

Asian Americans and Internalized Racial Oppression: Identified, Reproduced, and Dismantled

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Abstract

Internalized racial oppression among Asian Americans is currently an understudied topic in the social sciences. In this article, the authors draw from 52 in-depth interviews with 1.5- and 2nd-generation Asian Americans to examine this phenomenon. Although previous studies have examined individuals who engage in, and reproduce, internalized racial oppression from static lenses, the present research shows that individuals can (and do) shift out of perceptions and behaviors that perpetuate internalized racism. This research pinpoints the factors that assist in this fluid process. The findings show that the factors are centrally framed around the theme of critical exposure. In particular, it is the critical exposure to ethnic and racial history, ethnic organizations, and coethnic ties that ultimately leads to the emergence of an empowering critical consciousness, which is the necessary key in diverting Asian Americans away from behaviors that perpetuate internalized racial oppression.

Keywords

internalized racial oppression, Asian Americans, children of immigrants, racialization, inequality, racism

Our skin can be an incredible source of pride and power, but it is equally a source of unbearable pain, frustration, and—in our weakest moments—shame.

Viet N. Trinh (2015)

In 1966, Ava's parents journeyed from South Korea to the United States for their medical residency. Initially, they had every intention of returning to South Korea at the end of their stint. However, it never happened. The family's decision to stay in the United States was driven both by personal and larger structural factors unfolding during that time period. These factors included the passing of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, a high demand for medical doctors in their area, and the birth of their first-born in 1967. According to Ava, her dad's rationale for staying was centered on "the American Dream

thing," and "want[ing] the kids to have the better opportunities in the States."

Growing up in Cleveland, Ohio in the 1980s, Ava keenly recalls being only one of a handful of students of color at her schools. Ava shares that her self-perception was greatly influenced by how she compared with her white peers:

I was always self-conscious about how I looked.
I always hated my eyes, they were too small, [I

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wanted blonde hair, I was always too short, always wanted to look different, and [I was] not popular. I had a small group of friends, mostly white friends, but never really had boyfriends, and I attribute that to being Korean.

Ava reflected ethnic self-shame and attributed her self-perceived shortcomings to her Korean identity. Moreover, Ava saw herself as “very Americanized,” an identity that she associated exclusively with whiteness. She carried these sentiments into college. She says,

The first year [in college], I remember meeting some Koreans through intervarsity and feeling really uncomfortable and saying, “I’m not really Korean.” My experiences with Korean Americans have been really negative. I don’t feel like I belong. . . . I want to joke that I was like Ivory soap. I was 99.44 percent American. That’s what I would say. That’s how I would identify. I was the “Twinkie.” I was . . . very, very “Americanized” and kind of joked about it. Because they would say, “Oh, you’re very American,” because a lot of them were from California.

Ava’s powerful self-description as “Ivory soap” and a “Twinkie” illustrates how she saw her own social positioning during that period of her life: as someone who felt “yellow” on the outside and “white” on the inside. Although Ava attributed her shortcomings to her Korean ethnicity, her use of the ascribed racial term *yellow* highlights the influence and inescapable nature of racial identity and racialization for Asian Americans (Kim 1999; Tuan 2001).

We begin this article with Ava’s story to provide an example of an individual who grappled with racial and ethnic self-doubt and belonging and harbored a sense of shame and inferiority. These are all thoughts and behaviors associated with the reproduction of racial inequality, and it reflects how racial subordinates have internalized their own racial oppression (Pyke 2010).

What is internalized racial oppression (IRO)? Scholars who study systems of oppression have argued that internalized oppression is an “inevitable” condition of these structures (Pyke 2010:553; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Scholarship addressing themes of IRO existed long before the emergence of this terminology. In the early twentieth century, Du Bois (1903:3) wrote about the existence of “double-consciousness,” or “this sense of always

looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity,” to explain racial subordinates’ self-perception as heavily influenced by the dominant group’s negative gaze. Clark and Clark’s (1947) now famous doll test study, conducted on African American children, provided empirical evidence that internalized racial inferiority exists. They posited that psychological consequences for this mind-set included preference for whiteness and the overall belief in the superiority of the white dominant group over racial subordinates.

In the mid-twentieth century, Memmi (1965) touched on this process of IRO in his writings about the oppressive colonial relationship between the French colonizers and the North African colonial subjects in French-occupied North Africa. Memmi described the internalization process of self-hatred by the oppressed as follows:

The crushing of the colonized is included among the colonizer’s values. As soon as the colonized adopts those values, he similarly adopts his own condemnation. In order to free himself, at least so he believes, he agrees to destroy himself. . . . Just as many people avoid showing off their poor relations, the colonized in the throes of assimilation hides his past, his traditions, in fact all his origins which have become ignominious. (Pp. 121–22)

It is within this oppressive colonial structure that the colonial subjects can potentially begin to believe, internalize, and project the shame of who they are. Being at the receiving end of denigrating behaviors, the oppressed begin to question their identity, believe that they are inferior, and exude self-doubt and self-hatred (David and Derthick 2014; Fanon 1963; Memmi 1965). IRO embodies the existence (and perpetuation) of this reflexive process of internalizing and reproducing the “contempt and pity” of the dominant group.

Although this strand of literature is not new research terrain (Chou and Feagin 2008; David 2014; Hill 2002; Hunter 2002; Kohli 2014; Pyke and Dang 2003; Schwalbe et al. 2000), the systematic study of the processes that contribute to the reproduction of structural racial inequality and oppression is a vastly understudied topic within the fields of race, ethnicity, and migration studies in the social sciences (David and Derthick 2014; Pyke 2010). How does IRO function among children of immigrant communities? Specifically, what are the

processes that sustain or thwart IRO within the Asian immigrant community in the United States? These are crucial questions to examine because the ideology of IRO has vast material and psychological consequences, as it bears heavy weight on how victims of racism understand and define themselves and others (Chong and Kuo 2015; David 2014; Pyke 2010).

