as unique others. Nevertheless, minority groups commonly experience social invisibility because they tend to feel marginalized and displaced in their struggles to assimilate to the majority norms and values (McDonald and Wingfield 2009). While people of color prevalently experience feelings of alienation and unfairness, their stories are largely untold. In particular, Asian Americans’ model-minority image often conceals their inner struggles with racial inequality. In fact, their untold experiences are a very harmful form of invisibility (Chou and Feagin 2010).

While many sociological studies have discussed racial stratification in the labor market and its structural causes, few scholars examine Asian Americans’ subjective experiences of the glass ceiling. Moreover, previous focus on the structural aspects of the glass ceiling misses much of its relevance to understanding real-life implications from social actors’ standpoints. As Harris (2006) contends, inequality is a major theme in sociology; however, the meaning of inequality and the process of its social construction has not yet gained sufficient scholarly attention. Inequality is not always an obvious, objective fact, as it is also a socially constructed interpretation (Berard 2006; Harris 2004).

Despite their importance, accounts of inequality are largely under-researched, and little theoretical knowledge exists concerning how perceptions of inequality are shaped (Cech and Blair-Loy 2010). Acker (2009) points out this omission in her study of organizational hierarchy. She argues that informal interactions and practices are important mechanisms that reinforce systematic inequalities in the workplace. Specifically, she notes that they often hinder efforts to attain greater equality and, thus, increase the invisibility of hierarchies. Unfortunately, few studies document this dimension of workplace inequality (Acker 2009; Vallas 2003). Moreover, few studies examine intersectional effects (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.) on individuals’ experiences of inequality.

To fill these gaps, this article explores Taiwanese American professionals’ accounts on the glass ceiling. The findings reveal diverse interpretations of racial inequality and social processes involved in creating these interpretations to understand the meaning of inequality. With the objective of shedding light on the contexts and manifestations of inequality at the micro-level of social life, this article addresses the following questions: (1) How is the glass ceiling experienced, interpreted, and coped with in the white-collar workplace? and (2) Do men and women experience the glass ceiling differently? If so, how?

Based on 40 in-depth interviews with Taiwanese American professionals, this article aims to illuminate subjective experiences and interpretations of the glass ceiling, strategies used to negotiate the meaning of the glass ceiling, and gender differences in the glass-ceiling experience. This study contributes to the glass-ceiling literature in three significant ways: (1) it illuminates the micro-level aspect of structural inequality, (2) it provides an additional case study of Asian Americans who have been largely neglected in previous research, and (3) it examines the intersectional effects on individual experiences.
The glass ceiling refers to “the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements” (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995a:4). Empirical studies on the glass ceiling examine race, ethnicity, and gender as major social variables and the extent of such inequalities to discuss various barriers that block upward-mobility opportunities for female or non-white employees in work organizations (see Budig 2002; Eriksson-Zetterqust and Styhre 2008; Tang 1997; U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995b).

Empirical studies often discuss two facets of the glass ceiling phenomenon: scope of the glass ceiling and its causes. For instance, the existence of the glass ceiling is evidenced by a group’s under-representation in management positions, lack of promotion opportunities, salary discrepancies among various groups, and gender and racial segregation (see Adkins 1995; Kim and Sakamoto 2008; National Science Foundation 2000; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). In contrast, the causes of the glass ceiling are attributed to factors such as stereotypes, institutional racism and sexism, and social networks (see Cech and Blair-Loy 2010; Feagin 2006; Jeanquart-Barone and Sekaran 1996; Kvande and Rasmussen 1994; McDonald and Wingfield 2009; Pierce 2002; Royster 2003; Wingfield 2010).

In *Durable Inequality*, Tilly (1998) argues that unequal pairings of categories (e.g., white/black, male/female, citizen/foreigner) are often deeply built into the practices of organizations; inequality is indeed a relational matter. A major mechanism for creating such a durable inequality, *opportunity hoarding*, may explain social groups’ unequal access to valuable capitals (e.g., network opportunities and cultural resources) for career enhancement (Tilly:153). In a study of tokenism in the predominantly white-male leveraged buyout industry, Turco (2010) discovers that although African American men and white women are both minorities in the industry, the former are more advantaged because they possess the cultural resources that the industry values, such as interest in sports and aggrandized self-expression. White women’s disadvantage is also deepened by cultural perceptions of motherhood, which contradicts the ideal worker image. Similarly, several studies, such as Blair-Loy’s (2003) study of women executives, Pierce’s (1995) study of law firms, and Fletcher’s (1999) study of women design engineers, demonstrate how cultural beliefs about femininity, motherhood, and womanhood situate women in a disadvantaged position in various occupations.

For Asian Americans specifically, several studies report that, despite their higher levels of education, Asian Americans overall receive fewer socioeconomic rewards than their white counterparts (Hirschman and Wong 1986; Hsia 1988; Kim and Mar 2007; Kim and Sakamoto 2008; Woo 2000). However, nativity largely influences Asian Americans’ earnings disadvantage. Native-born Asian Americans and Asian immigrants who complete their education in the United States do not earn significantly less than U.S.-born whites. In other words, place of education plays an influential role on the overall lower earnings of Asian Americans compared to whites with the same level of education (Zeng and Xie 2004). Sakamoto and colleagues also argue that labor market discrimination against Asian Americans has largely declined in the post-Civil Rights era. In general, native-born Asian Americans have successfully assimilated into the contemporary society of the United States; however, they also face escalating class inequalities in the twenty-first century (Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009).
Moreover, although Asian Americans are overrepresented in the science, engineering, and technology (SET) industry, they are less likely than other racial groups to hold management or administration positions. Asian Americans are particularly underrepresented in high-level corporate positions; they comprise only 0.4 percent of the boards of Fortune 1000 companies (National Science Foundation 2000). In general, Asian Americans in management positions tend to have fewer supervisees than managers from other racial groups. According to the National Science Foundation, Asian American managers in the SET industry supervise fewer subordinates than their white and black counterparts. In a study of college-educated, native-born Asians, Takei and Sakamoto (2008) report that Asian American men in management positions supervise 14 percent fewer employees than white men in management. This managerial hierarchy reflects racial disadvantages against Asian Americans in the contemporary labor force (Sakamoto et al. 2009).

