I am American! Taiwanese Immigrant Women Battling Everyday Racism

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WOMEN AND INEQUALITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by Brittany C. Slatton and Carla D. Brailey
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Introduction

For non-White immigrants, the change of their status from being a racial majority in the sending country to a visible minority in the host society requires tremendous adjustment, even for those who are privileged with their social class. Unlike native-born minorities who live in racially stratified societies their entire lives, many foreign-born minorities experience race for the first time only after immigration. Without prior knowledge and “preparation” to face racial inequality, non-White immigrants have to handle prejudice and discrimination on their own. How do they perceive their race? How do they interact with other racial groups? How do they handle situations in which they experience racial prejudice and discrimination? Based on 45 life-history interviews, this chapter documents encounters of everyday racism in Taiwanese immigrant women’s lives, their accounts of these encounters, and their responses.

I begin with a brief review of sociological studies of Asian Americans’ racialized ethnic experiences, followed by an introduction of the methods and data used in this study. Next, I describe various encounters of racial prejudice in Taiwanese immigrant women’s everyday lives. Please note that all subjects in this study lived in predominantly White suburban areas, and professionals worked in primarily White workplaces. Subjects had very limited experience with non-White groups, such as Blacks, Latinos, and other Asians (except Chinese immigrants). Thus, all racial encounters chronicled in this chapter are interactions between Taiwanese immigrant women and Whites. Based on subjects’ interpretations and responses of these experiences, I discuss how citizenship constitutes a significant structural factor in shaping the women’s reactions to everyday racism and their negotiation of American identity in racialized U.S. society.
Asian American Experience of Everyday Racism

Asian immigrants and their offspring have a more than 150-year-long history of racial oppression in the United States. From the “yellow peril” over a century ago to the 1922 Ozawa case when the U.S. Supreme Court justified denying their naturalization by ruling that “Asian immigrants were not White,” historically, Asian immigrants have been perceived as an “alien race.” In contemporary U.S. society, the significant increase of the Asian American population since the 1960s and many Asian Americans’ economic successes have not prevented them from experiencing racial hostility and discrimination. Quite the contrary, Asian Americans continue to be viewed as foreign, submissive, and non-native speaking—even for native-born Asian Americans who speak perfect English (Tuan 2003). Asian Americans are also stereotyped as high achievers and model minorities, while their actual accomplishments are often discounted as being done by “nerds” who are socially awkward (Chou and Feagin 2010). Applying Chou and Feagin’s concept, Asian Americans are considered a “racial other” by a Whi-imposed racial frame in the United States. Their “othered” status echoes what Tuan (2003) calls “forever foreigners” and what Lowe (1996) terms the “foreigner-within.”

Regardless of the persistent racial hostility and inequality Asian Americans face, their experiences with everyday racism are largely invisible in social research. Among the few studies of Asian Americans’ racialized experience, it is often the second or third generation, not the first generation, who are the focus of the research (e.g., Dhangra 2007; Kibria 2002; Tuan 2003). Further, gender is rarely an emphasis of scholarly discussion on racialized experiences (for exceptions, see Gu 2015; Murti 2012). Moreover, Asian immigrant housewives’ experience with racism is simply non-existent in major publications that provide overviews of the literature on gender and immigration (see Donato and Gabaccia 2015; Gabaccia 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999; Pearce et al. 2011). To fill these gaps, I document encounters of everyday racism experienced by first-generation Taiwanese immigrant women, both professionals and housewives.

Methods and Data

Data presented in this article are part of a larger project based on 45 life-history interviews with Taiwanese immigrant women (33 professionals and 12 middle-class housewives) in a Midwest urban area. These women ranged in age from 30 to 62. Except for one permanent resident, all were U.S. citizens at the time of the interviews. They immigrated to the United States between 1968 and 2006. Professional subjects worked in a range of fields, including computer science, accounting, pharmaceuticals, and academia. All these professionals had at least a bachelor’s degree or higher.
Housewives were from middle-class backgrounds and lived in predominantly White suburban areas. These subjects were also highly educated—three had earned advanced degrees in the United States, six had bachelor’s degrees, and three held professional diplomas in Taiwan (equivalent to 15 years of formal education).