Although previous migration studies on this topic have noted the existence of IRO perceptions and behaviors from a static perspective (Danico 2002; Kibria 2002; Pyke and Dang 2003; Tuan 1999), in this article, we extend the current literature by empirically examining the fluidity behind individual perceptions and behaviors over a life course. Our research addresses the potential shift out of perceptions and behaviors that perpetuate internalized racism. We seek to pinpoint the factors that assist this shifting process. We draw from 52 in-depth interviews of 1.5- and 2nd-generation Asian American respondents who grew up in the Midwest to address this precise literature gap on IRO within these immigrant communities. The following three questions guide our inquiry: Do 1.5- and 2nd-generation Midwest Asian Americans in this study engage in practices that perpetuate IRO? If so, can individuals shift out of the mind-set and behaviors associated with IRO? What are the specific factors that would assist this shift?

This research shows that, in line with previous research on identity formation, practices reflecting IRO should also be recognized as variable (Nagel 1994). Our findings indicate that influential factors are centrally framed around the theme of *critical exposure*. In particular, it is critical exposure to ethnic and racial history, ethnic organizations (e.g., summer camps, college organizations), and coethnic social ties (e.g., role models). These different avenues ultimately lead to the emergence of an empowering critical consciousness, which is necessary for diverting Asian Americans away from behaviors that perpetuate IRO. We posit that in examining practices such as the engagement in IRO among individuals, it is essential to systematically document the transformation *and* allow and account for the possibility of *flux* in individual behaviors.

INTERNALIZED RACIAL OPPRESSION: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY OVERVIEW

In the middle of the twentieth century, a few scholars began to make connections between structural

oppression and its psychological effects (Clark and Clark 1947; Fanon 1963; Memmi 1965). However, only relatively recently has the field of psychology directly tackled the experiences of internalized oppression and its consequences among Asian Americans (David 2014). This strand of literature has been particularly focused on Asian American communities that have been directly affected by the vestiges of U.S. imperialism (e.g., Filipinos). In general, this emergent area has examined the role of, and psychology-related treatment for, internalized racism within racialized minority communities (David 2009; David and Derthick 2014; Kim 2008; Millan and Alvarez 2014).

In other studies, IRO has explored various topics ranging from colorism (privileging of lighter skin tones) and its association with social, racial, and symbolic capital (Glenn 2008; Hill 2002; Hunter 2002; Maxwell et al. 2015) to topics of internalized racism and educational achievement (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Kohli 2014). For example, in addressing colorism, Glenn's (2008) work pointed to the role of economic forces (i.e., multinational companies and their global marketing) in contributing to the expansive global skin-bleaching market in the global South. According to Glenn (2008), it is a market that should be "seen as a legacy of colonialism, a manifestation of 'false consciousness,' and the internalization of 'white is right' values by people of color, especially women" (p. 298).

In the field of education, Freire (1996), in his classic work on education among the oppressed, describes the detrimental psyche behind internalized oppression in writing that the oppressed "feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life" to the extent that it "becomes an overpowering aspiration," and "in their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them" (p. 44). Freire argued that this can be countered with *conscientização* (critical consciousness), which comes as a result of individuals who "emerge" from their "submersion" and "acquire the ability to *intervene* in [the] reality" of their oppression (p. 90). In other words, critical consciousness comes from learning to recognize one's own oppression and taking action against it.

Building on this previous work, Kohli's (2014) case study of 12 Black, Latina, and Asian American pre-service teachers provided an example of how IRO can potentially be perpetuated in education. Kohli documented the existence of internalized racism within the teachers' own K-12 schooling and argued for the importance of consciousness

building in “unlearning” and “thwarting” the development of IRO (p. 378). Although it was not tested in her study, Kohli suggested that consciousness can be developed through activities such as joining cultural organizations, learning one’s own racial history, and learning about the history of race and racism (p. 378). Similarly, Millan and Alvarez (2014:181) argued that a crucial engagement in this “process of healing” is through critical consciousness (e.g., critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action).

In sociology, especially within migration studies, there has been a dearth of IRO studies (Pyke 2010). Schwalbe et al.’s (2000) seminal inequality article highlights four generic processes that contribute to sustaining and reproducing systems of inequality: othering, subordinate adaptation, boundary maintenance, and emotion management. Schwalbe et al. argued that “most strategies of adaptation have dual consequences, challenging some inequalities while reproducing others” (p. 426). Their work mentions the strategy of “defensive othering,” or the “adaptive reaction” of “identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group” (p. 425). The processes to sustain practices of IRO would necessitate acts of “defensive othering” by the oppressed racial minority groups. Building on this, Pyke’s (2010:555–56) scholarship called for more immigration research on the “acculturative mechanism” by which “White supremacy and racial oppression” are taught and reproduced. Our research seeks to identify the processes by which IRO is thwarted by asking: What are some activities that respondents have engaged in to develop their own critical consciousness?

RACISM, RACIALIZATION OF ASIAN AMERICANS, AND INTERNALIZED RACIAL OPPRESSION

Racism lies at the heart of internalized racism. The evolution of the concept of racism has included various competing perspectives. In the 1960s, the definition of racism emerged as “the combination of relationships” among “prejudice, discrimination, and institutional inequality” (Omi and Winant 1994:69). In the 1970s, a competing neoconservative perspective emerged to reorient the focus on ethnicity, forward the colorblind perspective, and place the injury of racism on the individual (p. 70).

