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Six Stories: An Examination of What it Means to be Asian American

By Gillian Sherman

Childhood General and Special Education

Mentor: Mimi Rosenberg

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Master of Science in Education

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For my mother, father, and older brother. I love you more than you could ever imagine.

And to all my teachers throughout my life, who taught me how to be a teacher myself.

By Gillian Sherman

Title: Six Stories: An Examination of What it Means to be Asian American

The author, who herself identifies as Asian American, engages in a personal exploration of her own and others' experiences of being Asian in America. Through a review of the literature of documented stereotypes of Asian Americans as well as interviews the author conducted with five women who identify as Asian-American, an examination of what it means to be Asian American is presented. Further, consideration of the impact of international and interracial adoption experiences on the identity development of adoptees from East Asian countries is explored through two of the interviewees' experiences who were adopted as well the author's own experience of international and interracial adoption.

Two major themes are emphasized based on their prominence in both the literature and the interview data. The first theme is that there are many "ways to be Asian". And the second theme is that the prevalence of inaccurate and damaging assumptions and stereotypes when applied to individuals has serious and far reaching consequences.

Some of the widely documented and damaging stereotypes that are examined closely through the five interviewee's own reports include Asian excellence, the model minority myth, "tiger mother" parenting styles, perfect mental health, and the compliant, quiet, reserved personality type.

The author concludes with an extremely timely demand for change and a call to action, especially in light of recent Asian hate incidents. The urgency of the implications for teachers to be more racially aware and open minded are also addressed.

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Introduction

When I first began thinking about this project back in March 2021, I had recently just finished rereading the book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua, a memoir by Chua about her experience in raising her two daughters in the “Tiger Parenting” style and what she has learned from it all. The style of Chua’s writing was blunt, provocative, at times, and yet obviously so filled with genuine love and care for her daughters’ well being. This time post reading it, I was transfixed on the idea of Asian excellence and what it means to not only be “excellent” not only by Chua’s definition, but what it means to be Asian.

Being adopted and raised by a White family myself, I have always been intrigued by this since reading her memoir ten years ago. Personally, I found it so profound and impactful because in some ways I felt as though I should have been raised in that Tiger Parenting style because I am Asian. At the same time however, I wondered a lot about my own upbringing with my White family. I knew that I, as an Asian raised by a White family, was not alone in this family makeup. In the ten years since I have first read Chua’s memoir, I have continued to think about the words *experience* and *memoir*, something that Chua puts special emphasis on and the fact that every Asian’s experience in the United States is distinct to them. No experience, no person, no story will be the same. As I thought more about the specific topic I wanted to focus on for my IMP, these ideas became especially meaningful to me. I wanted to be able to explore a topic that was engaging and also personal to me. I also decided that I wanted this project to tell stories, not just my story, but the stories of people I know. I wanted to be able to take personal stories and utilize that as my research. I believe that telling real stories, not just stories in movies, books, or in television shows, but real stories about people I personally know would make this whole experience that much more meaningful to me. And it was.

I approached this project unsure of what I would end up learning, but eager to hear others' stories. Knowing from my own personal life, I know that a lot of pressure and stereotypes surrounding Asians can occur in schools. I felt that it was important to explore this topic to learn more about the experiences Asian students as well as give myself an opportunity to reflect on my own experiences with the Asian excellence stereotype.

The stereotyping of Asians has been something I have experienced my whole life. Over the years I have heard many comments, some of them positive, and some of them negative, about Asians and what they can do. While stereotypes of Asians affect a multitude of areas, one area that has struck a certain cord with me is the stereotype that Asians excel more at school, particularly in the areas of math and science, compared to other students who do not identify as Asian. As a child, this stereotype always bothered me because I never felt like I was an exceptional student. In fact, I found school to be quite difficult and tedious. Growing up, I often heard comments about my race in connection to my academic performance, and while I believe that all these comments were never intended to be hurtful, I felt that they were. Through middle and high school, I started hearing more comments about my race in connection to my academic performance. Classmates would sometimes say, "Oh well of course Gillian is going to get a 100 on the math quiz, she's Asian" and "She'll get that done in no time, Asians never stop studying." I even recall one teacher jokingly saying to me after I commented how much I disliked math, "I just always assumed that you would like math given your background." These comments, while again I don't think were ever intended to be offensive, bothered me more and more as I got older and went to college, especially when my friends and professors expressed shock that I chose not to pursue a medical or science focused major, something that is stereotypically expected for Asians. It irritated me that so many people made assumptions about me and my academic

abilities based on my race. Where were they getting these ideas from? Why did they think it was acceptable to make these comments to me? Were they aware that these actions were offensive to me?

When I became a teacher two years ago, I started to think even more deeply about the Asian excellence stereotyping in schools. Now as a teacher, I wonder about the expectations and assumptions we make our students, even if we are not aware of them. Do we have certain expectations for Asian students? Do we think that Asian students perform better than non-Asian students? Are we aware of any of these assumptions or are they all unconscious? Thinking more about this stereotype, I wanted to know more about the impact it was having on students in school, and if other Asians ever had the same wonderings as me.

As I started to think about ideas for my IMP, I kept coming back to my own experiences as a student and the position I now have as a teacher. Bank Street so heavily stresses the individuality of students and the importance of honoring the child as a whole (Bank Street, n.d.). This influence has played a huge factor in my desire to focus on this topic and message: Asians are affected by the stereotype in different ways based on their own personal story, and we as a society can not associate all Asians as one homogenous group aligning with the stereotype. Considering my own experiences and my desire to learn more about personal stories, I decided to have my IMP focus on individual, personal stories of people and their experiences in relation to the Asian excellence stereotype and how it has had an impact on their life.

Methodology

Participants

For this thesis I interviewed five people. I selected these five participants because I felt that they all had a story that was different from each other including where they were from, their age, specific Asian ethnicity, parenting status, and adoption/biological family makeup while also sharing the common factor that they were all Asian women. Prior to interviewing my participants, I was not certain if they had been impacted by any stereotypes about Asians.

All participants identify as female. My participants ranged in age from 23 to 37. The names of all my participants have been changed to pseudonyms. They describe their upbringing ranging from “culturally traditional Asian” to “Western” to “heavily influenced by Asians around them,” to “not influenced by Asian culture at all.” My participants were varied in where they grew up including New York, Tennessee, and Japan.

Two of my participants were adopted from China, while the other three were raised by their biological parents. Additionally, one of my participants had just become a new mother and a second participant expressed interest in adopting a child. All participants are of East Asian descent, Japan, China, and South Korea.

Lily has attained a Master of Fine arts degree and currently works as a graphic designer. Jennifer has received a Bachelor of Arts degree in East Asian studies and is currently pursuing a second Bachelor’s degree in engineering. Kaila has received an undergraduate degree and a Master’s degree in teaching and education. She is currently working as a teacher. Mako has earned an undergraduate degree and a Master’s of social work and is working at a school as a social worker. Finally Sun has earned an undergraduate degree, and a PhD and currently works as a graduate school professor of education.

Four of the participants I knew prior to the interview. I had known Mako and Kaila for less than a year, Jennifer for over a decade, and Lily I had known for nearly two decades. My fifth participant, Sun, I had never met and reached out to her at the encouragement of colleagues.

Data Collection

I conducted the interviews through video chat with four of my participants and interviewed one in person, all for one hour each. Additionally, I gathered further information from three of my interviewees, Mako, Lily, and Kaila informally through text message and through in person conversations. This was done as a way to quickly learn more information without having to set up a formal interview. I also conducted follow up interviews for two of my participants, Lily and Kaila, in order to gain more insight into their adoption stories and how it impacted their views on their Asian identity.

Interview Questions

When thinking about what questions I wanted to ask my participants during the interview, three main topics came to mind. First, I wanted to know about their childhood and family life. Second, I wanted to know about their experiences in school as students and if they felt academic pressure to excel in school and if so, what that academic pressure felt like. Third, for two of my participants who were educators, I asked questions about their own time as teachers and if they themselves had ever experienced comments from their students or colleagues directly related to their race. Finally, I wanted to know if they felt that they, either a little or a lot, had experiences that reflected the Asian excellence stereotype.

Structure of the interviews

During each interview, I first opened the conversation up by discussing what the Asian excellence stereotype is and what it meant to each of the participants. Following this, I talked

with each participant about their experiences in school and if they ever felt pressure or felt expectations (either from teachers or classmates) to behave or perform in a certain way because of their race. I asked about if they experienced specific comments or actions from teachers or classmates specifically relating to their Asian identity. Following this, I talked with each of my participants about their life today with each of them established in their careers and how the Asian excellence stereotyping affects them. At the end of each interview, I asked each participant about their views on if they fit the Asian excellence stereotype. This open question was free to interpretation and answered differently by each participant.

Literature Review

Stereotype

A stereotype is the belief that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same (Miriam Webster, n.d.). Stereotypes can occur across multiple areas and vary depending on the focus of the stereotype. One example of a stereotype is that all women are nurturing. While this is true of many women, it is not the case for all women. The danger of this is that for those women who do not fit the stereotype of being nurturing is that they may be interpreted as being cold or uncaring. Within this thesis, the term “Asian” refers to people who are of Asian descent.

There are many stereotypes that impact Asians and Asian Americans within the United States. Qiu and Zhao (2008) discuss multiple stereotypes in their article, “How Good are the Asians?” They identify a common stereotype, that all Asians are one homogenous group, hailing from the same place with an identical cultural, language, and history. Another stereotype is that all Asians excel at academics, particularly in the math and sciences, and that they all work and study excessive hours in order to attain high academic achievement. An additional stereotype is that Asians and Asian Americans have few mental health problems. And yet another stereotype

is that they are quiet, self-sufficient, seldom speaking up and causing trouble. These stereotypes give the false belief that all Asians and Asian Americans are successful, both academically in all areas and on a wider societal scale and that they are generally well adapted to fit into society (Abrams, 2019).

Abrams (2019) points out that Within the identity “Asian”, there are many different groups of people ranging from different countries, oftentimes consisting of more well known Asian countries of Japan, China, Korea, and Vietnam. However, other countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, and Malaysia are frequently not the first thought of countries when the image of “Asian” first pops up in people’s minds, but still in fact are considered Asian. Within the continent of Asia, there are over 20 different cultures, languages, and religions (Abrams, 2019). From this, the damaging impact can occur when people assume that all Asians hail from the same place, and not taking into account the specific culture and history that each individual country has.

Further, Qiu and Zhao (2008) point out that the identity, “Asian” does not account for generational differences and the immigration factors that occur within Asian communities including those who are first generation, second generation, and those who come to the United States through adoption when the term Asian-American is generally introduced. In fact, Qiu and Zhao write, “According to the National Center for Education statistics, two thirds of Asian Americans are foreign born, and one fourth of Asian children were foreign born, a larger percentage than any other race or ethnic group” (p. 340). When taking into account the significant immigrant and foreign born Asian population in the United States, the stereotype that all Asians are the same in terms of how long they have been in the United States, has the potential to lead to many problems. As Qiu and Zhao simply put it, “Those who were born in the

U.S. are certainly different from those who just arrived” (2008, p. 340). One glaring example of this is treating those who have just recently immigrated to the United States the same as those who have been in the United States for several years, or even Asians who were born in the United States. Such treatment can include assuming that Asians know information regarding American culture. It can also manifest in assuming that Asians know a lot about *any* Asian language or culture. The other way this can manifest is assuming that Asians are foreigners. For example, someone who is Asian may experience comments regarding their language stating that they speak English “very well” or that they are impressed that they can understand English. Though this can be interpreted as not racist because there is no direct offending language about the person, however, implying that someone speaks English very well suggests that they see them as a foreigner.

Given the vast diversity in identity and personal background, the label “Asian” or even “Asian American” contributes to stereotyping in a damaging manner. Further, because of the stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as one homogenous group despite the diversity of Asians that serious and detrimental consequences are an ongoing problem.

