Locating Identity: Narratives of Ethnic and Racial Identity Experiences of
Asian American Student Leaders of Ethnic Student Organizations

Thesis

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By

Annabelle Lina Estera

Graduate Program in Education

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Susan Robb Jones, Advisor

Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna
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Abstract

The purpose of this constructivist narrative study was to explore how Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations (ESOs) experience their ethnic and racial identities in the context of their ESO and the classroom. The primary research questions guiding this study were: (a) How do Asian American student leaders of ESOs experience and make sense of their ethnic and racial identities within the context of their involvement with their ESO; (b) How do Asian American student leaders of ESOs experience and make sense of their ethnic and racial identities within the classroom? Data collection included semi-structured interviews with six participants. Data was analyzed through Clandinin and Connelly’s “three dimensional narrative inquiry space” (2000, p. 49) for elements of interaction, continuity, and situation. Restories of each participants’ narrative were presented. Findings from this study include: (1) Complex and varied understandings and negotiations of ethnic and racial identities within the ESO context; and (2) Salience of ethnic and racial identity in the classroom associated with negative, challenging, and positive experiences.
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Vita

2005........................................................Princeton High School

2010........................................................B.A. Interdepartmental Studies, University of Rochester

2012 to present ........................................Graduate Administrative Associate, Office of Student Life, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Education
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I set the context for understanding ethnic and racial identity development of Asian American students at the intersection of student involvement and the classroom. First, I introduce the topic of ethnic and racial diversity in higher education of which Asian American students are a part. Next, I describe broad trends regarding Asian Americans in higher education, specifically highlighting their growth and diversity and the complexities of ethnic and racial identity development. Following, I discuss student involvement, with a focus on ethnic student organizations (ESOs). After I provide this context, I overview the methodology and describe the significance of this study.

Impact of Increasing Ethnic and Racial Diversity in Higher Education

The student population in American higher education is becoming increasingly ethnically and racially diverse (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Although immigration policy (e.g., U.S. Immigration Act of 1965) has changed the demographic of the country as a whole, legislation and policy at the institutional level (e.g., affirmative action) has increased educational access. This increased diversity has prompted changes in institutional practice as well as the development of new lines of research.

Institutionally, efforts have been made to increase compositional diversity (Chang, Milem, & antonio, 2011). Broadly, institutions have striven to “introduc[e] gender, racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity into their curricula and to create campus
environments that welcome people from different cultural backgrounds and provide opportunities for diverse individuals to learn from and about one another” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 637).

A more racially and ethnically diverse student population has been researched in multiple ways. Demographic diversity has led to research that supports a racially and ethnically diverse student body, framed as contributing to positive developmental outcomes for all students (e.g., Chang, 2002a; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Second, scholars have grown cognizant of foundational and current research inappropriately generalized to wider populations; theories and findings based on a narrowly-defined racial or ethnic sample cannot be applied to individuals who do not hold those identities (McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 1996). As a result, researchers created identity developmental theories specific to certain racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Ferdman & Gallegos, 2012; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Kim, 2012). Currently, a lack of research exists that validates these theories and those studies that do, “rarely address the applicability of the models to higher education or student affairs specifically” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 269).

**Asian American Students in Higher Education**

While Asian Americans are arguably one of the most misunderstood populations in higher education (Chang, 2011; Museus, 2009), their visibility is increasing in both public discourse and higher education (Museus, 2011). Because of their increasing numbers and the need to more deeply understand this population, a number of policy
reports have highlighted the diversity within Asian Americans and the need to move past stereotypes and towards more nuanced understanding of this population (e.g., Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007; CARE, 2011; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2007).

**Growth and Diversity**

The 2010 Census revealed that the Asian population in the United States “grew faster than any other race group in the United States between 2000 and 2010,” increasing from 4% to about 5% of the total U.S. population (10.2 million to 14.7 million; U.S. Census, 2012, p. 1). Specifically, the largest groups are Chinese Americans (3.8 million), Filipinos (3.2 million), Asian Indians (2.8 million), Vietnamese (1.7 million), Korean (1.6 million), and Japanese (1.3 million; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Within higher education, “Asian American students’ representation has nearly doubled each decade, from 0.8 percent in 1971 to 8.8 percent in 2005” (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007, p. 1).

Asian Americans are categorized in a number of ways. A long list of terminology is used to refer to Asian Americans, including Asian American (AA), Asian Pacific American (APA), Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA), Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI), Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AANHPI), Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA), and each has a slightly different nuance. The Office of Management and Budget’s Revision to Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity defined Asian Americans as “person[s] having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far
East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” (Revisions to the Standards, 1997, p. 58786). Asian Americans are also grouped regionally by country of origin: East Asian (China, Japan, and Korea), Southeast Asian (Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia), and South Asian (India, Nepal, and Pakistan) (Liu, Murakami, Eap, & Hall, 2009).

Under the encompassing label of Asian American lies the heterogeneity of the people it includes (Hune, 2002). Each ethnic group has experienced a unique history in coming to the United States (Chan, 1991; Liu, Murakami, Eap, & Hall, 2009) and “subgroups differ in their levels of academic preparedness, ability to pay for college, and their need to balance academic, employment, and family obligations” (U.S. Government Accountability Office as cited in Chang, 2011, p. 65). Although “many Asian American students are succeeding in higher education, many others are struggling academically, culturally, psychologically, and socially” (Museus, 2011, p. 70). Research on Asian Americans that has disaggregated data has found that Southeast Asian Americans suffer disproportionately in areas such as socioeconomic status and educational occupational attainment (Museus, 2011; Yeh, 2002, 2004). Furthermore, although categorizations are made around region and individual ethnicities, “U.S. Census data suggest that…within-race diversity is increasing” (Museus, 2011, p. 74).

**Complexities of Ethnic and Racial Identity Development**

Ethnic and racial identity development theories describe “the processes through which individuals explore their racial and ethnic identities as well as the concomitant
changes in identity, attitudes, values, behaviors, and affiliation that occur during these processes” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 115). These processes are grounded in definitions of ethnicity and race. Although the meanings of ethnicity and race are contested and continue to evolve, race is generally accepted to be a sociopolitical construct, while ethnicity is regarded as “social categorization based on the culture of an individual’s ancestors’ national or heritage group” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 130). Both are considered to be defined by external sources. On the other hand, ethnic identity and racial identity are psychological constructs that involve a sense of attachment or belonging to one’s ethnicity(ies) or race(s), respectively. For Asian Americans especially, “[t]he relationship between racial identity and ethnic identity is complex and not fully understood, and all of these complexities are embedded in the term Asian American” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 124).

Researchers have created models of ethnic and racial identity development for people of color (Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1990), as well as specific to Asian Americans (Kim, 2012), South Asian Americans (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997), Filipino Americans (Nadal, 2004), or have modified existing psychosocial identity development models in order to be more culturally appropriate (Kodama, McEwen, Liang & Lee, 2002). Most major theories borrow the idea of stages or statuses from ego identity theory (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) and describe identity as a dynamic phenomenon that changes over time.

The process of identity development for Asian Americans in higher education can be influenced on a number of levels. Widely-held perceptions of Asian Americans are
embedded in mainstream thinking, including the model minority myth which posits that all Asians Americans are successful and do not need support, and the perpetual foreigner myth, that suggests people of Asian descent in America can never be truly be accepted as American (Chang, 2011; Lee, Wong & Alvarez, 2009). Institutionally, research has demonstrated that Asian Americans experience campus climate differently than other racial groups (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kotori & Malaney, 2003; Park, 2009) and experience microaggressions due to their race (Poon, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal & Torino, 2007). Although Asian American students may not be able change these forces that exist on a macro-level which may have a negative impact on ethnic and racial identity development, the opportunity for student involvement, specifically ethnic student organizations, may provide a venue in which Asian American students have more positive experiences related to their ethnic and racial identity.

**Student Involvement**

Among other postulates, Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984) posits that “the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (p. 519). A substantial body of research supports this idea and the positive impacts of student involvement and engagement in college (Fischer, 2007; Montelongo, 2002; Tieu & Pancer, 2000).

By participating in student activities such as student organizations and other campus activities, students are able to “learn through action, contemplation, reflection,
and emotional engagement” (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004, p. 11). They also provide opportunities for leadership, time management, collaboration, and goal-setting (Hawkins & Larabee, 2008; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). Involvement is not only limited to out-of-class experiences, and can also refer to the extent to which a student is engaged with their coursework (Astin, 1984).

**Asian American Involvement in Ethnic Student Organizations**

Ethnic student organizations are an important part of student life in higher education (Hawkins & Larabee, 2008; Urciuoli, 1999) and are an avenue for student involvement. Indeed, an increase of Asian Americans on college campuses has contributed to the growth of Asian American student groups with a range of interests, such as specific careers, religions, and ethnic cultures (Chang, 2002b). Asian/Asian American-interest Greek organizations have gained popularity, and can be said to function “in ways more similar to their African American counterparts than to the mainstream Greek letter organizations” (Chang, 2011, p. 63). These groups serve different purposes for their members, from a venue for advocacy, to cultural expression (Arminio et al., 2000; Chang, 2002; Ko, 2012), and their members join for different reasons (Kwon, 2009).

Research on ESOs has generally explored the affective impact and influence of joining ESOs, such as the organizations’ importance in fostering students’ adjustment to and membership in the university (Hawkins & Larabee, 2008; Museus, 2008), providing comfort and cultural support (Hawkins & Larabee, 2008), and feeling a sense of
belonging to the larger university community (Sidanius, Laar, Van Levin, & Sinclair, 2004). Research has investigated the impact of ESOs on students’ ethnic and racial identity development to a much lesser extent. Although Inkelas’ (2004) quantitative findings on Asian American students indicate that involvement in ethnic cocurricular activities impacts one’s sense of ethnic awareness and understanding, there remains room to more deeply investigate how students experience and make sense of their racial and ethnic identities, and the experiences that contribute to these understandings. A qualitative study by Fried (2001) examined the ethnic identity experiences of members of two organizations, a Jewish and Latino/a organization, but no such research has been done on Asian Americans. Research on members of ethnic student organizations has not considered experiences outside of the organization, such as in the classroom, and their impact on identity. However, research has found that racial and ethnic minority students experience the classroom differently than their White peers at a predominantly White institution and benefit from having a diverse faculty and curricular content that includes their cultures (Quaye, Tambascia, & Talesh, 2008).

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this constructivist narrative study was to explore how Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations (ESOs) experience their ethnic and racial identities in the context of their ESO and the classroom. The primary research questions guiding this study were:
1. How do Asian American student leaders of ESOs experience and make sense of their ethnic and racial identities within the context of their involvement with their ESO?
2. How do Asian American student leaders of ESOs experience and make sense of their ethnic and racial identities within the classroom?

**Overview of Methodology**

A constructivist narrative inquiry served as the framework for this study to explore the narratives of Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations. Narrative inquiry examines peoples’ stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and is well-suited for studying identity (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

Using purposeful sampling for information-rich cases (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002) I identified six individuals to interview for this study. I conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant, as well as a follow-up interview for the purpose of member checking.

I relied primarily on Clandinin and Connelly’s “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” approach to explore themes across and within participants (2000, p. 49). Thus, each individual narrative was restoried with attention to interaction, continuity, and situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To create a restory across participants, I compared the themes that emerged in the individual narratives in order to comprehend the similarities and differences in how they experienced and made sense of their racial and ethnic identities.
Significance of the Study

The results of this study contribute to the literature examining the experiences of Asian American students in higher education. A review of five widely-read peer-reviewed academic journals in higher education found that approximately one percent of the articles gave specific attention to Asian Americans (Museus, 2009). Museus (2009) attributed this to the model minority myth, lack of sufficient empirical data on Asian Americans, and an overemphasis on the importance of degree attainment while ignoring other educational outcomes.

This study also adds to the literature on Asian American students by seeking participants of different ethnic groups, or of mixed ethnic heritage. Research on Asian Americans often aggregates data, masking any nuance between ethnic groups, or has samples heavily skewed toward people of East Asian descent (Accapadi, 2012; Chang & Kwan, 2009). As Accapdi (2012) wrote:

While no participant sample pool can (or should be expected to) fully capture the essence of Asian America, skewed samples – those that exclude or marginalize Southeast Asian, South Asian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial experiences and voices – misrepresent Asian America and oversimplify the heterogeneity of the communities under the pan-Asian umbrella. (p. 62)

By engaging in analysis across and within the participants, I presented information specific to the ethnic group of each participant, recognizing that each participant does not
represent the ethnic group with which they identify, as well as identified themes that were common and different across interviews.

This study also adds to student involvement and identity development literature in simultaneously considering curricular and cocurricular experiences. As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) described, research that focuses on one or the other leaves out an important part of the picture. Their review of college outcomes found that learning is holistic and shaped by multiple forces. Notably, “the research published since 1990 indicates that the students’ in and out-of-class experiences are interconnected components of a complex process shaping student change and development in ways we are only beginning to understand” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 629).

Lastly, this research holds relevance by also viewing ESOs as providing racial and ethnic diversity within the institution for all students (Museus, 2011; Uriciuoli, 1999). ESOs can be considered one of the “opportunities for diverse individuals to learn from and about one another” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 637). Inadvertently, “[s]tudents who get involved with the organizations take on the job of defining their racial category as culture…these organizations have the job of creating a multicultural imaginary that enhances the college” (Uriciuoli, 1999, p. 292). The way in which a student group presents itself will be influenced by the way its leaders and members think of their own ethnic and racial identities.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a background for understanding how the experiences of ESO student leaders contributes an additional perspective in the literature on Asian
American identity development and student involvement. The next chapter will further explore relevant themes in the literature on Asian American identity development and Asian American involvement in higher education.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations and how they make meaning of their ethnic and racial identities. Although the focus was on eliciting stories drawn from the context of the ESO and classroom, I will broadly review literature on the experiences of Asian American students in higher education, recognizing the difficulty in capturing the complex and holistic nature of their experiences. I begin by reviewing ethnic and racial identity development models of Asian American students as a framework through which to understand the subsequent topics discussed in this chapter. Following, I discuss two broad categories of topics, organized into external and involvement influences on the experiences and identity development of Asian American students. External influences refer to wider societal views, including the model minority myth, perpetual foreigner myth, and institutional context of campus climate. On the other hand, involvement refers to student organizations students can join wherein they can choose to engage their ethnic and racial identities.

Ethnic and Racial Identity Development for Asian American Students

Ethnic and racial development identity development for Asian American students are complex processes. In order to better understand how researchers have theorized and studied these processes, I will first explore what social scientists mean when using terms related to ethnic and racial identity development: ethnicity, ethnic identity, race and racial
identity. After these terms are defined, I will explore ethnic and racial identity
development models and their application to Asian Americans.

**Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is recognized as a social categorization that is based on the culture of
one’s ancestors’ national or heritage group. Ethnic groups are perceived as having a
“clearly defined sociocultural history and distinct cultural features that are transmitted
across generations” (Smedley as cited in Chang & Kwon, 2009, p. 115). People of an
ethnic group can often be identified by name and genealogy. While some cultural values
can be said to be shared across Asian ethnic groups, there are also values, worldviews,
customs, traditions, and histories that are unique to each group.

**Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity is defined by one’s attachment and sense of belonging to their
ethnic group or culture (Chang & Kwan, 2009). Whereas racial identity is grounded in
oppression and racism, membership in an ethnic group is often characterized by “the
expectation and perception that the group member knows and practices various aspects of
their ethnicity” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 119). These expectations can come from
multiple sources, including family and peers. Although marked by a demographic label
and possible expectations from others based on that label, individuals can choose to reject
entities associated with their ethnic group. In essence, ethnic identity involves an
individual resolving dissonance between how a person is expected to see oneself as being
of a specific ethnic group and how that person wishes to see oneself as an ethnic being
(Chang & Kwan, 2009).
Although some studies have found that ethnic identity is linked to psychosocial adjustment, others have not found the same association (Juang, Nguyen, & Lin, 2006). Although an increase in ethnic identity is often written about in a positive manner, Yoo and Lee (2008), in a study of 128 self-identified Asian American college students, found that high ethnic identity may actually exacerbate the effects of multiple occurrences of perceived discrimination. This finding is consistent with rejection sensitivity theory, because “individuals who identified with and were proud of their ethnic groups may take greater offense and become more sensitive to repeated” acts of perceived discrimination and “thereby experience lower well-being” (p. 71).

**External and internal aspects of ethnic identity.** Isajiw (1990) articulated a differentiation between external and internal aspects of ethnic identity. External ethnic identity is shown through participation in ethnic activities including language usage, food preference, and affiliation. Internal ethnic identity involves a sense of attachment and feeling of belonging. Within internal ethnic identity are three dimensions: 1) cognitive, 2) affective, and 3) moral. The cognitive dimension refers to an individual’s self-image of their ethnic group, knowledge of the group’s historical past, and knowledge of the group’s values. The affective dimension includes two types of feelings: 1) preference for members of one’s ethnic group versus other-group members, and 2) comfort with cultural patterns of the group. The moral dimension refers to feelings of group obligations that contribute to a commitment to group solidarity. Psychologists “have contended that the internal and external aspects of ethnic identity can express themselves independently of
one another…the attitudinal and behavioral expressions of one’s ethnic identity do not always go hand-in-hand” (Chang & Kwan, p. 122).

**Ethnic Identity Development**

In this section, I review models of ethnic identity development. I begin with Phinney’s (1995) model of ethnic identity development, which is applied across ethnic groups. I then review two models that have been created to specifically be applied to the Asian American subpopulations of Filipino Americans (Nadal, 2004) and South Asian Americans (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu, 1997).

**Phinney’s (1995) model of ethnic identity development.** Phinney’s model of ethnic identity development (1990) was based on increasing evidence of commonalities across different ethnic groups. This three-stage model “is based on Marcia’s (1980) adolescent identity model, which itself was derived from Erikson’s (1968) theory of ego identity formation” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 182). In each stage, individuals negotiate the tasks of exploration and commitment (Marcia, 1980). Exploration involves an individual actively questioning and trying out different facets of ethnic identity; commitment involves making firm decisions about identity and seeking activities that align with that decision.

In the first stage of unexamined ethnic identity (diffusion-foreclosure), feelings of ethnic awareness are stagnant. Either ethnicity holds no significance, leading to diffusion, or individuals may have received messages from significant others that they accept, which leads to foreclosure. Ethnic identity search/moratorium is characterized by a growing awareness of ethnic identity that prompts individuals to explore themselves as
ethnic beings. Individuals may feel intense emotions, including anger toward the dominant group and embarrassment of being previously unaware of racial and ethnic issues. The third and final stage is ethnic identity achievement. This stage is marked by an achievement of a bicultural identity where individuals are comfortable with their minority identity but have the capacity to interact positively with people of other cultures. Phinney (1990) asserted that being clear and confident about one’s ethnic identity does not necessarily imply a high degree of involvement and maintenance of one’s ethnic customs” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 123).

Kawaguchi (2003) interviewed fifteen APA college seniors at a predominantly White institution in the Southeast to explore their ethnic identity development. Included in his sample were five Indian Americans, four Korean Americans, three Chinese Americans, one Japanese American, and two of mixed ethnic heritage (Chinese and Japanese; White and Chinese). Six students were identified as achieved because they demonstrated a consistent and substantial level of ethnic practice during their childhood as well as their college years. Three students were identified as being in the moratorium pattern of ethnic identity development. They did not have opportunities for nor interest in engaging in ethnic practices prior. However, their interest in ethnic identity increased in their late adolescent years. Three students were in the foreclosed stage. While they had a clear sense of their ethnic identity, their engagement in ethnic practice was limited. Three students were diffuse, displaying little interest in their ethnic group. They also did not identify themselves as Asian American. As a result of this study, Kawaguchi (2003) suggested that future research explore “how and why levels of ethnic interest and practice
change over time for some students and not for others” (p. 25). He also suggested that “practitioners…provide opportunities for ethnic identity development to all Asian Pacific American students in general. These opportunities may include ethnic student organizations, Asian Pacific American cultural programs, and services provided by the office of multicultural affairs” (p. 25).


The six stages are: 1) ethnic awareness; 2) assimilation to dominant culture, 3) awakening to social/political consciousness, 4) panethnic Asian American, 5) ethnocentric consciousness, 6) incorporation. Stages four and five are unique to Filipino Americans. An individual in stage four views the term Asian American in a political sense, and will likely choose to identify themselves as Asian, instead of, or before Filipino. An individual enters stage five after experiencing an event (positive or negative) that helps them to understand that they, as being of Filipino descent, have been
“unjustly classified in the Asian American paradigm” (Nadal, 2004, p. 57). This individual is now aware of the marginalization of Filipinos as Asian Americans. Anger that used to be directed toward the dominant culture now extends to the entire surrounding society. They want “to be recognized and understood” along with their ethnic community (Nadal, 2004, p. 57). This feeling of double marginalization is not limited to Filipino Americans, but can also be relevant to other ethnic groups, such as those who identify as South Asian Americans (Chang & Yeh, 2003).

**South Asian identity development model.** Ibrahim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu (1997) presented a multidimensional model to better understand the ethnic identity development of South Asians, primarily Indian and Pakistani Americans. The authors asserted that “identity formation in South Asian Americans is influenced by the cultures and religions of the subcontinent” (p. 38). Unlike Nadal’s (2004) model, Ibrahim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu (1997) differentiate between immigrant and U.S. – born South Asian Americans. The authors also point to basic beliefs and values that may be consistent for South Asian Americans. These include: self-respect, dignity, and self-control; respect for the family; respect for age; awareness and respect for community; fatalism; and, humility.

**Race in the United States**

Race in the United States was first conceptualized as a biological phenomenon (Omi & Winant, 1986). This view has largely been rejected in the social sciences, and most agree that the concept of race has been shaped by social, economic, and political forces (Chang & Kwan, 2009). Omi and Winant (1986) described race to be a “sociohistorical” concept, “given concrete expression by…specific social relations and
historical context” (p. 60). Indeed, historically, races were created to “justify the enslavement, exploitation, or expulsion of one ethnic group by another” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 115). Racial groups were placed in a hierarchy, with Whites at the top.

While notions of inferiority and superiority based on race are seen as inaccurate and immoral, race nonetheless matters in U.S. contemporary society. Race is included on several types of forms, from college applications to the census, thus people recognize themselves and others as being part of a racial group or groups. Legacies of slavery, genocide, and exclusion of racial groups are still felt today. Real disparities between racial groups exist in areas such as educational attainment and socioeconomic status. While race is a construct through which people are socially categorized by others, racial identity is an internally defined identity. Omi and Winant (1986) stress its importance and go as far as saying that “[w]ithout a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity” (p. 62).

**Racial Identity**

Given the concept of races, racial identity refers to how an individual identifies with a racial group and is influenced by how they are socialized (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006; Helms, 1995). Racial identity is influenced by “how individuals deal with the effects of racism, give up dominant cultural views of their own racial group in exchange for self-definition, and develop positive attitudes toward their own racial group” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, pp. 116-117).

Claiming a racial identity of Asian American and defining this outside of wider societal definitions reflects an internally defined identity. The term Asian American
came out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s when Asian Americans of different ethnic groups came together to fight oppression. The term Asian American was chosen to “express solidarity among Americans of Asian descent based upon their common histories and experiences of discrimination and exclusion” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 115). Thus, Asian American became a social and political identity.

Taking pride in racial identity is seen by some Asian American students as divisive and unnecessary. For them, “issues or race and racism may be regarded as peripheral to both their daily lives and their identity” (Alvarez, 2002, p. 35). In focus groups with APA students, Inkelas (2003) perceived a lack of knowledge regarding APA history. She suggested that the overriding absence of Asian Pacific American history in efforts of multicultural education may have influenced the participants to minimize themselves and their group’s role in past and current civil rights discourse. Hershey (2009) conducted a study that looked at discussions of socio-cultural issues and self-awareness. Hershey (2009) found that Asian Americans had self-awareness scores that were statistically significantly lower than those of all other racial groups. Hershey theorized that this may be due to Asian cultural values of collectivism and interdependence that may make it difficult to separate an awareness of self apart from that of the whole or community. This study also had notable findings when comparing the frequency of socio-cultural discussions and the amount of variance in self-awareness it explained. Although multiracial students were found to partake in socio-cultural discussions more frequently than students from other racial groups, “socio-cultural issues predicted less of the variance in self-awareness for Multiracial students than it did for
Asian American students, who had the lowest frequencies of discussions of socio-cultural issues” (Hershey, 2009, pp. 125-126). Thus, although Asian Americans had socio-cultural discussions less frequently than their peers of other racial groups, these discussions had a significant impact on their self-awareness.

