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Published online: 12 May 2014.

To cite this article: Nolan L. Cabrera (2014) Beyond Black and White: How White, Male, College Students See Their Asian American Peers, Equity & Excellence in Education, 47:2, 133-151, DOI: 10.1080/10665684.2014.900427

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2014.900427
Beyond Black and White: How White, Male, College Students See Their Asian American Peers

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This research is a cross-site analysis of how white, male, college students see their Asian American peers. Semi-structured interviews with 43 white males were conducted at two universities that differed substantially in their representation of Asian American students. The interviews were theoretically framed by Critical Whiteness Studies and Bobo and Tuan’s conception of prejudice as group positioning. At the institution where Asian American population was higher (almost 1/3 of the undergraduate population), the participants described Asian Americans as not true minorities and blamed them for campus segregation, while also subscribing to many racial stereotypes about Asian Americans (e.g., being bad drivers). At both universities, the participants subscribed to the myth of the model minority. The high concentration of Asian Americans at one of the universities corresponded to an increased prevalence of stereotypical/racist beliefs regarding this population, which was predicted by the theoretical framework. The findings also counter the mistaken notion that Asian Americans are “almost white” because these white males framed Asian Americans as a racialized group.

In 2011, a University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) undergraduate created a firestorm with her YouTube video “Asians in the library” in which she blamed her Asian American peers for being disruptive during finals. The video included a number of explicitly racist depictions of Asian American students at UCLA that assumed they were foreigners, attacked their families, and used mock Chinese, “Ching-chong, ling-long, ting-tong.” The undergraduate’s rant also included, “In America, we do not talk on our cell phones in the library,” framing Asian American students as perpetual foreigners. There was an outcry by students and faculty over the racism embedded in the student’s video (Guo & Lee, 2013; Parkinson-Morgan, 2011), but this controversy also highlights an underlying issue generally unaddressed in diversity literature: Asian American students are a racialized group (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Lee, 2006; Teranishi, 2010).

According to the myth that Asian Americans are “honorary whites” (Tuan, 1999), there is a misguided assumption on college campuses that Asian American students have racial college experiences similar to their white peers. This, in turn, makes Asian Americans racially invisible within institutions of higher education (Museus, 2009), while also using Asian American success as a means of undercutting other minority groups’ claims of racism, which is known as the process of racial triangulation (Kim, 1999). Contrary to the stereotype, many Asian American students are the targets of racism, much like their Latina/o, black, and Native American peers (Kotori

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& Malaney, 2003; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). If Asian American students are targets of 
racism, then there are those who are racially targeting them.

While there is a small, but growing, body of work on Asian Americans and their experiences 
with campus racism, there are almost no explorations of how this racism is created and perpetuated. 
Within this context I explore how white college men view their Asian American peers in order to 
explain and document the meanings embedded in the kinds of racism against Asian Americans, 
such as that reflected in UCLA undergraduate’s YouTube video. I chose to study white men to 
match the gender of the interviewer 3 and to avoid cross-gender dynamics that conflate the potential 
racial dynamics between the interviewer and participant. In addition, white men convey lower 
levels of support for multiculturalism than their female and racial minority peers (Bonilla-Silva, 
2006; Cabrera, 2011; Hurtado, Sáenz, Santos, & Cabrera, 2008; Sax et al., 2005). Finally, coming 
from a position of racial hyper-privilege, being both white and male (Cabrera, 2011), white 
men hold the greatest amount of systemic power to either recreate or challenge the persistence of 
racism (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). Within this context, I wanted to answer the following questions:

- How do white, male, college students see their Asian American peers?
- How do these views differ as a function of the concentration of Asian Americans in a 
specific university setting?
- What do these views mean in terms of Asian Americans being thought to be “almost white”?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study primarily relies upon two veins of research: (a) The racial climate for Asian Americans 
in higher education and (b) Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) in higher education.

Asian Americans, Racism, and Higher Education

When discussing Asian Americans in higher education, the scholarship tends to focus on the 
myth of the model minority (e.g., Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, 
Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Teranishi, 2010), Asian American invisibility within the scholarship (e.g., 
Museus, 2009; Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2009), and sometimes, racial targeting (e.g., 
Chou & Feagin, 2008; Kotori & Malaney, 2003; Museus & Park, 2012). The first two issues, the 
myth of the model minority and invisibility, tend to be mutually reinforcing. The myth of the model 
minority leads to a misguided notion that, racially, Asian Americans are token white students 
(Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007; Chou & Feagin, 2008; Suzuki, 2002; Teranishi, 
2010). Lee (2006) argued that part of this invisibility of Asian Americans in the diversity literature 
and programming stems from these students being de-minoritized (i.e., not true minorities).

Within this context, Teranishi (2010) asked, “What’s wrong with a positive stereotype?” (p. 4). 
He and other scholars have argued that the myth of model minority leads to a systemic ignoring 
of Asian American issues in higher education (e.g., Museus, 2009). Essentially, the myth of 
the model minority serves to make the needs of Asian American students invisible, and this is 
especially prevalent when discussing racism that targets the Asian American community (Chou & 
Feagin, 2008; Kotori & Malaney, 2003). As Teranishi (2010) argued, positive stereotypes are still
stereotypes, and Asian American students in their educational experiences are still “up against whiteness,” to borrow from Stacey J. Lee (2005).