Hirschman and Wong (1981) use the term middlemen minorities to describe the unique position in which Asian immigrants and Asian Americans are situated under the glass ceiling. They argue that Asian Americans’ high education levels allow them to occupy certain “occupational niches” that are non-competitive with the dominant group. Nevertheless, a glass ceiling blocks Asian Americans’ enhancement into positions of institutional power (Hirschman and Wong:496). Kim (1999) uses the concept racial triangulation to theorize Asian Americans’ unique location in relation to both whites and blacks in the field of racial positions. She argues that Asian Americans are racialized by both valorization and ostracism. Moreover, Woo (2000) discusses several factors that serve as barriers to Asian Americans’ upward mobility, such as Asian stereotypes, lack of critical informal networks, absence of management training and mentoring, and biased performance appraisals. She contends that the structural and cultural barriers that Asian Americans face in the workplace are largely subtle, but fairly pervasive (Woo: 49).

In addition to the glass ceiling, scholars discuss how glass walls constrain women’s access to certain types of jobs that otherwise would place them in core positions to rise above the glass ceiling and reach upper management in corporate America (see Comer and Drollinger 1997; Mattis 2004; Morrison, White and Van Veslsor 1992; Townsend 1996) and public-sector jobs (see Kerr, Miller, and Reid 2002; Reid, Kerr, and Miller 2000, 2003). In this line of research, the glass wall is defined as an invisible barrier that restricts women’s entrance into certain types of jobs that would enable them to break through the glass ceiling. For instance, women are concentrated in support staff functions (e.g., human resources and legal affairs) that are outside of the typical career paths to senior leadership (e.g., sales and marketing functions and manufacturing). As a result, few women occupy these upper management positions (Townsend 1996). While most scholars perceive glass walls as one cause of glass ceilings, Morrison and colleagues (1992) consider them another barrier for women after overcoming the initial glass ceiling. Although many researchers suggest that these glass walls apply to racial minorities as well, few studies include non-white populations. With a few exceptions, black men and women are largely neglected in these studies (see Bell and Nkomo 2001 for an exception), and Asian American men and women remain absent in scholarly discussion.

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1 Although the term glass walls is used in these studies, the factors overlap with what has been discussed in the glass-ceiling literature.
The glass-ceiling phenomenon speaks to a core concern in sociology regarding social inequality; its importance is certainly evident. Although studies on the glass ceiling and glass walls underscore unequal opportunities for women and racial minorities, several gaps remain in the literature. First, empirical studies continue to focus on structural factors (e.g., occupational segregations, salary discrepancies, and representations in management) and subjective experiences remain under-researched. The following questions are pertinent to addressing this gap in the literature: Are individuals aware of the glass ceiling? If they are, how do they interpret the causes of their glass ceiling? If not, why not? What other career barriers exist? Because objective structural positions do not always match subjective awareness of such positions, how individuals experience and perceive the glass ceiling could be very different from how scholars define and measure this phenomenon. Therefore, it is important to understand individual subjectivities in the context of glass ceilings.

Second, the literature includes far more studies of gendered glass ceilings than of ethnic minorities and, particularly, few studies exist on Asian Americans. Empirical studies of racial and ethnic minorities are in great need to enrich scholarly understanding of social inequality in the workplace. Third, gender and racial populations tend to be treated as homogenous groups, and scholars rarely examine intersectionality to explore how individual experiences differ by varied intersectional social locations (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, disability, etc.).

To fill these gaps, I analyze how Taiwanese American professionals, both men and women, perceive their workplace experiences as a visible racial minority. I focus on how subjects identify and interpret major barriers to their career enhancement, particularly regarding race-related issues. I also investigate gender differences in individuals’ interpretations. In other words, the objective of this paper is not to prove whether the glass ceiling exists or to explain its causes; rather, the aim is to examine how Taiwanese American professionals perceive the glass ceiling and explore how men and women discuss their racialized experiences in the workplace.

By examining subjective experiences of the glass ceiling, this article illuminates the contexts, meanings, and manifestations of inequality in the white-collar workplace. This approach provides a complement to structural analyses of the glass ceiling phenomenon, which is also an objective that symbolic interactionist scholars strive to accomplish. In recent years, interactionist scholars have illustrated how empirical studies of micro-level social life can enhance our understanding of the larger social structure, especially inequality (see Anderson and Snow 2001; Berard 2006; Chang 2000; R. Collins 2000; Harris 2001, 2004, 2006; Schippers 2008; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Ulmer 2003). This study continues the efforts to examine how individuals experience racial inequality in micro-level interactions.

Moreover, this case study provides an empirical examination of Asian Americans, who have been largely neglected in the literature. The study also takes an intersectional approach to investigate gender differences in Taiwanese Americans’ experiences of the glass ceiling, thereby highlighting the heterogeneity of the studied group. As numerous scholars argue, it is important to underline how the intertwined systems of gender, race, class, and sexuality generate multifaceted patterns of inequality in sociological research (see P. H. Collins 1999, 2000; Glenn 1999, 2002; McCall 2005; Weber 2010). This article illustrates how gender intersects with race to shape variations of Taiwanese American professionals’ work experiences in their middle-class lives. The findings enhance scholarly understanding of the complexity of inequality production and perceptions in the white-collar workplace.
TAIWANESE AMERICANS

Taiwanese Americans, an ethnic-Chinese group comprised of post-1965 immigrants from Taiwan and their offspring, are part of the so-called “New Americans,” one of the emerging ethnic groups in the contemporary immigrant United States. Although sharing a Confucian tradition, the Taiwanese differ significantly from Chinese Americans in terms of socioeconomic and population characteristics (Holdaway 2007; Tseng 1995). The majority of Taiwanese Americans have high education, high incomes, professional jobs, and live in suburbs that are typically white areas (Chen 1992; Ng 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Most notably, both men and women share a high education and professional profile (Gu 2006). Over half of the population reside in California. The rest are scattered throughout the United States, especially in major metropolitan areas such as Flushing, New York; Houston, Texas; Seattle, Washington; and Chicago, Illinois (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000, 2010).

Culturally, Taiwanese Americans are similar to other Asian Americans who are under the influence of Confucianism, although variations exist among different ethnic-Asian traditions and within each ethnic community (Holdaway 2007). For instance, values of education, filial piety, and hard work are highly regarded in Taiwanese culture, and gender, age, and generation construct authority hierarchies in social relations (Gu and Gallin 2004). As for work ethics, Confucian culture places high values on diligence, harmony, group orientation, and personal relations (Yeh and Xu 2010).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND DATA

In my study of Taiwanese Americans (Gu 2006), the glass ceiling is the major source of distress for professionals. Professionals commonly reported their lack of promotion opportunities, which they sometimes interpreted as racial discrimination. Informants described details of the instances, causes, subsequent emotions, and coping strategies relevant to their glass-ceiling experiences. These interpretations provide rich narratives that illuminate the subjective experiences of the glass ceiling in the white-collar workplace. The data presented in this article are derived from this study. Below, I explain the research methods used in this study and demographic composition of the sample.