I used the life-history approach laid out by Atkinson (1998) to design my interview schedule. I typically began by inquiring about their lives in Taiwan (childhood, schooling years, family relations, employment, career goals, etc.), why they decided to move to the United States, and how they adjusted to their new lives in the United States. Ranging from two to twelve hours, these interviews were conducted in either Taiwanese or Mandarin Chinese. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed based on the inductive approach and principles outlined in Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The interview questions covered a wide range of topics, including gender relations, familial relations, parenting, work experiences, social networks, adaptation, distress, and community involvement. This chapter is based on the women’s narratives concerning their radicalized experiences in their everyday lives after migrating to the United States. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Everyday Racism in Immigrant Women’s Lives

Moore (2008: 447) argues that, “Everyday racism is not about racists, but about racist practice, meaning racism as common societal behavior.” According to Bonilla-Silva (2017), racism refers to a dominant racial ideology that frames, produces, and reinforces the status quo—it serves the powerful and is used by Whites in various ways to justify racial inequality. Tuan (2003) uses the Ito-D’Amato incident in the OJ. Simpson trial to illustrate how a well-accomplished, well-respected Los Angeles judge who was a third-generation Japanese American was racially ridiculed by a White senator—a third-generation immigrant himself. By mocking and complaining about Judge Ito’s “accent,” Senator D’Amato revealed his attitude towards Ito as an inferior foreigner whom he did not respect, rather than a fellow American citizen who had a career-long record of outstanding achievements (ibid.). During the 2016 presidential campaign, Americans witnessed déjà vu: a federal judge, Gonzalo Curiel, was attacked for his Mexican heritage despite the fact that he is a native-born citizen. Although Judge Curiel is not Asian American, the same White-imposed racial frame is evident because such racial ridicules, devaluations, and othering happens only to non-Whites.

In The Myth of the Model Minority, Chou and Feagin (2010) discuss the racial prejudice and racist treatment Asian Americans receive in various
contexts, including workplaces, schools, and public places. Instances of this everyday racism include, but are not limited to, White strangers throwing racial slurs and beating up a young second-generation Asian American at a bar, a first-generation Asian American receiving an unusually high finance rate from a local car dealer, and many Asian American kids being mocked for their lunch items. Unlike African Americans who have had a long history of fighting racial oppression since the slavery era, Asian Americans do not have a collective memory of racism, nor do they have much social support for open confrontation with discriminatory Whites. As a result, the emotional costs of enduring everyday racism are enormous (ibid.).

In their everyday lives, visible racial minorities carry their “racial marker”—skin color—that explicitly reveals their non-White status. Foreign-born non-White immigrants often add another type of status marker to their social interactions with others the minute they speak with a foreign accent. These two status markers place non-White immigrants in a vulnerable position that makes them prone to receiving racial prejudice and being treated as foreigners (a “non-us” or “othered” status). Moreover, immigrant women inherit an additional layer of disadvantage because of their gender. Their non-White, non-male, and non-native-speaking status constructs multiple structural inequalities, even for those who are advantaged in their socioeconomic status.

The two groups of women in my study—housewives and professionals—experience similar racial prejudice in their everyday lives regardless of their higher education and middle-class backgrounds. What is different between them is the vocabulary they used to describe their racialized experiences. Professionals directly identified and used the word “racism” in their narratives, whereas housewives told their stories of everyday racism more indirectly when describing “unfair treatment” by Whites. When asked what was the major cause of such unfair treatment, housewives identified both race and their lack of fluency in English as main factors, while race was the sole factor in professionals’ interpretations. In responding to racial prejudice, professionals and most housewives took a confrontational approach and a few housewives used the silent treatment as resistance. Such progressive reactions to everyday racism contradict stereotypes of Asian women as being passive, submissive, and quiet.