Museus and Truong (2009) argued that the scholarship regarding Asian Americans and campus racial climate has inconsistent findings. For example, Harper and Hurtado (2007) reviewed the campus climate literature and concluded that Asian American students generally reported a more positive higher education experience than other racial minorities, but the authors acknowledge that Asian Americans are understudied in the campus racial climate literature. The limited scholarship on Asian Americans and the campus racial climate does highlight that these students are racially targeted and experience racial stereotyping (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Museus, 2008; Museus & Park, 2012; Poon, 2011; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Teranishi, 2002). Kotori and Malaney (2003) argued that relative to their white peers, Asian American students both experienced elevated levels of racial targeting and did not feel as safe in the campus environment. Cress and Ikeda (2003) highlighted how a negative campus climate can lead to depression for Asian American students.

Chou and Feagin (2008) interviewed 43 Asian Americans about their racialized experiences, although only part of their interviews focused on college experiences. Contrary to the myth of Asian Americans being “token Whites,” their participants described numerous experiences with racism, including consistently being perceived as foreign/other, bad drivers, emasculated (men), unattractive (women), and even hearing racist terms (e.g., Chinaman), in addition to the stereotypes associated with the model minority (e.g., studious, nerdy, and socially inept). Museus and Park (2012) found similar racialization patterns for Asian Americans, adding that their participants also discussed issues of racial isolation, pressure to assimilate, and a general silence about the racialized experiences of Asian Americans undergraduates. This overlaps with the inventory of microaggressions against Asian Americans that Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007) identified, which additionally included the exoticization of Asian American females, while also pathologizing cultural and linguistic differences. This racial targeting created race-related stress that was associated with decreased self-esteem, anxiety, anger, and depression (Sue, 2010).

Overall, there is very little research on the racialized experiences of Asian American students in higher education, which, as the literature cited above suggests, is in large part a function of the invisibility that stems from the myth of the model minority (Museus, 2009; Teranishi, 2010). However, if Asian American students are the target of racist actions, there is someone doing the targeting (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). Therefore, I turn to the literature on Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS).

Critical Whiteness Studies and Higher Education

CWS analyses expose the means by which white domination persists, despite a general lack of overt racial bigotry—a system Bonilla-Silva (2006) refers to as “racism without racists.” Leonardo (2002) argues that, “‘Whiteness’ is a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘White people’ represents a socially constructed identity usually based on skin color” (p. 31). The discourse Leonardo references is one where the systemic power granted to whiteness hegemonically engrains white common sense into the normal functioning of society. Thus, Asian American racialization only exists in a context of white hegemony (Cabrera, 2012a), but CWS analyses tend to avoid the unique racialization of Asian Americans.
The literature on whiteness in higher education tends to focus on either ally development (e.g., Broido & Reason, 2005; Reason & Evans, 2007; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005) or students working through whiteness (Cabrera, 2012b; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). These analyses take a direction that is different from the literature on CWS, which is dedicated to making the frequently invisible privileges of whiteness visible, while critically interrogating and challenging systemic racism (e.g., Leonardo, 2009; Sullivan, 2006). When whiteness is critically analyzed within educational settings, the focus tends to be K-12 as opposed to higher education (e.g., Gillborn, 2008; Matias, 2012). There are some notable exceptions.

When faced with race-based multiculturalism in higher education, many white students claim they are the targets of reverse racism (Cabrera, 2012a; Chesler, Peet, & Sevig, 2003). Cabrera (2012a) interviewed white male college students and found they tended to downplay racism against students of color, while concurrently being hypersensitive to the possibility of reverse racism. In a similar vein, Chesler, Peet, and Sevig (2003) also interviewed white college students and found they tended to exist in college environments physically separate from racial minorities. This corresponded to the participants seeing racism as an individual defect, divorced from any historical or structural analysis, while also viewing Whites as the victims of reverse racism (Chesler, Peet, & Sevig, 2003).

The behavior of white college students can change when racial minorities are present (Cabrera, 2014b; Picca & Feagin, 2007). Picca and Feagin refer to this as “frontstage performance,” where, in the presence of students of color, white students are frequently politically correct when discussing issues of race. When white students are in the presence of other Whites, the use of racial epitaphs, including the n-word, is common, and Picca and Feagin (2007) label this “two-faced racism.” Cabrera (2014b) found a similar trend among white male undergraduates. When asked where they saw racism on campus, the most frequent response was racial joking. The participants also reported that racial minorities were rarely present when the jokes were told, rationalizing this by framing racial minorities as overly sensitive. This cycle of rationalization provided an ideological justification for maintaining racially segregated social environments in which they could tell and hear racial jokes (Cabrera, 2014b).

Even racially progressive white students struggle with race. Trepagnier (2006) recruited white female students who considered themselves non-racist to participate in focus group interviews, and she found a number of troubling trends. Despite these students professing to care deeply about racism, they continued to rely upon stereotypes of people of color and viewed them through the paternalistic lens of constantly needing help. Thus, the “unconscious habits of Whiteness” (Sullivan, 2006) can override an expressed desire to be anti-racist.