**Racial Identity Development**

To investigate the process by which people of color develop their racial and ethnic identities, a number of racial and ethnic identity development models have been created. In this section, I review the different conceptualizations of the racial identity development process for Asian Americans. I begin with Helms’ (1995) People of Color racial identity model and its application to Asian American students (Alvarez, 2002; Alvarez & Helms, 2001). I continue with Kim’s (2012) Asian American identity development model. Recognizing the link between racial identity and psychosocial development (Pope, 2002), I review Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee’s (2002) model of psychosocial development for Asian American students. Finally, I review theories that emphasize racial consciousness, including Accapadi’s (2012) Asian American Identity Consciousness Model and Osajima’s (2007) exploration of conscientization.

**Helms’ (1995) People of Color racial identity development model.** Helms’ (1995) People of Color racial identity model follows a tradition of racial identity theory in which race is regarded to be a sociopolitical construct. While previous theories and models of racial identity presented typologies or movement through linear stages, Helms (1995) introduced statuses which are interactive and mutually exclusive. For people of
color, movement through five statuses involves overcoming internalized racism and greater complexity in processing racial messages.

Individuals in the initial conformity (pre-encounter) status demonstrate a minimization of one’s racial group, affinity for White standards, and lack of awareness of societal inequalities and concerns that their group faces. The dissonance (encounter) status is characterized by feelings of ambivalence in which individuals begin to feel a sense of difference among their White counterparts and wonder about their own racial self-definition. The next status, immersion/emersion involves glorification of one’s racial group and aversion of perceived elements of White culture. Internalization is marked by a positive commitment to one’s own group and ability to interact in an objective manner towards members of the dominant group. Integrative awareness status represents a balance in identity and recognition of interconnectedness between racial groups. Although individuals in this status value their own identity, they also feel empathy towards other oppressed groups and may engage in collaborative activities (Helms, 1995).

Alvarez (2002) described how Asian American students may experience each of Helms’ statuses as well as how they may be challenged and supported (Sanford, 1966). Asian American college students in the conformity status may idealize White norms and reject an Asian self, and thus may seek opportunities in the White campus community and avoid Asian or Asian American students and organizations. Students may be challenged by activities that cause them to recognize that race is a salient construct in society that contributes to conflict among individuals and groups. Support may come in
the form of validating one’s feelings of wanting to fit in with the White community and exposing them to positive aspects of Asian American history.

For individuals in the *dissonance* status, their attitudes of White idealization and Asian denigration may be interrupted by experiences that signal to them differential treatment based on being Asian American (Alvarez, 2002). Challenge may come from membership in a ethnic student organization or Asian American Studies course. Supports can include validation of feelings, and students may feel disillusioned and confused.

For those in the *immersion/emersion* status, Asian Americans will adopt a self-definition that affirms their racial identity and involve themselves in solidarity efforts with other Asian Americans (Alvarez, 2002). Because an emotional intensity characterizes this stage where one focuses on their own group, it may be a challenge for students to show empathy and patience to peers who do not possess the same level of awareness. In order to help channel this new emotional energy, student affairs educators can assist these students in understanding what it means to strategize with an activist agenda as well as the consequences and implications of their activism.

In the *internalization* status, Asian American students develop a personal definition of Asian American (Alvarez, 2002). Challenge can come in the form of having students evaluate their perceptions of Asian American culture and White culture, while support may come in affirmation that having different views than that of the wider group does not necessarily compromise their identity as Asian American.

In the final status of *integrative awareness*, individuals have fully processed personal and group definitions of Asian American (Alvarez, 2002). They are also able to
think about their Asian American identity in relation to their multiple other identities. Students in this status may be challenged by examining aspects of their identities they gave little thought to before. Student affairs educators can help to facilitate this exploration.

A study by Alvarez and Helms (2001) utilized Helms’ (1995) model to investigate how Asian Americans psychologically cope with and internalize racial experiences. The authors hypothesized that racial appraisals, or the regard that one has for a racial group, would be related to Asian American racial adjustment, which includes racial self-esteem and awareness of racism. Participants were mainly undergraduates from a mid-sized private University on the East Coast and filled out questionnaires to determine their racial identity, racial appraisals of Asian Americans, and awareness of racism.

The authors found that both racial identity statuses and reflected racial appraisals were significantly related to collective self-esteem. In terms of racial identity statuses, “more sophisticated schemas of racial identity…were associated with a positive sense of collective self-esteem, whereas less sophisticated schemas…were associated with a negative sense of collective self-esteem” (Alvarez & Helms, 2001, p. 227). Consistent with the characteristic of individuals in the Immersion-Emersion and Integrative Awareness statuses expressing pride in their racial identity, individuals in these statuses had higher self-esteem. Also, “individuals who believed that Asian Americans generally had a high regard for other Asian Americans were also more likely to have a high regard for themselves as Asian Americans” (Alvarez & Helms, p. 228). Results also suggested that other Asian Americans may have more influence in shaping the development of
Asian Americans’ racial identity than White Americans. However, one limitation of the study is its inclusion of only three Asian ethnicities: Chinese, Korean, and Indian.

**Kim’s (2012) Asian American racial identity development theory.** In 2012, Kim updated her theory of Asian American identity development (2001) to be named Asian American racial identity development in order to delineate the theory as one of racial identity development and “further clarify the distinction between racial and ethnic identities” (p. 139).

Kim’s Asian American racial identity development model (2012) describes how Asian Americans come to accept their racial identity and work through internal identity conflicts in a society dominated by White norms. Similar to Helms (1995), Kim’s (2012) model involves negotiating and challenging internalized racism. This model also contains five entities, but these are stages that are distinct and sequential. Movement between stages as well as the experience within each stage depends mainly on their immediate social environment.

Prior to any schooling, individuals can be said to be in the *ethnic awareness* stage (Kim, 2012). Because of this, identity is viewed through interactions their families. In the second stage of *White identification*, schooling has begun and students start to learn cultural norms. They may have negative interactions with their peers in which they are made fun of or made to feel “other” as an Asian American. In this stage, Asian Americans may experience active or passive White identification. Those who grow up in a predominantly White environment will likely experience active White identification. Their response is to attempt to fit in by rejecting an Asian identity and embracing White
standards. However, others who grow up in racially mixed neighborhood may experience passive White identification and have a positive development of ethnic identity, although they still perceive Whites to be the dominant reference group. In *awakening to a social political consciousness*, individuals become aware that negative encounters they have had are due to a racist social structure and there are political and social implications for those who have an Asian American identity. Whites move from being the reference group to the antireferent group. *Redirection to Asian American consciousness* is marked by a sense of pride in their identity beyond that of oppression and further exploration of what it means to be of Asian descent in America. Asian Americans realize that while they had some knowledge of their heritage, they lacked knowledge on the Asian American experience. Support from others helps in this transition. In the last stage of *incorporation*, individuals are secure in their identity as Asian American. Whereas individuals previously immersed themselves in familiar Asian American settings, they form relationships with members of other races and are able to engage with other aspects of their own identity.

Kim (2012) made note of how college students she has worked with have responded to this model. Some students have expressed that a paradigm shift during the third stage can be hard to distinguish from the fourth stage. In other words, “*awakening to social political consciousness* and *redirecting to Asian American consciousness* may be seamless and felt as one stage” (Kim, 2012, p. 153). Kim (2012) also conducted a workshop in April 2010 with seventeen Asian American college students; fourteen of these students believed their experiences aligned with the stages of her theory.
**Relationship between ethnic and racial identity.** Kim (2012) explained why this model emphasizes racial identity rather than ethnic identity. She notes that although ethnic awareness is one stage of the model, the overriding developmental trajectory is not of an individual searching for elements of their heritage. As explained by the theory, understanding of one’s ethnic heritage is a necessary part of racial identity development, but it is also possible that individuals do not move beyond this to more fully develop their identity as Asian Americans.

Movement beyond the stage of *ethnic awareness* is often related to involving oneself in political movements that help in developing a new point of view which recognizes racism against people of color (Kim, 2012). Thus, while Kim (2012) acknowledges the ethnic diversity of Asian Americans, she believes there is a common experience of stereotypes and prejudice towards Americans of Asian descent:

Just as a Black person is treated primarily on the basis of the color of his or her skin in this country regardless of ethnic membership (for example, African, Jamaican, Cape Verdean, etc.), most Asian Americans experience a similar social dynamic. It is their racial membership, not their ethnic membership, that impacts how Asian Americans feel about themselves in this country. This is the primary reason for formulating AARID as a racial rather than an ethnic identity theory. (p. 156)

**Accapadi’s (2012) Asian American identity consciousness model.** In critique of racial and ethnic identity stage models that operate under the assumption that Asian Americans begin to explore their identity through an ethnic or racial lens first, Accapadi
(2012) created a model which has multiple points of entry for an individual’s exploration of their identity. These points of entry include: ethnic attachment, family influence, immigration history, external influence and perceptions, self as other, and other social identities. This model is significant in recognizing the “likelihood that one is simultaneously negotiating multiple identity development processes” (Accapadi, 2012, p. 69). The model is “dynamic…informed by interdisciplinary scholarship, acknowledges multiple heterogeneous Asian Americas, and honors the intersection of racial identity with other social identities” (Accapadi, 2012, p. 72). The model is nonlinear and nonhierarchical.

**Conscientization**. Osajima’s (2007) exploration of conscientization addresses the avenues through which Asian Americans may develop their racial identity, specifically in terms of developing a pan-Asian American critical consciousness. Osajima (2007) wrote on the processes of conscientization, a term coined by Brailizian educator Paulo Freire. In this study, Osajima (2007) interviewed 30 Asian Americans “who professed a pan-Asian American critical consciousness and commitment to social action” (p. 61). Reflecting on this journey to consciousness, participants identified moments which prompted them to think about how their lives as Asian Americans were connected to larger historical and social forces” (Osajima, 2007). Respondents mentioned different sources for this information, including Asian American studies classes, student group programs, workshops, and mentors. Osajima (2007) also pointed to conscientization as being comprised of both an intellectual, cognitive element, and an affective one that is formed mainly within social settings.
Asian American psychosocial development. Recognizing that psychosocial student development theory borne out of research with predominantly White student populations may not be wholly applicable to Asian American students, Kodama, McEwen, Liang and Lee (2002) constructed a model of psychosocial development for Asian American students using Chickering and Reisser (1993) as a foundation and starting point. While they kept the seven vector content areas intact, they introduced different tasks that an Asian American student may face in their development, framed in the “context of two external domains…Western values and racism from U.S. society and Asian values from family and community” (p. 46). They also changed the order and emphasis of the vectors, with identity and purpose as central to their model.

In applying the model, they advocated for opportunities through which Asian American students can learn about their cultural heritage with the help of role models, such as through Asian American studies programs and ethnic student organizations. This is because they assert Asian American students will experience greater development as they begin to see themselves in a broader societal context. Opportunities such as these allow students to explore and question definitions of “who and what is normal or developed” (Kodama et al., 2002, p. 56).

Complexities of Ethnic and Racial Identity Development

While my discussion thus far has separated the discussion ethnic and racial identity development, the boundaries between the two are complex and intertwined. Researchers assert that people have both ethnic and racial identities and that both develop continuously. In theory, the two develop alongside each other, but research has not
investigated if the development of one tends to precede the other and in what ways they influence each other (Chang & Kwan, 2009). Furthermore, ethnic and racial identity are often conflated; Asian Americans themselves do not always make a clear distinction between race and ethnicity (Kuo, 2001; Mac, 2011). I begin this section by discussing the “racialization of ethnicity” (Kibria, 2000) and concept of identity salience (Chen, 2005; Chen, 2009; Hurtado, Ruiz, and Guillermo-Wann, 2011), two areas of complexity in discussing racial and ethnic identity development. I conclude this section by discussing how Asian American racial and ethnic identity development are further complicated by situating Asian Americans in an American society that continues to evolve in this era of globalization and increased movement of people, yet also bears racist legacies of the past.

Racialization of Ethnicity

Kibria (2000) asked the question “How does the marker ‘Asian race’ shape the production of ethnic identity?” (p. 81). After interviewing sixty-four second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans between the ages of twenty-one and forty to explore their informal social encounters with non-Asians, among her main findings was an assumption of “sameness and the related dynamics of the racialization of ethnicity,” wherein “ethnic identity, labels, practices, and symbols acquired racial meaning and form” (Kibria, 2000, p. 81). For participants, the racialization of ethnic culture became apparent in situations wherein 1) they were believed to have knowledge of Asian cultural practices that were not associated with their own ethnic group, and 2) other people collapsed distinctions between ethnic cultures into a “generalized Asian culture” (Kibria, 2000, p. 83). For
example, one Chinese American participant mentioned how her colleagues, mostly White males, assumed that she was familiar with Japanese cultural norms. Though she challenged this assumption and tried to educate them on their incorrect assumption, some colleagues still held on to their initial assumption. Another Korean American participant shared an experience at her daughter’s talent show. Her daughter’s teacher said “how nice it was that [her daughter] was learning Asian dance” (Kibria, 2000, p. 83). Even after she tried to correct her teacher by explaining that it was specifically a traditional Korean dance, she felt that the teacher did not appreciate her making this clarification.

Salience

Salience refers to the relevance of race or ethnicity to an individual’s overall identity at a particular time. This can be triggered by external and internal catalysts. External catalysts include verbal and nonverbal behaviors that increase the awareness of one’s “Asianness.” Internal catalysts, “reflect the individual’s conditioned sensitivity to the potential implications of racial salience during cross-racial interactions” (Chang & Kwan, 2009, p. 116). Salience may change depending on the situation and relational context (Yip, 2005). Contexts can describe the “social, cultural, and political environment” (Chen, 2009, p. 176), and include changes including entering a particular occupational field, shift in geographical location, racial diversity, and others’ attitudes and knowledge about Asian Americans (Chen, 2005). Kim (2012) described a hypothetical example in which a Chinese American woman may more strongly express ethnic identity as Chinese when with her family, while she may feel a stronger
connection to racial identity as Asian American when interacting with White peers in a classroom setting.

Hurtado, Ruiz, and Guillermo-Wann (2011) conducted a study to identify “pre-college factors and college experiences associated with a heightened salience of racial identity for college students” (p. 3). They found that higher racial identity salience was associated with discussing race in both informal and formal settings through curricular and co-curricular activities. Participants who experienced discrimination and bias also had higher racial identity salience.

In her dissertation, Chen (2005) surveyed Asian Americans to better understand how Asian Americans conceptualized their multiple identities. Participants included 287 Asian Americans, ranging from age 18 to 63. Over half of the participants (57.8%) identified as second-generation. Chen (2005) found that ethnicity, race, and gender were the most salient social identities for her participants. Chen (2005) also found that participants generally felt that certain social identities (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status) were ascribed to them more strongly by society than themselves.

Chen (2009) described three ways in which individuals manage multiple social identities: 1) focusing on one social identity, 2) compartmentalizing identities in distinct categories, and 3) integrating identities. Focusing on one salient social identity may be related to the factor of identity being internally versus externally defined. An individual who passively accepts society’s definition agrees with what society deems to be their most salient social identity (externally defined). On the other hand, an individual who
consciously defines oneself with a particularly social identity can be said to have internally defined their identity, and have developed an internal sense of meaning related to that social group. In compartmentalizing multiple social identities, an individual recognizes their different identities but perceive them to be separate rather than interacting with each other (Chen, 2009). Multiple identities may be compartmentalized hierarchically wherein some identities are more salient than others, but all are nonetheless relevant. Individuals who integrate their identities try to make sense of how their social identities relate and incorporated into their self-concept and personal identity. They may describe their identities as intertwined and do not experience their identities as discrete categories.

**Asian Americans in a Changing American Society**

Beyond the specific situations that Asian Americans find themselves, difficulties and complexities in considering one’s social identities arise when considering the histories of Asian ethnic groups in America as well as the changing social and political climate. In order to more fully understand how ethnic and racial identities develop, historical, contextual, and situational factors must be considered (Chang & Kwan, 2009). As Kim (2012) wrote, “[t]he experience of identity conflict among Asian Americans is a direct result of living in a society that has institutionalized racism throughout its major structures, cultures, and value systems” (p. 144).

Bhatia (2011) explored “identities located in sociocultural contexts of transnational movement and migration” (p. 345) that are “fractured, shifting, and hybridized” (p. 345). Indeed, Asian Americans of all ethnic groups are diasporic,
bringing elements of the home country when they migrate. Migration to the United States from Asia means there is a potential for cultural practices to collide (Bhatia, 2011). Bhatia (2011) writes:

The rapid formation of diasporas as transnational communities, the collusion between the first and third world spaces, the spread of global contexts, the creation of hybrid identities and movement of highly skilled labor, people, ideas, commodities, artifacts across international borders have led to new configurations of culture and self-other relationships. (p. 348)

Globalization and migration have led to a “complex interconnectedness between local and global practices and the creation of new forms of identity” (Bhatia, 2011, p. 348). Asian American students today are connected to international communities through their traditional cultural heritages, the internet, and travel (Museus, 2011). Additionally, the relationship between Asian countries and the United States is marked by “contested histories, asymmetrical power relationships, and legacies of racism, colonization, and displacement” (Bhatia, 2011, p. 348).

The conception of the family has also evolved. More Asian Americans are marrying out of their Asian ethnic groups as well as racial group. An increasing number of Asian ethnic children are being adopted by White American families. Most of these children are ethnically Korean and Chinese. Researchers have created racial identity development models for multiracial individuals, but none specifically focus on individuals who have Asian lineage.
Lastly, the political and social climate are changing. Today, there is wider acceptance of the racial status quo and more resistance to grappling with issues of social justice. Kim (2012) asks, “[g]iven the importance of the sociopolitical environment in facilitating the development of an Asian American racial identity, how will the current, politically less progressive environment affect Asian Americans?” (p. 153). Museus (2011) raised concern as well. While AAPI college students are becoming more civically engaged, [i]t is less clear how connected and devoted as a group, Millennials are to their racial identity” (p. 60).

External Influences on Racial and Ethnic Identity Development for Asian Americans

Although a shifting and increasingly globalized society complicate our understanding of Asian American identities, there are two related and widely recognized concepts that frame the discussion around Asian Americans in higher education: the model minority and perpetual foreigner myths (Lee, 2006; Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). The model minority myth depicts Asian Americans as being well-off, academically successful, and without need of support services; the perpetual foreigner inscribes Asian Americans as not truly being American. I will discuss these myths as well as their implications on the experiences of Asian American students. After discussion of these myths, I explore how Asian Americans experience the institutional influence of campus climate.
Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth posits that all Asian Americans are successful in academics and their professional lives. This myth is oftentimes perceived as harmless, or even positive (Museus & Kiang, 2009). However, it has had negative consequences. Buying into the myth, opponents of equal opportunity policies point to Asian Americans' supposed universal success to try to prove that racism does not exist (Museus & Kiang, 2009). On an individual level, the myth can produce stress for students who then disengage in the classroom (Museus, 2008a).

History. Facilitated by the model minority myth, beginning in the 1970s, Asian Americans began to be taken out of affirmative action initiatives. Though community groups and student groups alike articulated the way in which collapsing Asian Americans into one group ignored the needs of struggling subgroups, the pattern continued. As enrollment of Asian Americans grew in the 1970s and 1980s, the public looked to the model minority myth to explain this phenomenon. In time however, the perception grew that Asian Americans were too successful and were taking over campuses. Schools took on nicknames reflecting this phenomenon, including MIT as “Made in Taiwan” and UCLA as “United Caucasians Lost Among Asians” (Lee, 2006, p. 7).

Misconceptions stemming from the model minority myth. Museus and Kiang (2009) discussed and deconstructed five misconceptions that are associated with the model minority myth. First, Asian American students are often assumed to be a monolithic group who all experience academic success. As mentioned previously, aggregated data that suggests that Asian American students have the highest rates of
bachelor’s degree attainment, masks any nuance between and within ethnic groups that exists. Second, Asian Americans are not perceived to be ethnic and racial minorities. Asian Americans are often excluded from institutional definitions of underrepresented minority students, which implies that Asian Americans do not face similar challenges of their African-American, Latina/o, and American Indian peers. Third is the misconception that Asian Americans “do not encounter major challenges because of their race” (Museus & Kiang, 2009, p. 9). On the contrary and as will be discussed later in this chapter, Asian American students encounter racism and face struggles “with regard to multiple cultures and negotiating complex racial and ethnic identities” (Museus & Kiang, 2009, pp. 8-9). Fourth, is the assumption that Asian Americans do not need support. However, evidence demonstrates that Asian American students are more likely than White students to deal with their personal challenges. The last misconception is that obtaining a college degree equals success. Further investigation reveals however, that controlling for level of education, Asian Americans earn less and hold fewer managerial positions than non-Asians (also referred to as the bamboo ceiling).

**Impact of the model minority myth on Asian American students.** Cheryan and Bodenhausen’s (2000) study explored the idea that positive stereotypes can have a negative effect on academic performance. This study was based on the phenomenon of stereotype threat, or impaired intellectual performance due to fear of confirming a stereotype based one’s social identity (Steele, 1997). Specifically, they tested the stereotype that Asian Americans are good at math, an idea that stems from the model minority stereotype.
Participants included forty-nine self-identified Asian American women at a Midwestern university. The authors sought participants who reported that math performance was very important to them. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three identity-salience conditions: 1) ethnic identity, 2) gender identity, or 3) personal-identity control. After completing a questionnaire designed to manipulate identity salience, participants completed a quantitative skills test, then a posttest questionnaire that assessed their reactions to the test (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000).

Results suggested that a positively stereotyped social identity can create a threat to academic performance. Individuals in the ethnic salience condition expressed difficulty concentrating which then translated to poorer performance on the quantitative skills test. Interestingly, the gender-salience condition did not create a similar stereotype threat effect, though women are stereotyped at being inferior at math (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000).

Whereas the previous study investigated impact of the model minority stereotype on intellectual performance, Museus (2008a) conducted interviews with ethnic and racial minority students to better understand how racial stereotypes impacted students’ experiences on an affective level. An interview with a Korean American student provided support for the idea that the model minority myth is present in the classroom and can create pressure on students to conform to the stereotype. This student “expressed concern over the possibility of not being able to meet those expectations [of high academic performance]” (Museus, 2008a, p. 4). She stated, “[in] the classroom, I’m sometimes scared to speak up because all eyes will be on me…and I am the only Asian in
class. There’s more scrutiny. There’s more ‘what is she going to say? Oh, it’s the Asian
girl speaking.’ It’s like I have to sound highly intellectual or something” (Museus,
2008a, p. 4). Pressure to meet the model minority stereotype came from her White
instructors and peers, as well as from members of the Korean subcultures on her campus.
The model minority myth also negative impacted her willingness and desire to approach
her professors for support. Even though she considered herself an outgoing person in
general, she found herself “shutting down” in classrooms (Museus, 2008a, p. 4).

One of the negative impacts of the model minority myth is that of lower rates of
students might avoid seeking Asian American targeted services if they internalized the
model minority stereotype” (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007, p. 113). If the myth is internalized,
Asian American students who may benefit from support services will not seek them out
because they believe they do not need any help.

Perpetual Foreigner Myth

The perpetual foreigner myth (also referred to as the forever foreigner or
perfidious foreigner) is related to the perception that Asian Americans are not real
Americans. Although the United States has an ethnically diverse population, members of
minority groups often experience interactions that deny an American identity. The
underlying meaning here is that one needs to be White in order to truly be American
(Huynh, Devos, & Smalarz, 2011).

One question through which the perpetual foreigner myth becomes apparent for
Asian Americans, “Where are you from?” Implicitly, the question implies doubt around
an individual’s national origin for members of minority groups. While the perpetual foreigner myth is not identified as a rationale for conducting further research on the experiences of Asian Americans in higher education to the extent of the model minority myth, “[t]he notion of Asians as ‘essential foreigners’ has played an important role in organizing and legitimating hostility toward and discrimination against Asians in the United States” (Kibria, 2000, p. 86). In higher education, the deleterious impacts of the perpetual foreigner myth are often tied to a lack of a sense of belonging and national identity, stemming from the creation of dichotomy of “Asian” and “American” (Kibria, 2000; Kuo, 2001; Kwon, 2009).

Impact of the perpetual foreigner myth on Asian American students. Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz (2011) conducted a three-part study with the goals of examining the perpetual foreigner stereotype and perceived discrimination in different ethnic minority groups, and to identify the potential implications of the perpetual foreigner stereotype for individuals’ identity and psychological adjustment. Participants were from a large, public university on the West Coast.