In my original study, I conducted 54 in-depth interviews with Taiwanese Americans in the Chicago metropolitan area in 2001 to investigate social and psychological adaptation in the family and work domains. Subjects were recruited by multiple methods, including personal networks, snowball sampling, and through various ethnic-Chinese community organizations and religious groups. I used a semi-structured interview schedule to explore sources of distress in three major areas: immigration decisions, social relations in the family, and social relations in the workplace. Data presented in this article focus on work relations. I asked the subjects whether they had experienced unfair treatment because of their race, whether they had encountered sexist treatment, and, if so, how they felt about these experiences. I also asked the subjects to describe their

\[\text{In this study, distress is defined in a broad sense to refer to a variety of negative emotions, such as feelings of frustration, unhappiness, and stress (see Gu 2006 for an elaborated discussion on this concept).}\]
interactions with co-workers. In other words, subjects were asked to describe both their overall experiences in the white-collar workplace and particular instances associated with their race and gender in which they felt uncomfortable or discriminated against. Finally, they were asked to describe their feelings and coping mechanisms during these experiences. This paper focuses on perceived racial inequality and subjective interpretations of racial relations in the workplace.

All interview questions were open-ended, and I often asked follow-up questions to encourage detailed descriptions and in-depth interpretations. Interviews ranged from one to four hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview data were analysed using a semi-inductive method to examine narrative patterns. Three subthemes emerged when coding the data: experiences of racial inequality, co-worker relationships, and work-related distress. Under each subtheme, I compared subjects’ demographic information to examine differences resulting from individuals’ structural positions (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity of origin, migration cohort, generation, etc.). In other words, findings reported in this article, including gender differences, are the major patterns that surfaced from the data analysis; however, they by no means represent all cases in the sample. In addition to gender, differences in interpretation by generation, class, and ethnicity of origin were found and discussed elsewhere (see Gu 2006).

In this study, 40 of 54 participants were white-collar professionals. Their interviews are the major data upon which this article is based. The 40 subjects included 22 men and 18 women ranging in age from 25 to 62 years and ranging in marital status and occupation; 26 were first-generation immigrants, and 14 were second-generation Taiwanese (see Appendix). All first-generation subjects were U.S. citizens and had lived in the United States for at least 22 years at the time of the interviews. All subjects held at least a bachelor’s degree; 12 had PhDs, and 17 had master’s degrees. All subjects’ highest degrees were completed in the United States, making them a group of U.S.-trained professionals. Most worked in large, white-owned corporations in computer programming, technology, engineering, or business; others worked in academic, research, and medical settings. At the time of the interviews, first-generation subjects had worked in white-collar professions for at least 15 years. The work experiences of second-generation subjects ranged from 3 to 9 years. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Please note that the data and discussions presented in this article are constrained by the purpose of the original study and the sample selection process. First, subjects were recruited largely through ethnic organizations. This approach may have missed potential subjects who did not participate in the ethnic community and whose racial identities might be less salient than those of subjects included in the sample. Second, Chicago’s Taiwanese Americans may experience different race relations from those in California, which has a larger Asian American population, and their experiences may differ from those of other Asian American professionals in the same region. The sample also included more first-generation than second-generation immigrants. Thus, the characteristics of this sample may restrain my findings. Like many other qualitative studies, generalizability is by no means the purpose of this article.

RACE AND OTHERNESS IN THE WHITE-COLLAR WORKPLACE

As visible racial minorities, Taiwanese Americans inevitably encounter race-related issues in everyday life, including in the workplace. Among the 40 professional participants, 23 reported that they had encountered unfair treatment in the workplace because of their race, and 13 had
witnessed instances of racial discrimination against other Asians but had not experienced it themselves. Lack of promotions, discounted opinions, low wages, and long working hours were examples used to describe these experiences, among which lack of promotions was the predominant explanation of racial inequality. In sum, the majority of white-collar subjects (36 of 40) testified that race was the major cause of the glass ceiling they faced in the workplace.

In addition to race-related unfair treatment, 35 of 40 subjects expressed considerable frustration with being excluded from core social circles. All 40 subjects, including those who were not frustrated, identified significant cultural differences between Taiwanese Americans and whites. Subjects also considered these differences as the major barrier in establishing close relationships with their white colleagues and superiors, which indirectly affected their career advancement.

In other words, subjects drew heavily on cultural differences to explain the effects of race relations on their career enhancement. From their perspectives, ethnic cultures shaped fundamental differences between Taiwanese Americans and whites.

The most mentioned differences included self-promotion and lifestyle. For instance, the subjects believed that they accomplished significantly more than what they told others, whereas their white colleagues advertised more than they had actually achieved. Additionally, informants disliked going to nightclubs, whereas their white colleagues often spent time together having drinks. Subjects also did not pay much attention to politics, sports, and pop culture, whereas their white colleagues talked about these topics all the time. From the subjects’ viewpoints, these essential differences drew a social boundary between the two groups and became a major obstacle to their career enhancement.

Below, I synthesize subjects’ interpretations of the glass ceiling.

Categorizing Differences

The subjects unanimously attributed the glass ceiling, or racial inequality, to their deviating from the majority white culture, particularly concerning differences in self-promotion and lifestyle. In the interviews, subjects frequently compared Taiwanese and white cultures when interpreting their racialized experiences. As I argue elsewhere, although ethnic cultures are by no means lists of given traits and fixed qualities, salient cultural characteristics associated with the two ethnic groups may merge in the psychological schema as two polar opposites (Gu 2010). For example, humility is highly valued in Taiwanese tradition, while American culture values self-assertiveness. Although not all Taiwanese are humble and not all Americans are aggressive in terms of self-promotion, Taiwanese immigrants often reported the values of modesty and assertiveness as major contrasts between Taiwanese and white cultures.