In the 1980s, Omi and Winant (1994) shifted the focus back onto race in their seminal work on racial formation theory, which they defined as “the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55). In this work, Omi and Winant argued that social projects were “racist” when they “demonstrate a link between essentialist representations of race and social structures of domination” (p. 72). This “essentialist” component also appeared in Schaefer’s (2013:14) definition of racism as “a doctrine of racial supremacy that states one race is superior to another” based on belief that certain races possess “inherently superior” characteristics. Bonilla-Silva (1997:467) added further clarification to the role and characteristics of racism by contending that it is more than just a derivative of social psychological maladies or class structure; that is, racism is the “racial ideology of a racialized social system” and merely serves as one segment of a larger structure of a racial system. In making this contention, Bonilla-Silva emphasized the importance of studying racism through the lens of racialization (p. 475).

In the Asian American experience, the broad history of their racialization as the “forever foreigner” and “model minority” has been well documented in academic literature and print media (Kim 1999; Osajima 1988; Peterson 1966; Spoehr 1973; Tuan 2001). The first label, the forever foreigner, traces back to the mid-1800s, when large numbers of Chinese laborers came to the United States to work in mining, on railroads, and in agriculture (Almaguer 1994; Chan 1991; Takaki 1989). This racial ideology created numerous negative stereotypes, including the threatening “yellow peril,” that possessed strange customs and posed as economic threats (Almaguer 1994; Spoehr 1973; Zia 2000). The “model minority,” on the other hand, is a more contemporary term that generalizes the socioeconomic and educational success of all Asian Americans (Kim 1999). This valorizing label is damaging because it hides the socioeconomic diversity among Asian America (Chou and Feagin 2008; Lee 2015).

LEGACY OF RACIALIZATION THROUGH LABELS

The legacy of racialization influences the framing of racial discourses and how racial minorities view themselves and one another. The framing of racial discourses on Asian Americans has historically resulted in various individual- and structural-level forms of anti-Asian racism, including but not

limited to immigration exclusions, racial violence, and barriers to land ownership, labor, and education (Chou and Feagin 2008; Lee 2015). It is also critical to note that the scope of racialization can change on the basis of geopolitical relations, as made evident in the South Asian American experiences in the post-9/11 era (Nguyen 2005; Rana 2011). Furthermore, when internalized, the strength of racialization also affects intragroup relationships. Reflecting Memmi's (1965) analysis of internalized oppression of the colonized, Asian Americans also fall victim to viewing themselves and other Asian ethnics through the racialized gaze of the white dominant group as inferior subjects (Osajima 2007).

Themes of 1.5- and 2nd-generation Asian Americans' using strategies of navigating racialization and engaging in IRO through the use of racialized "othering" labels are scattered throughout social science research and Asian American literature (Chiang-Hom 2004; Danico 2002; Kibria 2002; Pyke and Dang 2003; Shankar 2008; Talmy 2004; Tuan 2001; Wilkinson and Jew 2015). For example, Tuan's (2001) study of ethnic options among third-generation-plus Chinese and Japanese Americans found that respondents developed various strategies to cope with their own identities in reaction to their racialization as "perpetual foreigners" and "model minorities." These strategies include self-mockery or diversion from one's Asianness and disassociation from other Asians. For instance, one respondent engaged in self-mockery by asking for chopsticks at a pizza parlor—all in an effort to "get on the good side of their white peers" and to appear less threatening (Tuan 2001:84). Engaging in techniques of "defensive othering," these Asian Americans learned at a young age that fitting into the larger dominant white society means disassociating from co-ethnics possessing undesirable qualities (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Pyke and Dang's (2003) study of 1.5- and 2nd-generation Korean and Vietnamese Americans found rampant use of denigrating terms such as *FOB* (fresh off the boat), which refers to those who display ethnic identifiers similar to those who recently arrived to the United States (e.g., speaking with an accent), and *whitewashed*, which refers to those who have assimilated into the white mainstream and lack their own ethnic culture knowledge. The authors posit that the use of these labels, defined as "intraethnic othering," serve as adaptive strategies for these young adults to cope with their own racialization (p. 152). However, Pyke and Dang (2003) also argued that "although these

identities are constructed as a means of resisting a racially stigmatized status, they also reproduce the derogatory racial stereotypes" (p. 149).

Similar themes were also found in Chou and Feagin's (2008) qualitative research on the role of systematic racism in Asian American lives. They argued that Asian Americans are socialized in an environment that is filled by whites' racist framing. Consequently, although some have fought back through resistance (e.g., creating campus organizations, educating others), the majority has internalized existing anti-Asian stereotypes, discrimination, and racism (Chou and Feagin 2008:146). In short, Asian Americans are victims of the white racial frame, a framing that seeks to maintain white dominance by continuously denigrating racialized minorities at the bottom (Chou and Feagin 2008:19).

Other scholars have further contextualized the nuances of the IRO terrain by examining the role of class and gender (Kibria 2002; Shankar 2008). Shankar's (2008) scholarship provided examples of how second-generation South Asian Americans, particularly upper-middle-class Desi teens in Silicon Valley, used the term *FOB* to disparage their middle-class counterparts. The importance of class also appeared in Kibria's (2002) research on 1.5- and 2nd-generation Chinese and Korean Americans, in which she found respondents "disidentifying" (disassociating) from those deemed as "foreign" and those who lack middle-class cultural capital. The role of gender also emerged as male immigrants were stereotyped as "backward" traditionalist, who according to one respondent, "don't want their women to work" (Kibria 2002:91). Consequently, gendered stereotypes of the chauvinist Asian immigrant male become a rationale for disassociation.