They found that Asian Americans, Latino/as, and African Americans reported significantly higher awareness of the perpetual foreigner stereotype toward them than European Americans. They also found that Asian Americans, Latino/as, and African Americans who perceived that they were not viewed as Americans by others reported experiencing greater tension between their ethnic and national identities than those who were less aware of these perceptions. The findings suggest that some ethnic minorities’ awareness of being perceived as foreigners may make them feel as if “ethnic and national
identities are dissimilar and even incompatible, thereby forcing them to maintain a more complex social identity” (Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz, 2011, p. 155).

Park (2011) explored the idea of the Perpetual Foreigner in the context of a diversity event at a racially diverse inner-city high school. Using observation and interviews with Korean American students, Park (2011) argued that the celebration of cultural differences and emphasis on teaching others about these differences at the particular event “narrowly defined ‘real’ Americans to be cultureless Whites,” while the Korean students were conversely represented as “unauthentic Americans” (p. 451). While this study was conducted within the context of a high school, it is conceivable that similar dynamics could be found at similar events at colleges and universities as well as community settings.

Cheryan and Monin (2005) completed a series of five studies to investigate identity denial, defined as “the situation in which an individual is not recognized as a member of an important in-group” (p. 717). This is important to Asian Americans, who due to the perpetual foreigner myth, find themselves in situations in which an important part of their identity (i.e., national identity) is denied.

The first study revealed that individuals with European features were perceived as significantly more American than individuals with Asian features by White Americans, even when participants had been explicitly told the targets were born in the United States. The second study demonstrated that Asian Americans believed they belonged in America as much as White Americans, but realized at the same time that other Americans might not feel the same way. The third study found that Asian Americans were commonly
misperceived as being from another country or a non-native English speaker. The fourth study found that when faced with such threats to the national identity, they would reassert their identity as Americans. The fifth study found that Asian Americans would also claim participation in Americans practices as a technique to assert their American identity.

**Campus Climate**

The way in which students perceive and experience campus climate impacts their overall college experience and their ability to persist. In this section, I discuss research that has found that students of color experience campus climate differently than their White peers (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kotori & Malaney, 2003; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). I also discuss research that has found microaggressions influence campus climate. As will be discussed, microaggressions towards Asian Americans largely stem from assumptions derived from the model minority and perpetual foreigner myths.

Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) surveyed undergraduates using the Cultural Attitudes and Climate Questionnaire (CACQ) to assess the way students perceived and experienced campus cultural climate. They found that African American, Asian American, and Latino/a students were significantly more likely than their White peers to feel pressure to “conform to racial and ethnic stereotypes regarding their academic performance and behavior, as well as minimize overt racial-ethnic group characteristics (e.g. language and dress) in order to be accepted” (p. 182). This was more prominent for Asian American and African American students than Latino/a students. African
American and Asian American students also reported more experiences “of a racist atmosphere perpetuated by faculty” than compared with White students (p. 181).

Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) similarly found that White students reported greater overall satisfaction with their institution, compared to African American and Asian American students. A study done by Fischer (2007) found that those with more negative perceptions of campus climate expressed lower levels of satisfaction with their college experience. This finding held true across race and ethnicity and also increased the likelihood of leaving college.

Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) examined students’ perceptions of academic, racial, and general campus climates. Academic climate refers to the perceptions that students have of the academic experience, including how they are treated by instructors, if their peers perceive them to be serious students, and academic mentoring; racial climate refers to how students’ perceive of the experiences of racial minorities. Both undergraduate and graduate students participated in this survey study. For all three climate areas, students of color were found to perceive a more negative climate. Asian American students expressed a belief that the university could do more to support racial diversity at their institution. Overall, this study showed evidence that perceptions of the general campus climate are mediated more by perceptions of academic climate than by racial climate.

Maramba (2008) investigated campus climate qualitatively, looking specifically at the experiences of Filipina/o American students at a research institution in Southern California. Using semi-structured interviews, Maramba asked students questions related
to experiences of the campus environment, sense of community, and being Filipina/o at a predominantly White institution. In terms of campus environment, students felt that Filipina/o representation was lacking on campus, Filipina/o-specific courses were needed, and that student services were not sensitive to their needs. Regarding students’ sense of community, Maramba found that although students did not necessarily feel an attachment to the university as a whole, they did feel close ties to ethnic student organizations and certain resources on campus, such as academic support and the campus multicultural center. Many students were involved in co-curricular activities or activities off-campus. Most students did not feel a sense of belonging at the beginning of college, which led them to create “safe spaces” for themselves (Maramba, 2008, p. 1054). This did not always refer to a literal, physical space, but more so took on cultural, social, and political meanings. Three themes emerged in the experiences of Filipina/o American on a predominantly White campus. Respondents felt Filipinas/os were collapsed into a larger Asian Pacific American category, in effect, erasing their identities as Filipina/o. Students also described interactions within the classroom where they had to give more explanation of themselves or their culture. A final theme was that of not feeling their voice was valued on campus by professors, staff, and other students.

Harper and Hurtado (2007) also took a qualitative approach to studying campus climates, and conducted focus groups at five, large predominantly White institutions. The campuses were located in three different geographical regions. The study included Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, and White students; each group was racially homogeneous. One focus group was also conducted with college staff from
academic affairs, student affairs, and multicultural affairs. Nine different themes emerged from the focus groups: 1) ability of campuses to do more to promote racial understanding on campus, both inside and outside of the classroom; 2) race as a taboo topic and deliberately avoided in most places on campus; 3) racial segregation on campus; 4) differences in the level of social satisfaction by race; 5) legacies of institutional racism; 6) overestimation of minority student satisfaction by White students; 7) a general feeling of Whiteness across the university; 8) awareness of racial problems but feeling powerless to take action; and 9) lack of institutional efforts to learn more about the racial realities of their students.

Specific findings related to Asian American students included Asian American students expressing feelings of social satisfaction at the institution and being unable to name parts of the campus environment they would change. However, despite this social satisfaction, they were conscious of the campus existing as a White space and voiced desire for more cultural representation on campus.

Kotori and Malaney (2003) used data obtained from undergraduate samples of White and Asian Americans. They found that Asian American students were likely than White students to have reported that they heard at least a few times per semester ‘course instructors, university staff members, and other students, stereotyping, making negative remarks about, or telling jokes that put down members of their racial or ethnic group. Asian American students also reported experiencing physical confrontations or assaults by other students due to their race or ethnicity.
Microaggressions towards Asian American students

Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2001) defined microaggressions as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60). Through their study, they sought to examine racial microaggressions and the ways in which these microaggressions influenced campus climate. Through focus groups with African American students, they found that these students experienced racial microaggressions both inside and outside of the classroom environment. Inside the classroom, students felt invisible and that their experiences as African Americans were “omitted, distorted, and stereotyped in their course curriculum” (p. 65). When it comes to the effects of racial microaggressions, microaggressions led to feelings of a chilly campus climate as well as feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation.

Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007) studied microaggressions towards Asian Americans. Through focus groups, they found eight themes. These were: being perceived as an alien in their own land; assumption of intelligence; Asian women as exoticized; lack of acknowledgement of interethnic differences; denying a racial reality; Asian cultural values/communication styles as less desirable; being seen as a second class citizen; and being invisible. Participants described a range of feelings in response to these microaggressions which came from “well intentioned friends, neighbors, teachers, co-workers, and colleagues,” including belittlement, anger, and alienation (Sue et al., p.77).
Using critical race theory as a framework, Poon (2010) interviewed 25 Asian American UCLA undergraduates to explore their experience of racial microaggressions and how their responses supported or challenged racist ideologies. She found that all participants had experienced racial microaggressions. Four categories of microaggressions were identified: general experience of exclusion; feeling like a foreigner; microaggressions based on gender; and an assumption of intelligence.

Students also felt constraint in their academic and career choices based on microaggressions. In response to microaggressions, many participants dismissed them or conformed to dominant ideologies. However, other participants resisted these ideologies and “engaged in acts of transformational resistance” (p. 199). These students often had a developed consciousness of racial issues, formed in “spaces of critical race pedagogy” (p. 199). Examples of these spaces included student groups with social justice missions, ethnic studies classes, and media productions.

Myths and campus climate are powerful and widespread, often negatively impacting Asian American students. At the same time, while Asian Americans’ experiences related to the model minority myth, perpetual foreigner myth, and campus climate can potentially have a limiting impact on their ethnic and racial identity development, Asian Americans do have the ability and opportunities to create and engage with different meanings around their ethnic and racial identities.

**Influences of Involvement on Racial and Ethnic Identity Development**

Avenues for student involvement provide a different context in which Asian American students come to understand and define their ethnic and racial identities. I
begin this section by defining student involvement and outcomes. I then discuss participation in ethnic student organizations. Student participation in ethnic student organizations has also been researched in several ways. Most studies are framed in defense of these types of organizations, pointing out the positive impacts of joining these groups.

**Student Involvement**

Astin’s theory of student involvement (1999) finds its roots in a previous study (Astin, 1975) that sought to identify factors that impact persistence in college. This theory posits that the more one is involved, the more development that occurs. Involvement can be found in many forms, including investment in academic coursework, participation in co-curricular activities, and interaction with faculty and staff. Astin (1999) also detailed different areas of involvement, including place of residence, honors programs, academics, student-faculty interaction, athletics, and student government. Although Astin references race in his previous study wherein he found that Black students were more likely to persist at historically Black colleges and universities, he does not mention participation in culturally specific organizations. A more recent study done by Tieu and Pancer (2009) gives support to the assertion that the quality of a students’ involvement facilitates their adjustment to college.

A number of studies have identified positive benefits of joining student organizations, including feeling more attached to the campus and a greater sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and higher grades (Fischer, 2007). A study by Berger and Milem (1999) demonstrated that involvement in co-curricular activities in the
first year of college predicted involvement in the future, and was also related to commitment to the institution, integration into campus life, as well as persistence. Fischer (2007) also found that having more formal and informal ties was both positively and significantly related to higher levels of satisfaction on campus. Additionally, for minority students specifically, a higher level of involvement in co-curricular activities reduced the likelihood of leaving college. Conversely, the absence of these types of connections increases the likelihood of not persisting. In a review of literature of student participation in college student organizations, Montelongo (2002) identified three educational outcomes in which these organizations impact students, including satisfaction with the college experience, increased campus involvement, and enhanced intellectual development. One limitation of this literature review is that most of the studies reviewed focused on student groups that were predominately White. This is because of the minimal amount of research that has explicitly studied involvement of ethnic and racial minority students.

**Participation in Ethnic Student Organizations**

In a study of Asian American and African American students at a predominantly White rural, public, research university in the Mid-Atlantic region, Museus (2008b) asked students how and why they got involved in ethnic student organizations and what role the organizations played in their adjustment to the university. He found that “ethnic organizations facilitated the cultural adjustment and membership of minority student participants by serving as sources of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression
and advocacy, and venues for cultural validation” (Museus, 2008b, p. 576). At the same time, many participants also described racial segregation as problematic.

Because of the limited research on Asian American experiences, it may be useful to explore the experiences of other people of color. Harper (2007) wrote on the experiences of African American males in Midwestern public research universities. Harper (2007) found two themes, that of participants working towards the advancement of the African American community and the importance of cross-cultural engagement and advocating for those with oppressed identities. Their membership also helped to facilitate the development of their Black identities.

Inkelas (2004) drew upon Astin’s (1993) inputs-environments-outcomes (I-E-O) model. In this study, Inkelas (2004) utilized an ex post facto design and analyzed data that was collected from 1990-1994 from APA students at a large public research university in the Midwest. She found there to be “a significant relationship between participation in ethnic clubs and racial/ethnic community commitment” (p. 291). Participation in university-sponsored diversity events and political activism were also associated with increases in APA awareness and understanding.

Sidanius, Levin, Van Laar, and Sinclair (2004) pointed out a potentially problematic by-product of ethnic organizations. They studied minority ethnic organizations and Greek organizations at the University of California, Los Angeles, assessing intergroup attitudes toward racial policy, social identity, ethnic prejudice, and perceptions of intergroup conflict. Their results showed that “the decision to join ethnically oriented student organizations among minority students was associated with
high levels of ethnic identification and ethnic activism, as well as with the sense of being part of the larger university community” (Sidanius et al., 2004, p. 106). However, in agreement with critics of multiculturalism, they also found evidence that members of ethnic student organizations were prone to having perceptions of group victimization and intergroup bias.

Fried (2001) conducted an ethnographic study on two ethnic student organizations, a Latino organization and a Jewish organization, on two campuses of a large state university. Through this study Fried explored how the groups’ activities contributed to ethnic identity development, how students constructed their ethnic identities, and how organizational activities were organized and constructed. Over the course of one year, Fried engaged in multiple ethnographic methods. These included non-participant and participant observation of the groups’ programs and in-depth interviews with select members and faculty advisors.

Fried (2001) found that within the context of these student organizations, “student identity was constructed around…two contrasting components of cultural education and immersion” (p. 191). Through activities such as lectures and discussions, group members made a “rational, critical examination of the meaning of culture” (p. 192). Cultural immersion experiences did not engage the intellectual side of members to the same extent, but rather provided a source of cultural affirmation.

**Asian American Leadership in Ethnic Student Organizations**

In writing about Asian American leaders, Liang, Lee, and Ting (2002) brought attention to the potential relationship between group involvement, identity development,
and racial awareness. They suggested that opportunities to learn about and take pride in Asian American history can lead to a greater sense of panethnic identity. In turn, this increased identity may lead Asian Americans to become involved with culturally specific organizations where they can gain leadership skills. This merging of identity and involvement leads to feelings of “personal congruence and fulfillment” in Asian American student leaders (p. 82).

Arminio et al. (2000) conducted a study to examine the leadership experiences of students of color. Researchers’ recognition of low participation of students of color in leadership development programs at two institutions led them to conduct this phenomenological study. They conducted 106 interviews with African American, Asian American, and Latino/a men and women. Six distinct themes emerged from the study which suggested incongruence between experiences of the students and traditional ideas of leadership. These themes were: dislike of the leader label; personal costs of being a leader; simultaneous importance and lack of role models on campus; different perceptions of involvement in same-race groups, predominantly white groups, and multiracial groups; placing group needs over that of the individual; and different impact of gender.

Kwon (2009) studied the experiences of Asian American college student leaders from two different universities. Referred to as University A and University B, University A was a predominantly White university with 11% Asian Americans and University B Asian Americans made up 35% of the population at the time of the study (Fall 2007). Twelve students from each campus participated, for a total of 24 students. The sample
consisted of Asian American student leaders of Asian American racial groups, Asian American ethnic groups, and groups that were not based on race or ethnicity.

Kwon’s (2009) study garnered several findings related to Asian American experiences within a student organization. She found that student leaders of Asian American organizations expressed joining their organization primarily because of their ethnicity. They wanted to give back to their organization or felt passionately about the issues their organization espoused. They had high goals, such as wanting to make a difference and encouraging equity and awareness in their communities. Students also felt that experiencing identity formation and an increased understanding of their own cultural background would be a benefit of their participation. Some also indicated that due to their racial background, they were interested in knowing more about their Asian American history.

Students also experienced multiple struggles related to their racial identity. Thematically similar to the perpetual foreigner myth, Kwon (2009) found that the students struggled in thinking about their identities as Asian and American. They saw a dichotomy in cultural values and language and “described their experiences as either Asian or American” (p. 262). She also found that students believed they received mixed reactions from the Asian American community regarding Asian American student leadership. Specifically, perpetuating “Asian” cultural values was positively perceived from the community, while a more political stance was less supported. Kwon (2009) theorized that this may be due to the Asian American community internalizing the model minority stereotype that Asian Americans are socialized to not complain or disagree.
Interestingly, some students were very aware of the implications of the model minority stereotype and this contributed to their drive to be leaders.

**Summary**

This review of the literature on the experiences of Asian American students highlights the complexity of their ethnic and racial identities and the ways these may develop within the context of the classroom and ethnic student organization. Broadly, Asian American experiences are marked by a number of seeming contradictions, such as the negative effects of a positive stereotype; and being a member of an ethnic and group, the associations with which are seen as cultural and political, respectively, and not always compatible. This study of the experiences of Asian American student leaders presents an opportunity to further grapple with such complexities and better understand the negotiations that take place as they make sense of their ethnic and racial identities. In the following chapter, I discuss the methodology of this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the research design of this study. First, I discuss the methodological approach, including an overview of narrative inquiry, its appropriateness to studying Asian American ethnic and racial identity development, and situate my background as it relates to the topic of study. Then I outline sampling, including strategy, criteria, and procedures, leading into a brief description of the participant demographics. Following, I discuss data collection and analysis. I conclude with a description of efforts taken to ensure trustworthiness and limitations of the methodology.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist narrative study was to explore how Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations (ESOs) experience their ethnic and racial identities in the context of their ESO and the classroom. The primary research questions guiding this study were:

1) How do Asian American student leaders of ESOs experience and make sense of their ethnic and racial identities within the context of their involvement with their ESO?

2) How do Asian American student leaders of ESOs experience and make sense of their ethnic and racial identities within the classroom?
Methodological Approach

A constructivist narrative approach provided the framework for this study to explore the experiences of Asian American student leaders of ESOs and how they make meaning of Asian American ethnic and racial identities. Constructivist research seeks to “understand aspects of human activity from the perspective of those who experience it” (Hultgren as cited in Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006, p. 18). Knowledge is seen as coming from the individual and the researcher takes on the role of an interpreter or translator in engaging with participants. In this sense, meanings are formed through interactions with others (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A constructivist approach is appropriate for this study because narrative methodology emphasizes the experiences and interpretation of both researcher and participant. In this relational endeavor (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, 2007), the researcher and participant cannot be separated (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative can be thought of both as a method of study and phenomenon of study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). As a phenomenon, narrative consists of stories and experiences both lived and told; as a methodology, narrative involves the analysis and meaning making of these stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Through a narrative framework, researchers can explore human experience as conveyed through story (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Underlying narrative inquiry is the assumption that people make sense of experience by the “imposition of story structures on them” (Bell, 2002, p. 207).
Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conceptualized a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” that is created by interaction (personal and social matters); continuity (past, present, and future); and, place (situation) (p. 49). This space allows “movement” in four directions: inward, outward, backward, and forward. Inward refers to the internal (e.g., feelings, hopes, reactions); outward refers to the physical environment; and backward and forward refers to the temporal aspect of past, present, and future. Creswell (2002) explained:

The basis for this approach is Dewey’s philosophy of experience, which is conceptualized as both personal and social. This means that to understand people…one examines their personal experiences as well as their interactions with other people. Continuity is related to learning about these experiences, and experiences grow out of other experiences and lead to new experiences.

Furthermore, these interactions occur in a place or context…” (p. 339)

Narrative inquirers should experience these aspects and let this framework guide their questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Expanding upon the concept of narrative space, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative research as happening “in the midst” (p. 63). This can be interpreted as where one is located in the three-dimensional inquiry space, but also refers to the researcher being in the middle of both their own and their participants’ stories. Moreover, the communities and contexts of the participants can be said to be “in the midst” of their own stories.
Narrative Inquiry and Asian American Identity

Bhatia (2011) explained the relevance of narrative inquiry in an era of globalization. The movement and migration of people complicate one’s identity development, particularly for racial and ethnic minorities, including those whose ethnic heritage stems from Asian countries. In this sense, Bhatia (2011) suggests a “move away from privileging the self as the site of narrative production of identities and instead…to shift our focus to narratives that are produced out of colliding cultural practices” (p. 351).

Scholars have written on the appropriateness of narrative inquiry for studies of identity (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Lieblich et al., 1998). Narratives allow researchers to study the inner world of their participants through the stories of their lives and experience of reality (Lieblich et al., 1997). The narrative approach “enables investigators to study the “active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion identity” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, p. xiv).

Moreover, scholars recognize that narratives provide insight beyond that of individual and into group identity, belonging, and culture. As Lieblich et al. (1998) wrote:

…the life story constructs and transmits individual and cultural meanings. People are meaning-generating organisms; they construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks available in their common culture, above and beyond their individual experience…We join these scholars in our belief that by studying and interpreting self-narratives, the researcher can access not only the
individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller’s culture and social world. (pp. 8-9)

The stories that participants share are not only their own, but are connected to those of the community or communities to which they belong (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Additionally, “[n]arratives are also social in the sense of reflecting broad social, cultural, ideological, and historical conditions in which they get told and heard… We gain deeper understandings of the social resources…that they draw on, resist, and transform” (Chase, 2003, pp. 80-81).

Who I Am as a Researcher

Researchers must compose their own narratives before embarking on narrative inquiry, recognizing their status as both being “in the midst” and within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Doing so helps in becoming situated in the field and in text. Here, I will provide reflections on my past experiences in ethnic student organizations and how they have informed my being over time.

In my first year of college I did not become involved in cocurricular activities beyond orchestra and choir. Wanting to get more involved, I decided that I should look into activities I could join in the next year. In my second year, I joined both the Filipino American Students’ Association and an Asian American-interest sorority. The next two years after that were a blur in which I became very active in the Asian American community on campus. I came to know who was heavily involved within the Asian
American networks, and the general relationships between the many groups that would fall under the Asian American “umbrella.”

In my third year I started developing questions stemming from my participation in those two groups. Through participation in these groups I was able to connect with other people who shared a common experience in some shape or form, however, the experience also led me to curiosities which could not be answered through simple membership. I wondered why these groups existed and how they fit into the dominant culture. Beyond experiencing my racial and ethnic identities on an affective level, I wanted to do cognitive exploration as well. I learned about Asian American history through classes and contemporary issues facing Asian Americans through blogs. Through an Anthropology class I learned about multiculturalist critiques and could never see culture in the same way again.

My experience in that class stands out to me, both in terms of the content and in actual classroom discussion. There were around 25 students in this class; four of us were Asian American. I remember that the four of us did not speak up in class. I became hyper aware of this and it made me uncomfortable, especially knowing that the other Asian American students in the class were outgoing in general, in my opinion. In fact, one of the only times in which one of us spoke was when our professor (Korean American female) asked about a Korean restaurant in the area.

That class was a turning point for me and had an impact on the type of cultural programming I advocated for as part of my student groups. Namely, I encouraged more educational events, instead of the usual food or dance event, in an effort to complexify
others’ conceptions of Asian American identities. I also became hyperconscious of interactions that had a racial component. Ultimately, in this new state of consciousness and awareness, I felt a sense of responsibility to myself and to a wider Asian American community to which I felt connected. These are the events that have led to my commitment to Asian American issues and the present study.

**Sampling Criteria and Rationale**

Criteria for sampling in this study included: (1) current executive board member of ESOs who have been involved in the organization for at least one year prior; (2) participant’s ethnic background reflects that of the group; (3) variation in ethnicity; (4) variation in gender; (5) variation in college major.

Every student organization functions differently, but in general, to be on the executive board for a student organization requires time, energy, and a personal level of investment in the group. Current status as a student leader in a particular organization does not necessarily signify a student was previously involved in the organization. By establishing the criterion that participants must have been on the executive board for the organization for at least a year prior, the likelihood increases that they will have more, rich stories drawn from their experiences in the context of their involvement with their organization.

I should also note that being a student leader in an ESO brings with it certain assumptions. By being a student leader in an ESO, there is an assumption that the student’s ethnic background matches that of the ESO. I recognize that this is not always the case. The stories of student leaders of ESOs whose ethnic background does not
match that of the ESO would provide for an interesting line of inquiry, but is outside the scope of the present study.

Because of the aforementioned misconception of Asian American as a homogeneous group, I hoped to have participants who ethnically identified as being of East Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian descent. Because of the model minority myth’s presumption that Asian Americans naturally gravitate towards STEM fields, I strove to include participants who were current majors in the humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields.

The university that all participants attended is also important to this study. At the time of the study, all were undergraduates at a large, Midwestern research university. The campus is predominately White. There is an office that supports Asian students and there are many student organizations that focus on race and ethnicity.

**Sampling Strategies**

I used multiple sampling strategies, including purposeful sampling for information-rich cases and maximum variation, and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling for information-rich cases, identified as those from whom the researcher can learn much about the topic of study (Patton, 2002). I also used snowball sampling. Additionally, I sampled for maximum variation, which involves determining varied criteria to identify participants (Patton, 2002). The criterion were listed above.

**Sampling Procedures**

In order to recruit participants, I identified ethnic student organizations on the MU campus website, noting those that explicitly used “American” in their organization name
(e.g., “ethnicity” American organization) and those that did not. The campus website listed the email addresses of the leaders each organization, as well as the email address for the organization, if one was available. I sent recruitment letters via email (Appendix A) to all of the listed email addresses. Attached to the recruitment letter was an interest form (Appendix B) that I asked be completed and returned to me if they were interested in participating. The interest form allowed me to collect information to determine how participants matched the criteria for sampling. Four students responded to my initial email. Two respondents were recruited through snowball sampling.