Many housewives described encounters in their daily lives that they perceived as “unfair treatment due to their race” (racial prejudice). The following are some examples of these experiences. A former nurse in Taiwan, Linda was a 53-year-old housewife who lived in a middle-class White neighborhood. She volunteered at her children’s school three to four days a week when they were young. She described how other volunteers treated her at school:
Most teachers were very nice to me, although I spoke poor English. I think they appreciated my help. But, there were a few [White female] parents who were very rude to me. We volunteered in the school library and worked together three days a week, but they never talked to me. There was a mother who was especially rude. When I said “Hi” to her, she always turned her head away and pretended that she didn’t see me. After a few times, I stopped saying “Hi” to her.

Another college-educated housewife, Sophia, reported a similar experience:

One of our neighbors is very unfriendly. We see each other very often because they live just behind us, and our children go to the same school. But, every time I said “Hi,” she just turned her head away. I don’t know what her problem is ... Is it because I’m Asian? I don’t know, but she is very unfriendly.

Gina, who held a Master’s degree from a U.S. university, described an unpleasant encounter at a grocery store:

Several years ago, one day, when I went grocery shopping with my two kids, my one-year-old daughter was cranky. She was crying and running around while I was paying for the groceries. I was so distracted that I misspoke something in my conversation with the cashier. It was something like ... I said “one” instead of “a” or the other way around ...

The cashier corrected me and said: “You know, English is very difficult. You’ve got to work harder on your English so that you don’t make a mistake like this.” I feel very angry every time I think about this incident. Yes, I misspoke one word, but she [the cashier] treated me with this disrespectful, dismissive attitude ... it was like, she assumed that I was uneducated or illiterate. Even if I were uneducated or poor, I am a customer at the store. You cannot treat me like that! It’s racism!

I asked Gina if she did something in responding to this incident. She explained:

I wanted to complain to the store manager, but at that moment, my two children were arguing and pushing each other. They were so cranky that, at that moment, my focus was to calm them down and take them home. I regret it that I did not do something right away. If it happened again, I would definitely go to the manager. They can’t do this [to me]. I am American, although I look Asian.
When I asked what could cause such prejudiced treatment, Gina generalized that usually people with little education or those from the lower class tend to hold racial prejudice. Sophia explained that both her race and immigrant status shape people's assumptions about her and attitudes toward her. She said:

Before they [Whites] get to know you, they have already assumed that you don't speak English and that you are uneducated, just because you are an immigrant homemaker. But, in fact, I have good education and speak decent English. We live in this nice middle-class neighborhood, which indicates that we are a good family. But, I guess some people just don't like foreigners [immigrants]. I feel that some Whites just don't want to have anything to do with you, even when you are neighbors.

Immigrant women who are professionals and fluent in English are not exempt from the racial prejudice their housewife counterparts encountered. Tiffany was a retired computer programmer who held a Master's degree from a U.S. university. She described an unpleasant experience at a bookstore:

One day, as I was walking into a bookstore, I saw a [White] gentleman, who appeared to be in his early 60s, also coming toward the bookstore from the other end of the street. I held the door wide open to let him go inside before me. As he walked by, he looked at me and said: “Do you know you must be able to read to come here?” I wondered, would I be asked the same question if I were White? No, of course not! This is racism! When they [Whites] see you [an Asian woman], they just assume that you must be uneducated.

Ann, a 41-year-old scientist at a pharmaceutical company, insightfully explained why everyday racism occurs in middle-class immigrant women's lives. She used her own experience to illustrate her perspective:

At work, people know that I am a scientist with a Ph.D., so I get the respect that I deserve. But, when I leave my workplace, it's a totally different story. Because I look Asian, people just assume that I don't speak English and that I am uneducated. In fact, my education might be higher than most [White] people that I encounter in my daily life.