Hence, although Asian Americans are actively negotiating their position within a racialized society, some of their strategies are problematic, as they merely result in perpetuating racialized stereotypes and structural inequality. Although this previous body of interdisciplinary literature—all of which has contributed to Asian American studies—provides rich examples of the existence of internalized racism in operation, there is a lack of attention on individuals shifting out of these behaviors. Is it possible to stop engaging in behaviors associated with IRO? If so, what are the processes that trigger these transformations?

METHODS

Data for this study draw on 52 in-depth interviews conducted from 2011 to 2012 of 1.5- and

2nd-generation Asian Americans who grew up in the Midwest. The “Asian American” identity is an extremely heterogeneous category embracing everyone from the “Far East, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent” living in the United States (Hoeffel et al. 2012:2). Today, 42 percent of all Asian Americans reside in California and New York (Zong and Batalova 2016). Within the Midwest, the largest population of Asians resides in Illinois and Michigan. The only exceptions are Hmong, Cambodians, and Laotians, who are located mostly in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Minnesota is also home to a sizable Korean adoptee population. Although relatively small compared with other parts of the United States, the Asian population in the Midwest has experienced a demographic boom in the past three decades and is currently 2 million large. Their “invisibility” has prompted scholars to call for more research on their experiences, as there are negative consequences to being invisible subjects within these predominantly white spaces (Dhingra 2009; Lee 2009:252; Wilkinson and Jew 2015).

Interviews were conducted with 33 women and 19 men, with an average age of 25 years. The respondents derived from 11 different Asian ethnicities and from various multiracial backgrounds. The majority of respondents ($n = 33$) were from Ohio and Indiana. All were college educated, with some college or higher (see Table 1). Respondents were initially recruited by convenience sampling. This began via word-of-mouth and e-mail advertising through individuals and organizations in the Ohio and Indiana area. The research flyer was advertised through social media platforms (e.g., Facebook). After the initial convenience sampling, snowball sampling was used. Interviews were conducted using an interview instrument through three methods: in person, Skype video chat, and telephone.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using the qualitative Web-based software Dedoose. We omitted personal identifiers and assigned all respondents pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The interviews were between 1.5 and 3 hours in length. The interview instrument covered numerous broad topics. In this article, we draw most of the data from the “neighborhood context,” “education,” “relationship,” and “discrimination” subsections of the interview (see Appendix A). We began the initial analysis with broad-themed coding on the basis of questionnaire categories (e.g., family history). After this process, we implemented an inductive approach by using initial open coding (line by line)

Table 1. Selective Respondent Characteristics.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Mean age (years)	25	—
Home state		
Ohio	18	35
Illinois	15	29
Minnesota	9	17
Wisconsin	3	6
Michigan	2	4
Iowa	2	4
Indiana	2	4
Kansas or Nebraska	1	2
Ethnic and racial identity		
Multiracial ^a	8	15
Vietnamese	8	15
South Asian/Asian Indian	8	15
Korean	6	12
Chinese	5	10
Taiwanese	5	10
Multiethnic	4	8
Hmong	2	4
Cambodian	2	4
Filipino	2	4
Laotian	1	2
Japanese	1	2
Gender		
Female	33	63
Male	19	37
Generation		
1.5	10	19
2nd	42	81
Socioeconomic status		
Working class	21	40
Middle class	8	15
Upper middle class or higher	23	44
Educational attainment		
Currently in college	19	37
College graduate	16	31
Advance degree	17	33
Religious preference		
No religion	19	37
Buddhist	8	15
Christian	9	17
Agnostic	6	12
Hindu	4	8
Catholic	3	6
Other	3	6

Note: Fifty-two in-depth interviews were conducted.

^aThe category “multiracial” was created for the sole purpose of collapsing categories.

to identify emergent themes (e.g., intraethnic othering, use of *FOB* and *whitewashed*) (Strauss and Corbin 1998). After key themes were identified, we switched to more focused coding to identify key patterns from the numerous open codes discovered (Lofland et al. 2006).

In this article, we define ethnic identity as based on self-assertion and rooted in culture and sense of peoplehood, and racial identity is defined as an ascribed identity rooted in perceived phenotype and power relations (Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Omi and Winant 1994). Although the majority of the questions are framed around ethnic identity, we used a racial framework of analysis because we argue that our respondents are strongly influenced by their racialized Asian identity. As racial minorities, it is difficult for Asian ethnics to escape their racial identity, and by extension, racialization (Tuan 2001).

Finally, it is important to note that data for this research are restricted by group size and socioeconomic characteristics. Although the research provides the college-educated Midwest Asian American narrative, it does not intend to be representative of the entire Midwest Asian American population. However, the findings serve as an important contribution for existing literature.

FINDINGS

“Why Couldn’t I Be White?”

Do respondents engage in practices that perpetuate IRO? Yes. Although not asked directly, nearly all respondents shared stories of facing and reproducing negative stereotypical perceptions of growing up Asian American in the Midwest. This was the case for Mike, a 22-year-old “American Vietnamese,” who was born in Oklahoma. When Mike was in middle school, his family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, because of his father’s job as an engineer. There, Mike was enrolled in a private and predominantly white Catholic school. Mike recalls being the “only minority out of 500 kids,” and “everyone was very wealthy, except our family.” Growing up in the Midwest, Mike explains that he primarily sought to be perceived as “more than” just Asian American. Mike’s desire to “fit in” also led to ignoring the racial “jabs” directed at him (e.g., being told his eyes were small). Mike explains,

I make it a point to fit in but still be myself. . . . So even in high school—that’s why I think I didn’t let the [racial] jabs affect me because I was just like, it’s not worth it. Because if I do

that, I’m just gonna let them win. So, I think people saw that I was more than that. I was not just an Asian American; I was also an Asian American who was interested in tennis, who was interested in singing, who was interested in community service. I guess I thought of myself as more multifaceted, so that way, even if one person picked on one part, I still was like, well, I’m more than just that.