**Sample Size and Demographics**

Six people participated in this study. A sample size of six is consistent with narrative inquiry, which is suitable for in-depth exploration of the stories of a few individuals (Creswell, 2007). Perhaps most important to this sample size was the recruitment of individuals from different ethnic groups, while recognizing that each person does not represent their entire ethnic group, nor does the cumulative collection of their stories represent the entirety of Asian American student leaders.

Demographically, all six participants were of different ethnicities. Within the sample, two students were ethnically East Asian, two were ethnically South Asian, and two were ethnically Southeast Asian (one of which who further identified as Hapa, specifically, half Asian and half unidentified White). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 22. They represented a wide range of majors; 3 were premed and in STEM fields. Table 3.1 includes a demographic introduction to the participants.
From the beginning of my recruiting, I had to make decisions regarding students who did not “fit” my initial sampling criteria. For instance, the ethnic background of Amy, who was the first person to respond to my initial email to the student organizations, was not the same as the ESO in which she is a leader. My original rationale for including the criteria that the participant’s ethnicity match their ESO stemmed from the recognition that students who are of other racial backgrounds (e.g., White students) can be on the executive boards of Asian American student organizations. Although their experiences are worthy of study, I believed them to be outside the scope of the current study.

Recognizing that although Amy was of a different ethnicity, but still identified as Asian American, I decided to include her in the study. Benjamin, the last participant recruited, did not meet the criteria of being on the board of his current ESO the year prior. However, he had been active in two other ESOs, and I decided to include him as well.

Lastly, I did not foresee how many participants would be involved in multiple ethnic and/or racial student organizations. As written, my interview questions presumed membership in one organization. I viewed all of these not as hindrances to the research, but as adding to the diversity of the sample, and areas in which I could engage with the participants during the interviews. Ultimately, in alignment with the focus of this study, all participants identified as Asian American, and all were student leaders in ethnic student organizations. These initial negotiations to the boundary of sampling were simply a preview to the ways in which the participants themselves would negotiate definitions of identity throughout the interviews.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Leaders in the Following Student Organization(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ajay     | South Asian; 21 year-old 3\textsuperscript{rd} year junior; male-identified; Humanities and natural science majors (pre-med) | 1) Ethnic student organization  
2) South Asian organization  
3) Pan-ethnic Christian organization  
4) Pan-ethnic organization |
| Amy      | East Asian; 21 year-old 4\textsuperscript{th} year senior; female-identified; English and Chinese majors | 1) Ethnic student organization (non-matching ethnicity) |
| Benjamin | East Asian; 19 year-old 2\textsuperscript{nd} year sophomore; male-identified; Biology major (pre-med) | 1) Ethnic student organization  
2) Ethnic student organization (non-matching ethnicity)  
3) Pan-ethnic organization |
| Darren   | Southeast Asian; 22 year-old 5\textsuperscript{th} year senior; male-identified; Business major | 1) Ethnic student organization  
2) Pan-ethnic organization |
| Mariel   | Southeast Asian (Hapa); 20 year-old 3\textsuperscript{rd} year junior; female-identified; Political Science major | 1) Ethnic student organization |
| Maria    | South Asian; 20 year-old; 3\textsuperscript{rd} year senior; female-identified; Biology major (pre-med) | 1) Ethnic student organization |

Table 3.1: Description of Participants

**In-Depth Interviews**

I conducted one semi-structured interview with each of six participants for this study. For these semistructured interviews, I developed a protocol (Appendix C) to ensure the same topics were pursued with each respondent, but also had flexibility to ask further probes and questions that arose during the interview. I also conducted a follow-
up interview with each participant for the purpose of member checking and to ask any
follow-up questions from the initial interview.

Consistent with narrative inquiry, interview questions were written to invite
concrete, specific accounts and life experiences that the participant had to share (Chase,
2003). These accounts guided the interview and I asked additional questions that
“follow[ed] from close listening to the narrator’s story” (Chase, 2003, p. 83). Participant
accounts are of particular value because, as Chase (2003) asserted, rather than asking
participants “questions about cultural ideologies or questions that ask them to generalize
about others’ experiences…we learn more about those ideologies by listening to how
people express, use, and transform them through their stories” (p. 85).

I began each interview by providing an overview of the study and asking each
participant if they would like a pseudonym. All participants chose a pseudonym. Then, I
proceeded with the interview protocol, which contained three broad categories of
questions. In the first category, I asked questions that pertained to their experiences
before college in which their ethnicity and race were salient. The second category invited
accounts within the context of their student organization. Questions included asking why
they joined their organization and events that stood out to them, including any that made
participants think about themselves in terms of their ethnicity and/or race. I also asked
about their relationships with the rest of the executive board members. The third and
final category invited accounts within the context of their classroom experiences. I asked
questions about their major and career path and about times in which their race and/or
ethnicity were salient during class. In listening to participants’ stories, I probed for
descriptive details of the scenes they described as well as the participants’ own thoughts and feelings in the moment and afterward (Weiss as cited in Chase, 2003, p. 87). Some participants were able to recall stories with ease and great detail, while others found the task challenging, perhaps relating to the salience of their identities.

All interviews were audio recorded. Between interviews I listened to the previous interviews to create new or follow-up questions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Initial interviews took place at a time and location that was mutually convenient and lasted between 40 to 90 minutes. Follow-up interviews lasted between 30 to 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Narrative data analysis is considered to be one of the least structured processes (Creswell, 2007) as there is no standard way to analyze the data (Lieblich et al., 1998). Ollerenshraw and Creswell (2002) discussed two approaches to data analysis and restorying, that of problem-solution and three-dimensional space, the latter of which was highlighted earlier in this chapter. The problem-solution approach is based on narrative thought by Yussen and Ozcan (1997) and involves elements of plot structure (characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolution) to understand how a problem reaches resolution. Both approaches include a reanalysis through use of graphic organizers and differ in that the problem-resolution approach is linear and sequential, whereas the three-dimensional space approach emphasizes experiences and interactions from a more holistic perspective (Ollerenshraw & Creswell, 2002).
For this study, I drew upon the three-dimensional space framework to restory each participants’ individual experiences. The making sense of identities is a complex process that would not fit easily into a problem-resolution framework. Rather, by focusing on participants’ experiences and interactions I was able to create a broader picture of their meaning making.

To begin the restorying process, I read and reread field texts of the interviews and organized them, considering the three aspects associated with this approach: interaction, continuity, and situation. In order to look for interaction, I considered accounts wherein participants interacted with others, whether through conversation or simply the presence of others. In terms of continuity, I looked at the experiences of participants’ past, present, and future, and whether a connection could be made. Sometimes, participants themselves made connections between the past and present during the interviews, providing their own speculations for possible relationships between experiences of the past, present, and possible future. Regarding situation, I listened for when participants mentioned particular settings and places. Through the interviews, this often came to mean their particular institution, the Midwest, and specific classes. Through these aspects of interaction, continuity, and situation, I was able to identify “themes, tensions, and patterns” (Ollenrenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 342). Table 3.2 further outlines these three aspects.

I also listened for “turning points or epiphanies” (Creswell, 2007, p. 155). Denzin (1989) describes epiphanies as “moments of revelation” (p. 33). An epiphany may be viewed as a crisis or significant event. Similar to epiphanies are “critical events”
(Webster & Mertova, 2007). Critical events demonstrate a change in understanding or how one views the world and have significantly impacted the participant, influencing future decisions and attitudes. A critical event cannot be predicted or planned and thus are identified in retrospect (Webster & Mertova, 2007). During the interviews, I listened for accounts in which participants described a significant change in their worldview prompted by an event. Consistent with the definition of a critical event, the events were identified by the participants for their transformative impact after they occurred.

Following this initial organization, I created the restories. To create restories of each participants’ narrative, I reshaped their experiences largely chronologically, emphasizing descriptions of interaction, continuity, and situation. To create a restory across participants’ stories, I compared the themes that emerged across the narratives in order to comprehend the ways in which participants described the experiences related to their ethnic and racial identities similarly and differently.
Table 3.2: Three Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space

**Trustworthiness**

As Webster and Mertova (2007) suggested, there is consensus in the literature that narrative research should not be evaluated in the same manner as other quantitative and qualitative methods. This is because narrative research is “more concerned with individual truths than identifying generalisable and repeatable events” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 89). Yet, there are steps in which the researcher should engage to address researcher bias that may come from personal opinion and experience. In this study, trustworthiness was assured through strategies related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).
Credibility

Credibility addresses the areas of “intellectual rigor, professional integrity, and methodological competence” (Patton, 2002, p. 570). One aspect of credibility involves techniques that bridge the space between researcher and participant, specifically, between the realities constructed by the participants, and the interpretation and representation made by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To increase this area of credibility in this study I engaged in peer debriefing and member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Guba & Lincoln (1989) described peer debriefing as involving a “disinterested peer” in the process of discussing one’s findings and analyses. This person “poses searching questions in order to help the evaluator understand his or her own posture and values and their role in the inquiry” (Guba & Lincoln, p. 237). A current master’s student in the same program as me who has familiarity with the college student identity development and qualitative research served as my peer debriefer. As mentioned previously, I also used member checks. Following transcription and interpretation of each participants’ interview, I shared both with each participant so that they had the opportunity to correct, clarify, or expand on the interview data. This occurred through a follow-up meeting. Participants were largely in agreement with my interpretations and were able to clarify points around which I was confused. However, I was also reminded of how participants were temporally “in the midst” of their own identity stories, as I brought up points mentioned in the initial interview that participants regarded to being true to the time of the initial interview, but not during the follow-up. One example of this was found when I asked Amy to talk more about her use of the phrase “typical Asian American.” She
replied that she was in a certain mood the day of her initial interview, and while she used the phrase in a negative way that day, that she now recognizes that many ways in which people can “be” Asian American.

**Transferability**

Rather than claiming external validity or generalizability as in methods rooted in positivistic thinking, transferability is context based. Transferability is being able to connect the information in a study to another context. “Thick description” is the technique most associated with transferability. Through in-depth descriptions of people and context, the reader is drawn into the experiences of the participants and can make judgments of transferability based on these details (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 2002). I generated thick description by asking for detailed descriptions of each of the stories told by my participants.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to the ability for those outside of the research to track and assess changes related to the study design (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A strategy I engaged in to assure dependability was to keep a researcher journal that documented my logic and thought process as I conducted this study.

**Confirmability**

Strategies of confirmability ensure that the findings “are rooted in contexts and persons apart from the evaluator” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 243). Having a peer debriefer helped me to achieve confirmability. I was also able to further reflect on any
Researchers need to reflect on the biases, assumptions, and relationship to their participants (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). During my first quarter, I completed a practicum with our campus’ Multicultural Center focused on Asian American student initiatives. Through this practicum I became familiar with several students involved in the Asian American racial and ethnic student organizations. While my practicum technically lasted for only one quarter, I stayed in contact with the groups, attending events and providing assistance when asked. My involvement led to one group asking me to serve as a graduate advisor for the upcoming school year. My proximity to the students is an advantage in that it increased my access to them and helped to build rapport. At the same time, while close rapport with participants may help to make the research more informed, problems can also arise, such as whether the researcher is able to maintain distance and objectivity (Fontana & Frey, 1998). My status as a graduate advisor may have also created an uneven power dynamic that impacted how I approach the research and how participants respond. It is also possible that my racial identity as Asian American increased participants’ comfortability with sharing certain experiences and perspectives. My experiences as identity as Asian American may have also precluded me from more fully exploring some of the terminology used by participants, such as Darren’s use of the term “Americanized.”
Limitations of Narrative Study

The limitations of narrative study stem from ethical considerations, questions about the nature of narrative as told and experienced, and the researcher-participant relationship. These must be taken into account in approaching and conducting a narrative study.

Critics point to an unavoidable disconnectedness between a person’s actual experience and the way they describe the experience through story (Polkinghorne, 2007). They point to the limits of language and reflection and the gray area of co-creation of story (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Polkinghorne, 2007), which can potentially lead to the co-optation of the participant’s voice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I recognized this possibility, and as mentioned above, engaged in efforts to ensure participants’ stories remained their own, such as conducting a member check and using verbatim quotations.

Another limit of this methodology is found in the utility of narrative research being questioned by those who believe that the idea of experience is too comprehensive and holistic to study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Josselson (2007) described the dual role of the researcher who has responsibility to their relationship with participants but also to their scholarly community. Ethical navigation of these roles requires researchers to have an understanding of the dilemmas of narrative research (Josselson, 2007). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) echoed this idea in describing “wakefulness” (p. 182), which refers to narrative researchers being aware of how others may critique their research texts and narrative study in general; at the same
time, being thoughtfully aware of criticism does not necessarily translate to acceptance of it.

Summary

This study followed procedures consistent with a constructivist narrative study to examine the stories of Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations and the ways in which they make sense of their ethnic and racial identities. I used purposeful sampling to identify information-rich cases. I analyzed the data primarily by utilizing the “three dimensional inquiry space” approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 49). In restorying, I strove to create rich, detailed stories of these students in their various contexts that communicated an understanding of how they thought of their ethnic and racial identities, and the experiences that have contributed to the meanings they have created. In the next chapter, I present the findings from this study.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to tell the narratives of six Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations and experiences related to their ethnic and racial identities. I present each participant through a restory, using verbatim quotes. Each restory involves a “retelling” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71) of each participants’ story. I also drew attention to critical events, situated in the participant’s particular context.

Consistent with a narrative approach, in constructing the restories, I drew upon themes that emerged in relation to interaction, continuity, and situation. Descriptions of interaction include participants’ experiences and their internal feelings, as well as their interactions with people around them. Although Clandinin and Connelly (2000) did not advocate for an “ideal reordering” of events, each story is presented largely in a chronological manner to convey a sense of continuity wherein relationships could be seen, or not be seen, between the past, present, and future. Situation includes the context, time, and place of experiences. These three elements are woven together in each participant’s restory in this chapter. In the following chapter, I explore these elements in greater specificity, situating them in broader themes relating to the research questions.

Although no singular pattern emerged across all participants, narratives all contained trajectories of ethnic and racial connect and disconnect. I came to the following categorization in realizing that participants themselves used language that
implied location and physicality: of “connect” and “disconnect”, “fitting in” describing “Asian America” as a place that could be entered and departed. With this in mind, I identified three main narrative categories that described the major ways in which participants engaged and negotiated their ethnic and racial identities within their ESO involvement: 1) connecting to ethnic culture, 2) locating identity within Asian American ethnic and racial communities, 3) locating identity outside of Asian American ethnic and racial communities. While these categories could not thematically capture the entirety of each narrative, they serve as an organizing tool through which nuances and complexities within and between categories could be further explored. The ordering of the categories does not imply a developmental progression, nor is judgment made regarding the differences between them.

In creating these three categories, I focused on the content of student involvement and prior experiences and reflections because the majority of the interview time was spent on those topics. However, a pattern also emerged from analyzing the stories participants told regarding their classroom experiences. For some, similarities could be drawn between the way in which participants thought about their identities within the context of their involvement and within the classroom. For others, not as much. These will be explored further as I present each restory.

In order to contextualize experiences with each participant’s ESO and within the classroom, I begin with: 1) restories of reflections shared regarding their identities and experiences leading up to ESO involvement. Following, I will present: 2) restories of experiences and reflections regarding involvement with participants’ respective ESO(s),
and 3) in the classroom. Within each broad section, I identified at least one theme for each participant, captured within a quote.

In keeping a high priority on maintaining the confidentiality of the participants, I do not name their ethnicity, but rather use their Asian region of descent in introducing them (e.g., East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian). In verbatim quotations, I have replaced their ethnicity with the word “ethnicity” and additional words in order to preserve the meaning. I have also masked words that can be directly linked to a specific ethnicity (e.g., food, cultural attire, dance). Where their institution was named, I have used “MU,” to stand for Midwestern University.

**Narratives of Connecting to Ethnic Culture: Maria, Darren, and Benjamin**

In regards to their ESO involvement, Maria, Darren, and Benjamin used similar language to describe the impact on their identities. They spoke more about their ethnic identities and culture rather than their racial identities, in language that implied increasing connection. Many stories consisted of learning about and appreciation of cultural traditions or the histories of the country of their ethnic background. Where they differ is in the accompanying emotions and decisions they made connected to their ethnic identities. For Maria, increasing cultural connection was accompanied by a general sense of confusion. For Darren, increasing cultural connection led him to choose to identify more with his ethnicity than race. For Benjamin, increasing cultural connection, and social connection with others of his ethnicity, has prompted him to intentionally challenge a negative perception of people of his ethnicity.
Maria: “Nothing Too Divergent”

I met Maria for the first time at the initial interview, greeted by a bright smile that matched the warmth that came through her emails in when she enthusiastically volunteered to participate in my study. I graciously thanked her for her willingness to participate. In the middle of writing a thesis herself, she was happy to help out.

At a few points during the interview, I could see that the identity topics I brought up were not ones she had not given much conscious thought to before. There were a few extended pauses as she formulated her responses, and with slight embarrassment, she prefaced a couple with “I have the worst memory ever,” or a variant thereof, accompanied by semi-nervous laughter. I assured Maria that all of the answers she gave were fine and that I appreciated her thoughtfulness.

Growing Up: “It Just Stems Directly From What My Family Brought Me Up As”

In the beginning of our conversation, I learned Maria was a third-year student of senior rank, pre-med with a major in biology and minor in public health. She is also second generation, having come to the United States with her parents at the age of three. From the local area, she originally wanted to attend college elsewhere, but once accepted into the highly prestigious BS/MD program, decided she was not “going to give that up.” Regarding her premed path, she said her “parents are fine with that, I would say they like that,” while her older brother is “completely against med school.” She believes her brother feels this way because a lot of his friends went to med school and he observed the difficulties of the experience. This was the first of many times in which family and upbringing became a reference point in her responses. Maria talked about the community
in which she grew up, and from whom she “picked up [her] background knowledge,” including her immediate and extended family, and other people of her ethnicity who speak a similar language.

When it comes to ethnicity and race, she uses the “terms all interchangeably” and would also include religion. She continued: “I think it just stems directly from what my family brought me up as. Nothing too divergent from that because that’s what I knew and that’s what I was familiar with.” When I asked her how she thought of herself racially, she included nationality as well: “[ethnicity] American.”

The interconnection between these terms is captured in the following example. When I asked her about a memory related to race, she recalled an incident that happened to her and her family in fourth grade around the time of 9/11, mentioning religion, ethnicity, and family:

I remember how everyone was really, really scared. And I’m Muslim, that whole issue I know my whole family was really scared of what people would think and stuff. So, I remember once we were driving from a gas station, we pulled out, and someone threw their pop at our windshield, and later, when I think about it, it could have been for any reason. But I think my mom associated that with us being of a different ethnicity. So, I remember that being a scary time, and I remember my mom and our other family would all get flags and put it outside our door, or on our house and just be overly like, “We love USA,” to point that out.

After she described the ways in which she understood ethnicity and race, she said that her family was not “the most [representative] of her ethnic group.” She then added,
“We don’t have too many decorations in our home or anything like that. I feel very removed. We visit every few years, but, I don’t know, I don’t feel as connected.” I inquired further about this feeling:

It’s kind of a confused feeling, where like, you’re unsure, and you don’t know like, what parts you feel are a part of you, and what parts are just like, what other people do and believe in…I wish I knew more, but I don’t really know how to go about doing that.

This poignant reflection captured Maria’s internal confusion and struggle that she has yet to resolve.

Getting Involved: “I Wonder What That’s Like?”

It was around mid-year of her first year that she first heard about her ESO. One of her family friends was the president of the group and contacted her about it. Maria thought, “Oh, I’m [this ethnicity], I should join!” She did not know other people of the same ethnicity other than her family and the people she’d grown up with, so the thought of the group piqued her curiosity: “Other people from different backgrounds that are also [of the same ethnic background], I wonder what that’s like?”

This curiosity was followed by surprise, confusion, and learning as she became involved with the ESO. One of her first reactions after joining was surprise and confusion at the number of international students in the group. She said, “I didn’t realize that there were so many international students in general, or international students [of my ethnicity] for that matter.” She estimated a 75/25 proportion of international students to
American students and did not describe a difference between her relationships with the international versus American students in her ESO.

Maria provided an example through which she learned about certain elements of her culture that were not a part of her upbringing. In preparing for one of MU’s largest cultural events, Maria learned about music and two styles of dance that originate from [the country]. She also helped in putting together a cultural display for the event, looking to multiple sources outside herself to do so: “It’s always a learning experience. I’m always Google-ing things…I guess I rely on whatever the international students say ‘cause they have the most background, or even my other friends who know more about it.”

She provided another example:
We throw a New Year’s event every year that’s later in the Spring. Basically, my family, we don’t actually celebrate New Year’s [associated with our ethnicity] at all. I don’t know why, I still haven’t figured this out…When we celebrated [in the group] I had no idea it was [at that time of the year] or anything, and I didn’t know any of the customs or decorations, so it was just a new experience and it was learning. I was like, “Oh, I didn’t know this existed.” The first year we had a picnic and games so we were trying to brainstorm games and decorations and you know, I couldn’t suggest anything because I had no idea what any of that sort of thing would be. I learned a lot about different things from the culture [of my ethnicity], and I think that was a really neat experience.
Through this New Year’s event, she also learned of a tension that she had been unaware of until that point. She noticed that none of the first-generation immigrant community members she had grown up with had come and she was surprised. Later, she found out that historically rooted ethnic tension was the underlying issue. Through talking with her childhood friends and family, she learned of a civil war that happened in the country of her ethnicity between two social groups, and that although the war is over, “[t]here’s still a lot of tension…those groups tend not to get along, even here.” When she joined, the members of the ESO were mostly from one group, and she realized that those who did not attend, likely chose not to because they belonged to the other group. She added that she would like to learn more about this tension and the history underlying it.

Maria had this overall reflection on her ESO involvement: “I think my involvement has strengthened my identity in race [and] ethnicity. It’s really made me interested in learning more about [the country] and what the culture is and what the customs are and the diversity within it.” On top of her involvement making her want to learn more, “it’s made [her] more open to meeting different types of people and getting to know them.”

Her notion of family extended to her ESO itself, which she described “just like a big family.” This network also extends beyond MU. She mentioned members that would come to their events from the branch campuses as well as people from other institutions who are friends with MU students. Regarding an Asian American community, she mentioned other groups’ events that she would try to go to, mostly other South Asian groups.
Classroom Experiences: “I Feel Like My Background Influences the Way I Think”

Referencing her upbringing was also central to her responses in recalling times in class when her race or ethnicity was salient, with religion especially emphasized.

Regarding her Comparative Religions class, her favorite class she has taken while at MU, she said “[i]t was interesting to compare what I thought to what everyone else thought. Everyone else had different backgrounds [and] thoughts on religion and ethnicity. [It was interesting] the way we learned…and how we found commonalities and difference.”

She also brought up her Medical Ethics class that she was taking at the time of the interview, walking me through her thought process:

So whenever there’s a topic, I tend to lean toward the side of what the environment, like my parents, the way my parents brought me up and what I think I would do is probably what they would do in that situation…So, everyone in the class has a different point of view from where they grew up and what their culture is and what they would consider acceptable. So when everyone argues their own points it’s based off I feel like somewhat their background…I wonder what my religion would say about that, and if I actually believed that part of it…if we talked about abortion or whatever, I don’t really know what my views are, but my thoughts would be like, going over the facts first and then like what all the ethics, [what] all the other points of views are, and then I’d consider what my religion says, if I do believe in that or what my parents would say. I consider all of that in the back of my head.
Summary: Identity as Background and Culture Learning

Race, ethnicity, and religion are interconnected identities for Maria and are all tied to family upbringing. In general, Maria described a continual learning process, with definitions of culture and identity sought outside herself, whether from her family, from international students, or friends “who know more about it.” Alongside this is a feeling of confusion, a feeling she first described in the situation where her family’s car had a drink thrown at it, to realizing there were so many international students of her ethnicity at MU that she did not previously know, to not being aware of some of the customs that others in the group knew. As Maria described, the context of her relationships within and impact of her ESO involvement is connected mostly to the country of her ethnic heritage, moreso than a regional or pan-ethnic community.

Darren: “It’s More Specific To Me”

Darren is a graduating fourth-year student studying business. He is second generation Southeast Asian American. He is originally from a large, urban city in the south and describes his high school as 95% African American. During his junior year of high school, Darren toured the campus on a diversity trip and he was attracted to the school for many reasons, including the snow. He also received a full-ride scholarship. He wanted a different experience from his high school.

Growing Up: “I Honestly Didn’t Really Care for my Culture Before College”

Darren had difficulty in recalling specific instances in which race and ethnicity were part of his memory growing up. However, he said he knew that there were instances where a “slight racial slur” was brought up, and can remember “being picked on for having yellow skin” or friends from elementary school who “would make chinky
eyes.” At the time, Darren did not take any offense in the types of interactions. He shared: “I thought it was funny too because I was just a kid. I didn’t really know what’s offensive and what’s not.”