Some have critically analyzed the role of whiteness in shaping campus environments (Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Gusa (2010) offered a theoretical argument that whiteness as a cultural ideology is embedded in the all aspects of Predominantly White Institutions of higher education. This White Institutional Presence (WIP), Gusa (2010) argues, reinforces colorblindness, monoculturalism, and white privilege. Harper and Hurtado (2007) reviewed the empirical campus racial climate literature and found a consistent theme of white spaces in college campuses where, similar to WIP, whiteness is normed as cultural practice and embedded as systemic privilege. The institutional normalization of whiteness has different impacts for white students and students of color. For students of color, institutional normalization of whiteness contributes to their marginalization on the college campus (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). For white students, white spaces mask the realities of racism that cyclically reinforce their denial that
The current literature on whiteness is limited in two key ways. First, critical scholarship on whiteness in higher education is very sparse and the focus tends to be on racial identity (e.g., Evans, Economy, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009) or ally development (e.g., Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). Second, the literature on whiteness tends to fall along the black/white binary, and the racialized experiences of other groups are on the periphery. This is especially prevalent for Asian American students, who are frequently seen as not true minorities (Museus & Kiang, 2009). The current research begins bridging this gap by addressing how white male college students see their Asian American peers and what this means in terms of the racialization process of Asian Americans.

Before engaging in this CWS analysis of white male racial world views, I need to acknowledge a tension in this framework. Apple (1998) cautions that explorations of whiteness can have the unintended effect of recentering whiteness in discussions of race and inadvertently silencing the needs of students of color. Therefore, balance is required when engaging in CWS research to avoid this pitfall. Given the absence of literature on how white students see their Asian American peers, I believe that CWS is a useful framework to generate needed data. At the same time, it is important to constantly consider this tension when engaging in this type of work.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is partially rooted in CWS, which can illuminate the ways in which white racism is manifest and perpetuated; however, CWS is limited in explaining why expressions of white racism might differ based on the Asian American representation in a student body. Therefore, to supplement the CWS framework, I utilize Bobo and Tuan’s (2006) conception of prejudice and group positioning. Building off Herbert Blumer’s (1958) seminal work, Bobo and Tuan argue that racial prejudice and stereotyping are more complicated than simply an aggregate of individual attitudes. Rather, they are a function of threats (real or perceived) to the in-group positioning that manifest in racially prejudicial attitudes. Bobo and Tuan applied this theory to a racially tense atmosphere in Wisconsin where the conflict was between the white and Native American populations over treaty rights. The more the Native Americans pushed for their rights (e.g., spear fishing), the more racism informed the opposition’s position.

As applied to the current analysis, this theory of group positioning suggests that the higher the proportion of Asian Americans on a campus (challenging the normality of whiteness), the more prejudicial views the white male students will hold. Specifically, the analysis becomes an analysis of both (a) how white male undergraduates understand and explain Asian American educational accomplishments (focusing on stereotypes and prejudice) and (b) how these explanations relate to their group position. There is a slight tension in applying Bobo and Tuan’s (2006) framework to the current study because in their analysis, spear-fishing can be viewed as a zero-sum game. If one group has more access to fish, another will likely have less. At an institution of higher education, earning grades or a diploma is rarely a zero-sum game (e.g., Asian Americans graduating do not prevent white students from doing so also). However, Norton and Sommers (2011) discovered that white people actually conceive of racism as a “zero-sum game they are now losing.” While this is not, in fact, true (i.e., a decline in white racism does not have to correspond to an increase
in reverse racism), this may be how white people on the aggregate understand racism. Therefore, analyzing white male views of Asian Americans within Bobo and Tuan’s framework is useful to explore whether an increased proportion of Asian Americans in a student body can be conceived of as a threat to the cultural hegemony of whiteness on a campus (Gusa, 2010).

METHODS

Recruitment Procedures

I identified two large, public research universities as institutional sites (pseudonyms: Western University, WU; Southwest University, SWU) that differed in two key ways. First, SWU had a student population that was 65% white and 6% Asian American, while WU was 35% white and 33% Asian American. In addition, WU admitted approximately 20% of applicants annually, SWU admitted approximately 80% of applicants, and most rejected students did not meet admissions requirements. I hypothesized that perceived threats to in-group interests would be escalated the higher the proportion of Asian Americans on campus and the more academically competitive the environment, which should, theoretically, correspond to increased manifestations of racism (Bobo & Tuan, 2006).

I recruited a sample of students from a range of political orientations (ranging from extreme left-wing to extreme right-wing) based on literature that demonstrates a high correlation between racial ideology and political ideology (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). To accomplish this, I used the online directories at WU and SWU, identifying student groups with an implicit or explicit political orientation. For example, I recruited from the Objectivist Society, Young Republicans, housed fraternities, Young Democrats, and Students for a Democratic Society.

I sent mass, form e-mails to these groups, and solicited a targeted subsample in person at their weekly meetings. This strategy yielded 43 total interviews (WU, n = 22; SWU, n = 21) across the following, self-described political orientations: Objectivist, Libertarian, Conservative, Republican, Centrist, Liberal, Democrat, Progressive, Leftist, and Socialist. All were undergraduates who majored in either a social science or humanities field.