Perhaps the most prominent and recognizable stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans is that all Asians excel at academics, particularly in the math and science areas (Qio & Zhao, 2008). Furthering this, Bettina Chang states that Asian students do perform at a higher level in comparison to their non-Asian peers (Chang, 2017). What’s more intriguing is that the persistent stereotype has intensified to the point that even some Asian Americans actually believe that Asians are naturally smarter based solely on their race or Asian culture that gives them a competitive edge and advantage over other racial groups (Fuchs, 2017). Elaborating more on this, Fuchs further says, “There are many Asian Americans who think that Asians might be

naturally smarter, or there's something about Asian culture that makes them truly exceptional, unlike other minority groups like blacks and Latinos" (para. 12).

In an article discussing the academic differences between Asians and non-Asian racial groups Shafer notes, "On average, Asian American students obtain higher grades, perform better on standardized tests, and are more likely to finish high school and attend elite colleges than their peers of all other racial backgrounds, regardless of socioeconomic status" (2017, para. 1).

Moreover, East Asians have been documented as performing at a higher level in multiple areas in comparison to other ethnic groups (Qiu & Zhao, 2008). Additionally, data on Asian Americans as a collective group has shown that in comparison to other racial groups, Asian Americans do perform relatively well from an academic and economic standpoint against other racial groups (Yu, 2006). This evidence supports the Asian stereotype that all Asians excel at academics as there is evidence that Asians do outperform their non-Asian peers in academic areas.

While there is evidence that demonstrates that Asians and Asian Americans do outperform their non-Asian peers in some academic areas, there is still heavy discussion and conflict as to *how* and *why* this may be true. And if so, to what extent do Asians outperform their non-Asian peers and if there are significant negative implications because of this?

Despite some Asians demonstrating that they can perform at a higher level than other racial groups, research has shown that the explanations behind *why* exactly seem to relate more towards cultural value on education, choice to dedicate more time, and own personal motivation and will. Qiu and Zhao describe education as an individual choice, driven by cultural value and own desire to advance past the minimum expectations, something that is done by individuals' choice and not something that applies to an entire racial group. Further elaborating they write,

Asian-American emphasis on academic achievement seems to either be the will of individual students and their parents or a choice imposed by their social environments. Either way, the research unanimously suggests that Asian Americans' academic excellence is really a matter of choice, "not a matter of biological imperative (2008, p. 342).

In addition to this, debates of generational and immigrational differences display *how* they may also play a role in the significant differences between those who perform at the stereotypical high level, and those who do not. Research has demonstrated that Asian immigrants specifically, its own respective group, has achieved particular academic and economic success comparable to their peers, both Asian and non-Asian, further suggesting the idea that high achievement can be accomplished through hard work and diligence rather solely based on race or cultural background (Lee et al., 2017). Building on this point, Lui and Rollock go on to further elaborate, "Asian and Asian American academic success in part may be an artifact of generational differences in terms of *immigrant optimism* and also early experience in a different educational system" (2017, p. 451). The explanations behind why and how some Asians and Asian Americans have performed academically above their peers remain an area that needs further research and discussion. However, recent research has suggested that a possible reason is due to personal choice, not a cognitive ability that an entire race possesses, continuing to solidify the idea that education in the end is determined by individual choice.

Although, as the stereotype goes, that Asians are stereotypically excellent at math, studies have shown that Asians are not equally excellent at all subjects (Qiu & Zhao, 2008). For example, in a study performed by Rohrlick et al., they discovered that East Asian studies scored

significantly lower in their language and verbal skills compared to their mathematical skills (1998).

Additionally, the stereotype that all Asians are diligent workers, studying for an excessive amount of time has also been shown to not be entirely true. Discussing the focus and effort that Asians place on education, Lui and Rollock write, “Current literature does not support the notion that individuals of Asian --particularly East Asian -- descent place high value and priority on academic achievement, because education often is viewed as a vehicle for economic opportunities and social mobility” (2017, p. 451). In addition to the argument that the reasoning behind finding inconsistencies in this stereotype is that there is also a debate about whether Asians are outperforming their peers due to personal motivation and individual will, versus cognitive ability. In a ten year long study done by Chuansheng Chen, Harold Stevenson, and Shin-Ying Lee (1993), focusing on the mathematical ability in Chinese, Japanese, and American children, they were able to determine that there was no significant cognitive difference in ability between Chinese, Japanese, and American students. From their study they were able to determine that the reasoning behind Asian American students’ achievement in math was not based on cognitive ability but rather personal and family choice to dedicate more time and attention to academics (Chen et al., 1993). Finally, for Asian immigrants, a possible explanation of a notable difference in academic achievement over other racial peers may be because of immigrant optimism, a “fresh” or “renewed” sense of enthusiasm and motivation to do exceptionally well and be a “successful” immigrant (Lui & Rollock, 2017). This reason in particular is separate from cognitive ability and relates more to a personal, cultural, and individual choice of the person. With the establishment that Asians have been seen to perform at higher levels than other racial groups, there still are questions to what impacts this might have on

Asians and Asian Americans. One thing for certain however, is the tremendous impact that stereotypes regarding academic achievement have had on Asians and Asian Americans.

Despite the positive influence that research suggests Asian Americans have had on education and the generally uplifting image of Asian excellence, the indirect and direct impacts of stereotyping has shown to take its toll on the mental well being of Asians and Asian Americans (Abrams, 2019). The constant pressure and perpetual image of Asian excellence has a way of manifesting in many to the point of believing that that image is the ideal and the only acceptable option. While the ideal has been shown to be the goal, the concerns of many come into play when Asians and Asian Americans do not reach that ideal image of what an Asian should look like. The intense pressures of living up to the Asian excellence stereotype can take its toll in a negative way on the mental health of Asians and Asian Americans when impossibly high pressures and expectations become the standard (Chang, 2017). Qiu and Zhao describe the pressures and impacts saying, “Unnecessary pressures can fall on Asian-American students and hinder the performance of other ethnic groups if public reports continue to reinforce the stereotypical view that race matters more than effort” (2008, p. 341). Tianlong Yu further elaborates, “Since Asian American students are generalized as super-bright, highly motivated overachievers who come from well-to-do families, it is inconceivable that they could encounter any serious learning problems” (Yu, 2006, p. 330).

Contrary to this popular misconception, however, Asian American students are just like any other minority students who may experience difficulties in school. Qiu and Zhao (2008) state that they can struggle just as significantly as other students when schools do not come to their aid and provide appropriate learning support. Because of the model minority label, a term often applied to a group of people that is stereotypically believed to be more successful than other

groups, (Dictionary, 2021) Asian students may encounter more difficulties and problems than expected due to the assumption that they do not need any help. They are often subjected to unrealistically high expectations by their parents, their instructors, and even their peers. The pressures could be so great that their academic performance and personal well being suffer as a result (Chang, 2017). Thus, the model minority label has created a mental trap for these students. What is more is that the hardworking, quiet, and problem-free stereotype that Asians are given can give the impression that Asians and Asian Americans are immune to daily stressors and mental health difficulties at the same level as their non-Asian peers. Qiu and Zhao write, “Despite their superior academic performances, even the successful “model minority” students go through difficult educational and psychological experiences” (2008, p. 342).

Beyond the model minority image of academic excellence, the stereotype also projects an image that all Asians and Asian Americans are free of stress and anxiety and mental health problems. However, this is not the case. Asians and Asian Americans do experience stress, anxiety, and depression just like any other racial group. The key difference is that due to these harmful stereotypes and the perpetual image that Asians are always put together, Asians are less likely to seek professional help or treatment for these issues specifically (Abrams, 2019). These serious mental health challenges become even more concerning given that although Asian American students often show an increased risk of depression and anxiety, they are the least likely to report depression (Qiu & Zhao, 2008). Beyond Asians and Asian Americans not being seen as struggling with mental health issues, or being the last to seek professional support, the severity of this issue intensifies when the academic bar seems to perpetually rise, constantly getting higher and higher to a point that is achievable by some, but not the realistic majority (Fuchs, 2017). Finally, the consistent danger of the Asian excellence stereotype intensifies when

the societal, family, and at times even peer influence can internalize within individuals. By failing to live up to the stereotype, it can result in internalized self-perceived failure, ongoing difficulty with academic performance and overall stress and anxiety (Lui & Rollock, 2017). The mental health and overall emotional wellbeing should be treated with care and concern both for the individuals it impacts as well as how the persistent stereotypes intensify these feelings that can be harmful.

Racism

Racism is an issue that impacts all racial groups, but Asians and Asian Americans face a distinctly different form of racism from other racial groups; a form of racism that is blurred with the effects of the seemingly positive Asian stereotyping and the model minority myth (Eun & Kraus, 2020). The difficulty is that the stereotype that Asians are doing better than, creates this false image that *all* Asians are successful and that there is no struggle or difficulties they face. Discussing this specific issue more, Yale professors Eunice Eun and Michael Kraus write,

Asian people living in the U.S. are often held up as the paragon of integration into American culture. Stereotypes abound--from mathematical whizzes and Tiger Moms to polite, law-abiding doctors, lawyers, and engineers-- and they paint an exceedingly favorable picture of immigrant striving and thriving. But this model minority mythology simplifies and distorts the experiences of Asian people in this country (2020, para. 4)

Eun and Kraus go on to elaborate on the perceptions of Americans reading Asian success saying,

Model minority mythology shapes American perceptions of Asian people in the U.S. Conceived as model citizens, who also happen to be racial minorities, the valuable traits of Asian people are overemphasized (like strong math skills, and family values that

prioritize education) in ways that distort the public's conception of the group as a whole. (2020, para. 6)

Due to the complexities that stem from the model minority myth, Asians face a different form of racism that is complex and complicated. It creates this fallacy that Asians and Asian Americans are self-sufficient in regards to academics and satisfaction with their place in society, with minimal complaining resulting in this lack of noticing of serious problems that Asians face. Discussing this further, Yu writes,

This ostensibly positive stereotype only works against Asian Americans. Particularly, the stereotype functions to de-legitimize Asian Americans' concerns and protests about racial inequalities. Asian Americans still face serious discriminatory barriers in society, yet their complaints about discriminations are often not taken seriously" (Yu, 2006, p. 328).

In addition to giving the illusion that Asians do not experience racism, the model minority myth also creates barriers for Asians thus creating "bamboo ceilings" that seem to specifically relate to the challenges that Asian women face (Paik, Choe, Otto et al, 2018). They often face gendered and racialized negative stereotypes such as tiger mother, dragon lady and geisha girl which contribute to the barriers they encounter. It has also been suggested that for women in particular, the effects of social media glorifying the achievements in education women have made, which is not necessarily completely accurate, it creates this added pressure and impression of what Asian women can do, resulting in society going on to hold them to that sometimes accurate, but not always, standard. This indirect form of racism impacts women in particular in a different way than Asian men. (Paik, et al, 2018).

Another place where significant racism against Asians and Asian Americans takes place is in schools. For Asian youths, much of the racism comes in the form of bullying from peers

(Abrams, 2019). This includes mocking language (tone and accent), gestures (such as pulling eyes back to mimic traditionally small Asian eyes,) and making stereotypical jokes. Abrams writes, “The nature of all stereotypes is that they dehumanize people and prevent us from seeing them in their whole humanity” (Abrams, 2019, para. 8).

To add onto the bullying that Asian youths face, they further face a form of racism in the schools themselves by how they are categorized and identified. The issue persists that identifying as Asian can lead to complications, particularly in education where educators can have a tendency to treat Asians as one homogenous group opposed to individual and distinct subgroups with their own respective needs and struggles. Lee et al, 2018, go on to elaborate the mass categorization of Asians without regard to generation, immigration status, culture, or language that schools do of Asian students. By clumping all Asians as one uniform group, it denies the individualization that Asians deserve to be placed in academic settings that set them up for success. In doing homogenous lumping, it perpetuates a racist practice of viewing all Asians as the same and prevents them from individual paths they might need in order to reach success. For example, researcher G. C. Park discovered that Korean immigrant students would never fully be accepted as Americans by their teachers in their schools because of their Asian identity (2011).