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3 The five informants who were not frustrated by the glass ceiling acknowledged that they lacked good social relations with white colleagues, which they identified as key for promotions. They were not distressed by this disadvantage, and they made statements such as, “I don’t want to be a manager, because I know my limitations,” “We’re Asian anyway; we cannot compete with whites, so there’s no need to feel frustrated,” and “My [white] boss has been very supportive, so I’m lucky [to be a manager]. Other Asians are not as lucky though.” One of these informants tried to fight the perceived unfair treatment but failed. She quit her job to demonstrate her feelings of injustice.

4 In the interviews, subjects used the terms, “Taiwanese,” “Chinese,” and “Asian,” interchangeably when describing their culture of origin. They also used “white,” “Caucasian,” and “American” in a similar way when referring to the mainstream (white) American culture.

5 Similar patterns may also be found when people compare themselves to out-group members (e.g., Irish vs. French; New Yorkers vs. Midwesterners).
This tendency was evident in subjects’ narratives when describing major differences between themselves and whites. For instance, many informants complained that they did not receive the promotions they felt they deserved, despite their outstanding professional performance, because they did not boast about themselves. They attributed this shortcoming to the Taiwanese culture in which they were raised, a culture that values humility and self-reservation. According to subjects in this study, this cultural difference became a major barrier to their promotion opportunities in the white-collar workplace. Ren-Jer, a 42-year-old manager for a large pharmaceutical company, said:

America is a society that views self-expression highly. If you are not vocal enough in telling others what you think and what you have done, nobody will know how good you are. But I’m not good at it [telling people about my accomplishments]. It was not something that I learned growing up in our culture.

Chia-Lung, a 45-year-old male engineer who worked for an IT company, similarly maintained:

In American culture, if you don’t speak up, nobody will help you. We Taiwanese are more conservative [when expressing ourselves]. We don’t usually say more than what we can prove . . . We don’t advertise ourselves, but promoting yourself is encouraged in American society. Therefore, this cultural difference gives us a disadvantage when it comes to receiving promotions.

The Taiwanese cultural tradition not only values humility highly; it also condemns crafty language in self-expression. In Confucius: The Analects, Tzu-kung says, “The Master gets it through being cordial, well-behaved, respectful, frugal and deferential” (Lau 1992: 5). Additionally, Confucius teaches students that “It is rare, indeed, for a man with cunning words and an ingratiating countenance to be benevolent” (Lau: 3). Several old sayings in Taiwanese society, such as “Silence is Gold” and “Empty vessels make the most sound,” reinforce these values. For first-generation Taiwanese Americans who grew up in such a societal culture, realizing the disadvantages that their cultural heritage brings to their work lives may create feelings of frustration and injustice.

Many subjects described how their work characteristics were shaped by their culture of origin. For instance, they reported that they worked hard but rarely told colleagues about their merits, did not ask for promotions, and did not voice their ideas until others had solicited their opinions. In other words, the majority harbored the belief that as long as one works hard, others will recognize and praise his or her accomplishments. However, this belief often contradicted what happened in reality. “They [whites] never found out my worth,” said Kuan-Chin, a 47-year-old male engineer at an IT company. “I was supposed to be in charge of that project, because I was the most qualified and experienced, but they chose a white. I was very unhappy about that.”

Both men and women experienced such frustrations. Wan-Jen, a 52-year-old female manager for an insurance company, spoke about how this cultural difference can be a career barrier:

We Taiwanese do not dare to ask for what we want. We tend to assume they should know [but] nobody will promote you if you don’t ask. But we don’t have that kind of training, so we don’t really know how to do it. It took a very long time for me to learn how to speak for myself. We don’t have a role

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6 The cultural aphorism, “Empty vessels make the most sound,” means when a person knows little, he or she needs to brag with crafty words to cover up his or her ignorance. In contrast, a person who is full of knowledge is usually quiet and reserved.
model at work from whom we can learn. I had to observe how my white colleagues did [promoting themselves and asking for promotions] in order to become more assertive of myself. Even today, I still have to prepare myself when I plan to ask for a promotion. It doesn’t come naturally.

Knowing the challenges of Asian Americans abandoning their “cultural baggage” of humility (termed by Wan-Jen), Wan-Jen founded a non-profit organization to help fellow immigrants and their children learn how to “act like Americans” in order to succeed in corporate America. In particular, Wan-Jen emphasized the importance of outspokenness, aggressiveness, and straightforwardness. She labelled these characteristics “Americaness” and considered them the opposite of her Taiwanese cultural heritage. Wan-Jen also claimed that her promotion to manager was a testimony of her conversion to American culture.

Similarly, many informants viewed their ethnic culture as the primary barrier to career enhancement, a situation they sometimes interpreted as a consequence of racial discrimination. So-called Taiwanese characteristics, such as passiveness and self-reservation, are considered damaging to one’s career, especially in the American corporate culture, which values aggressiveness. Moreover, a lack of outspokenness not only affects self-expression but also leads to obstacles in social interactions. As a result, barriers to mutual understanding among different ethnic groups often develop. Interestingly, although men and women in this study were similar in their experiences and interpretations, only female subjects reported their efforts to adopt some aspects of white culture to transgress such barriers, an aspect which I discuss later.

Subjects also reported lifestyle and communication styles as disadvantages for career enhancement. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, Li-Ming, a scientist and manager for an IT company, discussed his not playing golf as a career limitation. Similarly, Hung-Wei, a 47-year-old computer programmer in the IT industry, elaborated on this perspective:

Work performance involves interpersonal skills and many other aspects, such as family relations and personal relationships. For example, I don’t play and am not interested in playing golf, but my white colleagues love golf. So, it’s very difficult for me to establish personal connections. Our cultures are essentially different.

In many subjects’ views, playing golf, watching sports, and commenting on politics are important for establishing personal relationships with whites; however, these areas are unfamiliar to them. Lifestyle differences prevent them from assimilating into the majority culture. Wei-Kun, a 54-year-old male engineer at a construction firm, added:

We don’t understand each other. Americans [whites] don’t understand us [Taiwanese Americans], nor do we understand them. Besides working together, you have to socialize in order to understand their culture, so that you can become one of them. Speaking their language [English] doesn’t mean that you can fit into their society. It’s not enough if you don’t understand their culture. You will not be able to become part of this society, and people will not consider you as one of them. Under this circumstance, they will not invite you to social occasions . . . . It’s not that we can’t compete with them in terms of professional ability. No, it’s the cultural differences that separate us from them.