Interview Procedures

I modeled interview questions after Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) Detroit Area Study in which he analyzed racial ideologies. I modified the protocol to reduce the number of questions and to focus on college experiences. Additionally, I added one question about Asian Americans, specifically. The majority of the participants’ views regarding Asian Americans, especially at WU, emerged when discussing issues of race in general (i.e., not when asked directly about Asian Americans). Thematically, the interviews included:

- definitions of racism and views about its contemporary prevalence,
- participants’ support or opposition to race-conscious social policies (e.g., affirmative action),
- and participants’ views and experiences regarding race on their college campus.
In previous research on this sample of students, I divided them into those working through whiteness (Cabrera, 2012b) and those normalizing whiteness (Cabrera, 2014a) based upon their racial ideologies (working through whiteness being more racially progressive). By racially progressive, I mean participants who viewed race as systemic reality instead of an individual defect. Additionally, these participants were able to identify white privilege and tended to support race-conscious means of addressing racial inequality (e.g., affirmative action). Being racially progressive also tended to correspond to other social identities. Participants who were more left of center politically or who came from one or more marginalized backgrounds (e.g., being gay) tended to be the ones who were more willing to take account of their racial privileges and challenge racism (Cabrera, 2012b). The narratives were very consistent when the subject became Asian Americans (i.e., there was little difference between those normalizing whiteness versus working through whiteness). Thus, all participants were included in the analysis.

Analysis

The transcripts were thematically coded for areas where participants discussed their views of Asian Americans. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), “a theme is most commonly understood to be an element that occurs frequently in a text or describes a unique experience that gets at the essence of the phenomenon under inquiry” (p. 89). The analysis was primarily deductive in nature, which involved identifying how white men viewed Asian Americans, examining how these views differed by institutional site, and analyzing how these findings related to the theoretical framework of prejudice as group threat (Bobo & Tuan, 2006).

Validity of the codes was established through triangulating data sources as well as through peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This entailed using multiple sources of data (transcripts, interview notes, reflection papers, and coding memos) and a reviewer not affiliated, but familiar, with the project to assess how accurately the data matched the coding scheme within the theoretical framework of the study. Questions directed to the external reviewer included: “Are the findings grounded in the data? Are inferences logical? Is the category structure appropriate? Can inquiry decisions and methodological shifts be justified?” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). The participants declined my invitation to conduct member checking. Additionally, I used Miles and Huberman’s (1994) framework for conducting a cross-site analysis and listed the frequencies of the different codes as a function of institution to see where substantial differences emerged. I organized my coding scheme using NVivo™ software, which was integral in identifying differences in the views of participants attending WU versus SWU.

Researcher Orientation

At the beginning of the interviews, I verbally self-identified as Chicano (my primary racial identity) and had the participants verbally self-identify as well. I hoped to create a cross-racial interaction, because I thought political correctness might temper some of the participants’ responses. After the first four interviews were completed, I questioned whether my racial self-identification was having the anticipated effect, as the participants tended to be very animated, using profanity, using sarcasm, and raising their voices as they shared their views on race/racism. In subsequent
interviews, I ended by asking participants how much they thought about my racial/ethnic background during our interactions. Almost uniformly, they said they did not think about it, and they offered two reasons: my light skin and my use of “standard” English, areas that help me sometimes “pass” as white. Thus, my phenotypic ambiguity allowed my racial background to slip into the background, providing me access to a group of students who are frequently inaccessible to researchers of color.

**FINDINGS**

Four inter-related themes emerged from the participants’ narratives: (1) Asian Americans as nonracial/not “real” minorities; (2) Asian Americans promoting self-segregation; (3) the myth of the model minority; and (4) other racial Asian American stereotypes. With the exception of the myth of the model minority, the other three themes were substantially more present at WU.

**Asians Not “Real” Minorities**

Museus and Kiang (2009) argue that “Asian Americans are often not considered an underrepresented minority in higher education research and discourse” (p. 8). The participants at WU frequently articulated a view that Asian Americans were almost white, although this belief was not articulated by participants at SWU. For example, George, a student at WU, said:

George: Asian people kinda seem like white people to me.
Interviewer: In what respect?
George: Um, I mean uh, it’s much more of a culture—Much more similar cultures. You know like we were kinda talkin’ about. Like success-driven cultures, like, upbringing is usually pretty similar between a white person and an Asian person. But, between a Hispanic or a black person there’s not nearly as many connections I think.

George not only identified Asian Americans as almost white, but he also said that Blacks and Latina/os were culturally different than Whites. He later elaborated that he believed Blacks and Latina/os did not want to be successful, and thus they are not.

The framing of Asian Americans as not true minorities (S. S. Lee, 2006) was selectively employed by some participants. For example, Asian Americans were seen as minorities to the extent that interactions with them justified the idea that racism no longer existed. Trevor offered the following, “Um, I grew up in Irvine where I basically interacted with Whites, Persians, and Asians. There was very little racism”. In his experience, Trevor (WU) saw little racism directed at his racial minority friends, and he later described how it helped shape his worldview that racism was not very important. Derek, a WU student, offered a similar sentiment, “I think coming here, definitely my groups of friends changed. At home it’s predominantly white, whereas here it’s predominantly Asian, but in that aspect, it sort of solidified my views whereas race doesn’t really matter.” Again, the Asian American peers were seen as racial minorities to the extent that they support a color-blind view of contemporary society.
For some participants, the framing of Asian Americans as not true minorities was more implicit than explicit. When I asked Alex his thoughts regarding the campus racial climate at WU, he offered, “When you look at certain groups, there’s so few minorities on this campus. I mean, it’s heavily white and Asian.” When Alex used the term “minority,” he applied it to Latina/os, Blacks, and Native Americans. Asian Americans were not part of this equation, and, again, they were grouped with their white peers.