One time, I was at a grocery store. As I was paying for my groceries, I asked the cashier if they had tic tacs. The cashier didn't know what I meant, so I repeated “tic tacks” a few times. Finally, she got it and found a pack for me. Then, she mocked my accent.
and laughed with another cashier. I said to them: “Well, I know I speak English with an accent. That’s probably because I speak four languages, so sometimes I don’t pronounce every word precisely. How many languages do you speak, by the way? The two cashiers looked embarrassed and stopped laughing. Gosh, you should see their faces! If they did not look so embarrassed, I would go to their manager and complain about it. This is racism!

Like Ann, most professional subjects used the terms “racism” or “racial prejudice” to conclude their experiences of prejudice. Elena was a director at a public service institute in downtown Chicago. She described her experience of racial stereotypes and prejudice:

I am so tired of being asked “Where are you from?” At work, I am the boss and people [co-workers] know that. Outside of my office, I am just an Asian woman. Like, for example, once I went to the salon on the second floor to get a haircut. The hairdresser asked me: “Where are you from?” and I said “from upstairs!” [laugh] They would not ask this question if I were White. They just assume that you must be from elsewhere. I am American, ok?! So, every time people ask me where I come from, I always say “I’m from Chicago” [smile].

Beth, a researcher for a pharmaceutical company, similarly pointed out others’ assumptions of her being a foreigner.

Once, when I walked into an elevator in a business building, a [White] lady asked me: “Where you are from must be very warm.” I was, like, “What?” “What did you just say?” you know, I did not even open my mouth. I could have been a native-born Asian American, but she just assumed that I must be a foreigner. Another time, when I went to pick up a prescription at a pharmacy inside of a grocery store, the pharmacist asked what my last name was, and I said “Liou.” She didn’t understand me and asked to spell it. I did. She appeared that she still didn’t get what I said and asked to see my card. So, I gave her my insurance card and then she found my prescription. As she was giving me my prescription, she mocked my accent and imitated the way I spoke in a teasing tone. “You were saying L—oo—on?” I was so angry! It’s not just insulting and offensive, it is racial prejudice!! I went to the manager and filed a complaint right away.

Jamie, a college professor in her 40s, described a scene she and her son encountered at a cafeteria:

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A year ago, my family took a trip to a national park. My son and I went to the cafeteria to get something to eat. We were waiting in line to get our food, and then, a [White] guy came up to us out of nowhere and shouted: “Do you understand English?” I stared at him and said, “Of course, I am a college professor and have a Ph.D.!” Then, he walked away.

That was a weird encounter, but it was not the first time that people made racist comments or acted upon racial prejudice to me or my son. I have had numerous conversations with my son, explaining what behaviors reflect racial prejudice and why, and how we should not let others define who we are just because we look different [from Whites]. I told him he was born in the U.S. and that he is American, and that he should never let others tell him otherwise or respect him less.

Like Jamie, many mothers took the responsibility of teaching their children how to deal with everyday racism. One mother, Carol, talked about how she helped her son accept and appreciate his differences from his White peers and resist prejudice. She said:

I made mostly Asian food for my children’s lunch when they were in elementary school. One day, my son came home crying. He told me a [White] girl made fun of his sushi lunch. In front of other kids, the girl said: ‘Yuck! That looks disgusting!’ He was very sad. So, I told him: “Well, too bad, I don’t think she has tried it before. Maybe you should tell her you have no idea what you’re missing!” The next day, the same girl teased him again. He responded: “Oh, you don’t know what you are missing. This is the best thing ever! Oh, my goodness, it’s so yummy! Yum . . . yum!” That girl has never said anything afterwards.

Carol turned this incident into a teachable moment to help her children understand why people say negative things about others and how to handle similar situations in the future. Mindy, a clerk at an importing company, described one situation:

One day, I was shopping with my 8-year-old son at a department store. When we walked by two female [White] store employees, we overheard them talking about Asians in a disrespectful way loudly. My son asked me: “Mommy, why do they talk about Asians that way? Did we do anything wrong to make them mad?” I went to the manager to report this incident. The manager apologized and promised to educate their employees about racial diversity issues. I had a long talk with my son that night about race. It was no: an easy topic for an 8-year-old, and honestly, I’m not sure if he totally
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understood. I'm hoping that the incident did not leave a scar. He may encounter more difficult situations when he grows up. We must prepare him for that.