Everyday, regardless of racial identity, schools teach children about race. Lee et al., describe, “Schools teach students about race, racism, and their racial positioning both through formal policies and practices and through everyday interactions between educators and students” (p. 492). From this, immigrant students in particular are affected through concerning patterns of “racial and cultural discrimination on both personal and structural levels.” (Lee, et al, 2017, p. 493).

As Lee et al make abundantly clear, schools are not “racially neutral institutions” (p.492). And, equally powerful is the statement that Leonardo makes in Lee, that schools “daily teach young people the naturalized status of race” (Leonardo, 2011, p. 680 as cited in Lee, et al.). Racism is a major issue impacting Asians and Asian Americans, fueled in part by the school communities they are a part of.

Currently making about roughly 6% of the United States population as well as being the country’s fastest growing racial group (Abrams, 2019), the intensifying racism and discrimination is a serious problem from the Covid-19 pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Parenting

The process of parenting is complex and deeply personal to each individual family. Parenting itself requires specific values and beliefs and those vary and differ depending on a multitude of factors including, generation, geographic location, culture, and personal beliefs. The relationships between parents and children also is dependent on similar factors. Despite the shared importance of parenting around the globe, there are key differences, particularly amongst cultures as the East versus the West. The Eastern or “Asian” style of parenting is seen to be much more cohesive in the sense that the parents and children are often viewed as one unit, in the respect that if either the parent or child fails, it is seen as shameful for the entire family.

Describing the Asian family structure Lui and Rollock write,

First, Asian families are characterized as collective units that emphasize cultural values of unity, cohesion, and avoidance of shame and losing face. Traditional Asian parents tend to view their offspring and families as extensions of self, consistent with the interdependent construal of selves. Asian and Asian American parents are more likely than those of the ethnic backgrounds to think of fulfilling their individual goals through

the lives and accomplishments of their offspring; thus, offsprings' achievements and wrongdoings will reflect on the family name (2013, p. 451).

Building off of this, it is argued that in Asian education, the children must follow the rules, routines, and uphold high academic standards in order to bring pride to their families as they are seen as indebted to their parents (Wieteska, 2017).

Furthermore, the children of Asian children must continuously bring their families (their parents) pride and glory as they (the children) are seen as direct extensions of their parents and any failure on the childrens' part is a failure on the parents' part. What is considered even more intriguing is that research has shown that in Chinese cultures, studies have shown that while opposition and conflict to these standards is deemed unacceptable, there is little of it to begin with (Wieteska, 2017).

Tiger parenting, the label that is often associated with the stereotypical high achieving Asians, came into heated debate through the publication of Chua's memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, in which she documents her own experience raising her two daughters in a "traditional Chinese way." In describing her parenting techniques (as well as the classic "Chinese mother") Chua writes,

The Chinese mother believes that (1) schoolwork always comes first; (2), an A-minus is a bad grade; (3) your children must be two years ahead of their classmates in math . . .(6) the only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal; and (7) that medal must be gold. " (Chua, p.5, 2011)

The methods of Tiger Parenting by Chua's descriptions are intense and not the blanket standard, but are documented sufficiently to determine that although the stringent "rules" of Tiger Parenting may cause negative effects in children, that is not always the case in Asian families.

(Wieteska, 2017) In fact, Tiger Parenting may have significant benefits to it, including the strong connections that children can have towards their parents. Chua elaborates,

The ultimate proof of superiority of Chinese parenting is how the children end up feeling about their parents. Despite their parents' brutal demands, verbal abuse, and disregard for their children's desires, Chinese kids end up adoring and respecting their parents and wanting to care for them in their old age" (Chua, p. 211, 2011).

Adoption

Adoption within the United States is a fairly common process for families. With one out of every twenty-five families with children in the United States having adopted a child, it is something that many families experience (Adoption Network, 2021). Of all those adoptions within the United States, a significant percentage of those adoptions were done internationally and with roughly 60% coming from Asian countries. In fact, the United States has gained over 70,000 Chinese children through adoption since 1999 (Panich-Linsman, 2014). Out of the international adoptions, more than 90% of the parents adopting internationally identify as White (Buchanan et al., 2020). As a direct result of this, transracial adoption has also become the most visible form of adoption within the United States, with the majority, if not all, of adoptive parents and adoptive children looking physically very different from one another. Given the stark difference of race between transracial families, common problems including identity and discrimination can occur.

For Asian adopted children, the subject of identity can be particularly difficult and painful. Especially for children who are raised by White families in the United States, there can be this intense confusion about which culture to identify with. For some, having to associate with being Asian or being American is challenging because for Asian adoptees by White families,

they have experienced both. Yet despite experiencing both, some feel as though they are never fully accepted by either culture as they are seen as too White or American to be fully Asian, and too Asian to be fully White or American.

For many Asian adoptees, attempts to connect with their cultural heritage are not always welcome, with them facing resistance from Asians themselves. Professor of sociology C. N. Le writes,

“Asian adoptees often encountered intolerance from AsianAms (Asian Americans) who often shunned their attempts to connect with their “roots” because they had lost the ability to speak their native language and/or had little knowledge of their ancestral culture, or if they were perceived to be too Whitewashed. In other words, Asian Americans are not always very inclusive either and can be just as judgemental as anybody else” (C. N. Le, 2021, para. 23).

Complicating the matter of identity for Asian adoptees further is the lack of shared connection with their White parents regarding ethnic and racial identity. Elaborating more on this, Buchanan et al. write, “The absence of a shared racial and ethnic culture with White American parents can create the feeling of a loss of ethnic or racial culture and difficulties in developing a positive ethnic identity and coping with experiences of discrimination” (Buchanan, et al., 2020, p.43). It is also important to note that not only are these adoptees lacking a racial and cultural connection with their families, but they have also lost upon their adoption their birth parents, birth country, birth language, and birth name; *All* of which are major factors in a person’s life, no matter how young the loss, and the sudden change (that occurs immediately with adoption) can be traumatic regardless of the age of child (Cao & Pitman, 2013).

When considering identity for Asian adopted children, it is crucial to remember the ongoing identity struggle that many, but not all, experience that is an ongoing process for many that lasts long into adulthood and beyond. To add, it is equally important that the adoptive parents are supportive and conscious of the racial and cultural differences that exist within the family structure. In a study focusing on Korean adoptees' experiences with identity and discrimination within their adoptive White families, it has been shown that parenting "color blindness," or to ignore the cultural history and identity of their adopted children has a significant negative impact on the children. Doing so has shown to make the children feel "racially alienated and invalidated" in their identity (Buchanan et al., 2020). In the same study however, it was shown that active parent involvement in their adoptive childrens' cultural background was extremely beneficial. Elaborating further, "Parental efforts to teach adopted children about their birth culture through cultural and social opportunities that provide knowledge, pride, and positive racial and ethnic identity strengthen feelings of attachment within the adoptive family" (Buchanan et al., 2020, p.44). In order to help with having a stronger sense of identity for adopted children, it is important to have universal support from families regarding racial and cultural background.

Another major element that impacts Asian adoptees in particular is discrimination and racism. While most racial groups face discrimination and racism in some form or another, adopted children face discrimination in a distinct way as it is often racially motivated and the majority of the time, their White parents are unable to relate or connect with them on this issue. Describing this lack of awareness, Buchanan, et al., describe "Because they have likely not directly experienced racial discrimination themselves, White American transracial parents are more likely to underestimate the amount of discrimination experienced by their children and the

emotional impact it may have on them” (Buchanan et al., 2020, p. 44). Being unable to fully understand or connect with their adopted children is a major obstacle in the parent-child relationship as the parent may not be able to fully connect and support their child in instances of discrimination and racism. This of course poses a major issue for Asian adopted children who face discrimination, not only in their ability to connect with their White families, but they may also be unsure of *how* to feel and respond. As a result of this, further mental health challenges may occur as

Perceived discrimination is harmful to psychological well-being, predicting outcomes such as anxiety, depression, distress, lower self-esteems, lower life satisfaction, and lower positive affect across multiple populations in a wide range of cultural contexts . . .

Discrimination is associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, externalizing problems, and substance abuse (Buchanan et al., 2020, p. 43).

The complex issues of identity and discrimination within Asian adopted children is serious and significant. Despite the barriers that are inevitable in transracial adoption, there are attainable and important steps that parents can partake in in order to minimize feelings of isolation and confusion. For adoptive parents, it is important to be fully conscious of the racial differences and recognize it. Moreover, actively talking about a child’s ethnic culture and racial makeup have been shown to positively impact a child. For families with Asian adopted children, it is important to be able to discuss and support the complexities that come with a transracial adoption in order to benefit the child as having a solidified comfort with an adoption identity can greatly improve the overall well being and mental health for transracial adoptees (Mohanty, 2013).

Although some Asian adopted children face discrimination and racism while finding difficulties in connecting with their adoptive White families, others have not. It is equally crucial to note that research has found adoptive families to also be incredibly supportive of their children. Commenting on the responses of Asian adoptees from their White adoptive parents regarding discrimination C. N. Le writes, “Many others have enjoyed extraordinary levels of love and understanding from their non-Asian adoptive parents, who have also sympathized and comforted their children when racial discrimination has happened” (C. N. Le, 2021, para. 24). This reaffirms that despite some families struggling to understand racial discrimination of their adoptive children, others do understand and have provided care and support to their children.

Narrative Stories and Reflections

Lily

Lily is a 23 year old Chinese-American woman living in New York City. She was adopted from Maoming, China at 14 months and has grown up and lived in New York City ever since. Raised by a single white mother, Lily had felt like she had not experienced a “traditionally Asian” upbringing, speaking English and having her Chinese name Guo Li Hua changed to a “more American name.” Lily also notes that she does not identify as Asian, but Asian-American or more specifically, Chinese-American. Elaborating on this, Lily says, “When I think about the term, Asian-American, I think more about people who were born in Asia and then stayed there for a long time before coming to the United States. I was only there for a year before I was adopted.” Speaking more about her cultural upbringing, Lily culturally identifies as white and very Western. She says, “I grew up with a single mom who is White and there was nobody in my

life to have an Asian influence on me. My Chinese identity, aside from my appearance, was not a part of my life. I feel very White.”

Reflecting on her adoption, Lily described her feelings towards being adopted as “complicated.” As a child she always knew that she was adopted and that she was not born in the United States. Growing up with a single White mother was difficult for her at times as people would ask her about it and wonder why she did not have a dad. She remembered that as a child she felt uncomfortable having to explain to people that she just had a mom and not a dad, as if this was a rare occurrence for families. People also at times would comment on how she did not look like her mother. Lily recalled a time when walking her dog, a neighbor stopped and asked if she was a dog walker. When explaining that she was Sarah’s (her mother) daughter, the neighbor replied in a surprised tone, “Oh, you don’t look anything like her.” This interaction was deeply hurtful for Lily and made her feel as if she did not belong. Throughout Lily’s teenage years, Lily felt a “resistance” to do culturally Chinese activities when given the opportunity to do so, such as attending Chinese New Year parades and parties, trying to learn Chinese, and learning about Chinese culture. However, it was around the same time that she started taking an interest in her biological family. She did a DNA test “out of curiosity” and watched several documentaries about people learning about their biological family and the One Child Policy. And many of these films, she actually watched with me. Ultimately, Lily states that she “feels fine” about her adoption saying, “I have a mom that loves me and I have a good life. But sometimes I just wish I knew who my biological parents are.” Commenting on her identity specifically, Lily said, “I think for me it has always been a bit weird. On the outside I look Asian obviously and always will be Chinese, but on the inside, I feel very White, and probably always will.”