Andy (WU) offered a more explicit analysis. When I asked him about instances of racism on campus, he talked about some stereotypes his friends held about Asian Americans, but concluded, “As far as the real minority groups on campus, I can’t actually think of examples when this has happened.” Much like the other participants, Andy did not see his Asian American peers as a true minority group on campus. While this is true in terms of numeric representation, this was not what he was referring to. His statement was regarding instances of racism on campus, and in terms of being the target of racism, Andy did not see Asian Americans as “true minorities.” The de-minoritization (Lee, 2006) of Asian Americans was complicated when juxtaposed with the participant narratives regarding their perceptions of campus racial segregation.

Self-Segregation

Participants were asked how well they thought students at their respective universities interacted across race. To a large extent, the participants said there was minimal racial tension because students from different racial/ethnic groups generally did not interact, although they tended to place responsibility for campus balkanization on minority students in general and Asian American students in particular. This blame was substantially more prevalent at WU, where nearly one-third of the students were Asian American at the time of the interviews. For example, Derek focused on culturally-based student groups as being responsible for campus segregation at WU, “There’s a number of . . . like Vietnamese Student Union, Hong Kong, and like Chinese, Japanese; however, there is a lot of like races tend to stick together.” For Derek, Asian American-specific student groups were the cause of the problem of campus segregation. He did not find it problematic when white students congregated because, as he later explained, it was not about race but social comfort; a common double standard many white people employ when describing segregation (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Chad (WU) similarly framed the issue and also argued that self-segregation was also self-limiting:

[W]e have a lot of Asian students here . . . I think to some level, they’re probably already used to being minorities, so that wouldn’t be too much of a shock to them when they step onto your university . . . yeah, I mean, why would you step outside of your comfort zone when you’re a freshman or whatever, you’re new at the university and all of a sudden you’ve got your circle of friends and you’re content. You might not even pay attention to the fact that it’s a racially limiting circle of friends mostly.

Like Derek, Chad saw Asian American students as the ones responsible for campus segregation as they did not “step out of their comfort zone.” This is a problematic statement given that white men tend to have the most racially homogenous friendship groups in college (antonio, 2001).
Lance was the most forceful in his statements regarding self-segregation at WU. He not only blamed all racial minority groups of segregating the campus, but he also claimed they were the ones who were responsible for campus racism:

Yeah, I think that the racial minorities who clamor the most about racism on campus are the most guilty of self-segregation and racism itself... You know, they’re the ones that are kind of, you know, grouping themselves together in these racial groups and saying, we the victims. The Blacks or, you know, the Latinos or the Asian American Pacific Island, you fill in the, you know, blank classification.

Noticeably absent from Lance’s list of racial groups were white students. He later explained that in his understanding, if a student group was predominantly white, it was happenstance (i.e., nonracial). Conversely, organizations for students of color, including Asian Americans, were not only guilty of self-segregation but also of racism.

Roger was equally animated regarding campus segregation. He saw racial self-segregation frequently occurring on the WU campus, and he blamed minority populations:

It is absolutely the case that minorities self-segregate. If it wasn’t there wouldn’t be a number of clubs that identify solely by ethnic background. There wouldn’t be a MEChA, there wouldn’t be an African Student Union, there wouldn’t be an [Asian Pacific American Student Union], a [Filipino American Student Organization], a Vietnamese Student Union... That said, I don’t know of a white student association.

Roger, like Lance, did not see student organizations with a large proportion of white students as problematic. Rather, the problem lay with culturally-based student organizations. This view highlights how the normality of whiteness creates a racial double standard (Sullivan, 2006), seeing white students and students of color engage in the same behavior while labeling one segregation and the other happenstance. These narratives were in tension with the most common view of Asian American students across both campuses: The myth of the model minority.

Myth of the Model Minority

During the course of the interviews, I asked participants to explain why racial inequality persists, and the participants’ narratives frequently relied upon racial stereotypes of Asian Americans in terms of their “overrepresentation” in higher education. Their explanations tended to focus on three interrelated concepts: Asian culture, familialism, and hard work. For example, Andy believed that Asian cultures held different orientations to hard work and this was why they were more successful:

Andy: The other thing is, from what I understand, in China or in Japan, there’s a different mindset than in America. . . .

Interviewer: In what respect?

Andy: In that people really work long hours and it’s almost like vacation time is not actually... you know, it’s not really part of their life. You know six-hour days instead of five-hour... or six-day weeks instead of five-day weeks is typical, so I think part of it might be the work ethic and the way the parents have been brought up and that trickles down to the kids.
Andy imagined that Chinese and Japanese people had a different culture in relationship to work, and this explained Asian American success. Additionally, he grouped Chinese and Japanese people together, overlooking the differences between the two countries. Duncan was more succinct, “the Asian American community puts a value on education, be it for any given reason, their children inherently want to follow in similar fashion.”