Sherry, a 29-year-old elementary school teacher, acknowledged that her principal (a white man) often passed her over for professional enrichment opportunities and teaching awards. She also felt frustrated that her efforts and accomplishments were not recognized as easily as those of her white colleagues because she did not engage in enough self-promotion when interacting with her principal. Hesitant to attribute this to her race, Sherry stated:
I don’t think they tried to be unfair, but I always found it hard to communicate with co-workers or managers. Asians are taught to be very indirect, but Americans [whites] are taught to be very direct. I’m the one that doesn’t communicate like them, and they’re usually like, ones that are managers, ones that are in authority. So, I’m the one that has to learn how to do it their way.

Based on these interviews, cultural differences, as seen along racial lines, construct a social boundary and create invisible obstacles that hinder subjects’ efforts to establish personal connections with their white colleagues. Many informants attribute their lack of promotion to their distant relationships with white colleagues as a result of their differences from “the norm.”

Reinforcing Boundaries

In addition to cultural differences, the subjects added their observations of how they were perceived by white colleagues as evidence of racial inequality. Chris, a 30-year-old finance analyst at an insurance company, insisted that his co-workers made assumptions about him and treated him according to their beliefs based on Asian stereotypes. He noted, “People have assumptions of what an Asian is and what an Asian does. They already have a preconception that you’re quiet and submissive and that you’re not a leadership type.” Through workplace interactions, Chris sensed what his co-workers thought of him—an Asian. This sense reinforced the boundary of which he was already aware. Kent, a 25-year-old business consultant at a financial consulting firm, was frustrated by the difficulties in his attempts to establish close relationships with his white co-workers. Born and raised in a predominantly white area in suburban Chicago, Kent had encountered obstacles in making friends with non-Asians since he was young: “They [whites] think I’m a nerd and that I don’t know how to have fun.” While both generations of Taiwanese Americans shared this sentiment, nuances existed in their interpretations of major causes for this perception. Second-generation subjects drew heavily on the racial stereotypes others held about them, whereas first-generation subjects acknowledged “actual” cultural differences between themselves and whites. It is possible that, because second-generation subjects are culturally similar to whites, they use race, rather than culture, in their interpretations.

Finding little commonality with whites, many Taiwanese American professionals socialize only with Asian co-workers, thereby reinforcing racial boundaries and social segregation. In other words, symbolic boundaries derived from cultural differences result in racially segregated social circles among co-workers. Wen-Ling, a 50-year-old female accountant for an airline company, described it this way:

We Taiwanese [Americans] still get together with Taiwanese [and other Asians], mostly, but others are all the same. Whites with whites, and blacks with blacks. Each ethnic group has its own circle. It’s very common, and it’s very natural.

Like Wen-Ling, many subjects considered racial segregation a natural result of cultural diversity. For instance, according to Chun-Hung, a 62-year-old retired computer programmer, “You can communicate much more easily and deeply when talking to Taiwanese, Chinese, or other Asians. With whites, I often don’t know what to say. It’s difficult to express yourself to them.” Min-Feng, a 50-year-old teller who worked at a white-owned bank, concurred:

They [Asian co-workers] understand you better because you share the same culture. For example, one time I brought some marinated chicken feet to our company. My white co-workers were scared
to death when they saw that . . . They thought I was weird [smile], but my Chinese colleagues were very happy to share those chicken claws with me, and they really enjoyed it.

In other words, the boundary between us (Taiwanese or Asians in general) and them (whites) in the workplace was evident in the subjects’ view. Min-Hui, 39-year-old scientist, said:

At work, you have some social occasions. Like, your manager . . . you can feel your manager has his own people. Like, only one or two of your co-workers are close to your boss. And, it’d never be us [Taiwanese or other Asians]. Eventually, we have different backgrounds. It’s impossible for us [Taiwanese] to fit into their circle very well, but the good thing is that . . . in our company, we Taiwanese have our own circle of friends . . . we are closer to each other [other Asians] at work, compared with all co-workers in our company. Although the manager would not behave very obviously that he is closer to whites than Asians, but you’d acknowledge this situation exists. So, you wouldn’t feel too bad if someone [a white] gets promoted but you don’t. You’d feel okay, because you’re Asian anyway.

Seeing the racially segregated social relations at work, subjects attempted to normalize their situations, despite their deep feelings of alienation. In their views, irreconcilable differences distanced them from core social circles. In contrast, subjects found congenial similarities with their Asian colleagues, and formed alliances on the other side of the relational fence. The concepts of “we” vs. “they” evolved from subjects’ racialized experiences in the workplace. Through their Asian alliances, subjects gained a sense of solidarity; they also received comforting support from their Asian unions, which helped ease the distress concerning their lack of promotion opportunities.

Negotiating Otherness: Gendered Strategies

Cultural differences, perceived Asian stereotypes, and segregated social relations mark Taiwanese American professionals’ racialized experiences in the workplace, thereby designating them as “the other,” regardless of their education and professional training. This “othered” experience engenders tremendous feelings of frustration, unhappiness, alienation, isolation, and unfairness (see Gu 2006). Interestingly, Taiwanese American men and women rely on different strategies to cope with their marginalization. For instance, men tend to consider their disadvantaged status and perceived unfair treatment as built into American society. They also tend to normalize race-related problems and unequal opportunities they encounter at work, frequently explaining, “It is normal to be discriminated [against]” or it is “understandable because we are not one of them.” Shi-Wei, a 60-year-old engineer at an IT company, stated, “Since race-related problems are inevitable, there’s no need to feel too bad about it.” Psychologically, this perspective may work as a coping mechanism. Nevertheless, it also justifies the glass ceiling and encourages acceptance of and acquiescence to racial inequality. As Shi-Wei explained:

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7 Among the 14 informants who socialized only with Asians in the workplace, nine reported distress. Among the 26 respondents who socialized with whites, 14 reported distress.
8 Here I do not intend to discuss gender and sexism in the white-collar workplace. Rather, I illustrate heterogeneity in subjects’ responses to their glass-ceiling experiences.
It’s very natural that whites don’t promote Asians. If we [Asians] were the boss, we would promote Asians first, too. It’s human nature. It’s very easy to feel frustrated under such a social structure. Your ambition would be worn out easily . . . . If I were white, I would have a louder voice at work.