As a student, Lily went to a public school in her neighborhood where the majority of the school's population identified as White and Latino. She was a minority and did not have many classmates that identified as Asian or Asian-American. In elementary school, Lily does not recall memories of having certain high academic expectations placed on her by her teachers or classmates. At a young age, she felt like she was able to "blend" in with the other students and did not feel a major difference between them and herself. This started to change however, when she entered middle school. Still at the same public school, she started to notice the difference between her race and the races of her classmates. It started to become more prevalent to her that she was different from her white, Latino, and few Black classmates. Around this time, she started to receive comments from her classmates about her race relating to her academic performance. Students would comment to her during math classes saying, "Oh Lily is so good at this! Of course she's going to get an A, she's Asian." Reflecting on these comments, Lily does not believe that these interactions from her classmates were intentionally meant to be hurtful and in most instances, laughed them off, not believing them to be serious. She commented on how she believes every racial group, Black, Latino, White, Asian, every group seems to have stereotypes about them, saying, "the stereotypes of course vary, but all racial groups do have stereotypes about them." Lily also recalled certain instances in school in which classmates pulled their eyes back to mimic the small eyes that Asians stereotypically have. Although brushing it off and laughing, Lily later noted how this bothered her and expressed regret at not saying anything in response, but instead describes, "I adapted to help keep myself sane. I knew that if I got upset at every comment, I would be a very angry person, so I just learned to deal."

While in school, Lily did not feel as though there were necessarily expectations placed on her relating to academic performance when she was in school from teachers, classmates, or

people from her family. She does, however, feel that there was an intense pressure to excel in academics that came from within. Lily describes, “I didn’t have pressure from other people. I think the pressure I felt to do well in school came from me, it was mostly internal. It’s just innate, it’s just who I am. I always felt pressure to be the best at everything, especially in school. But I don’t think the stereotype helped that.” This internalized pressure that Lily felt to do well in school resulted in her spending hours in middle and high school studying for exams and completing assignments. The studying and hard work she put into her studies allowed her to achieve high scores in school, particularly in the areas of mathematics and science.

During Lily’s college years, Lily went to art school to study graphic design. She did not follow the stereotypical path for Asians of becoming a lawyer, doctor, or scientist, but instead now does freelance graphic design work. Reflecting on her upbringing, she cites her “very Western” upbringing and did not have that stereotypical Tiger Mom to please. Now in her career, Lily is happy in her field and does not feel as though she would have been necessarily more successful as a lawyer, doctor, or scientist. She loves what she does and does not see fulfillment as a STEM profession that many Asians stereotypically pursue.

As an adult, Lily can identify in certain parts of her life in following the Asian excellence stereotype, and in other areas, she does not. Being raised by a white mother, Lily explained that she did not feel as though she experienced the stereotypical strict parenting or intense family pressure to excel that is stereotypically associated with Asian families. Over the years, Lily has accomplished excellent scores in school, particularly in the science and mathematics areas. While Lily still wrestles to this day with her Asian identity and what it means to her, she notes that the Asian excellence stereotyping has impacted her life and influenced it in ways that have had lasting effects on her and resulted in her fulfilling the stereotype in certain areas noting, “Did

the Asian excellence stereotype help me? Mentally? No. But it did help push me to be better, and I was. I don't know if I can call that "helpful" but it did have a large impact on me in that sense, and I suppose I am grateful for that."

Reflection

When I first began thinking about people I might want to interview for this project, Lily was actually the last person I thought of. I find this to be incredibly ironic as I have known Lily for 18 years. We have been best friends since childhood and over the 18 years we have known each other, we have never talked about the stereotyping of Asians. Not once. It was hard for me to believe given that we have grown up together and shared so much about our lives, but when I thought about it, it bothered me to realize that we had never talked about it. I was so thrilled when she agreed to let me interview her.

The most striking aspects of her story and interview were the details she told me that I had never known, despite knowing her so well for so long. More specifically, I was surprised (and also wasn't) to learn about the comments her classmates made about her race. I was surprised to hear about so many comments relating to her race and academic performance, particularly the cruel and racist comments. I was not aware of the comments that classmates were making. This was even more shocking to me because Lily and I were classmates at the same school. When I was a student at the same school, I did not experience this at all. Thinking more about this, it just reminds me again of how different experiences can be and how two people can see the world through such different eyes. Reflecting on this more, I am also curious to know if the fact that I did not receive comments like Lily did was because I was much more talkative than Lily. Out of the two of us, I was always known to have a "tell it like it is" attitude and found myself to usually say something if a classmate made a comment that upset me. I was always

louder and more talkative, much unlike the quiet and reserved image that Asians stereotypically get. Lily, on the other hand, was quieter and known to internalize things that bothered her. I wonder how our differences in personality had an impact on our interactions with classmates, even if we were not aware of it at the time.

The most relatable aspect of hearing Lily's story was the similarity of us both being adopted from China when we were babies. Sharing this connection with Lily, as well as sharing so many similarities in our upbringing (raised by a white family, in the same apartment building) has always led to comparisons between us growing up, but this is another area that we had never explored before and weeks later after our interview, I am still left with questions and wonderings. One of the most memorable moments from our conversation was Lily's mention that she does not feel culturally Asian, but white. This was a huge surprise to me. I was not expecting this and a surprise in part because while Lily does not "feel" Asian and even jokes sometimes that she mistakes herself for white, being Asian is the first thing that comes to my mind whenever I am asked to describe myself. Although like Lily, I am adopted from China and was raised by a white family, my Chinese identity is so important to me and something I am quite proud of. I can't imagine not "feeling Asian" but it just shows me how much of an impact the environment, including one's family, school experience, geographic location, and family, one is raised in has on their identity. After thinking further about this, I am reminded again of how the importance of identity, and also what identity means to each person, greatly varies. While there is nothing wrong with that and no right way to identify, I am left wondering about how our shared Asian identity impacts us individually, whether we are aware of it or not.

As I think more about my conversations with Lily, I am constantly reminded of how similar our lives have been, but yet how drastically different our experiences have been. Lily and

I have always had similar experiences in life, yet despite our similarities, I am still shocked by how different our reactions and feelings have been throughout the years. It was wonderful to be able to have this conversation with Lily, and share commonalities about views and also share our vulnerabilities to each other, nearly two decades after first meeting.

Mako

Mako is a 37 year old Japanese-American woman living in New York City. Makowas born in Tokyo, Japan and spent her childhood growing up in both Japan and Brooklyn, New York. Makowas raised in what she describes as a “very Japanese” household and was raised speaking Japanese and English. She describes her parents to be “traditional and culturally Japanese” and describes her parents encouraging her and her sister to always be polite and reserved growing up. Mako also has experienced growing up in two completely different environments. Mako was born in Tokyo, Japan and moved to Brooklyn, New York when she was a toddler, and then from when she was 9-12 she moved again back to Tokyo with her family. She relocated for the final time when she returned to Brooklyn at the age of 12 and has stayed in Brooklyn since then. Throughout her life, Mako experienced a mix of cultures and recalled times where when she was in Brooklyn, she felt more Japanese and when she was in Tokyo, she felt more American. During this time of constant transition, Mako remembered times when it became difficult for her to identify if she felt more American or Japanese, as when she was in Japan she felt more American, and when she was in America, she felt more Japanese. It was a challenging balance for her to manage though it allowed her to experience both cultures and identities that she grappled with, particularly during her teenage years.

Throughout her time in school, Mako had many experiences that both positively and negatively impacted her that made her wonder about how she wanted to identify. In preschool in

the United States, Mako attended a school that was “very white” and not diverse. Mako recalls her teachers thinking that she was mute due to the fact that she did not know English and did not speak, though she did eventually learn English gradually by watching Sesame Street. While in preschool, her teachers often wondered why Mako did not speak and attributed it to the fact that she was Asian and “Asians are always quiet,” effectively stereotyping Mako as a “quiet Asian” when in reality, she did not speak due to her not knowing how to speak English.

When Mako was nine, her family relocated to Japan where Mako attended an international school in Tokyo. While there, Mako recalls that her school was diverse as it was an international school with the student body consisting of students from many different countries and cultures. During this time while she was in Japan, Mako noted that she felt more American while in Japan due to the fact that she spoke English (as well as Japanese) and had spent a significant amount of time in New York prior to her move. While attending the international school in Japan, Mako did not feel as though there were any academic expectations from teachers or classmates placed on her in relation to her race, noting that for her experience, the Asian excellence stereotype did not seem to be prevalent there. When Mako was 12, she moved back to New York with her family.

During the final time in which Mako relocated to New York with her family, she began attending a Catholic school in Brooklyn which was not diverse, with the majority of the student body consisting of white students. Mako was one of the few Asian and Asian-American students at that school. It was during this time in high school that Mako remembers feeling a particular pressure to excel in all academic areas, but with a particular emphasis on math and science. At this time, Mako states that she achieved high scores in math and science, and expressed wondering to me about whether this was subconsciously related to her race and her desire to fill

this Asian excellence stereotype. However, Mako did not specifically make this connection, and merely questioned it during our conversation. More than this, Mako remembers times in high school in which she felt that there were certain expectations and assumptions placed upon her, particularly from her teachers and her classmates. Mako specifically recalled memories of classmates making comments about her performance in math and science, especially if she scored high on projects and tests. When asked about some of these comments, Mako remembered students' comments such as, "Well of course Mako got a 100 on the test, she's Asian" and "She's so smart because she's Asian." She described these comments as hurtful and racist but did not respond to any of her classmates, later commenting on how she wished she had said something at the time.

In college and graduate school, Mako recalls there not being a significant number of Asian and Asian-American students. When thinking about comments and expectations from classmates in college and graduate school, Mako did not remember specific examples from classmates. She did, however, describe a time while in graduate school that a professor commented on her graduate thesis. Mako's thesis focused on the objectification and commodification of the Asian female body and she recalls comments from a professor implying that she only chose that topic because she herself was Asian and that was the sole reason for her interest. Also during this time in graduate school Mako felt as though she noticed more comments about her race and academic performance, particularly from professors. These comments upset Mako and stayed with her for many years, but she ultimately did not directly respond to these comments. With her conversation with me, she expressed regret about not responding to these comments and wondered what would have happened had she spoken up.

Mako now works as a social worker at a school for students with language based learning disabilities. Though she mentioned that her father would have liked her to become a doctor or lawyer, she describes her family as being “very supportive” of her career choice and is quite happy in her profession. Although she does wonder about what her life could have been like had she pursued the more stereotypical Asian profession of a doctor, lawyer, or scientist, Mako quickly stated that “it was never for me, and I love my job now.” And while she did have to explain and justify her career choice to her family when she first started, she now feels as though her job choice has not impacted any expectations her family has of her and her family proudly supports her current work.

Reflecting on her upbringing and life now, Mako feels as though there are definite parts of her life that have more closely aligned with the Asian excellence stereotype, and there are other parts that have not. Considering her cultural upbringing, Mako recalls that her living in Japan and her family’s culturally Japanese lifestyle had a big impact on her life, particularly of being raised to always be quiet, reserved, and polite. She also notes her high drive and strong work ethic that led to high scores in math and science as a connection and similarity to the Asian excellence stereotype. Contrasting this however, Mako notes that she does not feel as though she fully aligns with the stereotype as chose a career path that is stereotypically different as well as noting that her upbringing while traditional and strict, was not ever extreme to the point that is associated with the stereotypical “tiger parenting.” Overall, Mako feels that she does in some ways fill the stereotype, and in other ways does not. It is something she finds to be complicated and a question that she still wonders about what it means and the impact it has had on her life.

Reflection

I really enjoyed my conversation with Mako. Although we had been colleagues for almost two years, I had not had the opportunity to speak with Mako in depth for this amount of time, let alone about our personal stories. Being able to talk together about our experiences, in all of our commonalities and differences, was especially meaningful for me. One main topic that came up during my conversation with Mako (that is not discussed in Mako story above) was her wonderings and questions about how she was going to raise her one year old daughter. Mako's young daughter is biracial with her being white on her father's side and Japanese from Mako's side. Mako expressed her anxieties and questions she had for raising her daughter in a biracial and bicultural environment. She expressed worry about cruel comments future classmates, friends, strangers, and even family members might make based solely on her racial makeup. We talked about the difficulties of having a "two worlds" life, whether that be bicultural, bicontinental, or biracial upbringing and what impact that might have on one's identity. And ultimately what I came away with was a reinforced feeling of uneasiness while also acceptance, knowing that each individual person will have their own journey and story, based on their racial makeup, cultural surrounding, and perspective on their own identity.