Whites' insensitivities to racial diversity and unawareness of their racial prejudice were often mentioned in the interviews. For instance, Kelly, an adjunct professor at a community college, recalled an encounter with a staff in the school district office when her family first moved to a predominantly White neighborhood. She said:

When we first moved here, we went to the school district office to ask about the schools in the area. The [White] staff who greeted us was very friendly. After an informative introduction, she said to us: "This is a very nice area. We have very few racial minorities here, so it's very safe." I was furious and responded: "What do you mean? We are a racial minority." She then apologized. I think she meant Blacks, not Asians, but that's not okay, no matter which racial minority she referred to.

Frances, a 50-year-old housewife, told a similar story. She described:

One day, I was talking with some other parents about an academically gifted program in our school district while waiting for my son outside of his school. A teenager was there with her mom. We talked about some kids we knew who qualified for the program because they scored very high on the SAT. That girl said to her mom [in front of us]: "Do you know Tina Chen also qualified for the advanced ELA program? English is not even her language." I was shocked by this comment, because Tina is second-generation Taiwanese who was born here [the United States]. English IS her first language! But, Tina's White peer still considered her a foreigner!

Frances continued:

When my son was in sixth grade, he told me a girl at school asked him where he was from. He was confused by the question because he was born and raised here, just like that girl. Another kid lifted his eyes up with fingers and made fun of my son's "Chinese look." I had to explain to my son how people often mistake Asian Americans as foreigners, but it's incorrect. Besides, we are Taiwanese Americans, not Chinese or Chinese Americans. I also taught him that everyone looks different. It's not okay to tease people about their looks. I had a long talk with him about his cultural heritage and race in America. I told him that he is American, period.

Teaching the...
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Teaching the next generation about racial prejudice is a major challenge that immigrant mothers face. These mothers not only stand for themselves when encountering everyday racism, but they also take it seriously when their children are involved. They usually did not initiate the “race talk” until their children asked questions about race, or when racial prejudice occurred in their interactions with others. Among all the mothers, Lisa was particularly proactive in advocating awareness of racial diversity and inclusion. She was a computer programmer at a large IT company that practiced extensive employee training on affirmative action policies and racial diversity issues. One day, her second-grade daughter came home crying because some kids at school called her names and made fun of her Asian looks. Lisa went to the principal the next day to discuss this matter. She recalled:

I asked the principal if the school had resources to train teachers about affirmative action and cultural diversity issues. He said no. He said that it’s [the] parents’ responsibility, not the school’s, to teach their children how to interact with racial minorities. I disagreed.

I told him about how my company provided employees with resources and training to increase their awareness and sensitivity around racial minorities. I believed that schools can and should do the same. So, I discussed this matter with my boss and asked what we could do. My company began to provide consultation and resources to local schools and helped train teachers about diversity issues. We also organized a parents’ network to provide input and support.

Lisa’s initiation and active involvement promoted public education on racial diversity issues in the local schools and the community. Many White parents joined the network and worked alongside minority families to advocate respect and appreciation of cultural diversity. The network later extended its efforts to promote diversity among teachers and to help recruit teachers of color for public schools. Although Lisa began learning about diversity issues in middle age, she successfully applied what she learned from her workplace to the larger community.

Discussion and Conclusion

Growing up in a single-race society, Taiwanese immigrant women did not need to deal with race-related issues until they moved to the United States. Appearing as a visible racial minority, they encounter prejudice and mistreatment in their daily lives regardless of their higher education and high socioeconomic status. Moreover, professionals who are respected in their workplaces for their education, management authority, and professional knowledge and abilities appear the same as their housewife counterparts—they simply look
Asian within the larger society. Compared to their male counterparts who are often stereotyped as IT professionals, immigrant women tend to be perceived as being uneducated and unemployed. Moreover, immigrant women bear another layer of disadvantage than native-born Asian Americans—they speak English with a foreign accent. Therefore, they face multiple inequalities as being non-White, non-male, and non-native speaking, which make them prone to receive prejudice and multiple layers of oppression shaped by race, gender, and nationality.