While such a response is fairly consistent across generations and ages, a slight difference exists between the two generations’ narratives: First-generation subjects used race and ethnic culture as the sole explanation, while second-generation subjects often incorporated race and gender (e.g., “we Asian men”) in their interpretations. In addition, subjects who had been in the workplace longer (10 years or more) appeared less stressed than their less experienced counterparts who showed more emotions in the interviews when discussing racial inequality.

In contrast to their male counterparts, women often explored the nature of the problems they encountered at work, sought possible solutions, and took actions to resolve these problems. Many female subjects expressed a need to stand up for themselves, while this sentiment was rare among male subjects. Additionally, many female subjects, including those positioned at the lower end of the corporate ladder, described instances in which they fought for their rights when handling race-related issues.

Mei-Li, a clerk for an importing company, confronted her boss directly about being mistreated. Chia-Yin, director for a non-profit organization, and Pei-Yi, a scientist at a pharmaceutical company, asserted their authority as managers when challenged by white colleagues. Ming-Feng, a bank teller, spoke up when her salary was unreasonably reduced. Wan-Jen, a manager for an insurance company, asked for the promotion she thought she deserved. Ying-Ying, a technician for the pharmacy department of a teaching hospital, sought assistance from the union to solve problems of unfair treatment and racial conflicts in the workplace. Although disadvantaged by both their minority status and gender, women subjects across occupations and positions appeared more confrontational than their male counterparts in responding to mistreatment. The following interview excerpt from Ming-Feng exemplifies this common characteristic among female subjects:

How can you [my white boss] just lower my salary without a good reason? I am an Asian woman, but it doesn’t mean that I would accept whatever you say or however you treat me. You cannot do that to me! So, I went to my boss and asked that he change my salary back, and he did [smile with satisfaction]!

Wan-Jen, a 52-year-old female manager at an insurance company said, “It’s difficult for them to hear Asian women say ‘No.’” Pei-Yi, a female manager for a large pharmaceutical firm also contended, “I’m really tough at work, even though I’m Asian and a woman.” Popular images of Asian women as passive, subservient, quiet, and docile, seem to be subverted in the case of these Taiwanese American women. As Ya-Chi, a college professor, described, “Whites expect Asian women to be obedient and passive, but I’m not.”

Aware of Asian stereotypes, female subjects showed determination to challenge co-workers’ assumptions. This tendency was particularly evident and consistent among first-generation women. In contrast, second-generation women often showed reservation and caution when explaining racial inequality and their disadvantages as Asian women at work. Several remarked that factors other than race and gender, such as personality and work environment, might also play a role. There women often added that they could not be completely sure whether race was the key factor after describing instances of race-related unfair treatment.
In comparison, women subjects report less distress than men about the glass ceiling. They also express a greater degree of satisfaction from work and are more likely to defend themselves when confronting unfair treatment. Unlike men, who tend to normalize and accept racial inequality, females are more confrontational. For most women, race is an issue rather than an obstacle. In other words, although both genders are distressed by racial problems, men tend to accept racial inequality, while women challenge it. As a result, men continue to feel frustrated even when they try to normalize their situations, while women become content after the problem is solved.

Explaining Gendered Experiences

Why do men and women respond to perceived unfair treatment so differently? First, men and women use very different cognitive frameworks in their interpretations. Men say, “We are Asian, so it’s normal that we don’t get promoted.” In contrast, women explain, “People think Asian women are submissive, but I’m not. I am American and here’s America; you can’t treat me unfairly.” These gendered logics emerged repeatedly in the interviews. In social psychology, status construction theory argues that shared cultural beliefs of status (e.g., gender, race, social class, age, occupation, etc.) frame individuals’ perceptions, behaviors, and social interactions. When people from different categorical groups interact with each other, hierarchies of respect and influence develop. Consequently, social differences often become status distinctions in relational contexts, which, in turn, reproduce and potentially modify structural inequalities (see Ridgeway 1991, 2006; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz 2013).

Status construction theory is useful in understanding gender differences in the case of Taiwanese American professionals. Although men and women are aware of their status as Asian Americans in relation to their white co-workers, the Asian component is salient in men’s cognitions. Conversely, the American element is significant in women’s psychological frameworks when comprehending their relational context in the workplace. Men tend to accept “their place,” as designated by this status distinction, whereas women challenge the hierarchical status shaped by their race and gender. This gendered response also suggests that status beliefs of race do not operate in a social vacuum; rather, they are influenced by intersectional factors. Specifically, race intersects with gender and citizenship in shaping individuals’ reactions to racial inequality in the white-collar workplace. In their intersectional positions, women and men form different status beliefs and take actions based on the salience of their social identities.

Previous researchers observe that immigrant women from patriarchal societies gain a greater sense of independence, emancipation, and equality in Western societies, where individual autonomy and women’s rights are valued more so than in their societies of origin (Ho 2008; Kibria 1993; Lim 1997; Pessar 1984). Similarly, the exposure of Taiwanese immigrant women to Western egalitarian ideologies facilitates their senses of self-worth and independence in American society. This newly gained autonomy is exhibited in the workplace (Gu 2006, 2010), and women’s confrontational approaches to work-related problems reflects this tendency.

Finally, female subjects’ work trajectories may influence how they perceive potential risks to challenge unfair treatment. Most first-generation female subjects worked in professions that differed from their college training because they migrated as dependents when their husbands decided to settle in the United States. Unprepared to work in the United States, many women chose in-demand jobs such as computer programming and accounting, rather than jobs in their...
areas of interest. As a result, many perceived their jobs in the United States as “a job that brings income” rather than “a career that fulfils ambition and self-worth,” as one subject in this study commented.

These women also changed jobs more frequently than their male counterparts, and they often retreated to the family when necessary. While many of these women chose to work outside of their homes because they did not find homemaking fulfilling, they continued to prioritize family over work. This context and exposure to Western egalitarian ideologies may shape women’s perceptions of employment and senses of justice. I asked Wen-Ting whether she worried about losing her job when she complained to her manager about racial discrimination. She responded:

If I lost my job because I stood up for what was right, so be it! I’d just find another job and move on. Changing jobs was never an issue for me. I had done all kinds of jobs, jobs that I had no background for and had to start from fresh. Besides, the company was a large IT firm. They can’t just fire people without good reasons. I knew I was right, so I didn’t worry about it. This is America. You cannot treat me unfairly!