He also recalled in high school, as one of few students of Asian descent, he would “get asked Asian-specific questions” wherein other students would draw assumptions from his race. One example of this was students assuming he knew all of the answers to math problems. He also remembered a time in which his peers were looking at “Chinese or Japanese characters” and they asked him, “Why do Asians write like that?” In response, Darren had to explain that he did not know because he did not “write those characters.”

Darren described his understanding of his identity prior to college in terms of his ethnic, racial background, and nationality, and mentioned a public versus private distinction. Because of his lineage he knew he was his ethnicity and race, yet he shared: “I guess growing up, I considered myself more as Americanized than Asian.” He also compares himself to his family, saying, “I was the most Americanized one in my family.” Darren also felt conflict between a home life where he was “raised [in a way that reflects his cultural background]” by parents who were “very [cultural]” and a school life where all of his friends were “really Americanized.” Thus, identifying as Asian or as his ethnicity was tied to his recognition of his parents’ background, rather than his own expression or attachment. Darren shared: “I honestly didn’t really care for my culture before college.” Before, when he thought about his wedding: “I would always imagine
my wedding or whatever to be more traditional like in a church in a vest [rather] than fancy traditional dress.”

**Getting Involved: “This is Good”**

When Darren got to college, he initially did not get involved “in anything culturally.” As a new student, Darren “was mainly focusing on trying to adapt, trying just to go to class and get back.” For the first two years, all of his roommates were White. About this, Darren commented:

I think initially that was what I was expecting or looking for coming from [my hometown] where it’s so urban and predominately African American. I kind of wanted a dramatic shift, so the first two years, pretty much all I hung out with were really White people, honestly. I had very little Asian friends…I kind of shunned myself from the Asian American community honestly…I was content with that too for a while.

Darren did recall a specific memory that happened either during his “first or second year” at MU that involved racism:

It was during a [football] game and I didn’t buy tickets, but there was these lines of people going towards the stadium and I was walking away from the stadium…I was walking away and this one guy said, “Go [team mascot]!” Like in my face. I didn’t say anything. And as he was walking, I heard him say, “Oh, he no speak English,” or something like that. I was like, “Okay, I’m not going to say anything to your face and I just walked away.” But that’s…I would say the first actual memory at [MU] that I found offensive. It made me want to punch the guy in the face.
Darren first heard of his ESO was during sophomore year at a large campus event showcasing the foods and dances of different countries. After that, there was at an autumn involvement fair where someone on the executive board “pulled [him] in and made [him] join.” Darren put his name on their email list and went to their first event. He found them to be “pretty sociable” and “nice” and described feeling “more comfortable than usual talking to them. I just talked with them naturally and made jokes here and there.” Darren also “felt welcome, I guess that’s the biggest thing. It made me feel like this is, this is good.” Even from initially becoming a member of the ESO, Darren describes the social aspect of joining, but additionally rationalized it through seeking cultural connection.

In talking about his involvement with his ESO, he talked about “culture” and how his decision to join in part addressed a “lack” of culture:

Being away from home, I kind of lacked that culture, so I guess I was just trying to find a piece of home in [this city]. And I’ve always known I was lacking [my ethnicity’s] culture, so I thought, “Why not?” and I just went to more events. After attending and participating in many events, he reflected: “I like the events that we do. I like that I’m somehow able to learn about my culture a little bit as I’m in [the group].”

He also described the nature of the events as he perceived them: “All of our events are somehow stemmed culturally…We have like [food] night. Our culture show. We have game night. There was an emphasis on the country as well: “Pretty much all our events that we do that are for the public stem somehow from [the country.] So, there
isn’t one event that made me, that doesn’t make me think of [the country], ’cause all of
them are.”

He also referenced how through his involvement he learned more about [the
country]:

[The country] is kind of divided, like many [people from the Southern region of
the country] are very staunchly [Southern]. Coming here at first, I was very
astonished. My parents are like South and North. Coming here, there’s also
another group, [of the same ethnicity but international]. They carry the other flag.
But talking to them, they’re pretty cool people too. So I’ve learned to appreciate
that…I find it kind of cool that I can learn to appreciate [the northern part of the
country] too.

Darren’s focus on culture and country through involvement with his ESO also
translated to how he prefers to generally identify:

I think it’s helped me a lot. I’ve confirmed that now, instead of just labeling
Asian American or American or [ethnicity], I find myself to believe that I’m more
of a [ethnicity] American. Where you know, I am learning to appreciate more of
my culture. I am learning more about it. Like, I actually enjoy learning about my
history and things like that. At the same time, I can also consider myself an
American…But it’s really opened my eyes to appreciate all these different things
about myself and about my culture.
Similarly, although Darren is also on the executive board of an Asian pan-ethnic group, he feels his ESO: “is more relevant than [the Asian pan-ethnic group] because it’s more specific to me and it’s something that I am, it’s something that my family is.

The social and community aspects were also very important to his experience with his ESO, leading Darren to share: “the people are the biggest things that made me stay.” He spoke about his relationship with the rest of the executive board and general members:

I love my e-board. I think they’re just all awesome. Sometimes during the stressful times, we go at each other because it’s just the pressure…Sometimes we have like quote, unquote, mandatory e-board hangouts where we just get food and stuff…As for general members, we always invite them to our hangouts if they want.

In addition to the relationships he was able to develop within the ESO, Darren mentioned another social network comprised of other Asian American ESOs: “Also, aside from just [my ESO], I like meeting people in different cultural groups, people from [another Southeast Asian American group], people from [an East Asian American group] and [another East Asian American group] and things like that. It’s just one giant social network. It’s like a door that opens to meeting other people in different organizations.”

Darren also shared how his ESO will have collaborative events with these organizations, including going to the zoo together. He tries to “build a relationship” with as many other Asian ESOs that he can. As we spoke, he realized that, “actually, most of my friends are actually in [my ESO], come to think of it now…and [the pan-ethnic Asian organization].”

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Additionally, he mentioned another social impact of the group and how:

…it kind of forced me to be more outgoing because normally, I’m a very reserved person. And, whenever I’m at these events, I try to be as social as I could be. So it kind of changed my personality…to be just more sociable.

**Classroom Experiences: “Singled Out”**

When I asked him about times when his race or ethnicity was salient during class, he responded: “I don’t think I’ve ever had that problem. Probably the only time is when I notice I’m the only Asian kid in class, but I don’t think that would ever happen because like all my classes are so big and in business there are a lot of Asians too. So, I never felt left out or singled out or anything like that.” I was struck by Darren’s initial response to my question, immediately interpreting salience of ethnic or racial identity within a classroom environment to be a “problem.” He associated it with feeling “left out” or “singled out.”

However, after thinking for a minute, he took this statement back and was able to recall one class experience:

It was a small class during my second year of writing. I took intro – like writing about feelings and stuff, and there is one segment where we were learning about different portrayals. And there was this one move we watched where it was – I forget the title, but pretty much it was supposed to be like this Chinese family immigrating into California…I think it was one of the few moments I kind of felt weird because it was a small class and I think I was only one of two Asians. I always feel kind of weird whenever in class we learn about Asians and I’m one of the few ones. I feel paranoid that people are looking at me when they are learning
about these things because [they’ll think], “Oh, he’s Asian, like the characters on
PowerPoint.”

Summary: Seeking and Choosing Cultural Connection

Connection to culture and ethnicity is made through learning of cultural traditions. In that sense, Darren upholds external definitions of culture. At the same time, Darren demonstrates internal choice by saying that he feels more connected to his ethnicity than his Asian American identity. The context of is relationships is not bound to the country of his ethnicity, as his group collaborates with others in the Asian American student community and he works to build relationships of his own accord with them.

Benjamin: “I’m Still in This Process”

Benjamin is a second-year student majoring in biology. He is of East Asian descent. He did not fit my criteria exactly because he only joined the executive board of the group of his ethnic heritage this year. However, last year, he was active with two other ethnic student organizations, one East Asian and one Southeast Asian.

Benjamin’s family moved a lot while he was growing up due to his father’s business ventures. Born in California, he lived there until he was three or four years old. After that point his family moved to Alaska, where they stayed until he was around thirteen years old. From thirteen to fourteen, they lived in Chicago. From the age of fourteen through today he has lived in the current city. There was nothing in particular that attracted him to [MU], rather, “it was just default.”
**Growing up: “I Felt Like the Odd One Out”**

Benjamin remembers in Alaska, which was predominately White at the time: “In grade school…a lot of kids pointed out that I was different in a way that I was sometimes excluded from activities when they were playing. This was around first or second grade.” During these times, others would tell him, “Oh, you’re Asian.” He says that when this happened, “I didn’t really mind it. I thought I was White for a really long time, because I’ve always grown up surrounded by Caucasian people. So I thought I wasn’t all that different from them.”

However, he also says: “I always had [an] Asian identity, but it only really came out when I was with family, but outside I always thought I was Caucasian….I didn’t really regard Asian culture when I was out with my friends. I wouldn’t really think I’m Asian, I’d think I’m one of them. So when they made Asian jokes, I’d be like, ‘hahaha, that’s funny.’”

In first grade, he was given an assignment in class to build houses. He was researching different houses and asked his dad for help. Together, they made a traditional house [the country of his ethnicity] that is like a hut. He went to school with the house and did show and tell. While he was making the house with his father, he says, “I felt nothing wrong with it.” However, when it came to show-and-tell, he “felt a little bit embarrassed…All of the rest of the kids had normal houses, whereas I had this traditional [ethnicity] house and I felt like the odd one out.” In high school, Benjamin started to explore the culture of his ethnicity. Prior to that, Benjamin said: “I knew I was Asian, but didn’t really give too much thought to the culture.”
Getting Involved: “It’d Be a Good Socializing Opportunity”

In high school, Benjamin was involved with a community group that worked with underserved youth. He was at one particular event where he met two student leaders of a Southeast Asian student organization from MU. “They found out I was going to [MU] and they were like, ‘Oh, you should join [our group]’ and kind of coerced me into it.” He also met another student leader of an East Asian student organization, also from MU. Benjamin ended up joining both groups, though neither represented his ethnic background. He saw them again at the college’s involvement fair. “Since then I’ve been really interested”:

I felt that by joining these Asian orgs, it’d be a good socializing opportunity. I didn’t know anyone going into [MU]. I mean, I had some high school friends here and there, but our schedules were way off. So, I thought it’d be a good opportunity to make friends too.

For his first year, he was very involved in both of the groups mentioned above. With the Southeast Asian organization, he “went on a whole bunch of conferences and leadership training [events]. He did this because he thought it would “be a fun road trip with friends.” Talking about one of the conferences, “[there was a] whole bunch of workshops in regards to Asian American identity, and I guess those workshops got me thinking. I mean, it sparked my interest for trying to explore more into my roots and culture. That’s why I joined [the student organization of my ethnic background.]” When I inquired further in regards to the workshops, he says they are “all pretty cliché and have the same message: It’s important to know your roots, to find out who you really are.”
In terms of the other organizations in which he is a leader in, the East Asian organization, he wanted to continue what the previous presidents were doing. For the pan-ethnic organization, the current president of the East Asian organization suggested he run so he could be a liaison between the two groups.

Benjamin has had differing experiences in each of the groups of which he is a part. [The East Asian group] has a “discussion night about interracial couples.”

We were discussing about the masculinity of Asian American males and why Asian women prefer exploring out of the Asian group. So I guess it made me feel like less of a man. Because we’re perceived to be more feminine, that sexuality aspect, which people thing we lack.

[The East Asian group of his ethnicity]: “We don’t really have discussion nights or any meetings of significance, so mostly the meetings that we do are really like food-oriented.”

His relationships with each of the groups differs as well. He says of the pan-ethnic group: “I like them a lot…I mesh with them well.” Of the East Asian group, “I like them as people, I just don’t like working with them…They kind of exclude me because…like they go off in their little corners speaking [language], and I’m just standing there like, “Oh, what are you guys talking about?”

In regards to how his involvement has impacted his identity, Benjamin shared: “I’m more aware of it [identity]. I’m still in this process of trying to explore it more. So, all the traditional stuff we did back home when I was a kid, I wouldn’t really give too much, like I wouldn’t give a crap about it, and now I’m starting to appreciate it more.”
He told me about a New Year’s tradition that his family did that he thought “was completely stupid growing up as a kid.” Now, he says, “I’m starting to appreciate it more…It’s kind of cool seeing how it got passed down, ‘cause each family, they do it differently.”

He also says he is “more accepting towards [people of ethnicity] now. Before [ethnic group of his ethnicity]…I’d normally try to avoid them.” He explained to me how many people of his ethnicity grow up together in the church and develop community throughout. He was never really a part of this because his family moved around a lot: “I didn’t really have the chance to stick in one [ethnicity] community, and they’re really exclusive…I’d always be the odd one out and wouldn’t feel welcome. And that’s why I turned to my Caucasian friends.” This feeling of exclusion was something Benjamin “wanted to fix.” This desire to help fix this observed dynamic is a large part of why he joined the ESO: “Because I noticed the group is really exclusive and I wanted to make it more inclusive. A lot of people [outside the group] are saying that too, that [the group] is really exclusive…If you want to be in it, you have to work really hard.” Benjamin was able to join the group because he was friends with one of the executive board members. He tries to go out and talk to strangers and try to get them more involved and interested in the group.

**Classroom Experiences: “Doctor…Forced Upon [me by] My Parents”**

I learned about the difficulties he is currently having in thinking about his career choice. He answered his career path abruptly, with one word, “Doctor” and after a brief silence, added, “forced upon [me by] my parents.” It is a current struggle for him. He is interested in studying business because:
I think I’d do sort of well in that field…A lot of people say that I do have a knack for it, so personality and attribute-wise, I think I’m more suited toward business…and I like meeting new people, so I think it’d be really fun. And I do want, if I could take the business route and go into non-profit, that would be the ideal goal…I just like the whole idea of social responsibility.

However, his parents do not approve of this path because they believe that “business doesn’t have a future. They think the only way to become successful is [by becoming] a doctor. That’s their whole mindset.” Two of his older cousins are a part of the picture: “one is planning on becoming a dentist and the other one is in hospital management, so [my parents] are like, ‘Oh, you should be like them.’” For Benjamin, this makes him feel “really, really crappy…I personally feel I haven’t really done too much in my life.”

Benjamin knows that his struggle is not unique to himself. “[MU] has a good amount of Asian population…And I guess a lot of them happen to be in my class. That makes sense since it’s like, bio, chem, and math…I feel like I know a lot of other Asian teenagers like me, [where] their parents are forcing this career path upon their kids…It’s cool if they want to do it, but I don’t think it’s something that should be forced upon [them].” Sometimes, Benjamin will think in class: “Why should I keep on doing this if I’m never going to end up happy…It just feels like I’m wasting away my first years of college.”

Summary: Seeking Cultural Connection and Beginning to Challenge

Benjamin’s involvement has made him more aware of his racial and/or ethnic identities, and also more appreciative of traditions from his ethnic background. Benjamin can be said to be involved with the wider “Asian American community” because of his
involvement with groups outside of his ethnicity. He shows awareness of different stereotypes towards Asian Americans, such as Asian American masculinity, as well as trends of Asian American students, such as pursuing medicine. He shows a desire to challenge stereotypes in intentionally trying to counter the perception of people of his ethnicity as being exclusionary; he also shows a desire to challenge the pressure of a “typical” career path for Asian students.

Narratives of Locating Identity within Asian American Ethnic and Racial Communities: Ajay and Mariel

In regards to their ESO involvement, Ajay and Mariel’s narratives are similar in that their stories consisted of navigating ethnic and racial communities and structures that were not congruent with expectations. This presented challenges and necessitated negotiations to their respective identities, wherein both ultimately found or negotiated space for them. For Ajay, this meant working through the challenges of realizing that inclusive labels (e.g., South Asian American, Asian American) often did not translate into communities where the diversity within was regarded and represented equally. For Mariel, this meant reconciling previous feelings of not feeling “enough” of her ethnicity by creating new definitions, finding connections with others of the same ethnicity who grew up in vastly different contexts from herself, and encouraging increased participation of Southeast Asian students in pan-ethnic organizing.

Ajay: “…It All Came Together Eventually”

Ajay is a junior and second-generation South Asian American. A self-described overachiever, Ajay has one major in the humanities and another in the natural sciences, as well as a double minor. From the very beginning of the interview, Ajay recalled stories
with ease and great detail. Although the above quote was used in reference to a story from his childhood, it also captures the sense of confusion, struggle, and negotiation that Ajay underwent in order to figure out how and where he “fit” within ethnic and racial communities at MU.

**Growing up: “I Began To See The Intersections”**

Ajay displayed active curiosity about his identity prior to college and was reflective of many of his experiences. He was cognizant of his ethnic and racial difference from those around him, whether this was pointed out to him or he did his own exploration.

In a very literal sense of the word, Ajay tried to locate himself in the world even from a very young age. He remembered asking his mom once: “Where do [people of our ethnicity] come from?” He also recalled when he was about three years old, looking at a world map and trying to piece together elements of his identity. He explained:

I was thinking, okay, so I’m part of a country called America. I think I’m from the state of [country] or something. I was really confused as to how everything worked out. Actually, I think for a little while, I thought that [the country] was a different planet too…it all came together eventually.”

Ajay also told me about how when taking standardized tests and checking the “race box,” one teacher said: “Everybody check White except for Ajay.”

Though Ajay described a number of instances wherein he was different, he also made connections, mentally, and personally, related to his ethnic and racial identity. Books played a role in this. As one example, he connected with the concept of having
different “public and private” lives, something he read about in a book he had to read in high school about one Mexican American’s experience, *Hunger of Memory*. He noted: “That’s probably when I started going over to White friend’s houses and seeing their private lives” and thinking how their “private lives” were “totally different” than his. Another book he read on his own by someone of the same ethnicity and going through a similar identity struggle of “Am I [ethnicity]? Am I American?” also helped him to understand how he was both his ethnicity and American.

Technology facilitated his learning about Asian American identity. He found out about “all these different blogs that existed, all the Asian American stuff that’s out there on the internet.” A Burmese friend got him interested into Asian American YouTube stars. He drew connections between different identities as he described:

I began to see the intersections between South Asian, American, [ethnicity], the larger Asian American identity. I think around 10th or 11th grade, that’s when I really began to identify as Asian American and seeing this pan-Asian, Asian American racialized identity…I think also back then I began to also see it more as an Asian race, like somehow we’re all connected and inherently ‘other’ to White people like as an Eastern race versus like a Western.

Ajay also spoke about a Chinese American student in high school whose actions he did not agree with. This student “regularly made jokes about his ethnicity, regularly spoke in “Chin-grish,” just to get laughs and seeing that, I was like, yeah, I’d rather be proud of my race than disparage it for the laughs of White people.” In high school, he also connected with Asian international students. About them, he thought: “Oh, you know,
we have shared culture. We share a similar heritage so I can just automatically get along with you even though, for example, you have difficulty speaking English.”

**Getting Involved: “It’s Not Quite Lining Up in the Way I Thought”**

Though prior to college, Ajay’s story is one of increasing connection and consciousness, his involvement is largely one of struggle and negotiation when his interactions with others do not meet his expectations. Differences between his expectations and actual experiences were felt from the beginning of his involvement experiences at MU when it came to Asian international students, within-ethnicity diversity, and the relationship between South Asian and Asian American identity.

Ajay’s expectations were shaped by his previous experiences and assumptions. Coming into college, Ajay was very excited to get involved and knew about some of the events thrown by his ESO because “people talked about it even in [his hometown]” and he had heard about it “through the network of high schoolers [of the same ethnicity].” Though he had developed an Asian American consciousness in high school, Ajay said: “I don’t think I was really thinking about the Asian American community at large, but definitely the South Asian one and I wanted to just completely throw myself in that.” He came into his college experience thinking: “Let’s celebrate the culture. Let’s have fun. I want to be [my ethnicity] and meet other [people of the same ethnicity] and all of us be friends together in our [ethnic] community.”

At MU’s involvement fair his first year, he “collected every single flyer from the ethnic aisle and sat down and organized them.” With this information, he attended all of initial meetings. The message he took away from the ESO meeting was “Yeah, we do all
this stuff, but we’re really about partying.” Ajay did not consider himself a partier, so felt a bit “isolated” afterward. Then he went to the [ethnicity] organization meeting and realized it was made up of mostly international students of the same ethnicity. At the time, he said: “I did not really see a difference that much between [international students of the same ethnicity] and myself.” He explained this was because of his relationships with Asian international students during high school as president of their international club. However, he realized: “It’s a little bit different hanging out with [ethnicity] internationals than it is with [ethnicity] Americans. There is a difference.” Ajay ended up staying with the American group, and not international group. Just the fact that there were two groups of his ethnicity, one for Americans and one for international students, made Ajay aware of distinctions he had not yet experienced. There was also a regional group, a South Asian student group, which Ajay joined.

Though Ajay knew within-ethnicity group diversity existed before, he did not think this would impact his ability to connect with others. Ajay made other observations in these beginning immersions of the [ethnic] and South Asian American community at MU: “I think already at that point I was looking around and seeing the [ethnic] community was very [much dominated by people with heritage from the Northern part of the country], very [particular ethnic group], very [from particular religion].” This made him “starkly aware” of his differences. Though, in one sense, he thought of this as being to his advantage: “I was kind of like, [my heritage is of the Southern part of the country] and I’m Christian, I’m [particular Christian], so I’m bringing diversity to the table, to your organization since you guys don’t have any [people with heritage from the Southern
part of the country].” Overall, however, Ajay described: “[It] became more apparent to me in college when I think I met more and more [people from the Northern part of the country] and realized that not all [people of my ethnicity] can get along necessarily because we're all [the same ethnicity], or that we are the same.” His ethnic identity became “sharper” than just [ethnicity] American.

In some ways I did not fit into the South Asian community in the way I had previously thought. But I think everybody goes through that unless you’re [of the dominant ethnic and religious group], then you probably fit in pretty well… I think in terms of South Asian identity, it’s just become more complex and seeing that it wasn’t just one shade, it was many different interlocking pieces. I also began to see a lot more of the brokenness in the South Asian community when I came to [MU].

Ajay attributed this in part to the sheer size of the South Asian community on campus, including of that of his specific ethnicity: “There’s such a large population of us that it kind of self-segregates into different groups, and it’s not always just by culture and religion.”

Similar to his unmet expectations around a unified [ethnic] and South Asian community, he found the Asian American community to be different than his expectations. While he knew “there was this Asian American thing out there” and through blogs like Angry Asian Man knew “that South Asians fell under that as well,” Ajay had experiences that ran counter to the idea. At an orientation event geared towards Asian Americans, although he went with a few other South Asian friends, he noticed they
were only one of few South Asians there. Going through the event’s list of Asian groups at MU they also noticed the list did not include any of the South Asian groups. He also mentioned how the flyer “had cranes and was very Japanese.” Still, he described the event as “fun” and met a lot of people who ended up being in the Asian American pan-ethnic Christian group in which he is a leader.

In the context of the Christian group, although people were not trying to intentionally be offensive, there were a couple of instances wherein other Asian Americans did things like talk in a stereotypical [ethnic] accent to try to be funny. He said: “It was…kind of hard being the only South Asian at the time.” All of this made him wonder: “Oh, do I fit in here? Do I stay?” Ajay shared his struggle:

It’s not quite lining up in the way I thought because my cultural background is pretty dissimilar than some of the other South Asians and then seeing on the other hand like the East Asian, Asian American, Pan-Asian kind of community that’s there that was mostly Pan-East/Southeast Asian, and seeing that and kind of knowing that that’s a box I check and then knowing that somewhere in the United States in these national networks there is a Pan, actual Pan-Asian phase, but at our campus there isn’t. And, well, I could go here [Asian American events] because technically I’m Asian American, but no one else looks like me, so do I really fit in? So I was kind of ethnically caught between those two places. I could definitely identify more with the South Asian community, but it’s really hard to fit in here [South Asian community] versus the East Asian community. I also have a
lot of friends and I know I’m Asian American, but I don’t really know if I can cross over.

**Staying Involved: “Cross Over”**

Amidst his struggles, Ajay was able to negotiate his place within ethnic and racial communities at MU. Ajay has reached a place where he feels a part of the Asian American community. His involvement with the Asian American pan-ethnic organization helped him, as he explained:

I think for me, my experience with [pan-ethnic] group really helped me because it was a very positive experience…there was a South Asian on the board the year before me, out of twelve people one South Asian, so I felt like it was very token, well, even if it’s token it’s still being accepted and I personally feel very accepted and affirmed by this group, as a South Asian joining that I’m not like an “other” that I’m Asian American.