The participants not only used ideas of culture and familialism to explain Asian American educational success but also other racial minority educational failure in what Kim (1999) refers to as racial triangulation. Trevor, a WU student, began by relating some personal experience he had interacting with Asian Americans and his understanding of their cultural background:

I’ve dated a couple of women from various Asian countries, and their parents I know; I have a lot Asian friends. And, the culture values achievement and hard work and discipline, and stuff. There’s certainly Asian kids who grew up in gang culture, but the parents are still saying, “Work hard, and do this and achieve.” And, you know, uh, you know, all the Asian people are really hardworking. They have this sort of dogged zeal to achieve.

In Trevor’s understanding, Asian Americans had hard work engrained in their culture which resulted in “a dogged zeal to achieve.” He then juxtaposed this against other minority communities where he did not see the same cultural orientation:

Whereas, in other communities, I think those incentives are less, uh, less strong. And you know, uh, a lot of people talked about this. You know, like there’s a whole literature on like, you know, black parenting. You know, what do you want to do? And I, uh, guess . . . you know, you know, the examples earlier of the black, black community is where like it’s a bad thing to be white.

For Trevor, black people did not want to be white, and not wanting to be white was a key explanation for why black people were not as successful as Asian Americans. This also played into the mistaken idea that Asian Americans are almost white (Zhou, 2004).

There were several other participants who also coupled their explanations for Asian American educational achievement with an analysis of other minority group’s lack of success. For example, Jason (SWU) focused on different racial/ethnic groups and the process of assimilation:

Then in some other cultures where education was considered very important, like many Asian American cultures, but also Jewish people, especially Eastern European, the conversion from menial immigrant to college-educated immigrant was a much shorter generational period . . . [Upward mobility for] Latinos, it will happen in theory at least, but it happens much slower because there’s not that culture of educational respect.

Jason argued that Latinos did not value education in the same way Asian American, Jewish, and Eastern European people did. Thus, in his understanding, the assimilation and upward mobility processes were much slower for the Latino population because “there’s not the culture of educational respect.” Roger (WU) held an almost identical belief:

The Asian American community and the Asian society, as well as the Jewish community, have a huge push towards education. Education is a huge investment . . . And education is said to be the way that success is attained within that community. And I think that it is less emphasized in other communities of color.

In Roger’s understanding, there were some cultures that valued education (Asian/Jewish) and others that did not (black/Latina/o); For him, this cultural difference accounted for contemporary
inequality. There was an assumption embedded in this narrative that racism was not an important factor in determining life outcomes. This is especially important given the discussions of Asian Americans being “honorary Whites,” because it overlooks the fact that previously racialized Eastern Europeans had the opportunity, via phenotype, to assimilate into whiteness (Roediger, 2005). This is an avenue not open to Asian Americans (S. J. Lee, 2005).

The myth of the model minority was frequently used by these participants to pit minority groups against each other. David was part of a housed fraternity, and while he did not want to “air dirty laundry,” he offered, “You know there’s, even in our house, there’s you know a conscious effort to recruit, you know, Whites and Asians for GPA boosting”. He followed that his fraternity brothers avoided recruiting Blacks and Latinos because the members believed this would lower their collective GPA. Thus, Asian Americans represented the model minority that was sought, while Blacks and Latinos were viewed as a liability. These beliefs contextualized a number of the other stereotypical beliefs the participants held regarding their Asian American peers.

Asian American Racial Stereotypes

The participant narratives reflected a range of stereotypes regarding Asian Americans. This, again, was a substantially more prevalent theme at WU than SWU, an irony considering that participants at WU were also the ones who spent the most time explaining how Asian Americans were almost white. Many of the participants offered racial stereotypes of Asian Americans they either heard or subscribed to themselves and did not consider them problematic. For example, Derek (WU) offered, “racism has that connotation where it’s always going to be negative and everything, whereas there’s some aspects that it’s either neutral or positive, like Blacks having large penises versus Asians having small ones.” Derek said he did not believe either stereotype was necessarily harmful because he heard them primarily through comedy routines and, therefore, framed the stereotypes as funny instead of damaging. In contrast, Eng (2001) refers to this stereotype as a form of “racial castration” for Asian American men.

Other participants described racial stereotypes they heard about Asian Americans and driving habits. A number described hearing their friends make comments, some that were overtly hostile. Jeremy (WU) said:

I feel like there’s a lot of stereotypes involved and the whole Asian bad-driving stereotype because there’s a lot of Asian kids here, so [inaudible] on Asian kids or something . . . that comes into play a lot. You know, I hear, “Fucking Asian driver. She needs to . . .,” stuff like that, I’ve seen that.

Unlike Derek’s framing in humor, Jeremy’s narrative highlighted overt antagonism directed at Asian American drivers at WU. Later in the interview, Jeremy said he was uneasy with his friends’ anger at Asian American drivers, but he did not find the stereotype itself problematic. In addition, he did not tell his friend the comment was racist, which some argue is a form of complicit racism (Cabrera, 2014b; Feagin & O’Brien, 2003).