This conversation was something that I have thought about a great deal since Mako raised many questions that I could see myself having one day. I desire to be a mother in the future and wonder what type of environment I want my future child to live in. Some of the questions Mako and I discussed centered around what type of environment she wanted for her daughter and what it means to grow up in completely different cultures both in America and in Asia. Mako was raised in a bicultural and bicontinental environment and given that they live in New York, wondered how she was going to address possible concerns and questions that her daughter might have for her one day regarding language, culture, and identity. She and I also discussed what it

means to raise a child now with the strong influence of social media and its role towards perpetuating stereotypes against Asians compared to when she and I were growing up when social media was not as present. We talked about what impact it has and what those implications are going to be for future generations. Are those impacts going to be positive? Negative? A combination? The hardest part of these questions we determined was simply not knowing. Although we can make predictions, we won't likely know the full implications until much later.

Another thing that we informally discussed, but left a big impact on me was what it means to raise an Asian daughter in the United States. Mako and I had a great conversation about her own experience growing up as an Asian given the fact that she had a bicultural upbringing both in the United States and Japan. We also talked and compared our own upbringings in the United States and the differences based on generation as well as geographic. While we had clear differences based on time period and geographic location, we also shared about the common feelings of confusion, anger, and also sadness that our Asian identities brought us. Both of us experienced these feelings throughout our lives, at different periods, and for different reasons, but it was reassuring and validating to know that despite our different life stories and experiences, there is a shared sense of uneasiness and discomfort in being Asian.

It was a great experience to be able to sit down with Mako and hear about her story and the wonders and questions she has now as a mother herself. We connected on many topics and I came away with feelings of uncertainty, sadness, and also a feeling of joy in that I personally gained a sense of validation that I was not the only person to experience similar experiences and feelings.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a 26 year old woman living in Syracuse, New York. Jennifer identifies as half Japanese on her mother's side and half white on her father's side. During her childhood, Jennifer grew up in Edgewater, New Jersey and describes living in an "affluent neighborhood." Recalling her cultural upbringing, Jennifer describes feeling a heavy cultural influence from her mother's side, Japanese. As a child, her mother often would cook Japanese food, speak to her and her older sister in Japanese, and would try to encourage behaviors that are considered to be more stereotypically Asian of being quiet, reserved, and always polite. Jennifer explains that while her mother's Japanese influence heavily impacted her as a child, she feels as though it ultimately did not result in her being a stereotypically reserved and quiet person. On the contrary, Jennifer describes herself as quite talkative, loud, and not reserved at all when it comes to making jokes and speaking out during class or when something she feels isn't right.

In elementary school, Jennifer went to a school that was primarily one race group: White. She does recall however, a few Asian classmates, and some that she became quite close to as friends. This limited diversity did not bother Jennifer as a young child as it was, "simply what she was used to" and did not think of it as odd until she became an adult. Despite the limitations in diversity, Jennifer recalls feeling pressure growing up to achieve high scores in school and act in a "traditional Asian way" (quiet, reserved, polite). She clarifies though that she strongly feels as though this pressure did not come from any external sources, but rather internal pressure. An internalized expectation of what she should be. She further emphasized that while her mother did have high expectations, they were never exceptionally demanding and that she always was supportive of her daughter's achievements, whatever those might be. Jennifer reaffirms that her childhood was happy and low stress, free from any external pressures to live up to any Asian stereotypes, despite her mother's strong cultural influences.

As Jennifer moved into high school and college, she remembers there not being many Asian or Asian-American students in her program, and even fewer students who identified as biracial. Around this time, Jennifer became more aware of her biracial identity and started to notice even more so that people around her did not always know what race she was. Oftentimes people would assume that Jennifer was Mexican, Middle Eastern, or sometimes Native American. While this at times frustrated Jennifer, the majority of the time she laughed it off and would simply say, “Oh yeah, I’m half white and half Japanese.” Because of this confusion, Jennifer feels that people rarely had expectations or stereotypes assumed about her due to the fact that people hardly thought she was Asian.

Jennifer also does not specifically recall any teachers or classmates making any comments about her academic performance in connection to her race. However, she and her friends frequently talked about race, often in a joking and lighthearted way. Throughout high school and college, Jennifer describes working very hard in school and achieving very high scores and grades. She worked “incessantly” noting, “Yeah I was a bit obsessive when it came to school.” Reflecting on this Jennifer believes that this was something separate from her race and a part of her personality. She does however admit that she wonders if there was some stereotyping of excellence that was internalized in her that unconsciously resulted in her working extra hard in school.

Currently, Jennifer is enrolled in a second bachelor’s program focused on environmental engineering. Explaining why she decided to pursue a second bachelor’s program she said, “I wanted a degree that would get me a better job” (Her first bachelor’s was in East Asian Studies). When discussing her current program Jennifer noted that there was a significant amount of Asian and Asian-American students and expressed curiosity about whether that was because

environmental engineering was considered more “acceptable” to some in Asian cultures. While in her program now, Jennifer does not feel as if there are any expectations or stereotypes placed upon her by classmates or teachers. She does however, recognize that she does achieve very high scores in her grades and wonders if this might be because of continued internalized pressure she has experienced throughout her life or if the high drive and focus she strives for is a result solely because of her personality and work ethic.

Reflecting on her life, Jennifer describes her upbringing as a mix of Western as well as Asian, but notes that there were heavy Japanese influences from her mother’s side of the family. As a student, Jennifer identifies with the Asian excellence stereotype in respect to her high grades and intense work ethic. She also credits her mother’s heavy Japanese influence as another for her connection to the Asian excellence stereotype. Despite this, she does not feel as though she fully associates or “fills” the stereotype because of her mixed racial identity. Growing up biracial, her physical appearance of medium tan skin, dark eyes and dark hair, created a lot of ambiguity and confusion not only for other people, but for herself as well. Jennifer described being confused in adolescence, particularly during middle school, about her identity. She questioned if she was considered *fully* Asian, or if she was considered *too* white. These feelings of uncertainty and discomfort resulted in her not being able to fully believe if she could truly align with the Asian excellence stereotype.

As an adult now, Jennifer feels as though she is continuing to come to terms with her identity and lightheartedly noted, “I will be wrestling with this for the rest of my life!”

Reflection

I first met Jennifer about ten years ago as a friend of my brother’s and over the past decade, I have had the pleasure of becoming close with Jennifer’s family. And one of the first things

Jennifer and I connected on was the fact that we were both Asian. Over the years we have talked often about our experiences of being Asian, and yet despite all that I knew about Jennifer and her family, I was still surprised to learn that she felt confusion and uncertainty about her identity.

While Jennifer noted that she does not know if she feels “fully Asian” because of her biracial identity, I was even more surprised when she joked with me about how I was just like her in that I had experienced a bicultural experience growing up. Admittedly I laughed and did not know what she meant when she first said this, but after thinking about it for a moment, Jennifer was right. Being adopted and growing up in a white family has allowed me to live this almost bicultural life; something I used to think about a lot when I was a child, but less so in recent years, so much that I almost forget sometimes that I was raised in a white family. Because for me, I do not view my family as my “white family” or my “adoptive family,” but simply, my family. This off the cuff comment was all meant in a light hearted manner and in fact, it made me reflect even further about how much of my life had paralleled Jennifer’s in ways that I had not thought about prior to this interview.

Much like Jennifer, I have experienced both white, or western influences as well as Asian. I have had this weird balance I’ve had to juggle throughout my life and a state of questioning where I have wondered where I fit in. It is a clash of cultures that leaves an impossible state of trying to have a happy medium where in reality, neither side feels complete or comfortable. For American culture, I’m too Chinese to be an American. And for Chinese culture, I am too American. Identifying as Chinese-American is difficult. While not the same situation or story as Jennifer, I have been reflecting a lot on this question of “What does it mean to have both White (or Western) and Asian influences, and how does that shape one’s identity?”

Something else of note that I found to be striking from my conversation with Jennifer were her comments on how she studied and worked for hours as a student, yet she feels as though this was part of her personality and separate from her identity as an Asian. As I was reflecting more on this, it reminded me of my own educational experience as a student and how I myself spent a considerable amount of time doing school work. While I never considered myself to be the highest performing student, I did always feel like I had a need to do things immediately and done exceptionally well in school. Again I never thought of myself to be a huge math or science whiz, or an exceptional student for that matter, but the pressure was there. The pressure to be the best and the feelings that I had to work hard and always go above and beyond (even if I didn't end up doing this in reality.) I think more about this and what it could mean. For two of my participants, Jennifer and Lily, they described a similar mindset of having pressure and a constant feeling of having to do well in school. From this pressure, they both ended up working extremely hard and going on to achieve high scores in school. Additionally, they both state that this was something they felt as though it was part of their personality and work ethic and separate from their identity as Asians. However, they did both acknowledge the possibility that there was an internalized pressure that was felt from the Asian excellence stereotype.

For me, I'm not sure if I feel as though my drive to be excellent was separate from the pressure of the stereotype. I think that in some respect, it is impossible for me personally to separate myself from my Asian identity and all that it comes with. I believe that for me, identifying as an Asian automatically comes with expectations and stereotypes that I have to live with so having to separate myself from that, including the Asian excellence stereotype, is impossible. I find it so fascinating and intriguing that Jennifer and Lily feel as though their work ethic and experiences as students is separate from their Asian identity, but just as pleased to

reinforce the idea that all Asians are not the same in their work habits or their choices in how they identify.

Kaila

Kaila is a 24 year old Chinese-American woman living in New York City. She was born in Guangxi, China and adopted to Memphis, Tennessee when she was one year old. Growing up, Kaila was not raised in a diverse neighborhood, with the majority of the population identifying as white. This was something that Kaila never thought of as odd or different, but just something she was accustomed to. As a child, Kaila did not experience a “culturally Asian” upbringing, but instead described a heavily religious upbringing as her family practices Christianity. When describing her upbringing and family identity, she reflects on the Southern roots her family has and how living in the South has had a large impact on her identity, with more conservative values and with a large Christian influence on her life. Kaila also notes that she feels “very white” as she was adopted and her family is white and there were no Asian people around her to have a cultural influence on her life. Being adopted into a white family was something that as a child and teenager, Kaila experienced occasional discomfort with. She felt as though she did not fit in with her family and that her Asian appearance against her white family made her stand out in a way that made her “stick out in an awkward way.” As a result of this, Kaila did not want to label herself as adopted when she was a child, instead wanting to “just be white” so that she could fit in with her family and friends that all identified as white. Her adoption has been a major influence in how she identifies as an Asian, and continues to be an aspect of her life that influences her evolving identity. At times Kaila has felt that she was not a “true” Asian because she could not speak the language, she did not know much about the culture or history of China, and her name was even changed to an American name upon her adoption. On the other hand,

Kaila has also experienced confusion and awkwardness in her state as an American. Her physical Asian appearance has also led her to feel like she is not a true American, but a perpetual outsider in multiple places including her home state of Tennessee, school, and even her family at times. During childhood, her adoption was a constant reminder that she was different from the rest of the people she interacted with. Despite the feelings of uncertainty regarding her identity and at times feeling confused at her state as an American, Kaila clarified that this was not a reflection on her family. She further emphasized that she has felt nothing but love and acceptance from her family saying, “My family has been great. I love them and they love me for who I am. Any feelings of insecurity or not feeling like I didn’t belong is me and not at all a reflection on anything my family has specifically done.”

In Kindergarten through eighth grade, Kaila attended a small private school in Memphis that she recalled to be “very white.” In early elementary and middle school, Kaila did not ever feel like was in a community in which she fit into. She felt her physical appearance made her stick out amongst everyone, something that made her feel out of place in school and eventually became something she came to resent. In high school she moved on to a private high school, also located in Memphis. This school was an all girls school that Kaila describes to be, “not diverse at all in race, gender, or ethnicity, or anything for that matter.” Due to the limited population of Asian students, Kaila described an environment where any stereotypes of Asians did not exist in her environment, as there just was not much exposure to any Asian cultures or stereotypes.