Within the Asian American pan-ethnic Christian organization, despite the negative interactions he previously had, overall he felt: “the East Asian community of [the pan-Asian Christian organization] definitely welcomed me in with open arms.” Indeed, he considers the group to be “family.” Having discussions with a staff member for the group also helped him to feel more connected to an Asian American identity:

I think it was really helping talking to [name] and [name] and some of the other people who are more leaders in the community who were also very invested in Asian American identity stuff. Especially [name], she’s all into that stuff. So I talked to her a lot freshman year about these kinds of issues that we were all
interested in and we talk about the differences that were there between South Asians and East Asians or their similarities and just like these bigger issues facing Asian America… I think that was another reason just like seeing that most of the people who are passionate about Asian American issues were all East Asian just helped me kind of cross over and helped me strongly identify as more pan-Asian American or what have you, than just kind of [thinking] like South Asian, East Asian are different things…

His involvement with the Asian American pan-ethnic Christian group was important to him not only in helping to affirm his Asian American identity, but also his faith. He said: “I think my spiritual journey has been very tied up with my ethnic journey, which has been interesting and cool” and that “learning about my ethnic identity has really affirmed my faith [and] faith has affirmed my ethnic identity, and that’s something I feel like for a lot of Asian American Christians that’s not something that happens to them.”

A turning point for him happened at a conference he attended with the Asian American pan-ethnic Christian group between his first and second years. There was a talk called “Deconstructing the South Asian American Dream.” It was “about how most of our parents came over here because of the better quality of life, to earn more money, and…seeing in my life that I was structuring my entire life, my career goals around me getting money and deciding that’s not what I want for my life. I want to structure around what God has for me.” This path is not yet clear to him: “I’m still navigating what that
is and still trying to discern that.” It could be medicine, something related to Asian American Studies, or a merging of the two.

Ajay described a positive experience within the Asian American community as a South Asian American, yet he knows that an Asian American identity is something that most South Asian Americans would not actively claim; though they would check the Asian race box, most do not see the connection of: “I’m similar to Chinese Americans because of these racializations or these shared experiences. It’s kind of like Chinese culture is totally different from ours. Why would we be put in the same box?” He also mentioned that though he tries to use Asian American in South Asian settings, he is starting to feel a sense of defeat: “They will never say Asian American really to describe themselves versus, I always try to, but now it’s kind of like I am trying to fight a losing battle so I usually just say Asian [ethnicity] now.” Even at the close of the interview when he offered to help me recruit through snowball sampling, said: “I will try to find you a South Asian who is very typical South Asian on the campus.” In using “typical,” he did not use the word in a patronizing sense, but just being cognizant that his experiences and opinions are not common, at least within the context of MU.

The act of “crossing over” and claiming an Asian American identity and community did not mean a lessening of commitment or devotion to his ethnic identity and community. In regards to the community of his ethnicity, he wants to see the identity “grow” and be “a lot more welcoming.” Despite differences and the “brokenness” he described, Ajay still feels “pretty comfortable because I have a lot of friends and feel very
tied to it.” His “love” for his ethnic culture remains: “I…maybe think it’s the best [culture], I don’t know. It’s the best for me.”

**Classroom Experiences: “Othered” and “Affirmed”**

Similar emotions to those described in his involvement can also be found in his academic and classroom experiences. Ajay said he would want to do a “South Asian American” major, but no such major exists. Thus, in compromise and creativity, he is double majoring in Asian American Studies and South Asian Studies. Of all the participants, Ajay had the most to share regarding the salience of his ethnic and racial identities in the classroom. He described a few experiences, some challenging, some affirming.

Ajay shared a couple of negative experiences in his Cultural Anthropology class. He mentioned the demographic make-up of the class of about 30, most of whom were White, “one or two Black people,” then himself and a female friend of the same ethnicity. He shared an incident wherein a peer said during class discussion: “In many [social categories] in [Ajay’s country of ethnic background] you know they marry their first cousins and that’s normal.” Ajay and his friend replied: “No, we don’t…That’s actually really taboo. We’re not supposed to marry people within our own family.” Though Ajay and his friend challenged the statement, the original thought was already put out and the rest of the class had the mindset of that being a “gross” practice associated with people from the country. He went on to describe what he says was the “most salient moment” from the class:
We began moving to the topic of marriage… Our teacher asked us to raise our hands if getting married is a goal in our life, if that’s something we see as a priority and me and my friend [of the same ethnicity] raised our hands and out of the class of like 30 people, no one else did, and I think that just hit me as kind of like, “Whoa, there really is something different here.” That’s actually something I’m still surprised about just because I feel like for a lot of White woman, just any woman, a lot of people plan their wedding so, if you’re planning your wedding dress…I feel like you probably have a priority in your life to get married, but apparently not.

Ajay also told me about a challenging experience in a class on Native American Literature. In the class, most of the other students where White, “or maybe it might have been part Native four of five generations back,” and one student was tribe-affiliated. He felt: “I can identify with the Native American writers in some ways, but also not entirely because my situation as a settler is different than the indigenous people.” He made connections to a character in one of the books and felt challenge from the rest of the class who “vehemently” disagreed with him:

This historian during the Trail of Tears, her marriage falls apart in which the husband kind of abandons his wife when she doesn’t meet the cultural needs and roles that she was supposed to be playing…While the marriage was falling apart, she ends up cozying up to the White soldier, so that’s another reason why the husband was like, “No, I’m done.” I remember I was the only person in the class who stood up for [the husband] like, it’s not that he’s just a complete jerk who is
abandoning his wife, he is undergoing all this stress because he’s not able to provide in the ways that he’s used to and she’s not meeting the rules she’s supposed to and she’s cozying up to a White guy, so he’s feeling emasculated. Ajay was alone in his opinion, and came to it because as a “brown man” himself, and “[identified] with this other fellow brown man.” To him, the husband’s actions did not reflect a more oppressive culture, but the stress he was going through. Ajay described feeling “othered” that day, like he was not “being recognized fully.”

In classes where he is learning “anything about Asian Americans or like ethnic culture,” his identity is salient in a more positive way:

Usually those class settings are ones where there is much more open dialogue and even for the Native American Literature class, there was a lot more open dialogue than most classes. I think for a lot of those, when I have an experience and I would like to share, it’s something where I can…share and I feel…everybody’s very open to hearing it and encouraging of hearing your stories and also in a lot of the classes you find lots of people who were able to resonate with you, either because they also have shared similar experiences or because they are reading about them. [In] the class on Indian literature, most of the people in the class were White, but they were understanding some of the things that I can resonate within the book because they were having [to] read the book and kind of living that experience through the book.

The feeling of open dialogue and affirmation is not an occasional one, for Ajay, “it’s kind of like an everyday thing…You just go in and it’s like you feel very affirmed
by what you’re reading.” This is especially the case when a class is on Asian Americans and South Asians. Because of this affirmation, he wished that more South Asian American student took Asian American Studies classes. Reading across identities is a little bit more of a mental exercise, yet still important to Ajay: “Reading about the Native American [experiences] was just a little more of a challenge, but it was a really cool experience for me just growing in that.”

He added how he actually feels most “othered” in the class for his Christian identity rather than as a person of color:

I would say overall actually if anything, that I feel like I’m most othered in the class, and it’s not entirely me per se, but I think Christianity is something that’s usually in most of these classes framed as one, being Western, and two, being a negative, oppressive force, which is something that I do obviously recognize that Christians in the past or at least people who called themselves Christians have done a lot of horrible things and I don’t deny that, but I feel like sometimes it’s to the point where…people are all kind of lumped, Evangelical Christians treat people this way, and it was kind of like, well, I consider myself Evangelical and I definitely don’t treat people this way or I don’t condemn homosexuality like that. Part of it is always semantics, like how somebody understands the word Evangelical versus how I understand it, but definitely I feel a lot more othered in the class for being a Christian than I do for being of color, specifically South Asian/ [Ethnicity] American/Asian American.
Summary: Actively Negotiating Points of Connection

Ajay’s stories reflect deep engagement with ethnic and racial identity, both in student organization involvement and in the classroom. He has many stories of struggle and compromise that demonstrate the diversity within ethnic communities, as well as broader South Asian and Asian American communities. His struggle of navigating and locating himself within the Asian American community happened both within the context of student organization involvement and within the classroom. Though he has mostly overcome the question of whether he fit in certain spaces, he still feels struggle, but ultimately grows through it.

Mariel: “My Situation…Was Different From Most American Kids”

Mariel, a 20-year old, third year student studying political science, has a story that differs from the rest of the participants in a number of ways due to her upbringing in Vietnam, though she is not of biological Vietnamese descent, and her identity as hapa (“half-undefined White, half Asian”). Her father is White and from Australia; her mother is a Southeast Asian ethnicity.

Until she was seven, Mariel lived with her grandparents in the country of her ethnic background. When she was seven, her mother and father got married. While “technically” he is her stepdad, she said: “for all intents and purposes, he’s the only man I’ve ever considered my father.” At that point, Mariel and her parents moved to Vietnam. There, she began going to an international high school. Everyone in her graduating class was trying to go to school in [Europe], whereas she was “one of maybe two people trying to go to America. It’s where I really wanted to go.” Her mother was against the idea at first because she thought it was too far away. She wanted Mariel to go to a school in
Australia since it was closer to Vietnam. She ended up choosing where to go for college because of cost and that she had family in a city just over two hours away. She said: “In hindsight, I don’t think I could have adjusted the way that I have if I didn’t have family there.”

Still, there was some hesitation beforehand. Mariel thought at the time: “I do want to go to America over Australia, but do I really want to go to the Midwest? When I could go to a big, cosmopolitan, diverse city? Which is what Melbourne is. So I took a chance and came here. And I have not regretted the decision at all.”

**Growing Up: “Oh, I’m Not, I’m Not [My Ethnicity], I Guess”**

Mariel recalled an event at her middle school called “International Week.” During this week, there was a “parade where everyone comes to their school in their national costume dress and you line up with all the people who are from the same country as you, and you have a flag, and you play the national anthem and walk around the field.” One year, she had a [cultural] costume and stood with the rest of the students who were her ethnicity. Though all of the other students knew her and “some of them were good friends” of hers, they were not aware she was of the same ethnicity. She recalled an exchange that caused her to think about her ethnic identity:

One of them turned around and said to me, “Whoa! Mariel! You’re [the same ethnicity as us]? I didn’t know that!” And I was like, “Yeah I am!”…And he goes, “Well, I never see you at church, so I didn’t think [you were the same ethnicity].” This confused Mariel, and she reflected on how that particular day marked a turning point in her conceptualization of her identity:
The concept of having to be a certain way in order to be considered a certain ethnicity hadn’t entered my mind until probably that day. I was like, “Actually, why don’t we go to church? That’s what [people of my ethnic background] do, right? And they definitely hang out together and they definitely all speak [the language] to each other. And their moms probably cook food [associated with the background] like all the time…But that was probably, that was middle school that I felt like, “Oh, I’m not, I’m not [my ethnicity], I guess.”

Generally, prior to college, Mariel “didn’t feel [her ethnicity]. Like at all.” She likened it to how some Asian Americans “feel White.” Although she never felt White, she described it as a similar “sense of disconnect,” that although she “knew” and “loved” being her ethnicity, she didn’t “feel connected to it.” Rather, she saw herself as “just Asian.” Looking back, she rationalized this by explaining how there was an ethnic community of which she and her parents were not a part. At one point she thought they were not part of the ethnic community because of her mixed racial background. However, she realized there were many other racially mixed students who “looked way Whiter” than she did “who were really into the [ethnic] community,” so her family’s disconnect from the ethnic community “wasn’t a function of [her] only being half.” Rather, it was a matter of: “my mom didn’t hang out with them.” Thus, towards the end of high school, Mariel took intentional steps “to do something [ethnicity].” She helped out with making a cultural booth and a dance performance, finding out when dance practices were so she could make sure she could go.
Getting Involved: “I Definitely Feel [My Ethnicity] Now”

Though Mariel spoke of internal ethnic identity struggle prior to college, and the steps she intentionally took to connect to her ethnic background towards the end of high school, it was through her involvement with her ESO that she reached a point wherein she “felt” her ethnicity. A first year of college wherein she had some difficulty connecting with others started her down a path to feel this connection.

Interactions during her first year brought to light different cultural norms that existed in Vietnam and MU. For example, Mariel spoke about different expectations to answering a common introductory question, “Where are you from?”:

So when people ask the “Where are you from?” question, it was never a problem for me growing up because it was always like, “Oh, where are you from?” And someone would be like, “Oh well, my mom is from here, my dad is from here. I was born here, I grew up here, and now I’m here.”

While this “back and forth” interaction was “normal” at her high school, this was not the case when she came to MU. Later, she realized when other MU students would ask her where she was from, they were asking “Where did I grow up and where did I go to high school.” The simple exchange got even more complicated once her peers found out she grew up in Vietnam:

… then I’d get the question, “Oh, are you Vietnamese?” I’d be like, “No, my mother is this, my father is that.” And then they’d still ask again, so you’re not Vietnamese, you’re not Vietnamese, like, at all.” I’m like “No, I just lived there.” And people couldn’t process the fact, “Why would you not be ethnically Vietnamese but live in Vietnam?” In people’s heads, if you are “ethnie” and you
live anywhere that’s not America, it has to be your origin country. So, it didn’t
make sense [to them] that I was [of my ethnic background but living] in
Vietnam…It’s like, “Why are you living there?”

These exchanges made her feel “awkward” as a first year student. She wished she could
just say, “Oh, I’m from California, and no one would say anything further from that.”
Later, she realized that the line of questioning was related to mainstream thinking that
“Americans only look White.” She also noticed that other Asian students on the same
floor of her residence hall would not mention ethnicity when people asked them where
they were from. She wondered: “Do they not want people to know? Are they ashamed
of it?”

In general, regarding her move to MU, Mariel felt:

If you haven’t lived in Midwest America, suddenly having to live here, it’s
culture shock…I don’t have a language barrier, but it’s kind of like if you just got
an American and you just dropped them off in China. I literally did not know
what was going on.

Because of these new understandings, Mariel did not have any interest in joining her ESO
during her first year. She had difficulty “trying to find common ground with regular
kids,” so she wondered: “What am I going to talk about with kids [of the same ethnic
background] who grew up in [an ethnic home] and probably did that whole community
thing because they weren’t White?” However, she did seek out the Vietnamese student
organization because she thought she would find “common ground” there, having lived in
Vietnam herself.
After her first year, Mariel went back home to Vietnam over the summer. She “traded stories” with her friends from high school and she noticed “they seemed so much happier with their freshman years.” She realized there were things she missed, like the availability of different types of Asian ethnic foods. She felt “alienated” and explained: “Even though I got along with everybody and I spoke perfect English, and I sound like an American, something didn’t feel right.”

Because of this, Mariel had a mission when it came to getting involved her sophomore year:

I literally went to that involvement fair just so I could find the [ESO] booth and get info. I don’t remember actually talking to anybody in the group, I just kind of picked up a flyer and didn’t say anything ‘cause like, my sole mission for going to the involvement fair was to go to the cultural section and just get all the flyers, get all the events, sign up for all the listservs, because I was just sick of not being around people who cared about culture. And I think it was at that point that I started to kind of resent, not like, White people, but I started to resent Midwest America. I was like, I love this University, but this place is killing me. And then I went to my first meeting [of my organization]…and I’ve never looked back. During the first meeting, she “kept getting really excited because they were pulling things from the culture and stuff that I remembered and that I could relate to.” She kept attending events and eventually started to socialize with them.

All the while, Mariel made comparisons between herself, others in her ESO, and other people of her ethnicity with whom she grew up and observed points of
commonality and difference. For instance, she estimated that there were only four people at the first meeting who spoke the language fluently and realized she was not the only one who did not speak the language. This was different from her high school, where the other students of the same ethnicity could all speak the language, or another dialect. There were many people who had never visited the country before or been friends with a person of the same ethnicity until joining the ESO. Even through Facebook she learned about others’ upbringing: “So, you look at their photos from high school and it’s just like, one brown face, [against a] sea of White.” Despite the differences, she felt a commonality with other members of the ESO:

We want to know more about [people from our ethnicity], we miss things from home, we miss…that there was rice on the table everyday and now there isn’t. I had so much in common with them, despite the fact that we grew up in two completely different places and different contexts.

One event that was particularly transformative was a regional conference that she attended with her ESO during the fall of her sophomore year. Socially, Mariel said: “That solidified [the ESO] for me…that was the roadtrip [where] everyone became friends and that was like, yeah, I’m here to stay.” In terms of her identity, she was struck by the experience of being around the sheer number of people around her who had the same ethnic background. At the conference variety show, there were different performances from different schools, including cultural dances that she “didn’t even know existed.” The “whole act of going” to the conference prompted Mariel to “think
about what it meant to be [her ethnicity].” I inquired about what she meant by this, and she shared, in a poetic manner:

It’s not about eating rice, or eating [particular food dish], or even liking it. It’s not about knowing the steps to a dance or knowing how to speak [the language] or having even been to [the country]. It’s not even about having two parents who are [the same ethnic background].

She further explained how she came to this realization, noting the number of students in attendance at the conference who were not of the same ethnic background as her, something she similarly observed within the membership of her ESO at MU. She continued:

I realized it’s not about physical features or genetic or language or whatever, it’s about this general sense of family…Regardless of the context in which they grew up, whether they spoke [the language] at home or not, everyone was so open.

At the same time, there was a reification of cultural facts as strengthening cultural identity, yet flexibility in terms of accepting those who had more or less knowledge:

The people who knew a lot about [the ethnic] history or culture [of the country] were really open about sharing it, and there were so many people who were willing to learn about it. And I realized that’s really what it means to be [my ethnicity]. It’s that sense that like, like the pride, it’s the ability to be extremely proud of your culture but also be extremely willing to share it. And there’s no such thing as exclusivity or, like in [the culture of my ethnicity] it’s just, if you
want to learn about it, if you want to share with us, then we’re more than happy to let you in.

Ethnic identity also blended with the physical ESO context as she compared her ESO with others that attended: “Even though we’re smaller comparatively than all the other schools [in the Midwest], we have just as much passion and pride for our org[anization] and our culture.”

Beyond definitions of ethnic identity itself, Mariel gave much thought to how her ethnic identity fit into the wider Asian American community at MU, as manifested through student organizations. Mariel shared:

I really noticed a lot of things that didn’t sit right with me. About the way that Americans treated Asians, treated international students. The way that the community, I noticed, didn’t hang out together. How Indians didn’t consider themselves part of the Asian umbrella, that they were just kind of over here on their own being brown. And then, [my ESO] just kind of hung out on its own where the only Asian community just seemed like the East Asian community…I thought there was an underrepresentation of Southeast Asian culture…

She begin to talk about these issues with others, including members of a multiracial student group, and felt upon learning of the group’s existence: “Oh cool, there are other awkward mixed people at [MU] that I can talk to.” In regards to these conversations, Mariel shared: “It started sophomore year, all of these conversations that I’d been wanting to have ever since I got here. But I had no one to talk about them with.” In response to her realizations and conversations, Mariel wanted her ESO to be a bigger part
of this community. She observed that she would often be the only person of her ethnicity at other events put on by other Asian American ethnic and racial organizations and would think: “Why aren’t there more people from [my ESO] here? That’s odd…There’s this Asian community here. And I want [my ESO] to be a part of that, and I want [my ESO] to lead within that community.”

She reflected on not only her involvement with her ESO, but also within the wider Asian American community in general:

My involvement in [my ESO], and the Asian community in general, has made me really critically think about what it means to be Asian and how you define your culture and your ethnicity…I had some issues with not feeling enough [of my ethnicity]. I definitely feel [my ethnicity] now.

While recognizing she had to overcome the feeling not “enough,” she considered herself “lucky,” after hearing stories from some of her peers:

I realize there were so many kids who had negative, really negative experiences growing up and being Asian in a suburban, White context, or even, hapa kids…one of my friends…had experiences where she was completely rejected by her mom’s [Asian ethnicity] side of the family because, “Oh, you don’t look like everybody else.” I never went through that…I never felt the need to act White or be White or talk White or do White things because it wasn’t something that ever entered my head…I got lucky to be able to grow up in a place where I never felt bad about my race.
All of these experiences and realizations contributed to the way she approaches her leadership position in her ESO. Though she has held leadership positions throughout her life, she shared: “I don’t think I’ve ever been as devoted to anything in my life, in terms of something I was in charge of.” She has a personal mission of sorts:

I want to be able to help kids who are my age realize that it’s okay to be proud of where you’re from, and that one should ever make you feel like you’re worth less or you’re of a second class just because you don’t happen to be Caucasian… It’s a very odd thing to have to explain to another Asian why something is offensive. And I see it immediately because the things that get said here have never been said to me in my entire life.

Mariel believes her skills can help her “to effect change in the community…To get people talking, to rally people. To think critically about an issue.” In addition to the community, each new member presents a new opportunity: “If a new face pops up at a meeting, you can bet that I’ve jumped on that, gotten on their Facebook, added them to our listserv, exchanged numbers.”

**Classroom Experiences: “Yeah, Go Asians!”**

Similar to the way in which Mariel sought to create personal and community connections through her ESO involvement, her experiences in the classroom in which her ethnicity and/or race was salient reflected a desire to create connection. While the first story is one of an inability to make a connection, the second one she shared described empathy with another Asian person, across boundaries of ethnicity and citizenship. Both
cases involve a recognition of the unique, and often inequitable, experiences of people of Asian descent.

Mariel told me about a discussion after her identity politics class with her professor and some of her peers. Her professor had the class read a piece about identity construction for White people. She began to talk about the “Where are you from?” question and “American attitudes towards people who do not look White.” In general, Mariel was trying to make a point about how people of Asian descent are racialized in American society in a unique way. However, she felt that her professor, who was French Canadian, and a White peer who identified as Jewish, were trying to equate their experiences with an Asian experience. She described her frustration:

I had to try really hard to not be like, “No, you’re White. I’m Asian. It’s different.”…I felt bad because I understand there’s a lot of anti-Semitism in the world…But what I was talking about was a face value thing where someone sees Asian, assumes this, says this. Versus what he was talking about, he’s like, “Oh when you know someone’s a Jew, you say this, and you do that.” I’m like, but I didn’t know you were Jewish until two seconds ago when you told me you were Jewish.”

While that was an instance of a time wherein she was unable to connect in understanding, she also talked a time in an International Relations course that spoke to a broader connection she felt to someone also of Asian descent. During one class, they were talking about U.S.-China relations, and this “growing fear, or threat from China, the political climate and how that would possibly affect their foreign policy decisions and
how the U.S. should react.” Someone in class, “invariably a White male,” raised their hand and start talking about: “Chinese culture and mindsets and I think China will react this way…basically that they were going to be violent or react somehow negatively.”

During the class, Mariel thought about how she disagreed with most of what he said, but didn’t say anything. However, a Chinese international student in the class spoke in response and “basically made everything that the guy said invalid…She basically gave him a whole rundown of Chinese cultural philosophy and why she disagreed with what he said based on the actual culture of Chinese people, like what you said will actually never happen in China.” After she spoke, there was a “stunned silence” in the room and in her seat Mariel thought, “Yeah, go Asians!” This is a telling comment, as she could have thought in a number of different ways. Instead of “Go Chinese international student!” she claimed a racial connection. In effect, the sentiment was not “Go you!”, but “Go us!”

**Summary: Realizing Points of Connection**

Through challenging and confusing interactions, Mariel experienced the ways in which certain identities are constructed, from her middle school peers questioning her ethnicity due to her absence from church, to college peers’ inability to process that though she lived in Vietnam, she was not Vietnamese. Her initial experiences and assumptions led her to believe that she might not find a place of ethnic and racial belonging in college.

Though through her involvement Mariel found many differences between her peers in her ESO in terms of their past and current experiences, she also found
commonalities, leading her to feel connected to her ethnic identity and community. In addition to ethnic community, Mariel’s stories speak to her recognition of and entry to a pan-ethnic Asian American community, as well as a global Asian community.

A Narrative of Locating Identity Outside of Asian American Ethnic and Racial Communities: Amy

The last narrative differs from the previous ones in a number of ways. Whereas the first five follow a general trajectory of “connect” to ethnic/and or racial identity and the state of each at the time of the interview was still one that could be characterized by “connect,” Amy’s narrative has a trajectory of connect to Asian America, followed by a desired disconnect from Asian America. She did not actively engage in ethnic and racial identity exploration, rather, different aspects of her involvement contributed to the way in which she thought about Asian American identity more generally, and she increasingly distanced herself from the label.