Corresponding to the myth of the model minority is the stereotype of Asian Americans as being socially inept, and this was the most common stereotype the participants either heard or expressed on campus. Jonathon (WU) said,
[I hear] stereotypes, like all Asians are hard-studying nerds... I mean, you watch comedy films and they’ll have the Asian student who’s like, “Oh, I’ve gotta study.” They play out the stereotypes, but it’s probably because people think it’s funny, it’s fun to do that.

Jonathan did not find humor that relied on racial stereotypes problematic. Instead, he found it funny, not harmful, and not racist. Sometimes, the participants rooted their beliefs in personal experiences. For example, Dwight (SWU) said, “The Asian American... I guess people that I’ve been involved with... and I’ve had some really good friends... they always seem to be almost socially negligent.”

Andy offered his own experience regarding stereotypes of the Asian American population at WU. His primarily white friendship group frequently made comments about Asian Americans on campus:

Well, I’ve heard sort of verbal racism of someone saying... usually not to the person’s face because people are not that outgoing, but behind someone’s back, I’ve heard someone say like... one of the more common racial slurs or racial, sort of... I don’t know, phrases I hear are directed towards the Asian population and I hear people say stuff like, “It’s typical Asian.”

Andy said that “typically Asian” usually meant being nerdy, bad drivers, and socially inept. What was striking about his comment was the social environments in which the racial slurs were made. His peers said these comments with relative frequency but never in the presence of Asian Americans. Andy downplayed the racial significance of these events which begs the question: If the comments are not problematic, why are they uttered in the absence of Asian Americans?

George also described racial stereotypes when responding to where he saw campus racism at WU offering, “I mean if you see an Asian person with their head down walking around campus with a backpack on, you kind of think they probably don’t have much of a social life or like a pre-med or something like that [laughs].” In George’s discussion of campus stereotypes, he described these stereotypes as other people’s views (“you”) but finished his statement with a laugh. This discursively allowed him to find humor in racial stereotypes of his Asian American peers without having to espouse the view himself.

DISCUSSION

The participant narratives revealed a great deal about how white, male, college students saw Asian Americans, in general, and Asian American college students, in particular. While the participants almost uniformly subscribed the myth of the model minority, those at WU held contradictory views about Asian Americans. For example, they tended to believe that Asian Americans were “almost white;” then they proceeded to express racist stereotypes about this population (e.g., being bad drivers or having small penises). In addition, the participants at WU tended to frame Asian Americans as contributing to campus segregation, which is a common way other racial minority groups are viewed by their white peers (Villalpando, 2003).

This is consistent with Bobo and Tuan’s (2006) theory of prejudice as group positioning. The higher the concentration of a minority group in a given environment, the more it challenges the normality of whiteness and the more dominant group views are manifest in prejudicial/stereotypical ways. There was a tension within this framework. I initially thought the competitive admissions
process at WU might provoke some academic resentment as the white male in-group’s position is threatened (i.e., more Asian Americans means fewer white men). Instead, I found no resentment along these lines. I could not explain this until I changed the parameters of what constituted the participants’ group interest. These students were already attending WU, and, therefore, they were no longer in competition with Asian Americans for admission. In addition, the belief in the intellectual superiority of Asian Americans coupled with their high concentration at WU could potentially enhance the prestige of a degree from WU. I additionally failed to consider groups to which the students did not belong. None of the participants were in the STEM fields, where there is more competition for grades. Thus, the belief in Asian American intellectual superiority coupled with minimal competition between the participants and their Asian American peers, might explain the lack of academic hostility.

These findings would seem to contradict contact theory, whereby increased cross-racial interactions lead to decreased prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Allport (1954) originally argued that four conditions were necessary for cross-racial interactions to have this effect: people had to enter the interactions on equal terms, have common goals, demonstrate intergroup cooperation, and have authority support. Pettigrew (1998) added a fifth condition: the contact must occur in a situation that has “friendship potential.” Returning to the participant narratives, especially those at WU, these conditions for positive group interaction based on contact theory were not met. Their cross-racial interactions tended to occur in passing and never in situations with intergroup cooperation, working toward common goals, or having friendship potential. Thus, the numeric representation of Asian Americans at WU led to a situation of increased, not decreased, racial prejudice.

Returning to CWS, the participant narratives highlighted several methods of discursively normalizing whiteness while racializing Asian Americans. For example, participants tended to assign blame for campus segregation on minorities, in general, and Asian Americans, in particular. White students almost never held responsibility for this campus phenomenon, which is consistent with CWS literature, whereby the practices of white people are framed as normal (Cabrera, 2011, 2014a; Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). Additionally, the myth of the model minority was frequently used to castigate black and Latina/o communities for not being as prosperous as Asian Americans in a process that Kim (1999) refers to as “racial triangulation.” This can foster intergroup antagonism where racial minorities battle each other instead of fighting against systemic racism (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Suzuki, 2002). Again, the practices of whiteness were rendered invisible as the participants did not find the myth of the model minority problematic and were generally unaware of its consequences.