In contrast, most men made comments such as “There’s no need to fight against discrimination because it’s part of American society” or “It would be a waste of your time [to argue over unfair treatment].” No male subject directly expressed his concerns about potentially losing his job had he pursued equality. When I asked about the potential risks for pursuing fairness at work, a few revealed their anxiety implicitly. For example, Jer-Wei, a 46-year-old engineer at a pharmaceutical company, admitted he considered the possibility of being fired if he complained about not receiving promotions: “Then, what should I do [if I lost my job]? I have a family to feed. Besides, it could jeopardize my career. I didn’t want to be seen as a trouble maker.” He also repeated a point he made earlier in the interview: “It is common that Asians are bypassed for promotion opportunities. There’s no need to be upset.” Similarly, Pei-Der, a 52-year old computer programmer, reported that he was overworked and underpaid at his first company. He tolerated the unfair treatment and maintained silence for years until he found a better job. He explained, “I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. I needed the job.”

Kuo-Hui, a 49-year-old computer programmer, was the only male subject who had ever been vocal about unfair treatment at work. Early in his career, Kuo-Hui complained to his manager about a work evaluation he had received. He was angry that his manager marked his foreign accent as poor job performance. He explained to his manager that he could not get rid of his accent because he was not a native speaker, but he did work hard and finished all assignments effectively. His manager dismissed him and continued to point out his foreign accent in performance evaluations year after year. Kuo-Hui explained,

After the confrontation, I gave up. There’s nothing I can do. My manager didn’t give a shit about what I said. I just had to accept it. It’s totally unfair. When they [whites] can’t say anything about your job performance, they pick things like this [accent] to push you down. But, on the bright side, I have a good paying job. I don’t want to lose it. So, I’ve learned to let it go.

Like other male subjects, Kuo-Hui explained it was very common that Asian Americans are discriminated against, so “it’s no big deal.”

In sum, although both Taiwanese American men and women acknowledge that significant relational barriers exist between them and their white colleagues, women do not perceive these barriers as mechanisms for the glass ceiling, nor do they experience racialized exclusion as
acutely as men. In contrast, many female subjects believed their non-white and non-male status was an advantage for receiving promotions, regardless of their double-marginalization, because corporations and institutes are required by law to have diverse representatives in management. In fact, female informants believed their race and gender status placed them in a smaller pool of competition when diversity was a factor for promotion. Unlike many of their male counterparts, who longed for high-level management positions and felt frustrated by the glass ceiling, women often expressed their contentment as mid-level managers. In other words, while men perceive racialized exclusion as the major factor of the glass ceiling, women attribute the primary mechanism for the glass ceiling to common institutional characteristics of American society.

Previous studies argue that Asian women are more deprived than Asian men because of their double disadvantage as non-male and non-White (Espiritu 1997; Man 2004; Shin and Chang 1988). Such double disadvantages lead to Asian women’s marginalized status in the labor force, which traps them in vulnerable positions. Patriarchal and racist ideologies consign Asian women to a secondary and inferior position in the capitalist wage-labor market. As a result, they experience the work world as both gendered and racialized individuals, who obtain fewer economic resources than their male counterparts across social classes (Chai 1987; Espiritu 1997; Hossfeld 1994; Mazumdar 1989; Rajzman and Semyonov 1997; Shin and Chang 1988; Yamanaka and McClelland 1994). Nevertheless, the findings of this study illustrate that Taiwanese American professional women’s double disadvantage in the labor force does not result in more reports of racial problems compared to their male counterparts. On the contrary, women are more content with their working environments, more likely to develop friendships with co-workers, and less likely to form social circles composed of only Asians.

Moreover, scholars argue that women of color show a dual consciousness, and perceive themselves in terms of both race and gender, while their male counterparts tend to see only race (see Bell 1990; Chow 1987; Denton 1990; Espiritu 1997; Glenn 2002; Lowe 1998). Overall, my subjects displayed a similar pattern; women always referred to both their race and gender, whereas men talked exclusively about race, even when I asked gender-specific questions. However, this case study of Taiwanese Americans highlights one more dimension, citizenship, in the social identities of people of color. Because most subjects were foreign-born, many (especially women) perceived their being American as an important identity when deciding what to do in discriminatory situations. This finding suggests that racialized experiences are influenced by other social variables, such as gender and citizenship. Therefore, future empirical studies should carefully examine the intersecting effects of race, gender, class, sexuality, and immigrant status.

DISCUSSION

The glass-ceiling experiences of Taiwanese Americans revealed in this study provide an important foundation for understanding subjectivities of racial inequality in the white-collar workplace. First, glass ceilings are experienced and interpreted as the result of racialized exclusion and cultural differences. In this study, subjects identify significant cultural differences between themselves and whites, which lead to unequal opportunities for the two groups. They also point out Asian stereotypes that their white co-workers hold, which reinforce their deviance from mainstream white culture.

Nevertheless, ethnic differences are by no means a neutral distinction between two groups in equal positions. As Balibar (2005) contends, race or ethnicity is not just a difference; it pushes to
otherness, which leads to exclusion. In other words, differences construct ethnic boundaries and reinforce racial hierarchies in the workplace, and both processes involve power and inequality. According to Morris (2007:411), “Racial designations are more than just intriguing products of social construction—they are driven by power relations and result in very real patterns of inequality.” Schippers (2008) also observes that structural inequality produced by race can extend to relational power in the workplace, and doing difference can become doing power. These arguments echo Tilly’s theory concerning how unequal pairings of categories construct inequality in organizations, which is essentially a relational power issue (Tilly 1998). While glass ceilings may restrain Taiwanese Americans’ socio-economic achievements, racialized exclusion hinders their social relations with those in power.

Furthermore, sociologists treat both race and ethnicity as social constructions that are culturally defined categories (Morris 2007; Nagel 1994). Conceptually, races are groups generally defined based on physical characteristics; they are historical products and are often contested. In contrast, ethnicity refers to a group’s imagined shared culture, geographic origin, and history (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Ethnicity and race may accompany each other or stand alone as a basis for inequality (Acker 2006). Together or separately, they also shape collective and individual identities. In other words, race and ethnicity refer to discrete but often overlapping bases of identification and social hierarchies (Cornell and Hartmann). For Asian Americans in particular, race and ethnicity are inseparable, because Asian Americans tend to be racialized as foreigners—what several scholars call “racialized ethnicity” (Ancheta 1998; Kibria 2002; Tuan 1998).