Amy: “My Self-Development Evolution Is Gonna Extend Past Asian America”

Amy is a graduating senior of East Asian descent, double-majoring in English and Chinese, and minoring in business. She is also second-generation. Amy grew up in a predominately White neighborhood in another Midwestern state. She went to the school [of her ethnicity] every Sunday for about ten years. It was pretty much only in this setting that she interacted with other people of Asian descent.

Her English major shone through her answers as she used metaphors to illustrate her points. She spoke very quickly and with a sense of urgency, though she expressed hesitancy before arriving at conclusions. She showed consideration of the utility of her answers for my research and would sometimes interject her responses when someone she
referenced in her answers struck her as someone that could participate in my research. Describing herself as “reflective” and “introspective,” it was clear to me that she had thought about, and struggled with, these issues at length.

**Growing Up: “A Lot Of The Social Things I Wanted To Conquer Weren’t About Race Necessarily”**

Amy shared that growing up, she struggled socially. She had “no self-esteem” and low “self-confidence.” When mentioning what could be interpreted as microaggressions against her, she resisted attributing these situations to ethnicity or race: “A lot of the social things I wanted to conquer weren’t about race necessarily.” Even while saying, “maybe, partially, subconsciously, I associated race with that,” she immediately followed up with: “And that’s not fair, ‘cause that’s not why that happened.”

Although she said that race was not relevant to her growing up, she was able to recall a couple of situations with great detail. In elementary school, around second grade:

I was at an ice skating rink and then like I was just standing there like I don’t know what I was doing, but then this White kid who was like older, like, came up to me and says [in a higher pitched voice] “Can you speak English, Japanese girl?” and I wasn’t saying anything, so I think they said like “Hello” or something and I didn’t say anything ‘cause well, you know, if you just come up to me and say hello like I might not say anything.

She also recounted another experience in her first grade class:

The teacher offended me, I think without knowing that she offended me. We were learning about other cultures, I think we were learning about Indians, their
eating, like, their choice of utensils, ‘cause they use bread, or they use their hands. It’s unusual, right, I thought it was unusual because I’m not Indian. So I said something like, “That’s unusual.” But then the teacher, I forgot how she phrased it, but I just remember being offended. She’s like, “Well, you people [of your ethnicity] use chopsticks.” But the way she said it was almost defensive of Indian people and it was like an attack or another marginalization on people [of my ethnicity]…

At this point in the interview, Amy got very emotional and started to cry. She mentioned that she had been crying prior to the interview. She began to talk about how she did not like the name of her ethnicity, with a heaviness to her voice:

I hate the word [my ethnicity]. I’d rather be an Asian person, I just don’t like the word [of my ethnicity] because in my mind it’s always been associated with such pejorative meanings and then like, I can’t disassociate from that. I actually prefer the word “Oriental.” To me, that word, it’s just, dirty…[My ethnicity] was always one of those things so different, just so blatantly different, the most different you could be. It’s not even Black, it’s [my ethnicity]…. It’s always been a marker of differentiation for me, and it’s not like it’s a good one.

She would compare her upbringing to that of others who, in her words, grew up “healthy.” She alluded to others whose parents would tell their children, “Hey, these are your roots, you need to stay strong in them.” She felt “that really helped them, but for me, that was never addressed.”
These initial interactions and experiences which she explained as being “huge shocks” and a sort of “childhood trauma,” she theorized could be in part attributed to an early experience. Amy was sent away to the country of her heritage from the ages of two to four because her parents were finishing up their doctoral degrees. When she came back to the United States at the age of four she had to learn English and adjust to a completely new environment.

**Getting Involved: “The Focal Point Is Socialization”**

Amy’s involvement with her ESO, and the Asian American community, was driven by interest in self-development, and not identity. Though during her first year Amy went to an Asian American pan-ethnic organization meeting “a couple of times” as well as a meeting of the student organization of her ethnicity, at the latter she “didn’t click with anybody” and “didn’t feel they would accept her,” and so she “faded out of the Asian American scene” for the rest of the year.

Going into her second year of college, Amy told herself, “You need to go out there, you need to force yourself to talk to people, get yourself out there.” She was “still dealing with some of the old things[she] dragged on from high school.” She became involved with the East Asian organization for her own self-development. Joining her current organization was a matter of: “They need more people…if I join eboard, I have to be there all the time. I don’t have to deal with the social anxiety that I got going to clubs…If I’m on eboard, I don’t have to worry about people liking me or fitting in. I have to be there all the time.” She also mentioned that was “only socially comfortable with Asians.”
I inquired about her not being of the ethnicity named by her student organization. She replied, “Well, close enough.” She noticed there was a White person on the board when she went to the first meeting, so realized that membership identity was fluid. She also referenced the Asian American community at MU: “Now, I feel comfortable going to events [of other Asian American organizations] because I know people. But back then, it’s strict.” Her thought process was: “I can’t fit in with [specific Southeast Asian student organization] because I don’t look like them…You go in to meet people you feel comfortable with and look like, because that’s the whole point.”

She talked about two discussion events put on by her ESO, one on the distinction between “fobs” and Americans, the other was on interracial dating. While there was nothing particularly revelatory in the content for her, she saw the value in these discussions as a venue for attendees to create connections. She emphasized “the commonality that was exposed through those discussions” and the “sense of community that those things kind of build. It’s not explicit, but it’s there.”

Amy talked about “cultural recognition” events, such as food nights, in a similar way with emphasis on the social aspect and described, “The focal point is socialization.” She described further her rationale and personal investment in her ESO: “It’s like a social conduit for more people to meet each other. I feel like that’s the reason why I do these things, because I know how it feels to not have that social conduit.”

Amy spoke with energy about the national ethnic organization with which her ESO is associated, again emphasizing the social connections, often instantaneously made:
All of a sudden you become tapped into the Asian American across the West coast, East coast, and you see stuff that blows your mind. In [our state], our Asian American community and population isn’t that big. It’s really not. But when you see the whole nation, and you feel this instant connection with people because of your identity, it’s like, “Wait a minute, hold up, something’s going on here.” ‘Cause I go to California, and I would meet people, and we would talk. I felt like I was White, like I would go in the street and talk to anybody. We’d connect, even if I wasn’t as Asian as other people. It was just that mutual vibe…

Amy talked about the network that resulted and how friendships and “connections are perpetuated” through Skype, gchat, and Facebook. She explained:

I feel sometimes social media is like a narrative… ‘Cause whatever you add, somebody else’s story becomes part of your life, because you see their feed in your life, so it’s like all of a sudden you add all these other voices to your life that you don’t usually get to hear.

She likened it to football: “What’s really cool about American football games is they think, ‘Oh yeah, I can’t wait until the next game’ and then the next game for us is like, ‘Oh, next conference, next retreat.’” Amy described part of the value of this network and also likened their interactions to “real-life networking”:

I’m really grateful that I’m always going to have this subgroup to always be able to rely on and connect to in my future, whenever I venture out into White America, whatever that would be...So I think that was the first time where I really
thought about ethnic identity, but it was more like kind of a professional, societal sense.

While Amy enjoyed and saw the value of making connections within Asian American communities, she saw herself as different from those around her. She described the “core” of her executive board in a way that distanced herself from them. Amy talked about how they “eat food together,” “get bubble tea together,” “watch Asian dramas together.” Amy was “not into that stuff” and felt “removed from that. While she described her ESO involvement as “all work,” she perceived this to be different for her executive board: “It’s their lifestyles. This is where they fit in, where they feel comfortable.”

She also described the concept of leadership as distanced from being Asian American:

Leading Asian Americans is different. It’s just like Asian Americans have a different leadership style. It just depends on how Asian you are, like that continuum…The more outspoken, the more articulate, ‘cause leadership is like, you have to be a little more White to be a leader. You have to be able, you want to have to stand out from the crowd, and that’s already not Asian.

She also became cognizant of differences between Midwest Asian Americans and “East and West Coast Asians.” Amy said: “We will never be a part of that, no matter what” because of their different “backgrounds.”
Becoming Un-Involved: “Asian America’s Great, But There’s Something That I’m Not Fulfilling That’s A Part of Me”

Amy said her [ESO] “has made me grow a lot, become more confident, know what leadership is, and know what being an accountable leader is. Those are generic for any race without ethnicity involved” and that “it provided me an environment to become strong, and that may or may not be influenced by whether I identify more strongly with Asian American or not.”

Despite these benefits, Amy described a growing disillusionment and dissatisfaction with being a part of the Asian American community, one in which she feels she cannot “express herself fully.” In regards to her enlarged, and online, network, Amy shared:

I love having that feeling of connection to somebody else over space or distance and that’s why I was enthralled with it when I was first with [the national organization]. But now, I’ve realized, I have to censor [my blogs]. I can’t put them on Facebook because all the Asian Americans are reading it and people in my e-board are reading it… Not that I shouldn’t be saying them, but I have to be very aware of my audience the whole time and that’s just tiring and I don’t like that.

Because she feels this “community pressure,” she added: “The only person I can really be myself is in front of [name], who’s White.” Even our interview itself was a different type of interaction for her: “I usually can’t talk like this to other Asian Americans,” who she says “fall on the conservative side of social.”
She offered additional critique of Asian America, a “comfort zone” in which “everybody…is friends because they’re all Asian, not because they do the same things…I realize…Asian America is great, but…ultimately, it does not give me self-actualization…truth and clarity…what I yearn for.” These thoughts brought her to a point in which she struggles over the thought of “leaving” Asian America. Amy reflected:

Maybe I kind of want out a little bit. And then I think like, should I want out? Am I being judgmental? Am I not being a good person? I always try to look at people in a positive light. I always try to be humanistic, loving, ‘cause that’s just what I believe in. But then after a while, even if you try to keep this positive outlook on life, a few days ago, I felt kind of empty. I’m like, well, Asian America’s great, but there’s something that I’m not fulfilling that’s a part of me…I realize my own self-development evolution is gonna extend past Asian America.

Looking to the future, Amy will “look for what [she wants] somewhere else” though she feels challenge because of the level of her investment in the Asian American community. She also is “kind of scared” because she is comfortable in the Asian American community. She knows that she “can't reject Asian America because I’ve got so many good friends in it…even though they are typical Asian American.” Where she wants to go next is driven by her passion:

I know what my passion is. Most people don’t pursue their passions in Asian America…I realize that like there was something bigger that I was not fulfilling
and that was the fact that I'm a writer and I need to be with more literary people because I leave and breathe words and that’s how I express myself.

She wants to be part of a community of “people who are completely expressive,” “kind of hipster, but not like hipsters,” “like the Tina Fey kind of crowd.” In this type of community she can be “fully expressing” of herself. Amy sees this community, and Asian America, as “being mutually exclusive” and “two distinct entities that can’t be merged.”

Ultimately, in her view, her individualism is suppressed by being in the Asian American community. To be a part of this community, “you need to relinquish some of your individualism to join into the group because the group, it only takes place because you guys will have this common identity as Asian Americans.” Amy expanded on this idea: “That identity [Asian American], it kind of takes up more space in your time, so you gotta throw away your other identity of being. So, I cannot fully pursue my career as a writer while I'm in here. I just feel like I have to step back. Maybe this is just me.”

Outside of ethnic and racial communities, Amy believes people come together based on their common interests:

    So, all the writers come together. All the music, hipsters come together. All the sports people come together. That is how it is, but when you're Asian and you come together, it's not completely… your identity, your essence is not Asian, it's all these other things.

She described “essence” as when someone steps back from the world and they are “quiet with [their] own mind…In that moment, you’re a mind and a body…identity politics
distorts that, or shunts it into little spaces.” She also described her spiritual identity as more relevant to her than her racial identity. Amy shared: “My spirituality negates identity politics…My spirituality is more energy…so if you think of the world in terms of energy, you don’t see race anymore…so it [spirituality] would transcend it [race]…”

Amy speculated as to why she has reached a point wherein she wants to distance herself from the Asian American community:

Maybe the reason why I'm going through this point is because I never went into Asian America thinking like, "Oh, I'm going to find my home here." I only came here, I remember, my sophomore year, "I'm gonna go to Asian America, learn some social skills, and then move on." And then, I never thought that that was what actually going to be what happened, because I thought I was so invested and like I loved the community so much, but then I realized it’s not everything that I wanted.

This also likely explains why she feels she has “never gotten more clarity out of being Asian American from” her involvement.

**Classroom Experiences: “I Never Actually Had Any Issues”**

Amy displayed similar thinking about times when her race was salient during class. She described her two majors, English and Chinese, as majors wherein “people are innately not as racist.” She described English majors as “really liberal,” and “wouldn’t be racists because when you’re in humanities you’re usually more open-minded. That’s just the tendency.” She took the perspective of a White person to talk about her Chinese culture classes and said: “Well if you're a White person in a Chinese culture class, you’re
not going to be racist, right. ‘Cause obviously, you're more open-minded to learn a language and really want to major it.”

She also talked about her time in an accounting class that had many international students of her ethnicity. In that setting, “it’s kind of impossible not to think about race when you’re like in a room full” of Asian international students. Amy distanced herself from the international students in her class, taking the perspective of White American students:

Americans don't know any better. Like they don’t know if you speak English or not. So sometimes I'm like, you know, "Well, if somebody doesn’t talk to me and they try to talk to the White person next to me, I would assume, like it's a little voice in my head, oh, he probably thinks I don’t know English or something."

Which is, I mean, I can't blame them…you know I can't blame them because, I mean, you wouldn’t go up to someone who doesn’t look like they can speak your language. I could, but that kind of makes me feel uncomfortable.

Summary: Questioning Points of Connection

Amy’s narrative is one of coming into the Asian American community, moving through, and in the future, moving out. Amy did not actively engage in ethnic and racial identity exploration, rather, different aspects of her involvement contributed to the way in which she thought about Asian American identity and involvement.

She demonstrated a general pattern of thinking in dichotomies and well-defined boundaries when it comes to racial and ethnic identities. The most of these was an “Asian vs. White” dichotomy, generally talked about in a way that framed White being
positive, and Asian being negative. Other identities were regarded in the same way as Amy stated, “Writers come together, sports people come together, hipsters come together.” The “hipster” and Asian American communities are perceived to be mutually exclusive. Amy also pointed to differences in the Asian American and Asian international students, in terms of how each regarded each other, and how they are perceived by the wider community.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented restories of six Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations. Each restory consisted of accounts and reflections regarding their ethnic and racial identities prior to their ESO involvement, during their ESO involvement, and in the classroom. Among the six unique and varied narratives, I identified three broad categories based on a general trajectory of “connection”: 1) Narratives of Connecting to Ethnic Culture, 2) Narratives of Locating Identity Outside of Asian American Ethnic and Racial Communities, and 3) Narratives of Locating Identity Within Asian American Ethnic and Racial Communities. In the next chapter, I situate these findings in relation to the research questions and research questions, with special attention to interaction, continuity, and situation/place based on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three dimensional narrative inquiry space. I will also discuss implications for practice and future research, and limitations of the study.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this constructivist narrative study was to explore how Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations (ESOs) experience their ethnic and racial identities in the context of their ESO and the classroom. In this chapter, I discuss themes in relation to the research questions based on restories from the previous chapter. I also discuss the results in relation to existing literature of ethnic and racial identity development. I conclude with implications for practice and future research, and limitations of the study.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

In the following sections, I discuss the findings as they relate to the research questions. Through discussions of interaction, situation, and continuity, I attempted to capture the complexities and vast range of how Asian American student leaders of ESOs experienced and made sense within the context of their involvement with their ESO and in the classroom.

How Do Asian American Student Leaders of ESOs Experience and Make Sense of their Ethnic and Racial Identities within the Context of their Involvement with their ESO?

The six narratives explored all presented very unique stories. Through experiences and interactions with others, participants’ ethnic and racial identities were broadened or sharpened, and were intertwined with notions of communities, evoking a
sense of “place” in which one could enter and depart. Participants’ stories demonstrated where they made connections across difference, and where they felt and choose disconnect. They described a variety of different experiences, and, even when similar topics were brought up, participants spoke about them with different interpretations and perceived impacts. Recognizing the complicated web of experiences created through viewing all six narratives, I discuss the findings within a broad theme, followed by subthemes within interaction, situation, and continuity.

**Complex and varied understandings and negotiations of ethnic and racial identities.**

*Interaction.* I identified five subthemes within interaction: 1) encountering diversity within one’s ethnicity; 2) encountering international students, 3) conferences as critical events, 4) engaging with technology as social connector and resource, and 5) experiencing other identities.

*Encountering diversity within one’s ethnicity.* Participants mentioned coming into contact, sometimes for the first time, with diversity within their ethnicity. This could expand one’s view and knowledge, such as Darren coming to appreciate people on the “other side” of historical conflict, or Maria learning about tension between ethnic groups, a legacy from a civil war carried over by immigrant parents. In contrast, for Ajay, encountering diversity within his ethnicity caused his ethnic identity to “sharpen” and become more specific through highlighting his roots in the Southern part of the country and his Christianity.

*Encountering international students.* The presence of, and interaction with, international students surfaced within multiple narratives. In regards to international
students, participants spoke in language that included them, or distanced them. After encountering international students within the context of their involvement, Maria and Darren chose to identify with them. Encountering international students was a bit more complex for Ajay. Similar to the Maria and Darren, there was an element of surprise involved. However, he ended up gravitating towards the [ethnicity] American group, feeling that he was very different from the international students.

*Conferences as critical events.* A number of participants brought up going to conferences as important events in thinking about their ethnic and racial identities, while each was impacted in very different ways. For Benjamin, workshops on identity contributed to his desire “to explore more into [his] roots and culture.” Mariel’s first conference made her think about “what it meant” to be of her ethnic background, ultimately expanding her definition. Amy’s experience was impactful in that “Asian America” became alive for her. The conference that Ajay attended blended religious, ethnic, and racial identities, and prompted him to give deeper thought to his professional aspirations.

*Engaging with technology as social connector and resource.* Many participants made some mention of technology, namely how it connected them with others, but also how they came into contact with new information, and for one, how it also presented disadvantage. Maria and Mariel described Facebook as connecting people. Through Facebook, Mariel described how she could learn about others’ social networks prior to college. Amy talked positively about how social media allowed her to stay connected with people she met at conferences; but also about how such dense online, and offline,
interconnections and a sense of conservatism among Asian Americans caused her to have to “censor” her blogs and feel like she could not be fully expressing of herself.

**Experiencing other identities.** Participants experienced their gender, religious, and professional identities in different ways. Benjamin talked about a discussion with one of his student groups regarding interracial dating and how part of the discussions focused on the assertion that some Asian women prefer dating outside of their race. This had to do with perceived femininity of Asian men. During that conversation it made Benjamin feel “less of a man.” Religion was also a part of multiple narratives, often tied to whether the participant was part of a religious community closely associated with their ethnic group. Ajay is of a religious minority when it comes to his ethnic group. He expressed struggle when joining a pan-ethnic Christian group that was predominately East Asian American. While there were times that he questioned whether he belonged there, over time he came to feel affirmed by the group. Lastly, Amy discussed the way in which she felt her professional identity existed in tension with an Asian American identity, largely due to perceived conservatism of Asian Americans.

**Situation.** These subthemes exist against a backdrop of a large, predominately White institution in the Midwest. I discuss how situation related to participants’ ethnic and racial identity, both on campus and in a broader national context.

**On campus: Size leads to segregation or combination.** With the exception of Mariel, compared to their demographic contexts growing up, the population of people of Asian descent that the participants encountered at MU was much larger. The size of the institution has created the conditions that have made it possible for the participants to
encounter diversity within their ethnicities and international students. As Ajay described, there were many people of his ethnicity, allowing there more opportunity for the ethnic community to segregate into smaller social groups. To one degree, this has largely meant an “American” and an “International” group for many ethnic groups. This contrasted with Ajay’s experience in high school where he was president of the international club and he had close relationships with Asian international students, including those of ethnic groups different than his own. Maria was the only participant who mentioned being of a student group that had a substantial international student membership. The campus population of people of Maria’s ethnicity is much smaller than that of Ajay’s, which likely contributes to the nature of their different relationships with international students of their same ethnicities.

*Off campus: Institutional and national comparisons.* Similar to how the previous subtheme described the way in which the demographic make-up of MU contributed to both an increased sense of sameness and differences, travelling to other institutions and learning about Asian American communities in other communities through other resources simultaneously facilitated both increased social connection and a sharpening of identity where MU students recognized their unique context at MU and in the Midwest.

Situation is also especially relevant in thinking about conferences that took participants out of the MU and Midwestern context. With conferences bringing together people who identify similarly ethnically or racially (though I acknowledge many conferences are open to people of any background), this is a very different setting than participants were used to and ultimately heightened a sense of difference between ESOs
as well as U.S. region. Through this interpretation, institutional affiliation becomes merged with ethnic and racial identity. Participants described an increased connection to Asian Americans at other institutions in the country, however participants’ identities were also sharpened. Beyond being an Asian American of a specific ethnic group, through meeting others at conferences it became apparent that their identities as students attending MU made them different from other Asian American students. Amy described how “Asian American” culture has been different at every school she has attended. She also emphatically mentioned how through her involvement with the national organization, she learned firsthand how different her experience was from that of East Coast and West Coast Asian Americans and said, “We’ll never be that.” Mariel was the only participant who had not spent time growing up in the Midwest prior to attending MU. In retrospect, she described coming to the Midwest in general as “culture shock.” After attending a conference at another Midwestern institution and making comparisons between her ESO and that of other schools, Mariel realized how they were different.

This is also relevant in thinking about Ajay’s struggle in finding a place for his South Asian American identity within the pan-ethnic student organizations at MU. From his time spent reading blogs online that covered Asian American issues, he knew in some places that pan-ethnicity with an equal footing for South Asian Americans was possible and existed somewhere. Though he did not quite find this upon arriving to MU, since then he has been able to find a place among these organizations.

**Continuity.** In the restorying process, connections between past, present, and future were more apparent for some participants than others. Participants were able to
trace the trajectory of their ESO involvement, including events prior to college. Participants expressed different degrees of intentionality and motivations in joining their ESO. Sometimes a connection was made to an event that prompted the decision to join, such as Benjamin, he who decided to join after attending a conference that encouraged him to “get to know his roots”; for Maria, curiosity and the thought of, “Oh, I’m [this ethnicity. I should join” led to her involvement. Interestingly, Ajay was the only participant who had an internal motivation to join his ESO prior to college. He also had developed the most expectations prior to going, which likely contributed in large part to the identity negotiations he underwent.

**How do Asian American student leaders of ESOs experience and make sense of their ethnic and racial identities within the classroom?**

Participants mentioned a range of ways in which they experienced their ethnic and racial identities within the classroom. Again, recognizing the complex intersections of all six narratives, I discuss the findings within a broad theme, followed by subthemes within interaction, situation, and continuity.

**Salience of ethnic and racial identity in the classroom associated with negative, challenging, and positive experiences.**

**Interaction.** I identified three subthemes within interaction: 1) encountering international students, 2) encountering faculty and peers, and 3) race as more salient than ethnicity.

**Encountering international students.** Similar to how the presence of Asian international students differentially impacted participants within the context of their
involvement in both inclusive and distancing ways, the same can be said within the
classroom. Mariel’s empathizing with a Chinese international student in class spoke of
connection; Amy’s thought process in her accounting class spoke to a distancing from
Asian international students.

Encountering faculty and peers. Participants’ interactions with faculty and peers
presented negative, challenging, and positive experiences. Negative experiences include
Ajay’s cultural anthropology class in which the teacher said racist comments, and when a
peer spoke comments that misrepresented his ethnicity. Mariel had a challenging
experience when trying to explain to her professor and a peer the way in which she could
not get her point across regarding the uniqueness of the racialized experiences of people
of Asian descent. Ajay also described a challenging experience in his Native American
Literature course when although he was trying to make a connection between himself and
a character as a fellow male of color, he was alone in his opinion. In contrast, Ajay
described generally positive experiences in his Asian American Studies and Ethnic
Studies class wherein he felt his ethnic and racial identities to be affirmed, and the
settings ones that consisted of open dialogue.

Race more salient than ethnicity. Interestingly, ethnicity was rarely mentioned by
participants when sharing classroom experiences, with the exceptions being Maria, who
described her background as influencing her thinking, and Ajay’s experience in his
cultural anthropology class when he and his friend of another ethnicity found themselves
the only ones in the class to say they felt marriage to be a priority in their lives. All other
experiences elicited salience around participants’ racial identity as Asian.
Situation. The classroom demographic can be one way in which to think of situation, or physical landscape in the classroom. Participants often mentioned the racial makeup of their classroom as integral to their stories. This was often classrooms wherein the majority of the classroom was White and the participant was one, or one of a few, Asian students in the class. This served to heighten participants’ awareness of their difference to White students, such as Darren’s story about his film class, or Ajay’s story above from his cultural anthropology class.