When Kaila was in high school, she gradually became more aware of stereotypes of Asians and the high academic expectations that are stereotypically placed on Asians. It was around this time in high school that Kaila recalls starting to feel an internalized pressure to do well in school, particularly in the math and science areas. In school she felt as though she needed

to study excessively and work hard in order to achieve high grades. Kaila did go on to work and study long hours, which also led to her achieving scores and grades in classes and on tests. While Kaila noted that she did in some regard fit into the stereotype of working hard and achieving high scores because of that work, the pressure to do so was primarily internal. She notes her intense drive as part of her personality, and something she wonders if it would always be with her, regardless of whether she was Asian or not. In high school, when remembering interactions between her and her classmates, Kaila describes jokes that her friends would often make to her. Her friends would joke about how being Asian would allow her to automatically understand information in school and automatically do really well. Though Kaila found these comments to be jokes and would even laugh at them, she still was bothered by them, but did not respond to these comments directly. Over time as the jokes from friends about her race and academic performance continued, Kaila started to play along with her friends sometimes saying, “Yeah I should totally get this because I’m Asian” and “Of course I did well, I’m Asian.” When reflecting on these responses, she feels as though this was a way for her to laugh about the situation and not make her feel so uncomfortable. Years later however, she noted how she wished that she didn’t feed into the jokes that were hurtful.

Although most of the comments from her classmates were jokes, Kaila did recall a specific memory of a teacher that made a comment to her based on her race. When applying for colleges, Kaila’s teacher commented on how her grades and extracurricular activities were not sufficient enough for her to be accepted into her chosen schools. This particularly bothered Kaila as her grades and listed extracurricular activities were perceived as the equivalent of her white classmates. Her teacher vocalized how as an Asian, Kaila needed to have a specific profile, one that she did not fit. This teacher also stated that Kaila would not be able to be accepted into

college because she was not making high enough grades. This event deeply bothered Kaila and made her feel as though she was being compared to a stereotype, one that she did not fit, and was being judged for it. She commented, “I think that this teacher just had this specific idea of what Asians were supposed to do and she had this list in her head of what I needed to do, and I just wasn’t checking those boxes. It was offensive and hurtful.” Kaila confronted her teacher about this and expressed that she felt like she was being picked on for not filling this stereotype, a response that she later felt proud to have had stood up for herself.

In college, Kaila attended a public university in Memphis and later went on to attend graduate school in New York City. Both schools she recalls as being very diverse and something that helped her feel more comfortable in her Asian identity. While in college and graduate school, Kaila did not recall any specific memories of expectations of actions and comments from either classmates or teachers about her academic performance.

Thinking back on her early childhood experiences to now, Kaila does not feel as though she fits into the Asian excellence stereotype. She notes her limited exposure to Asian culture in early childhood, white family, and outgoing and talkative personality as factors that do not lend herself to fitting into the stereotype. Additionally, she describes that while one crucial aspect of her life, her drive and determination for excellence in school does more closely align with the stereotype, she points out that she does not feel as though this is solely because of her Asian identity, but rather a part of who she is, as Kaila.

Reflection

During my conversation with Kaila, one of the main points that we connected on was how our adoption as babies impacted our feelings of fitting in, or not fitting it, both in our families and at school. Both being raised in white families, we shared the feelings of not feeling

“like part of the family” with our physical characteristics of dark hair and dark eyes making us feel like they were clear and obvious markers that we were not the same as our family. These feelings of insecurity have impacted not just our emotional reactions to certain situations, but also how we viewed ourselves as Asians, and what it meant to identify as an Asian. What does it mean to be an Asian, especially in the United States? What does it mean to be an Asian raised by a white family? How can you fully feel like you are “part of a family” when the rest of the world views you as a perpetual outsider?

For me, being able to have this conversation with Kaila really allowed me for the first time in a long time, to think more deeply about what all these questions meant. And knowing that everyone has a different experience, I’m even more conscious of how different upbringings and personal experiences can impact the way a person feels about certain aspects of their identity as well as their own personal feelings towards themselves. In my experience, I have always had a mixed reaction to how I respond to these questions. Some days I love to talk about adoption, while other days, the very topic can make me irritated and resistant to talking about myself all together. Being able to hear similar thoughts and feelings from Kaila was incredibly validating to me and gave me comfort in my discomfort. Sharing our experiences normalized the confusion and gave me a sense of peace.

Another prominent topic that Kaila and I talked about was our limited exposure (and also sometimes none at all) to Asian culture. While Kaila noted that she was not exposed heavily to Asian culture, I’m reflecting on my own experiences. Growing up my family made a strong effort when I was young to incorporate Chinese culture into my life. My parents signed me up for Chinese classes where I could learn the language. We tried to eat Chinese food a few times a week, and we even watched a few Chinese movies and television shows, though I don’t

remember the titles. My family made a very strong effort to incorporate Chinese culture into my life, but I vividly remember that around the time I entered fourth grade, it all started to fade. I remember I stopped attending Chinese classes, we still ate Chinese food on occasion but there wasn't as much effort into having it every week, and interest in trying to find Chinese shows and movies seemed to rapidly fade.

At the time I don't remember thinking very much about the sudden decrease in this exposure to Chinese culture, but now as I think about it more, I wonder what implications this might have had on me, if any. Did I subconsciously feel like I lost a part of my Asian identity? Did I stop associating myself as "fully Asian" and instead think of myself as being in an awkward state between "not Asian" enough, while also not being "not American" enough? It's something that I'm not really sure the answer to, but this whole project has provided me with the opportunity to stop and ask myself these questions, and truly reflect and wonder about these questions in a way that I have never done so before.

Sun

Sun is a 36 year old Korean-American woman living in New York. Born in Los Angeles, Sun spent time as a young child in Korea and Pennsylvania, but spent the majority of her life growing up in Westchester, New York. She also spent every summer as a child in South Korea with her family. Sun's family is "very proudly Korean" as her parents immigrated from South Korea and her South Korean influence has had a large impact on her life. As a child, Sun was not allowed to speak English at home, she ate traditional Korean food everyday, and all media and literature in her home was in Korean. Her family's choice to have this model at home was intentional and reflecting on this as an adult, Sun described how happy this made her feel to have this "very

Korean upbringing.” This influence in her life is an important part to her identity and she is very proud to have such a strong cultural background.

Further describing her childhood, Sun emphasized her family’s deep values of excellence in education and always performing to the best of one’s ability. She recalls discussing Ivy League Colleges and taking the SATs as early as five years old with her family. As a child, Sun believed that her family always had this implicit expectation that excellence was the goal. In school, she also recalls that her father would occasionally make comments about her academic performance if she made a few mistakes on a test or a quiz. Yet despite the high academic standards her family expected, Sun never felt as though her family was ever disappointed in her if she were to struggle or not receive an A in school. She fondly describes her family as loving, supportive, and encouraging, all the while still maintaining high expectations for success. In addition to the high academic expectations, her family was also very formal, especially when talking to elders. As a child Sun remembers using formal language and performing bowing practices to elders and during mealtimes, with an emphasis always on respect and humility.

In elementary school, Sun was one of three Asian students in her class. Originally, she was also placed in English as a second language classroom, as she spoke only Korean at home and the teachers thought she did not speak English. Upon learning that she spoke English fluently, she was quickly moved out of that classroom into a general education classroom. She entered Kindergarten at a higher performance level than her peers so her teachers felt that they had to raise their expectations for her (that she felt she had to meet), and as she continued throughout elementary school, the expectations of “being ahead” continued to be passed on throughout elementary school, and thus started a pattern of always feeling like she had to perform above her peers.

In high school, Sun also remembers feeling pressure and high expectations from her teachers to do well as she was high performing. The higher the expectations, the more she felt she had to rise to meet them. More than this, Sun had an older sister at the same school with her that helped add to the level of pressure and high demands. Sun describes, “My sister and I were always high performing but because my sister was older, she set high expectations for me by doing so well. By the time I came to the class, they (the teachers) would already expect excellence because my sister was excellent.” This situation did not necessarily bother her, but she did note that it caused her to work harder and strive for excellence more than if she did not have that added pressure of her sister’s excellence. During this time, her family’s high standards for education did not wane, but also remained fully supportive and loving. While in college and graduate school, Sun maintained high grades and noted that she studied often and worked hard. In college especially, Sun remembers that she did exceptionally well in math and science courses, but they were not her passion. She found these subject areas to be “uninteresting” and “hard to follow.” Yet despite this, Sun notes that she constantly felt pressure to do well and felt as though she had to be the best at everything she did.

After graduate school, Sun chose not to follow the STEM path that is done for many Asians instead pursued a path she found more meaningful and fulfilling: education. Currently, Sun works as a graduate school professor of education in New York City. As a progressive educator, she draws on the irony of how the education she teaches does not focus on pushing students to achieve high scores and working excessively, but instead, stresses the importance of working to the best of one’s ability and warns of the dangers of pushing students to exceptionally high standards; something she did not do herself as a student. Her stance on education and what

she stresses to her students is the complete opposite of what she experienced herself, but one she firmly believes in.

Reflecting on her experiences as a student and family life, Sun does feel that for the most part, she does fit the Asian excellence stereotype. Elaborating on this more she notes the Ivy League degrees that she possesses, strong (“almost excessive work ethic”), and culturally traditional Korean upbringing that she feels more closely align with the Asian excellence stereotype. Despite this, Sun feels that part of her does not fit the stereotype in the sense that she is very talkative and considers herself quite outgoing. She describes her relationship with the Asian excellence stereotype as complicated, but one she admits that she does fall into to a significant degree.

Reflection

After talking with Sun, I was so fascinated with her story and what she shared with me. For me, I particularly find this intriguing because it serves as another example of how different one's opinions can turn out to be, oftentimes being influenced by one's own experiences. For Sun to have such a drastic difference in educational beliefs from her upbringing is so fascinating to me. It makes me think a great deal about how our upbringings can impact us, and how that will influence our choices in our own lives going forward.

One element from Sun's interview that stuck with me was her discussion of how she was constantly compared to her older sister. The fact that her older sister excelled at school and her teachers therefore raised their expectations for Sun, was something that was surprising to me in some aspects, and other ways not. As a teacher myself, I do find it interesting to notice similarities and differences between siblings. Another reason I find it particularly memorable that Sun recalled being compared to her older sister in school is because I was also frequently

compared to my older brother when we were in school. Throughout elementary school my brother and I attended the same school. My brother found school to be easier in the sense that he did not struggle as much as I did to understand material or execute work. He had an easier time performing in class and overall, did perform at a higher level than I could at the time. This was particularly noticeable as I entered the grades that he already completed and in two instances, in third and fourth grade, had the same teachers he had. What made this more challenging was the occasional comments I received from the teachers noting how I was related to my brother in a tone that seemed to be surprising and disapproving because I was not performing in a similar manner then he did. While different from what Sun and her sister experienced, I was reminded of my own experiences in school and how I was also frequently compared to my brother. What was more was the race and gender differences between my brother and me, (my brother is White,) also played a role in how I responded to the comparison to my brother. Though I did not necessarily feel like I had to be smarter than my brother, I did have a feeling in the back of my mind that I should be performing at the same level as my brother was able to when I was his age. It was an awkward feeling and I didn't necessarily know how to process my feelings then, but I vividly remember there being feelings of awkwardness and insecurity. As an adult now, I wonder how this could have been influenced in part just because I was Asian and I felt that that alone should have allowed me to be smart. At the time I did not think too heavily on these feelings and the reasons behind it, but as an adult now I do wonder where those feelings came from.