While it is common not to distinguish race and ethnicity when studying Asian Americans, I argue that we can use this case study of Taiwanese American professionals to illustrate nuanced differences between race and ethnicity in subjective experiences. The Taiwanese American professionals in this study experience racial barriers that reduce their promotion opportunities. They attribute these reduced life chances to the existence of “naturalized” cultural and ethnic differences between themselves and their white co-workers and supervisors. The subjects also experience unfairly restricted promotion opportunities (i.e., the glass ceiling) compared to their white counterparts. These experiences transform the salience of their self-concepts from “professionals” to “Asian professionals.” However, their beliefs in essential ethnic differences reduce their senses of frustration, especially among those men who acquiesce to their situations. However, these relational fences are inevitable not just because of cultural differences but also because Taiwanese Americans, like other Asians, are seen as cultural foreigners/outsiders, which is a process of “civic ostracism” as termed by Kim (1999: 107). In other words, glass ceilings are racial barriers; however, they are experienced and reinforced by Taiwanese Americans as essentialized ethnic barriers or relational fences. This case illuminates the process through which a racial identity results from subjective experiences of structural inequality.

Second, experiences of glass ceilings and racialized exclusion are gendered. Although men and women identify similar barriers to their career enhancement, the two genders adopt very different strategies to negotiate their racialized status. Women take confrontational actions to transgress their racialized and gendered positions, while men use acquiescent and coalitional approaches, dwelling together in their designated territories. This gendered pattern suggests the importance of intersectionality in shaping variations of individual experiences.

In their study of black and white women managers in corporate America, Bell and Nkomo (2001) contend that race intersects with gender and social class to shape separate pathways
that women managers travel in their journeys to climb over career barriers. In comparison, black women are more prepared than their white counterparts when encountering discrimination because they grew up in a culture of racial oppression and resistance. Black women are also more vocal about injustice but more accepting about their marginalized position as outsiders. In the case of Taiwanese American professionals, I argue that race intersects with gender and citizenship to influence how men and women perceive their statuses in relation to their white co-workers and in their responses to perceived unfair treatment. Specifically, men tend to accept their Asian status as positioned lower than that of whites in the racial hierarchy, and they consider this hierarchical order as normal. In contrast, most women see their American status as more salient than their race, gender, and immigrant statuses, thus, they strive for equal rights as individual Americans. In other words, status beliefs, shaped by intersectional positions, affect how men and women respond to their othered experiences in the white-collar workplace.

Moreover, women’s immigration backgrounds and work trajectories may partially influence their perceptions of potential risks when challenging unfair treatment. Approximately three quarters of employed first-generation female subjects migrated as dependents. They entered the U.S. labor force late in life and worked in fields different from their original training. Additionally, most women worked not for the income but for self-fulfilment, and some changed jobs frequently. Conversely, men worked in the areas of their professional training, and they perceived employment as the major path to their career development. Men’s roles as breadwinners may also add to their hesitation and caution when considering challenging perceived unfair treatment. Regardless of their different responses, both women and men acquired a sense of empowerment in the process of negotiating otherness. In addition to gender differences, I observed variations in Taiwanese Americans’ work relations by social class and ethnicity of origin, which I demonstrate elsewhere (Gu 2006).

CONCLUSION

In one story in The Myth of the Model Minority (Chou and Feagin 2010), a Korean American man, Frank, never experienced racial injustice until he competed with a white colleague for the vice president position at his company. It was a defining moment for Frank to realize his disadvantages as an Asian American in the competition—what he called his “cultural handicap.” Frank began to sense a feeling of displacement in the white-dominated world and see “his place” in the U.S. racial hierarchy.9 Many subjects, especially men, in my study reported similar stories regarding their experiences of racialization in the white-collar workplace. When encountering unfair treatment at work, Taiwanese American professionals recognize their othered status in relation to that of whites, and identify it as a major obstacle to their career enhancement. From the subjects’ perspectives, the existence and actual causes of the glass ceiling are not always easy to validate. In contrast, individuals often experience vivid relational barriers along racial lines; therefore, individuals use such experiences to exemplify the glass ceiling they encounter. This finding suggests that racial inequality is often experienced through race relations at the micro-level of social life.

9Like the male subjects in my study, Frank tried to discount his sense of racial injustice (Chou and Feagin 2010:92–93).
Most importantly, individuals’ interpretations of the glass ceiling are gendered. Taiwanese American men and women give different meanings to their experiences of racial inequality in the workplace, and they take different actions to negotiate their othered status. Although recognizing their unequal opportunities for promotion, men tend to accept their designated places and normalize racial inequality because, using Li-Ming’s words, “We are Asian anyway, it’s very natural that we don’t get promoted.” In contrast, women often challenge Asian stereotypes and pursue individual equality. As Wan-Jen contested, “I am American and here’s America. You can’t treat me unfairly.” Race intersects with gender and citizenship in shaping the salience of individuals’ social identities, which affects how men and women negotiate otherness in the white-collar workplace.

Morris (2007) contends that race involves a complex process of identification through which a person constructs, negotiates, and reaffirms his or her race through ongoing interactions. The negotiation of otherness is not simply a construction of racial identity or a re-definition of otherness; rather, it is a dynamic process of self-identification in social contexts. The case of Taiwanese American professionals illuminates individuals’ subjectivities of race and ethnicity in the glass-ceiling experience. This micro-level understanding is complementary to and significant for macro-level investigations of racial inequality. Although the findings of this study are constrained by the sample characteristics, they provide invaluable information to enhance scholarly knowledge of Asian American experiences. Most importantly, the gender differences discovered in this study not only highlight the heterogeneity of this group, but also suggest the importance of intersectionality for future empirical investigations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chien-Juh Gu is Associate Professor of Sociology at Western Michigan University. Gu is the author of Mental Health among Taiwanese Americans: Gender, Immigration, and Transnational Struggles and has published articles on immigration, gender, culture, social psychology, and racial inequality. She has received the Gender Scholar Award and the Faculty Research and Creative Activities Award from WMU as well as the Junior Scholar Award from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation.

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REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Characteristics of the Sample

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<td>39</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>clerk at importing company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lisa female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>marketing analyst at credit card company</td>
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<td>Lauren female</td>
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<td>BA</td>
<td>realtor</td>
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<td>Emily female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>PhD</td>
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<td>Molly female</td>
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<td>physician’s assistant at hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sherry female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>elementary school teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aurora female</td>
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<td>MBA</td>
<td>financial consultant at consulting firm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grace female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>physical therapist at hospital</td>
<td>2</td>
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