Continuity. Blending with interaction, it is interesting to note that early ethnic and racial memories for participants nearly always took place in the classroom setting. In the early classroom, the teacher or participants’ peers pointed out difference, leading participants to feel a range of emotions, including “embarrassed,” “offended,” “the odd one out.”

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Relevant Literature

In this section, I will situate the findings within relevant literature. The findings add a layer of complexity to research on Asian American students in higher education, supporting and contradicting previous research. I begin this section by returning to previous findings of participation in ethnic student organizations. Following, I revisit the literature on ethnic and racial identity development, perpetual foreigner myth, campus climate, then bring in literature on Asian American Studies.

Participation in Ethnic Student Organizations

Consistent with Museus’ (2008b) finding that ethnic student organizations served as “sources of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and
venues for cultural validation,” many participants in this study expressed a home-like feeling regarding their organizations. In the setting of their organizations, participants could freely engage with activities related to their respective ethnic cultures, and had access to food that they might only been able to get at home. Through various campus events, participants could express their cultural backgrounds through dances and cultural booths.

The findings extend the literature on Asian American student involvement by focusing on identity, and adding voices that spoke of learning, confusion, and struggle that trouble notions of “familiarity,” “expression,” and “validation” (Museus, p.568). While some participants grew up with and recalled various traditions related to their ethnic cultures, leading the re-visitation of these traditions to evoke a sense of “familiarity,” the familiarity is absent is when someone did not grow up with the particular cultural traditions. Maria’s narrative serves as an example of this. Though she found learning about different aspects of her culture “neat,” she also expressed feeling “confused” and wondered about what was a “part of [her]” and what “other people do and believe in.” While Ajay has reached a point in which his identity is validated, getting to this point required much struggle and negotiation. Amy’s narrative presents a very different perspective, as she was not the same ethnicity as that of her group. Because of this, she did not feel a cultural connection to the events, and she thought of herself as outside of the group.

Similar to the groups researched by Fried (2001), “cultural immersion” experiences could be found through ESO events such as food nights and culture shows,
which provided cultural affirmation rather than a venue for intellectual exploration.

Although ESOs in this study did mention some cultural education events thrown by themselves, within these narratives, these were not events that the participants referenced as contributing to their identities. Rather, deeper thinking about the meaning of culture and identity happened on a more individual basis, or through talking with one other person.

**Ethnic and Racial Identity Development Models**

Elements of the narratives suggest participants’ “placement” within existing ethnic and racial identity development. For instance, Maria may be in Kim’s (2012) *ethnic awareness* stage of the Asian American racial identity development model, as much of her conception of identity is derived from her family and upbringing. Amy displayed elements of the pre-encounter status of Helms’ (1995) People of Color racial identity development model. This is because through her comments, though socially she connected with Asian Americans, she also minimized the group in favor of White standards. However, she does not have a lack of awareness of societal inequalities, rather, she chooses not to think about them. Ajay may be approaching the *incorporation* stage of Kim’s (2012 Asian American racial identity development model as he is mostly secure in his Asian American identity and finds connection with other people of color.

What current models do not yet capture is the intertwining of multiple identities. Religious identity was an important part of the narratives of Maria, Benjamin, Mariel, and Ajay’s identities, whether currently, in their past, or both. Their association, or non-association with majority or minority religions of their ethnicity played a role in their
ethnic identity development. Amy also mentions her spiritual and professional identities and the way in which she feels these identities to be at odds with values of Asian American communities. Certain identities were evoked within particular settings, in alignment with Chen (2009).

**Complexities of Ethnic and Racial Identity Development**

Consistent with Kuo (2001) and Mac (2011), participants in this study did not always make a clear distinction between race and ethnicity. Participants also told stories of experiences prior to college in which a “racialization of ethnicity” occurred, such as Darren’s peers asking him what different characters said, though he was not of the ethnicity of the characters (Kibria, 2000). Dynamics of salience (e.g., Chen, 2009; Yip, 2005) were also part of many of the narratives, in part explained above in discussions of “situation.” The way in which participants managed their multiple social identities can be identified by categories set forth by Chen (2009). Amy can be said to have compartmentalized her professional and racial identities into distinct categories, whereas Ajay and Maria have integrated their ethnic, racial and religious identity. After exploration of both ethnicity and race, Darren has chosen to focus on his ethnic identity.

Bhatia (2011) referenced identities “located in sociocultural contexts of transnational movement and migration” that are “fractured, shifting, and hybridized” (p. 345). This is very relevant to all the narratives and indeed contributed to “new configurations of culture and self-other relationships” (p. 348). Although I did not set a criteria for participants to be second-generation (i.e., their parents are from another country; the participant has spent the majority of their life in America), five out of the six
participants identified as second-generation. Mariel was the only exception.

International students figured into participant’s understanding of their own identities as well, although this was not a topic I explicitly brought up during the interviews.

**Perpetual Foreigner Myth**

Assumptions stemming from the perpetual foreigner myth, including the assumptions that someone needs to be White in order truly be American and that anyone of Asian descent is automatically not from America, were found in multiple narratives (Huynh, Devos, & Smalarz, 2011). Mariel mentioned the “Where are you from?” exchange which enforces these ideas. In this study, the manifestation of the perpetual foreigner myth became complicated by a relatively large number of Asian international students. Cognizant of their large number and implications of the perpetual foreigner myth, some participants chose to distance themselves from associating with international students of their ethnicity, lest they feel more “othered” than they already did. I also noticed the assumption that Americans were only White was reinforced by language used by Amy, specifically the use of “Americans” vs “Asians.” This could also be found in Mariel’s comment wherein she stated that an “American” would feel culture shock if they were “dropped off in China.” This comment dismisses the possibility that this hypothetical “American” could be a Chinese American who has visited China before.

**Campus Climate**

Participant stories provided support of Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr’s (2000) finding of experiences “of a racist atmosphere perpetuated by faculty” (p. 181). This was made known through direct comments in Ajay’s class.
Stories also echoed Maramba’s (2008) finding of Filipino/a students describing times in the classroom where they needed to give additional explanations of themselves or culture. Both Ajay and Mariel had to do this; Darren expressed feeling pressure to do so, though he did not do so by the end of his story. In line with Harper and Hurtado’s (2007) finding of students having a general feeling of Whiteness across their university, so did students in the current study describe Whiteness, both in the classroom and the campus overall. Being surrounded Whiteness was sometimes a factor for experiences in which participants’ ethnic or racial identity became salient, or led to experiences in which they felt othered.

Consistent with Sue et al.’s (2007) study of microaggressions against Asian Americans, participants told stories wherein they were perceived to be foreign, assumed to be intelligent, believed to have cultural values/communication styles that were less desirable, and seen as second class citizens. Though not within the context of his ESO involvement, Darren’s experience of having someone assume that he did not speak English could be considered a microaggression and contribute to a chilly campus climate. Microaggressions were not only directed towards Asian Americans from White students, but from other Asian American students. This includes Ajay’s stories of students within the Asian American pan-ethnic student organization speaking in a stereotypical South Asian voice in front of him. Consistent with Poon (2010) wherein many participants dismissed microaggressions or conformed to dominant ideologies, Amy was dismissive of microaggressions and upheld dominant ideologies. This includes Amy’s belief that Asian Americans need to be “White” in order to be a leader.
Asian Americans in a Changing Society

Through the interviews, it became evident the ways in which globalization played a part in creating the conditions that contributed to the conceptions of their identities within the context of their ESO and the classroom. Indeed, participants talked about “new configurations of culture and self-other relationships” impacted in large part by those in their surroundings and demographic setting created through globalization and migration (Bhatia, p. 348). More specifically, participants perceived a large Asian international student population as well as people of the same ethnicity who differed from themselves in multiple ways, such as religion. Participants, such as Darren and Maria learned about aspects of their heritage countries through interacting with others of the same ethnicity, but different cultural associations. It is important to note that at the time of the study, MU was emphasizing international student enrollment and sought to promote its presence internationally, a trend which will likely continue.

Media is also connected to globalization, as it is largely through media that people form their perspectives on issues. For instance, this can be seen in the account that Mariel shared in her international relations class in which a peer presented a hypothesis on U.S.-China relations which was likely based on media perceptions. While the strength of media is its ability to connect people nationally and internationally, a limitation is found in that certain sources dominate others and interpretations can lead to potentially harmful perceptions of others.
Asian American Studies

That Ajay described a vastly different classroom experience within Asian American and Ethnic Studies classrooms bears further reflection and exploration and is in line with authors’ suggestions that Asian American students take these types of classes to help develop their identities. Chang (2011) identifies the growth field of Asian American Studies programs as being a likely contributor to Asian American students’ racial consciousness.

Asian American Studies as a field of academic study was born out of a social movement that began in the late 1960s. The Third World Strike at San Francisco State College (now University) was followed by similar events as other institutions, and ethnic studies programs slowly grew in number, with most found on the West and East coasts (Wei, 1993). The Midwest has largely been missing from discussions on Asian American studies and even Asian Americans more broadly.

Research has also examined the impact of taking coursework that pertains to one’s social identity. Halagao (2004) explored the questions: “How do students of color experience a transformative multicultural curriculum about their ethnic history and culture? How do they interpret and emotionally respond to learning about their ethnic selves in history?” (p. 461). In her study, six Filipino American students at a large urban university in the Northwest enrolled in a multicultural curriculum and education course learned a curriculum called Pinoy Teach, and were prepared to teach it to 7th grade students. From analysis of interviews with the college students emerged six themes “revealing the complex interplay among prior knowledge, ethnic identity, and a
curriculum about one’s self” (Halagao, 2004, p. 459). In this experience, Pinoy Teach: filled gaps in knowledge of Filipino history; complexified students’ notions of ethnic identity; and promoted a sense of empowerment by connecting history to social action.

From a psychological standpoint, Lee (2008) found taking Asian American Studies coursework “to be associated with increased positive well-being, positive feelings regarding one’s race and racial identity, and social justice-related outcomes, compared to participants in no Asian American Studies coursework” (p. 125).

Kiang (2002) conducted an ethnographic study focused on Southeast Asian American students in Asian American studies classes. Framed through the lens of persistence in college, Kiang describes the ways in which students who felt isolated academically and socially prior, experienced a change in the Asian American studies classroom “where they not only survived, but thrived” (p. 241).

In the second of a two-part study, Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, and Day (2009) asked Asian American students about their experiences in Asian American courses, how those courses influenced their perception of self and others, and what aspects affected them. They identified three outcomes, including: increased self-awareness, increased motivation and involvement, and more positive views of other Asian Americans. They also employed the students-as-researchers model in their study. The student researchers “perceived the findings of the project as relevant to the processes they had gone through in Asian American studies courses: processes regarding how and why their own understanding of themselves and others had changed” (p. 52). They also developed
stronger racial and ethnic identities, and recognized the research as actions of resistance against inequality and oppression.

These findings are consistent with Quaye, Tambascia, and Talesh (2008) who describe that racial and ethnic minority students experience the classroom differently than their White peers at a predominantly White institution and benefit from having a diverse faculty and curricular content that includes their cultures. Ajay’s overwhelmingly positive experiences within ethnic studies classrooms are an example of this benefit, as opposed to the many accounts participants shared wherein they felt different and othered based on their ethnic and racial identities.

**Implications for Practice**

This study contributes to the limited research on Asian American student experiences and suggests multiple implications for student affairs practice. In general, the narratives suggest that practitioners be mindful to the diversity that exists with race and ethnicity. In regards to promoting ethnic and racial identity development of Asian American students, many authors point to encouraging students to join ethnic student organizations (e.g., Alvarez, 2002; Kawaguchi, 2003; Kodama et al., 2002). In doing so, practitioners should keep in mind that all experiences in ethnic student organizations are not the same, and students within the groups can have a “minority within a minority” experience that can contribute to a lesser sense of membership. Encountering diversity within one’s ethnicity can provide experiencing of learning aspects of history of the country of their heritage, which may at times be confusing and uncomfortable. Practitioners should be aware of this and be open to discussing related issues with
students. In addition, practitioners should recognize the multiple identities students have. Some may be more salient than others in different contexts. Lastly, are students focused on their ethnic and racial identities at the expense of the exploration of others?

That international students were mentioned by multiple participants within the context of their ESO in varied ways prompts another implication. Practitioners should be cognizant of the reasons that Asian American students may want, or not want, to be associated with Asian international students within the context of involvement experiences or otherwise. For students, this “choice” of association may be accompanied by feelings of confusion, like Ajay, who initially felt a bond with international students in high school, which somewhat dissolved in college. Often related to the size of student body, institutions will sometimes have two student groups of the same ethnicity, one geared towards American student participation, and one towards international student participation. Thus, certain delineations of identity have been set for students before they even enter college, presenting them with possible “choices” to get involved. In general, practitioners should be cautious in making assumptions about how students of a particular ethnicity choose to identify, who they want to associate with, and their knowledge of cultural history. Exploring students’ opinions around these topics can also bring about avenues for potential dialogue. For example, discussing Asian American students’ feelings towards Asian international students can also be a way of broaching the topic of the perpetual foreigner stereotype.

Given the number of participants who mentioned the powerful, mostly positive, impact of attending conferences and becoming part of wider networks, student affairs
practitioners can encourage and support Asian American student conferences that explore issues related to ethnicity and race. At these conferences, students have the unique opportunity of connecting with other many other students and attending workshops that can prompt new understandings of themselves and their identities. Additionally, student affairs practitioners can reflect on the elements on conferences that make them transformative experiences for many students. How can they recreate these experiences and bring them to their daily practice at their home institutions?

That Ajay and Mariel mentioned specific individuals with whom they had discussions related to race and ethnicity that helped them to make sense of confusions regarding their identities suggests that student affairs practitioners increase avenues for sociocultural discussions regarding Asian American identities. This could mean becoming more familiar with specialized staff and faculty on campus, communities off-campus, as well as informing themselves so that they can be conversant in these issues too.

Student affairs practitioners can also think about the power of technology and social media. In the same way that Amy mentioned other people’s narratives becoming a part of hers through Facebook and social media, practitioners working in multicultural student affairs can be aware of this, and also add their own. In creating Facebook pages and other social media sites for their own multicultural student affairs entities, practitioners can create content that can engage students in thinking about their identities in broader contexts.
Practitioners should also be aware of regional differences for Asian Americans, and students’ perception of these differences, especially in the Midwest, as evidenced through the interview. Because institutions on the East coast and West coast in general are known for having higher percentages of Asian American students, this can lead students who do not live in these areas to feel that they have less of a history. In the Midwest, practitioners can work to help students feel more confident and empowered as Asian American students in the Midwest. At the same time, encouraging them to attend conferences outside of the Midwest provides additional opportunities. When encountering East coast and West coast Asian American students prompts a moment of dissonance for Asian American students from the Midwest, practitioners should be able to talk through this with students.

Within the classroom, professors should be aware of the ways in which classroom demographics can impact Asian American, and Asian international, student experiences. That students experienced racist comments and told of accounts wherein their professors and peers did not understand messages they tried to convey about Asian American experience suggests that wider institutional efforts be taken to education students, staff, and faculty about the nuances of Asian American experiences.

**Implications for Future Research**

The limited research on ESOs presents many opportunities for future research. This study warrants further exploration of the multiple identities of Asian American students. The diversity of ways in which participants found their ethnic and racial identities to be tied to, or at odds with, other identities prompts further research to explore
the ways these intersect. Particularly, additional research should explore intersections with religion, spirituality, and gender, where were all mentioned by participants.

Because many participants mentioned Asian international students as influencing their identities, research could examine the experiences of Asian international students in ESOs. How do Asian international students connect or distance themselves from Asian American students, and for what reasons?

Many participants mentioned conferences impacting them in powerful ways, such as influencing their decisions to join a student group and prompting new definitions of ethnicity. Thus, one line of study could examine the longitudinal impact of conferences. Research could also explore whether there is a difference for students who attend one or multiple conferences. Another area of study could investigate what experiences in particular at conferences cause them to be such transformative events for some students.

A cognizance of many participants regarding the uniqueness of being Asian American in the Midwest, at MU in particular, as well as a recognition that every campus has a different culture, suggests increased research across regional contexts. In particular, the size of MU contributed to how participants understood their identities, thus suggesting a line of comparative research of institutional size and number of Asian international students attending. This could explore if and how a relatively small or large presence of Asian international students interacts with manifestations of the perpetual foreigner myth.

All of the participants found points of connection, and stayed because of a combination of social and cultural attrition. Amy’s narrative is different in that she
sought disconnect. An interesting line of research could investigate why students decide to leave ethnic student organizations. Related to this is additional research on conferences, for although all of the students in this study mentioned conferences as being very impactful, this may not be the case for all attendees. How do other students interpret their experiences as conferences?

Lastly, in recognizing that this study included monoracial students and one multiracial student, further research could explore the experiences of multi-ethnic and adoptee members of ethnic student organizations. Would their trajectories match those outlined above, or would they present vastly different paths?

Limitations

Because I chose to focus on experiences within the context of the ESO involvement and in the classroom, one limitation of the study is the lack of consideration of experiences that occurred outside of the classroom, such as in common areas like residence halls or libraries. While I did include some detail of experiences within common areas, this was limited. Had I asked participants directly about these contexts, this may have revealed even more relevant experiences that contributed to their understanding of their ethnic and racial identities. Additionally, though all six participants were of different ethnic backgrounds, they are still just six of many Asian ethnicities.

Summary

The purpose of this constructivist narrative study was to explore how Asian American student leaders of ethnic student organizations (ESOs) experience their ethnic
and racial identities in the context of their ESO and the classroom. Findings revealed complex and varied understanding and negotiations of ethnic and racial identities within the context of participant ESOs, and that salience of ethnic and racial identity in the classroom was associated with negative, challenging, and positive experiences. Encountering people who presented an element of difference prompted students to either broaden or sharpen their ethnic and racial identity. Upbringing, expectations, and physical context all mediated this process.

The findings of this study contribute to the limited research on Asian American students and involvement in ethnic student organizations. Implications for practice include mindfulness of diversity that exists within race and ethnicity, recognition of multiple identities, encouragement of attending conferences, and increasing avenues for sociocultural discussions. Possible directions for future research include further exploration of multiple identities of Asian American students, longitudinal research on conference attendees, comparative research of different regional and size contexts, further exploration of reasons why students decide to leave ESOs, and research on multiethnic and adoptee members of ethnic student organizations.

Through their participation in their ESOs, these six participants saw themselves in a broader societal context. The ways in which they responded to and navigated this new context were vastly different, reflective of a number of mediating factors. Still, what is certain is that all of these students are at different points than they were before they joined their ESOs, and they will continue to be shaped through their future interactions to bring about new understandings of themselves and others.
References


& A. Agbayani (Eds.), *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders* (pp. 121-142).

Washington, DC: NASPA.


APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello,

My name is Annabelle Estera and I am a second-year Master’s student at Ohio State studying Higher Education and Student Affairs. For my thesis research I am interested in learning about how student leaders of ethnic student organizations think about their ethnic and racial identities. I want to do so through listening to your stories and experiences.

This research can help educators and others who work with student organizations to better understand the experiences of Asian American students. At the same time, I hope our interviews give you a space in which you can also more deeply consider your own identity and experiences.

I am looking for current executive board members who meet the following criteria:

1) Your ethnic background is the same as that specified your organization’s name* (can be of partial ethnic heritage)
2) You were also on the executive board, or highly involved, with your organization for the entirety of the past school year

Participation in this project will involve one interview during the fall semester, lasting an hour to one and a half hours. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview as well as my interpretation of your interview, either through email, or a follow-up interview that would last no more than 30 minutes.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you are interested in being a part of this research, I ask that you complete the Interest Form attached and email it to me by (INSERT DATE) (estera.4@osu.edu). I will review all forms and select participants that represent a diverse demographic group. I will let you know within a couple of weeks if you have or haven’t been selected.

If you have any questions at all please feel free to email me. Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you soon!
Sincerely,

Annabelle Estera

*From my own experience, I recognize that leaders (and members) of ethnic student organizations need not share the ethnic identity specified by the organization’s name. Though I have set this criterion for the current study, researching leaders whose ethnic background is different from the organization’s name would present another interesting line of inquiry.

This research is conducted under the direction of Dr. Susan R. Jones, Associate Professor, Educational Policy and Leadership, Higher Education and Student Affairs.
APPENDIX B

Interest Form

Name _____________________________

Email address ________________________

Year in school _________

Age ____

Major(s) ____________________   Minor(s) (if applicable) _____________________

Ethnicity ____________

Gender ______________

Are you an international or domestic student? ______________

How long have you lived in the United States? __________________

In what ethnic student organization are you involved? ______________

What is your position in this organization? ______________

How would you describe your involvement in this organization prior to the current school year?

__________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name: _______________________________________

Date: ___________________

Pseudonym: _________________________________

Welcome participant and thank them for participating.

Review the informed consent that they have signed – specifically:

• Confidentiality
• Use of pseudonym
• Recording
• Participation is completely voluntary/can choose to discontinue at any time

Ask if they have any questions.

General Questions/Pre-college:

1) Can you tell me about your decision to come to [MU] and what factors played a role in that decision?
2) Prior to college, how did you think of yourself racially?
   a. Can you tell me about a specific moment, the earliest memory you have, in which race was brought up or maybe race was a part of that memory but not explicitly brought up?
3) Prior to college, how did you think of yourself ethnically?
   a. Can you tell me about a specific moment, the earliest memory you have, in which ethnicity was brought up or maybe ethnicity was a part of that memory but not explicitly brought up?

Student Organizations: As you know, for this research I am interested in learning about the stories of student leaders of ethnic specific organizations.
4) When you first came to college, what sorts of activities were you hoping to get involved in?
5) How did you find out about your organization in the first place? What attracted you? What was the first meeting like?
6) What made you decide you wanted to become an executive board member for your organization?
7) Can you describe an event, or events, put on by your group that made you think about yourself differently in terms of your ethnicity or race?
8) How would you describe your relationships with the other executive board members and general members?
9) Overall, how has your involvement in your ESO influenced your racial and/or ethnic identity?
10) How else has this group influenced you? How would you describe the relevance of your organization in your life compared to all of your other college commitments (coursework, other groups, job, etc.)?

Classroom: I am also interested in learning about your academic and classroom experiences.

11) Prior to college, what was your intended major/career path? What influenced this? Who influenced this?
12) What is your major now? How did you choose it? What factors played a role in that decision?
13) Can you tell me about a time or times when your race or ethnicity was salient during class? Who was involved? How did you feel?

Possible probes:

- "Could you tell me about a time that displays that at its clearest?"
- "Is there a specific incident you can think of that would make it clear what you have in mind?"
- "Could you tell me what happened, starting from the beginning?"
Appendix D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Racial and ethnic identity development of Asian American student leaders of ethnic specific organizations

Principal Investigator (PI): Susan R. Jones, Associate Professor, Educational Policy and Leadership, Higher Education and Student Affairs

Co-Investigator: Annabelle Estera, Master’s Student, Higher Education and Student Affairs

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:
The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences that have contributed to how you think of yourself racially and ethnically.

Procedures/Tasks:
By agreeing to participate in this study, you will take part in a semi-structured interview lasting no more than 90 minutes with one of the study’s investigators. You may be asked to take part in a follow-up interview of approximately 30-45 minutes in length if additional information is needed. You will be asked about experiences that have contributed to how you think about your racial and ethnic identity.

Duration:
You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are
otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

• Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
• The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
• The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researchers will not identity you, if so desired. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, Dr. Susan R. Jones and Annabelle Estera can code the data so your name and organization will not be revealed. In addition, all data will be encrypted and stored in a secure location. Only the principal and co-investigator will have access to this confidential confirmation.

Risks:
This process may affect your perception of yourself and inform future personal decisions.

As in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

Benefits:
The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to reflect on and discuss your college experiences.

Incentives:
After completing the interview, participants will receive a $5 Starbucks gift card.

Participant Rights:
You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.
If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Susan R. Jones, Principal Investigator at 614-688-8369 or jones.1302@osu.edu, or Annabelle Estera, Co-Investigator at 513-885-6083 or estera.4@osu.edu

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

If you are injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact Susan Jones, Principal Investigator at 614-688-8369 or jones.1302@osu.edu.

Signing the consent form
I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Printed name of subject ________________________________ Signature of subject ________________________________ AM/PM

Date and time ________________________________

Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable) ________________________________ Signature of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable) ________________________________ AM/PM

Relationship to the subject ________________________________ Date and time ________________________________
Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Printed name of person obtaining consent  
Signature of person obtaining consent  
AM/PM

Date and time