The other main takeaway from my conversation with Sun was her sharing her desires to adopt, hopefully from Korea. Being able to discuss this was especially memorable and special as I was able to share my own experiences with adoption. Sun shared her questions and wonderings about adoption and specifically the adoptive mother-adoptive daughter relationship. While not

directly related to the Asian excellence stereotyping, it was particularly meaningful to me that Sun, someone whom I had only just met, felt comfortable to talk to me about such an intimate and vulnerable topic. I shared with Sun my own experiences with adoption and how my story of interracial adoption had impacted my experience with Asian culture, history, and ultimately, what it means to be a Chinese-American woman living in the United States. It was wonderful to be able to hear about Sun's story as well as her desires for the future, and how that all impacts her thoughts and choices today.

Analysis of Results

Although the term "Asian," often brings up only one image that is stereotypically given to all Asians, there is a vast diversity of language, culture, and history within the Asian racial group. Abrams (2019) states that there are over 20 different cultures, languages, and religions within the continent of Asia, thus allowing there to be specific distinctiveness for each person. Within my five participants, their backgrounds and specific ethnic identity shows some of that diversity. Of my participants, Lily and Kaila identify as ethnically Chinese, Jennifer identifies as half Japanese and half White, while Mako and Sun identify as Japanese and Korean, respectively. Additionally, all of my participants have spent a significant portion, if not all, of their lives in the United States, allowing them to associate and identify with American culture in some form.

One of the most common stereotypes I researched is that all Asians and Asian Americans excel at academics, but particularly in the math and sciences areas. Describing this, Shafer writes, "On average, Asian American students obtain higher grades, perform better on

standardized tests, and are more likely to finish high school and attend elite colleges than their peers of all other racial backgrounds, regardless of socioeconomic status” (Shafer, 2017, para. 4). *All of my participants who do not represent a random sample, are college educated and 3 out of 5 have advanced degrees.* Two attended Ivy League schools.

In regards to specifically having high achievement in mathematics or science, my interviewees, Lily, Mako, and Sun stated that they did tend to score high in the mathematics and science areas, as well as enjoying those subjects more compared to other subjects. This aligns with the stereotype of Asians doing exceptionally well in the mathematics and science areas (Shah, 2021). The other two participants stated that while they did well in those subjects, they did find themselves to be less interested in those areas.

Interestingly, all of my interviewees, Lily, Mako, Sun, Kaila, and Jennifer have noted that when they were students, they did put in extra effort into their schoolwork. Each of them, at different parts of their life, started to feel at some point an internalized pressure to live up to the stereotype that all Asians excel at academics. And from this, they felt as though they had to somehow meet this image, resulting in them choosing to study for long periods of time. On the other hand, Kaila and Jennifer in their interviews described feeling an internalized pressure, partially as a result of the stereotype that all Asians are good at all academics, that they *had* to perform exceptionally well. They reported that despite this pressure, that for *some* people could result in decreased performance, they did go on to receive high scores in those areas, similar to Fuchs findings (2017).

In a study focusing on the cognitive differences between Japanese, Chinese, and American students, researchers Chen, Lee, and Stevenson (1993) investigated whether or not there were differences cognitively between Asian and American students that could have

explained why Asians were scoring higher than their non-Asian peers. From their study they were able to determine that the reasoning behind Asian American students' achievement in math was not based on cognitive ability, but rather personal and family choice to dedicate more time and attention to academics. Similar to this finding, all of my participants have recalled that at some point in their careers as students, they have studied long and "almost excessive" hours in response to internalized pressure to live up to the image. However, all my participants have noted that this was ultimately done on their own, independent from specific family pressure or cognitive ability. Their dedication to school work has been their individual choice, based on pressure to live up to the stereotype.

Lily's decision to work harder came from internal pressure. She recalled "I didn't have pressure from other people. I think the pressure I felt to do well in school came from me, it was mostly internal. It's just innate, it's just who I am. I always felt pressure to be the best at everything, especially in school. But I don't think the stereotype helped with that." In result of this pressure and feelings that she had to be the best at everything, she did go on to study and work very hard which ultimately awarded her high grades in school, but particularly in the math and science areas. Similar to Lily, Jennifer also worked very hard in school, even self describing her work and studying as "incessant." In our conversation together she even said, "Yeah I was a bit obsessive when it came to school." Sun and Kaila also discussed the pressure that they felt to do well in school and the long hours that they invested in school work that resulted in them going on to achieve high scores in the math and science areas. Finally, Mako also discussed that when in school, she felt a certain pressure to excel particularly in the math and science areas but did not recall spending long hours studying but did achieve high scores in math and science.

Elaborating on the academic achievement of Asians, Qiu and Zhao describe the individuality of each person. They write, “Asian-American emphasis on academic achievement seems to either be the will of individual students and their parents or a choice imposed by their social environments. Either way, the research unanimously suggests that Asian Americans' academic excellence is really a matter of “choice,” not a matter of biological imperative” (Qiu & Zhao, 2008, p. 342). And, it is also crucial to note that two of my participants, Kaila and Jennifer, said they felt that their work ethic was based on their individual personalities, separate from any stereotype based on racial makeup, consistent with Qiu and Zhao’s findings.

Another key factor in my participants’ pressures to do well in school was their own respective choices for education. Jennifer, Lily, Kaila all acknowledged that while they did choose to spend long hours in school studying, much like Qiu and Zhao’s point of “Asian Americans' academic excellence is really a matter of “choice,” not a matter of biological imperative,” all three also distinguished that they believed that this was something that was part of who they were, their individual desires to do well, and separate from their race. However, all three did express wonderings to me during our conversations about whether this was in fact connected to the pressure of the stereotype and they were just unaware of it at the time.

Contrasting this, Mako and Sun recollected that when they were in school, they felt pressures from family and classmates that made them feel as though they had to work extra hard. This is different from Jennifer, Lily, and Kaila who all believed that their pressures were more internal, while Mako and Sun’s pressures were more external. The split between these two groups, Jennifer, Lily, and Kaila, and Mako and Sun is particularly intriguing as the participants within each respective groups share commonalities. Jennifer, Lily, and Kaila were raised by White parents (with the exception of Jennifer who is biracial and also was raised by her

biological parents, and a Japanese mother). Mako and Sun were raised by their biological parents and had a “traditional Asian” influence on them and their upbringing. Also interesting to note is the age and generational differences between these two groups. Jennifer, Lily, and Kaila at the time of their interviews ranged in age from 23-26. Mako and Sun at the time of their interviews were 37 and 36, respectively. Whether the ten year age differences between these two groups in the end is the result of the significant distinctions is up for discussion and interpretation, but I felt that the commonalities between these groups could not be ignored.

Another common stereotype for Asians is that Asian parents are Tiger Parents which has a profound impact on how they raise their children and the expectations placed upon them (Chua, 2011). The term “Tiger Parents” refers to a very strict parenting style, with the parents demanding that the children always receive the highest achieving grades, that they study for excessive hours, and that anything less than excellence is unacceptable.

In my sample, none of my participants reported having been raised with a Tiger Parent style of upbringing. Noteworthy is that one of my participant’s, Sun, shared that while her parents were strict and traditional, they were never in her mind seen as Tiger Parents to the extent described by Chua. Sun’s experience as the daughter of Korean immigrants, aligns more closely with the way that Lui and Rollock (2013) describe a traditional Asian style of parenting, “characterized as collective units that emphasize cultural values of unity, cohesion, and avoidance of shame and losing face” (p.451). Mako, daughter of Japanese immigrants, noted that while her parents had high expectations for her and verbalized these to her, they did not insist that she study for multiple hours a day. Her parents, like Sun’s, were traditional and strict, but never extreme to the point that is associated with the stereotypical Tiger Parenting as described

by Chua. Both Sun and Mako did note though that their parents raised them to be quiet, reserved, and polite, which does align with the stereotype of traditional Asian parenting.

These findings about Asian parenting, though intriguing and true for some families, are not universal, as they are a stereotype. Three of my participants, Lily, Kaila, and Jennifer described not being raised by very strict parents at all. In fact, Lily and Kaila were not even raised by Asian parents, but rather by their adoptive White parents.

Similar to Sun and Mako, Jennifer, raised by a Japanese mother who was an immigrant and a White American father, described feeling a heavy cultural influence from her Japanese mother's side. As a child, Jennifer often ate Japanese food, spoke to her family in Japanese, and was encouraged to to be quiet, reserved, and polite. In addition, Jennifer also recalled that when she was in school, her mother did have high expectations for her in her schoolwork, but that they were never exceptionally demanding. She felt that unlike Chua's stereotype of Tiger Parenting, which places high grades as a priority, her mother was always supportive of her academic achievements, whatever those may be. Finally Jennifer stated that despite having these factors in her life, she emphasized that her family was hardly ever strict and while there was a highlight on Japanese culture, it was not extreme and her childhood was happy, and low stress.

On the other hand, Lily and Kaila, raised by White adoptive parents, had an upbringing that did not match the research that Lui and Rollock found, which only includes children raised by Asian parents. In her conversation with me, Lily described her upbringing, "I grew up with a single mom who is White and there was nobody in my life to have an Asian influence on me. My Chinese identity, aside from my appearance, was not a part of my life. I feel very White." Likewise, Kaila also did not describe an upbringing that was not "culturally Asian" but rather one that had a heavily Christian and Southern influence. Lily and Kaila's differences in

upbringing compared to my other three participants, shows that any assumptions about parenting of individuals who identify as Asian must be carefully reexamined.

Research has shown that adoption has a large impact on the adoptees and can impact their views on identity as they grow up (Mohanty, 2013). Two of my participants, Lily and Kaila, were adopted from China when they were babies. They reported that adoption has had a huge impact on their lives and also complicated their views about themselves regarding identity and their own relationship with the Asian excellence stereotyping. Discussing the change that occurs through adoption, Cao and Pitman (2013) stress that when international adoption occurs, adoptees face losing their birth parents, birth country, birth language, and birth name, oftentimes happening all at once. This is something that Lily and Kaila have directly experienced through their adoption upon being adopted to New York and Tennessee, respectively. Furthermore, Buchanan et al (2018) discuss the difficulties that can occur during transracial adoption which can leave the adopted children feeling alienated from their adoptive parents while also not feeling like they “fully belong” in either racial group. From this Asian adoptees can feel either too American to be Asian, or too Asian to be American. What Buchanan et al describes is similar to what Lily and Kaila have experienced. In their interviews with me, they both expressed similar sentiments to me about not feeling as if they fully belonged to a racial group. Commenting on her identity specifically, Lily said, “I think for me it has always been a bit weird. On the outside I look Asian obviously and always will be Chinese, but on the inside, I feel very White, and probably always will.” Elaborating further on her difficulties with distinguishing her identity growing up Lily also commented on a resistance to do things that were culturally Chinese such as attending Chinese New Year parties, trying to learn the language, or learning about the culture and history as she felt as though she did not identify with that.

Likewise, Kaila also made similar comments to me about her evolving identity. She explained that her physical appearance made her feel like she was “sticking out in an awkward way. As a child she even commented on how she would not want to label herself as adopted, instead, wanting to “just be White.” Kaila also noted that she felt like she was not a “true” Asian as she could not speak the language, did not know much about the culture or history of China, and she did not have a Chinese name any more. Despite the challenges that might occur during adoption, equally important of note is the love and support that some adoptive parents give to their adoptive children. Commenting on the dynamic of Asian adoptees and their White parents C.N. Le (n.d.) writes, “Many others have enjoyed extraordinary levels of love and understanding from their non-Asian adoptive parents” (para. 25). This again aligns with Lily and Kaila’s story as despite challenging feelings surrounding identity and their adoption, they feel loved by their families. When I asked about this specifically, Lily reassuringly and quickly said, “I have a mom that loves me and I have a good life. But sometimes I just wish I knew who my biological parents are.” Correspondingly, Kaila reaffirmed similar sentiments stating, “My family has been great. I love them and they love me for who I am. Any feelings of insecurity or not feeling like I didn’t belong is me and not at all a reflection on anything my family has specifically done.”