Almost all participants subscribed to numerous stereotypes of Asian Americans but never framed them as racist, again discursively normalizing the practices of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2002; Mills, 1997). At both institutions, participants discussed vague ideas of Asian culture instilling a strong work ethic coupled with an education-oriented familial culture. These statements were problematic for a number of reasons. First, a stereotype is still a stereotype, even if it is a “positive” one, because it allows the target of the stereotype to be pigeonholed and their needs ignored (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Eng, 2001; S. J. Lee, 2005; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Teranishi, 2010). In particular, it overlooks the racialized experiences of Asian American students because they are not viewed as being “true minorities” (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Suzuki, 2002; Teranishi, 2002). Additionally, it overlooks the heterogeneity within the term “Asian American” and can functionally serve to mask the needs of Asian American students who
do not live up to the stereotype of the model minority (Pang, Han, & Pang, 2011; Teranishi, Lok, & Nguyen, 2013).

The participant narratives were not comprehensive of all racial stereotypes Asian Americans encounter. For example, no one offered a variation of the exotic Asian American female stereotype (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007) but this was likely a function of the interview questions. Participants tended to focus on issues of education, economic inequality, definitions of racism, and interpersonal experience. There was no discussion of sexual partner preference, and when this did arise, it was more happenstance as opposed to embedded in the interview protocol. The participants might have subscribed to these stereotypes, as well, but the interview was not a setting that prompted these discussions.

Of the 43 participants, there were three who never relied upon stereotypes of Asian Americans, and these three tended to analyze Asian American educational “over performance” in structural terms. For example, Larry juxtaposed the resources necessary for a Mexican to cross the southern border, versus a Japanese national to cross the Pacific Ocean, arguing that this partially explained Asian American education performance (i.e., the most educated and those with financial resources were the ones who could go to the United States). Among this sample of three males, I found no distinct trends that explained why these participants held their views regarding Asian Americans. This was troubling because in previous research using these data there were strong differences in experiences and views between students normalizing whiteness (Cabrera, 2014a) and those working through whiteness (Cabrera, 2012b). Those working through whiteness were the more racially progressive group, but even these white men tended to racially stereotype Asian Americans. This could be a function of Asian Americans being excluded in discourses around diversity because they are not seen as true racial minorities (S. S. Lee, 2006). Essentially, racism is framed as a black/white issue (sometimes white/Latina/o), and the racialization of Asian Americans is not considered even among racially progressive white men.

While the participant narratives provided insights into how white men see their Asian American peers, it is not clear how representative their views are. In addition, it would be interesting to see how white women and people of color view their Asian American peers. They might have increased solidarity due to having one or more marginalized social identities, or they might be resentful as Asian American success is concurrently used to explain their relative failure. Finally, future research needs to explore how these views play out in terms of student-to-student campus interactions.

Regardless of these limitations, some important conclusions can be drawn. First, higher education administrators and student affairs practitioners working with white male students need to be prepared for increased Asian American stereotyping and prejudice the higher the proportion of Asian Americans at a campus. This will also likely entail practitioners having to work through their own racial biases regarding Asian Americans. Practitioners might unconsciously subscribe to the “Asians as honorary Whites” paradigm (Tuan, 1999) and, thus, will need to take account of this before they can begin to push their students to do the same. Second, practitioners need to work with their white students to problematize the myth of the model minority and the notion that Asian Americans are not true minorities (Lee, 2006; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Suzuki, 2002). In particular, they need to interrogate the notion that positive stereotypes exist; rather, stereotypes are negative, regardless of the context, and with respect to Asian Americans this leads to ignoring the diversity of needs within this community (e.g., between Hmong and Japanese students) (Teranishi, 2010; Teranishi, Lok, & Nguyen, 2013). Finally, educators and administrators need to
continually disaggregate the term “Asian American” (Pang, Han, & Pang, 2011; Teranishi, Lok, & Nguyen, 2013). Many Asian Americans are struggling, and their academic needs are not being met, in part, because educators are convinced that the problem does not exist.

CONCLUSION

While the YouTube video, “Asians in the Library,” was racially shocking, it highlighted a very unpleasant reality that is frequently overlooked: Asian Americans are racialized in contemporary society and this includes on college campuses (Buena Vista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009). Far from the myths of being “almost white,” these students are subject to similar racial mistreatment as their black, Latina/o, and Native American peers. However, the myth of the model minority, coupled with a discourse of post-racialism (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2009), can lead many Asian Americans to question whether or not they are racially targeted (Pyke & Dang, 2003). Thus, the challenge becomes reframing Asian Americans as “true” racial minorities and pushing white students to work through their prejudicial views of this group. In the absence of this push, it is not possible to have campus environments that are both academically excellent and racially inclusive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2011 meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Charlotte, North Carolina. The author thanks Samuel D. Museus and Cheryl Matias for their insightful critiques, comments, and suggestions on previous drafts. The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers of this article who provided invaluable critiques that ultimately made the article substantially better.

NOTES

2. This term is problematic because Asian American implies a U.S. citizen of Asian descent. This overlooks the diversity of cultures embedded within this pan-ethnic identity (e.g., Korean, Hmong, or Japanese). However, I am interested in this study to understand how white, male, college students see their Asian American peers. The participants in this study tended not to differentiate by country of origin or by U.S. citizen/foreign national. I use the term Asian American as a way of identifying this racially targeted group.
3. While the gender of the interviewer and the participants matched, the racial/ethnic background did not as I am biracial and primarily identify as Chicano. This posed some methodological issues that I address in the Researcher Orientation section.

REFERENCES


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