At the start of his college career, Mike had no intentions of participating in the “Asian scene,” because he did not want to be pegged as the “Asian who hangs out with all the other Asians, and not having white friends.” At that point in his life, he admitted that “because I had a misconception that the Asian American associations were very ‘Asian power,’ like, we don’t want to be friends with white people.” However, by the end of his second-year, Mike ended up joining the Vietnamese Student Association when he realized that “they were just like me.” Mike felt these fellow coethnics possessed similar values, cultural backgrounds, and shared experiences of growing up in the Midwest within predominantly white spaces. By his fourth year in college, Mike became the association’s president.

At the same time, Mike also accepts being called “whitewashed” and actively engaged in disassociating himself from Asian international students. Although he experiences acceptance and camaraderie with other Vietnamese Americans, Mike is often called “whitewashed” by his friends. However, this does not offend him. He attributes this label to his “preppy style” and being from the Midwest. Mike, in drawing from common racialized tropes, clearly demarcates the distinctions between being Asian American and being “fobby.” He defines the latter as someone who just came from Asia and speaks in “broken English, and [is] very anime-esque, huge glasses, and bracelets up the arm, and tacky accessories, like Hello Kitty everything.” Mike’s portrait of the “fobby,” when juxtaposed against his “preppy-style,” reveals his *reactionary* disassociation from Asians as forever foreign and his preference for what he perceives as normative whiteness.

Actively participating in IRO as a reactionary by-product of dealing with existing racialization and experiences with discrimination was a prevalent theme. For example, this was the case for Andrea, a 26-year-old from Ohio, who is ethnically Japanese and Chinese and identifies as Asian American. Growing up in a predominantly white context, Andrea recalls experiencing racism and its influence on her Asian self-identity:

When I was growing up, I did experience racism. I experienced it as early as kindergarten. And so I think, up until high school, I really didn't want to associate myself too much with my Asian side because I knew that being Asian, I was probably going to face racism, therefore it was bad.

Likewise, 19-year-old Gina, a second-generation "Korean American" who was born and raised in Illinois, recalls how she began questioning, and was ashamed of, her own identity because she was socially ostracized and bullied as a child:

At one point, I asked my mom, "Why couldn't I be white?" You know? I have small eyes—when I was little, I got beat up because I had small eyes. I wrote a paper about how I got picked on a lot because I was the only Asian in the class. . . . Every day, they dragged me to the back of the bus. Ugh, it was terrible. So . . . because of that, I was a stronger person. But as I grew up, I realized I hated being Korean. I despised it. I didn't speak Korean. I hated Korean food.

Gina's statement indicates that she internalized self-hatred for being Korean and Asian because they served as the reasons for her being bullied. Mai, a 22-year-old who was born in Wisconsin and raised in Minnesota and self-identifies as "Hmong American," shares eerily similar themes of discrimination and whiteness. She shares,

I think growing up, having to go through the prejudice and discrimination, there was a point when I was a little child where I was just like, "I just want to be an American. I just want to have blonde hair, blue eyes so that nobody would judge me or that nobody would discriminate against me."

Abby, a 22-year-old "half-Korean, half-Asian" who grew up in Ohio also shares a similar experience. Abby's experience with racism led her to desire to be "white," as she explains: "In junior high, I wanted to be white. I just wanted to not be Asian because I wanted them [other classmates] to stop saying mean things to me, racial slurs."

In all the above experiences, the negative association with racial and ethnic identity reflects an individual-level reactive adaptation. Consistent with previous literature, we also find that respondents displayed (and reproduced) IRO as a reactionary response (defensive othering, disidentification,

and disassociation) to their experiences with stigma and discrimination for being Asian (Chou and Feagin 2008; Kibria 2002; Pyke and Dang 2003; Tuan 2001). Furthermore, for many respondents, experiencing racism went hand in hand with possessing the desire for whiteness. They all grew up within a predominantly white Midwest context and were socialized by the pervasive white racial frame (Chou and Feagin 2008). Their statements of desiring blonde hair and blue eyes or not viewing "white-washed" as problematic, along with any association with "Asian" as foreign and undesirable, reflects their socialization to view whites as normative and the default Americans. In their young eyes, to be white was to be a "normal American."

"I Took a Class!" Critical Exposures to Ethnic History, Organizations, and Coethnics

Beyond providing strong evidence of engaging in practices that reproduce IRO, some respondents also exhibited changes associated with these behaviors. This section focuses on identifying factors that thwart the perpetuation of IRO. Our findings show that the factors that lead to these shifts are centrally framed around the broader theme of critical exposure. According to our respondents' experiences, there are three central recurring themes throughout most narratives; they include critical exposures to ethnic and racial history, ethnic organizations, and co-ethnic social ties.¹

For example, for Ted, a 26-year-old second-generation "Vietnamese American," who grew up in Minnesota, critical exposure to all three themes played a major role in his self-perception and racial group identity. According to Ted, his family relocated from California to Minnesota when he was young because his parents felt that moving the family to a predominantly white environment was the best adaptive strategy for their kids. Ted explains it as follows:

I think [my parents] wanted me to improve my English because the whole point of my pops moving me out of the hood was for me to interact with white people, and compete with white people, and do better than white people.