In “Who Benefits from the White Coat? Gender Differences in Occupational Citizenship among Asian-Indian Doctors,” Murti (2012) documents incidents of racism that Asian Indian physicians encounter in their daily lives. She argues that Asian doctors’ honorary membership in middle-class America is accepted only when others recognize their occupation. Nevertheless, female Asian Indian physicians receive less respect than do their male counterparts because the public perceives their non-White femininity as incompatible with scientific competence, which is associated with White masculinity (ibid.).

Professional subjects in my study do not have the “white coats” that Asian Indian physicians use to reveal their occupational citizenship and earn social acceptance, as illustrated in Murti’s study. Although respected in their workplaces for their education, management authority, and professional knowledge and skills, Taiwanese American women simply “look Asian” and speak with a foreign accent in public. Professionals and housewives alike experience similar racialized ethnic interactions within the larger society. In this chapter, I document many instances of everyday racism that these women encounter at grocery stores, at their children’s schools, and in their own neighborhoods. They are often treated with disrespect, and excluded from the mainstream social circles because of their skin color and foreign accent. Moreover, their native-born children are also assumed foreign and considered an “other” by peers and their parents.

Interestingly, regardless of subjects’ multiple structural disadvantages and lack of experience with racism prior to immigration, most act confrontationally to challenge prejudiced attitudes and treatment, including the housewives who speak little English. Their behaviors contradict prevalent social stereotypes of Asian women as passive, quiet, and submissive—characteristics of Asian femininity that are also highly valued in their society of origin.

What contributes to these women’s progressive acts? As revealed in the women’s narratives, their good understanding of racism shows a certain degree of acculturation. Their American identity further empowers them with a sense of entitlement to assert themselves and act upon what they consider the “American spirit”—protecting one’s own rights and speaking up against injustice. For example, Ann, Gina, Elena, and Beth all said “I
am American. They can’t treat me like that. It’s racism!” Carol, Frances, Jamie, and Lisa told their kids that “You are American. Don’t let others tell you otherwise or respect you less.” In fact, these perceptions and statements largely depart from the prominent cultural values in subjects’ society of origin, a patriarchal Asian society in which conformity, respect for hierarchical social positions, and relational harmony are norms for social interactions. The women’s fearless contests against everyday racism exemplify their agentic resistance to racial-power imposition. As Foucault argues, “there are no relations of power without resistances” (Foucault 1980: 142). Although racist practice continues, the women’s American identity shaped by citizenship equips them with a toolkit and vocabulary to unapologetically negotiate their equal stance in U.S. society.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do people assume that immigrant women are uneducated and cannot speak English? Where does this assumption come from? What are major social factors that shape this assumption? What can we do to change this stereotype?

2. Why do some people avoid interacting with immigrant women, even when they are neighbors? In this chapter, these women live in middle-class suburban areas, and their children go to the same schools that their White neighbors attend. Why do some neighbors continue to ignore immigrant women, even when they work side by side at their children’s schools?

3. Why are Asian accents ridiculed, while European accents are considered “cute” in U.S. society? What are major social factors that shape these different perceptions? What do these ideas tell us about the larger social structure?

4. Why do young children tease their non-White peers? Where do they learn about the concept of race and the vocabulary of mocking non-Whites at a young age? What are the social consequences of such behaviors? What should parents do to prevent their children from developing racial prejudice? How should teachers handle racial bias and implicit prejudice at school?

5. In everyday life, when we witness instances in which non-White individuals encounter racial prejudice or discrimination, what should we do to advocate social justice, rather than being bystanders?

6. Have you ever felt you were treated unequally because of your race, gender, sexuality, religion, or accent? Describe your experience and how you felt at that moment. How did you respond? Would you respond differently if it happens to you again? Why? In your opinion, what is the best way to combat prejudice?
Suggested Readings


Suggested Social Media


References


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