An additional area that I explored during my research was the issue of racism and how it impacts Asians and Asian Americans. What I have found is that racism is a very real issue and has affected all of my participants in some form. Markedly, a significant amount of racism occurs in schools. For Asian youths, much of the racism comes in the form of bullying from peers. This includes mocking language (tone and accent), gestures (such as pulling eyes back to mimic traditionally small Asian eyes,) and making stereotypical jokes (Abrams, 2019). To add on to this, in the journal article, *Racialization, Schooling, and Becoming American: Asian American*

Experiences, authors Lee, Park, and Wong describe, “Schools teach students about race, racism, and their racial positioning both through formal policies and practices and through everyday interactions between educators and students.”

Lily, Kaila, and Mako recalled that when they were in school, they would regularly receive comments from classmates such as, “Well of course you got an A, you’re Asian!” if they had scored high on a math test. They both also remembered comments suggesting that they would automatically understand information because they were Asian. More than this, they also distinctly remember that classmates would pull their eyes back to mimic the physical appearance of small eyes that many, but not all, Asians have. This automatic assumption that they would score high on a test or instantly understand a math topic solely because of their race was not only inaccurate, but also a form of racism because they were stereotyping and assuming something based only on their race. Lily, Kaila, and Mako’s experiences of receiving jokes and having their physical characteristics made fun of clearly follows Abrams’ points of the ways in which Asian youth face racism in schools.

Moreover, Lee, Park, and Wong’s statements of students experiencing racism through “everyday interactions between educators and students” also rings true for my participants. When Kaila was in high school and applying to college, she had one interaction with a teacher in which the teacher claimed that Kaila’s academic performance and extracurriculars were not sufficient in order for her to be accepted into her chosen schools. Kaila’s teacher specified that as an Asian, Kaila needed to have a specific profile, one that she did not fit. Mako also experienced an interaction with a professor in graduate school that was racist. While working on her graduate school thesis focusing on the commodification of the Asian female body, a graduate school professor incorrectly suggested that Mako chose the topic exclusively for the reason that she

herself identified as Asian. Mako and Kaila's experiences directly correspond with Lee, Park, and Wong's statement that schools teach students about racism, and that students *do* experience racism, through everyday interactions between educators and students.

While it seems clear that generalizations based on group membership can sometimes be accurate for some aspects of some individuals, overall, it feels more urgent to me than ever that we as a society become more aware of the damaging assumptions we make all the time about who Asian Americans are and the corresponding devastating impact that such racist beliefs bring.

For me, this analysis raises more questions than it answers. What are the ways that we can dismantle these stereotypes? How can we prevent further generations from developing these harmful beliefs which then become dangerous actions? Why as a society do we continue to tolerate such unacceptable behavior?

Personal Story

My own story with the Asian excellence stereotype is one that started before I think I was even aware of it. I was born in Jiangxi, China and adopted right after I had just turned one year old. I moved from China at one year old and landed in New York City with my family, a White family all with blonde hair and blue eyes and little knowledge of what it would be like to raise a child of a different race. For the first few years of my life, my family made many strong attempts to help me retain my Chinese culture and identity. My family signed me up for lessons where I could learn Mandarin, celebrate Chinese New Year each year, and they made an effort to decorate my room with many "Chinese things" like Chinese paintings and calligraphy. We even

tried to watch Chinese films and television shows for a little bit. Plus we ate Chinese food regularly, with my mother even attempting to cook “authentic” Chinese cuisine.

While my family made a strong effort to help me retain a sense of my Chinese identity, there were also notable things that they did that did not help in this way. The most significant change my parents chose to make that I have never fully accepted or appreciated was their decision to change my Chinese name of Rao Li Lin, to a more “American name,” Gillian Sherman. This decision to change my name was something that I have come to resent, especially as I entered my teenage years, and have never had full closure with. For me I felt as though it was a crucial part of my identity that was taken away from me without my knowledge or consent. However, my parents did make the conscious effort to include the letters of my Chinese name, Li Lin, in my American name Gillian. Within the name Gillian, there are two ls, two is, and one n. While this was something that my parents consciously did for me as a way to try and maintain some connection to my Chinese name, it still remains an area that feels like I have lost a part of my Chinese identity.

When I was in elementary school, I often heard comments about Asians being really great at school. At the time I didn’t fully know what this meant, but I did know that I was Asian and the frequent comments I heard from people about Asians being great at school made me feel as though I had to do the same. The challenging part was that I did not feel like I was good at school. In elementary school I felt quite self-conscious about myself, especially when it came to school. I found school to be really hard and I never felt like I was performing at the same level as my classmates. And I was not. For much of elementary school I struggled with a learning disability and had a really hard time keeping up with classmates in class, especially in math, the one subject that I was *supposed* to be really good at. Math became this daunting thing that I

feared and never seemed to understand. Numbers were a foreign language to me and the idea of having to perform in math class was paralyzing. Despite the debilitating effects of a learning disability, the most debilitating thing was the fear that I was not living up to this stereotype that I should be really good at math, something that even as young as eight and nine, I felt.

Around the time that I was in fifth grade, I started to better understand what all the comments about the Asian excellence stereotype meant. I interpreted the comments as meaning that as an Asian myself, I had to be excellent at all areas in school. The internalized stereotype really had impacted me to the point of feeling so intimidated by school that I rarely even participated in school, but especially in math class. It created this pressure to live up to the stereotype, but despite the pressure, I never felt as though I was actually living up or fulfilling the stereotype, in part due to my challenges in math as well as my own insecurities with school overall. One day in fifth grade I even recall my math teacher saying to another teacher, "I don't understand why she can't do math. She's Asian, isn't she supposed to be good at this?" That teacher said this away from me and quietly enough so she thought I wouldn't hear this, but that comment is forever etched in my mind. It strengthened my own complex with math and the feelings that I had to be excellent at it, while struggling so significantly with it. The fact that I was so intimidated by the thing I was supposed to be good at is not lost on me and while it is something that I do chuckle at now as an adult, the feelings of guilt and embarrassment were very real and painful.

I was very lucky that in middle and high school I was able to change schools and receive a large amount of support with my learning disability. Although math never did become my favorite topic, or my strongest topic, it did become less daunting and I was able to gain some confidence back in that area. I was very privileged to be able to receive the support I did. Though

my own learning and confidence in school significantly improved, the internalized pressure to live up to this stereotype continued throughout college, and even a little bit into graduate school, though it is gradually fading as I become older and more confident in my own abilities as a learner.

Another aspect that added complexity to my own relationship with the Asian excellence stereotype was the fact that I was adopted. Being adopted is something that throughout my life, I have had mixed feelings about. When I was younger and did not have a full understanding of what being adopted meant in terms of biology or racial difference, I was pretty confused by it and I didn't understand why I looked different from my parents, or why people were always commenting on it. My brother and my father have always looked very similar and people would constantly comment on the physical features that both my father and brother shared as well as mannerisms and behaviors that my brother seemingly inherited from my father. There were so many things that people loved to comment on about the connections, but they never seemed to realize how hurtful this was to me, primarily because I knew that I would never be able to share those characteristics with my family. Around the time that I entered my teenage years, I gained a much better understanding of what it meant to be adopted and how being adopted affected me from my racial makeup and my own connection to the Asian excellence stereotyping. Though I had heard comments about Asians doing well in academics when I was younger, even though I didn't quite understand them, they still became internalized within me. The comments I received from classmates and even on one occasion a teacher, stuck with me and made me feel as though I had to be excellent in school.

For a long time I felt confused about how I identified. While I definitely felt Asian, there was another element to me that caused conflicting feelings. My upbringing in New York City in

my White family made me wonder about my American identity. Even though I grew up in New York City my whole life, my Asian appearance prevented me from fully feeling like I was an American, after all, and I did not actually become an American citizen until I was eight years old. At the same time, I wondered a lot about if I could fully identify as Asian. With my name changed, my inability to speak the language, and my zero knowledge of Chinese culture and history, I felt as though I could not fully identify as Asian either. So despite feeling pressure to do well in school according to the Asian excellence standard that Asians are stereotypically held to, I did not know how to feel for a long time about this issue in particular.

My own journey with the personal impacts of the Asian excellence stereotype as well as my own identity as an Asian will always be evolving. I think that for the rest of my life, I will experience a range of different emotions and reactions to how Asians are stereotyped. Although I did not realize it at the time when I first began this project, I think that I wanted to do this project so that I could give myself an opportunity to really reflect and think about what all of this meant to me. I wanted to learn more about other peoples' stories, but also my own as well. What I learned from this project was that there is no single story for Asians and Asian Americans, and that it is important to see a person holistically.

Conclusion

The process of doing my own research through interviews as well as learning about outside research was so valuable and meaningful to me. It had a great personal significance to me as an Asian American woman and also equally important as a teacher. As I came to the ending stages of my project, I reflected a lot on why this project was important to me. This project was important for me to do as someone who identifies as an Asian American. This

project was important for me because I felt the pressures (and still do today in some capacity) to perform in a certain way. This project was important to me because it allowed me to ask myself deep questions about my own identity and how I view myself as a learner. Finally, this project was important to me because as a teacher now myself, I feel it is my responsibility to learn about my students and always see them as individuals and not ever assume that they can or can not do something in school based on a stereotype. I believe that as teachers it is important to continue to learn about our students and the different experiences they face in life. When I thought more deeply about the implications of this project, I am reminded that these stories that I learned more about serve as an example to me that no story is the same. Also equally important of note is that while all of my participants had differences ranging from adoption, parenting status, family immigration, and age, they also had stark similarities including coming from financially stable and loving families, being able to attend school, and not having to face the difficulties and challenges that some families do while immigrating. These identifiers set apart my participants and remind me that these five stories alone do not by any means cover all stories experienced by Asians and Asian Americans. The experiences of Asians and Asian Americans are diverse and it is crucial that as educators we are always mindful of those differences when interacting with Asian students in our classrooms.

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Appendix A: IRRB Approval Letter



Bank Street
Graduate School
of Education

**Bank Street College of Education
Institutional Research and Review Board**

March 25, 2021

Dear Gillian Sherman

We have reviewed your application for your study *Asian Excellence: Three Stories*. The documentation that you submitted meets the requirements for IRRB Exempt status approval.

We wish you all the best in your research.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the IRRB at researchreview@bankstreet.edu.

Sincerely,

Cecelia Traugh, Ph.D.
Dean, Bank Street Graduate School of Education
Margaret McNamara, Ed.D.
Senior Director of Student Learning Support and Community Initiatives
Co-Chairs, Institutional Research and Review Board

cc:
Jessica Blum-DeStefano, Leadership Department
Carla Espana, Teaching & Learning Department
Robin Hummel, Leadership Department
Dirck Roosevelt, Teachers College, Columbia University

<p>For office use only: Reviewed by: Margaret McNamara Date <u>March 25, 2021</u> Approved <u>March 25, 2022</u> Revisions required <u>n/a</u></p>

Appendix B: Sample Consent Letter

I am conducting research on the stereotyping of Asian Excellence. I am investigating this because I am curious to know about the impacts it has on Asian and Asian-American people both as students and as teachers. If you consent to participate, you will be asked to be interviewed by Gillian Sherman for one hour, one time.

If you take part in this project, you will be providing information to the interviewer on your personal experience regarding impacts of the Asian excellence stereotyping. Taking part in this project is entirely voluntary. If you take part, you may stop at any time without penalty.

If you want to know more about this research project, please contact me at

gsherman@bankstreet.edu or at 917-968-1806. This project has been approved by the Institutional Research Review Board at Bank Street College of Education. Information on Bank Street College policy and procedure for research involving human participants can be found on the college website at:

<https://www.bankstreet.edu/graduate-school/academics/institutional-research-review-board/>.

Additional questions or concerns you have about the way the research is being conducted should be addressed to the Co-Chairs of the Institutional Research Review Board, Dr. Cecelia Traugh and Dr. Margaret McNamara at ResearchReview@bankstreet.edu

I _____ give Gillian Sherman permission to interview me for her graduate school thesis. I understand that all information provided will be kept under password protected files, and any identifying information will be removed in written works. In addition, I understand

that I have the right to retract or change any information from my original statement at any time. Should I desire to do this, I understand that I need to communicate this in written form to the interviewer.

Signature: _____

Date: _____