Within this context, Ted "experienced a lot of racism" growing up, which adversely influenced his self-perception. He recalls asking his dad in middle school whether he could change his Vietnamese last name to a generic Anglo-sounding last name

because “the kids thought [his last name] was funny and stuff” and were making fun of him. At that moment, his Vietnamese name was his source of shame. In retrospect, Ted views this incident as something “that’s really sad now,” because he is no longer ashamed of his ethnic identity. Ted describes that transformative period as follows:

I guess I just always felt really different growing up. I think it’s not only about learning—it was about finding who I was. I think part of that was trying to figure out where I came from, why my skin is this color, what does it mean to be Vietnamese, and what is Vietnamese? Like on a deeper level. I think taking classes and connecting that with what I was doing in the community was really empowering. It kind of made everything understandable. I don’t know how to explain it . . . interacting with other Vietnamese Americans, and they would invite me to stuff. . . . [And] I took a class! I think that’s what inspired me. It was Introduction to Asian American Studies . . . [the professor] talked about Chinese American history, Asian American immigration to the U.S., and later on refugees. . . . This really made me think about stuff. I mean they have questions that I never really had to answer before, so it challenged my views. So, it was good, really good. Once I did that it really started getting the ball rolling in terms of working with multicultural organizations.

Ted credits his own sense of empowerment and identity shift to these various critical exposures through the ethnic studies courses and participation in ethnic organizations.

John, a 23-year-old “Taiwanese American,” who was born in the suburbs of Illinois, is someone who also shifted away from this feeling of self-shame. John’s family was sponsored to the United States in the early 1980s by an aunt. In elementary school, John was already cognizant that he was different than his predominantly white classmates. He recalls an incident when a white kid had taunted his cousin by pulling his eyes back to a slant, and saying, “Your eyes look like this.” John recalls laughing at his cousin. John explained that he laughed because, “I didn’t wanna feel left out or something.” Reflecting back, John acknowledges how this “little thing” still affects him today; he shares, “[I] always kinda wished I was the type of person that stood up for my cousin.”

John’s explanation also points to exposure to other coethnics through a summer camp organized

by the Taiwanese American Foundation (TAF). One of the goals of this summer camp was to teach Taiwanese cultural identity. According to John, “The community of TAF was really, really important for me in finding identity, and being okay with myself as a Taiwanese American.” It was at the camps that he met others who had similar shared experiences. During his senior year in high school, John decided to join the U.S. military. John’s explanation for enlisting reflects the gendered racialization of Asian America:

If I’m really honest with myself, I feel like part of why I joined the military also was claims to citizenship and patriotism and stuff like that . . . but maybe even being an Asian American male, more so, made me feel like I was really searching for ways to claim masculinity because of all of the ways that people tend to emasculate Asian American males.

In college, John decided to major in Asian American studies and credits this education in providing him with the tools to critically access his identity. He continues this work today by creating films that address Asian American identity. In making the connection between racialization and his own racial identity, John notes,

I feel like there’s a space that the rest of America has sort of carved out for people who look like me. They’re always going to see me as being Asian American first, or they’ll see me as being Asian first, before anything else, you know? The only thing left for me to do is to claim that identity and to celebrate it, you know? I think that’s the only way people will start to see other Asian Americans as individuals and complex.

At the same time, not all experiences were alike. For Anna, a 26-year-old who identifies as “Asian American” and as a “transracial Korean adoptee,” the journey toward dismantling her “internalized racism” was couched in a different narrative than previous respondents. However, the results were similar. Anna was born in South Korea and adopted by a white family in Minnesota at four months old. Her mother raised her in a colorblind household in which she was taught, “You’re just like everyone else. Everyone’s purple; race doesn’t matter.” Anna recalls solely identifying as “white” growing up and checking the “white” race box on school forms. Different from the majority of other study respondents, Anna was able to identify her

own racial bias against “Asian-Asians” as “internalized racism.” Anna states,

I have a lot of work to do because I am fully aware that I have my own biases. I think I’ve been socialized and culturalized partially by living in the Midwest, partially by having a white family, to have somewhat negative perceptions of immigrants. . . . And I needed people to know that I was an Asian American, and that that was somehow distinctly different, and if I’m being completely honest, somehow valued in my mind as distinctly better than an Asian-Asian. And so I have a lot of unpacking to do around my own *internalized racism*, because clearly there’s something there. I definitely struggled with it. . . . In the area that I grew up, there was a large Hmong immigrant community in the Twin Cities, and I did my best to disassociate with them. I think that it wasn’t so much about my negative feelings towards them as immigrants or as other Asians or Asian Americans, it was more so I didn’t feel Asian enough. . . . I felt like I would be judged for being too white because I had a White family, and I didn’t know another Asian language and all of that (emphasis added).

Anna’s statement attributes her disassociation from “Asian-Asians” to her own struggles with not “feel[ing] Asian enough.” In response to whether she views herself as white, she notes:

I don’t anymore, but I did. I actually wrote my graduate school application to get into graduate school [on an essay] entitled, “I’m a Twinkie.” The thesis of it was, “don’t be mistaken, I might look Asian but I really am white.” Grad school was really transformative for me. I have now come to understand that even though I was raised in a white family and in a predominately white community, that my experience is still Asian, and that it’s just a different experience; that it’s more complex.

Anna credits her formal education in graduate school with being “transformative” and providing her with the tools to understand and appreciate her own racial history.

It is also interesting to highlight that although previous narratives (Ted, John, and Anna) spoke about the influences of ethnic studies courses, not all respondents acquired their education through

formal channels. Some conducted their own research and/or reached out to their social networks because courses were not available. For example, Jill, a 31-year-old multiracial “Hapa” who was born and raised in southern Illinois, engaged in self-education through what she describes as “public study.” In college, Jill never took any race-specific courses or joined any ethnic organizations. However, she was an active participant in antiwar movements in her college community. During her independent research on political movements, she stumbled across the 1960s Asian American “Yellow Power” movement and the brutal killing of Vincent Chin. Jill shares,

Just reading how the idea that Asian American identity and Yellow Power, it’s not about, “I’m really proud of Japanese aesthetics” or “I love Chinese food.” It was about people trying to forge something new, not on the basis of genetics, but on a shared American experience. And, that Yellow Power was about a counter-narrative to white supremacy at the time. That Yellow Power was inherently about solidarity because they were trying to form a Pan-Asian movement before it existed. And they operated in solidarity with the Chicanos, organizing school walkouts. They organized in solidarity with the Native American students occupying Alcatraz. . . . They organized in solidarity with the Black Power movement. Of course, as Asian Americans, they spoke out against Vietnam. And so, once I read all of that stuff, I felt like, there’s a legacy here that I’m already a part of. . . . I think that all those really vague feelings that Asian Americans feel as a result of not being a part of the conversation about race in America, for the most part, [are] based on assumptions about being a model minority. All of these sort of vague feelings I think a lot of people feel, like not really fitting in, or just the kind of alienation you feel from your own story never being told, it’s always there on some level or another—whether it’s immediately on the surface for you or buried below. But, I feel like understanding Asian American history, and not even the most radical part in the 60s, but all the experiences before that—that are so much about being immigrants chasing the American dream, faced with racism. The idea that Asian Americans too—that our bodies have been moored on and legislated against, and that people have organized, and that change has happened. I feel like I definitely understand the

legacy. These people might not be my ancestors in DNA but they're my ancestors in spirit, and I will say that that's felt very genuine and it's meant everything.

Jill's self-education has enabled her to bridge her personal history to this larger ongoing legacy of Asian American activism. That bridged history provided her with a space to belong.

Andy, a 39-year-old "Chinese American" who grew up in northeastern Ohio, began his self-education at college. Prior to this, Andy grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and spent his formative years harboring "stereotypical perceptions" about his fellow Asian Americans. He shares,

Through high school, I did have stereotypical perception of Asian Americans, Chinese Americans. Because we were all kinda a little bit dorky, a little nerdy, at least the ones that I knew, and that would include myself. So, you tried to distance yourself from it.

Andy's sentiments began shifting the summer before college, when his mother forced him to attend a summer Taiwanese cultural immersion program, popularly known in his community as "The Love Boat."² During this trip, Andy met other coethnics who shattered his prior stereotypical images. He explains,

One of the reasons I was trying to disassociate myself with some of the Asians in high school was sort of this perceived "geekiness and nerdiness, not very fun kinda crowd," and these guys were almost the opposite of that. I would be the conservative one. They're crazy partying people. I mean they pretty much blew away any potential stereotype you might have had of that group, which was a really good thing.

After this critical exposure to other coethnics, Andy went to college and was exposed to a larger group of Asian Americans from throughout the United States. During this period, Andy educated himself on Asian American history. He says,

I would say soon after that, when I got to Penn . . . I actually read up on a lot of Asian American stuff. There was a section in the library that was very small that had Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*. . . . In college . . . I had started meeting more Asian Americans and I

started perceiving them more like people, like individuals, rather than ethnic groups.

Consequently, Andy became involved in a "bit more social justice, Asian American issues" and currently serves as a board member for Asian American organizations and fights to bring Asian American studies to his campus. The exposure Andy had to other coethnics via "The Love Boat," the self-education he acquired on his own through the school library, and the interaction with ethnic organizations and coethnic friends all played a large role in altering his previous perceptions of Asian Americans and his own self-identity.

Kia, a 19-year-old "Hmong American" who grew up in Twin Cities, Minnesota, shares her own experience of navigating IRO and her influential coethnic exposure. Kia's family escaped Laos after the end of the Vietnam War and arrived as refugees in the United States in 1979. Initially living in Fresno, California, her family engaged in secondary migration and settled in the Twin Cities to be near the larger Hmong community. Although Kia does acknowledge that there is a supportive ethnic community in the vicinity, she also reveals that she never really had a Hmong American mentor growing up. In response to whether she ever felt ashamed of being Hmong growing up, Kia shares,

Yes. I'm not afraid to admit that because I have learned why that is, and why I shouldn't be ashamed of it. I think I was ashamed of it because I've always felt like [sigh], I don't know, it's hard to say. I just know that growing up, I've always wanted to be white, like a white girl. I wanted to have blonde hair, blue eyes. . . . I remember as a child, whenever I went to the mall with my mom, I didn't want to be with her because she didn't know how to speak English, you know? It's like, "You should know how to speak English," that kind of mentality. So I think I was ashamed of those things and not really understanding why she couldn't speak English. [Question: At what point did that change for you?] I think because I went to this weekend conference where the Hmong author, Kao Kalia Yang . . . I think she really inspired me to really appreciate who I am. It's okay to speak Hmong; it's okay to be bilingual; it's okay to be different. . . . I think that was the turning point for me in knowing that I shouldn't be ashamed of my skin color, my hair color, you know?

Similar to other respondents, Kia's response highlights her shame of her mother's lack of English skills and her desire for whiteness through "blonde hair, blue eyes." Kia credits the beginning of her shift away from this self-hatred, to an encounter with a fellow Hmong American who "inspired" her to appreciate herself and not be ashamed of her own skin color.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The candidate for assimilation almost always comes to tire of the exorbitant price which he must pay and which he never finishes owing. He discovers with alarm the full meaning of his attempt. It is a dramatic moment when he realizes that he has assumed all the accusations and condemnations of the colonizer, that he is becoming accustomed to look at his own people through the eyes of their procurer. . . . Must he, all of his life, be ashamed of what is most real in him, of the only things not borrowed?

Memmi (1965:123)

How are systems of racial inequality perpetuated and sustained? To understand this, it is critical to examine the practices and behaviors that perpetuate IRO, because these individual-level interactions play a pertinent role in the reproduction of racial inequality (Pyke 2010; Schwalbe et al. 2000). We begin this section with a quotation from Memmi (1965) because it captures the central focus of this article: the ability and potential for change when one is empowered by the consciousness of one's oppressed state. At the individual level, is change possible when one realizes one's own racialized and oppressed state?

In attempting to answer this question, this research goes beyond previous literature, which only identifies the existence of internalized racism behaviors among children of immigrants (Kibria 2002; Pyke and Dang 2003; Tuan 2001). This article extends the literature by empirically examining the fluidity, or potential for shifts, behind a child of immigrants' perceptions and behaviors that perpetuate internalized racism over a life course. We examine the specific factors, or what we term critical exposures, which have the potential to shift respondents away from perceptions and behaviors that reproduced IRO in their everyday lives. Three questions guided our research. The first inquiry was whether 1.5- and 2nd-generation Midwest

Asian Americans engage in practices that perpetuate IRO. On the basis of the findings, the answer is yes. Many respondents shared stories of facing, reacting to, and reproducing negative stereotypical perceptions of Asian identity. Statements were plagued with desire for "blonde hair, blue eyes" and "to be white," disassociating from the "Asian Asians," and using the anti-immigrant term *FOB*. Similar to previous research findings, we find that respondents display and reproduce IRO as a reactive by-product and adaptive response to their experiences with racism and discrimination. Respondents consistently conveyed that growing up, they believed that being Asian was the root source of their struggles. They were treated differently and "bullied" because of their race. For example, Andrea shared, "I knew that being Asian, I was probably going to face racism; therefore, it was bad." These self-perceptions resulted in respondents questioning their racial identity growing up, leading to questions like, "Why couldn't I be white?" Hence, there is a strong link between experiencing consistent discrimination as a result of being Asian and the pervasive desire for whiteness (e.g., blonde hair and blue eyes). In the responses, we can see the existing legacy of racialization and how it continues to frame racial discourses in ways that racial minorities denigrate themselves to appear less threatening and/or to belong (Chou and Feagin 2008; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Tuan 2001). This is consistent with previous studies' findings of defensive othering, disidentification, and disassociation (Kibria 2002; Pyke and Dang 2003; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Tuan 2001).

The second inquiry encompasses two questions that drove the central crux of our research. These questions are, first, if practices that perpetuate IRO exist, can individuals shift out of the mind-set and behaviors associated with IRO? And second, what are the specific factors that would assist in this shift? Our findings show that the individuals can shift out of perceptions and behaviors that reproduce racial inequality through IRO. Behaviors such as harboring self-hatred, desiring to be white, and using terms such as *FOB* can and do have the potential to cease over time. We argue that these shifts attribute to the theme of critical exposure. Specifically, it was exposure to three factors—ethnic and racial history, ethnic organizations, and coethnic social ties—that led to changes toward positive self-perceptions.

The first factor, exposure to ethnic and racial history, was a crucial component in this shift away from internalized racism perceptions and behaviors.

Respondents in this study provided examples of acquiring this education through formal ways (e.g., via Asian American studies in college) and informal ways (e.g., via “public study”). According to the responses, both avenues were effective in empowering the individuals because they were exposed to Asian American history. For respondents such as Jill, it was learning about the history of Asian Americans’ contributions to the “counter-narrative against white supremacy” that provided her with an understanding of the larger legacy. Regardless of how respondents arrived at the education (inside or outside the academy), it is necessary to highlight the critical role that the educational materials played in this education. Written largely by, and about, oppressed racialized minorities, it was the educational materials that were transformative.

For those who were exposed to the second factor, ethnic organizations, they discussed the impact of engaging in and learning from the activities that were provided through organizations. For example, John spoke about how one ethnic organization, the TAF, helped him find a sense of identity and be “okay” with himself “as a Taiwanese American.” At the same time, these involvements in ethnic organization activities led to exposures to the third factor, other coethnics, that respondents might not have had exposure to growing up. This was the case for Andy, who attended “The Love Boat,” which exposed him to Asian Americans who shattered his previous “stereotypical” view of Asians who were “geeky” and “dorky.” In other examples, Kia’s exposure to a coethnic role model inspired her with an alternative route away from self-hatred. In the end, these critical exposures ultimately lead to the emergence of an empowering critical consciousness, which is the necessary key in diverting Asian Americans away from behaviors that perpetuate IRO (Kohli 2014; Millan and Alvarez 2014). Our results reaffirm Freire’s (1996) findings on *conscientização* (critical consciousness), as our respondents were able to recognize their oppression and intervene on their reality through actions.

Furthermore, our results show how the critical exposures and emergence of a critical consciousness led respondents to resist the white racial frame of whiteness as normative and embrace a more positive self-image as Asian Americans (Chou and Feagin 2008).

We opened up this article with the example of Ava’s thoughts and behaviors that reflect IRO. Because identities are dynamic, Ava, like other respondents, experienced a shift in perspective during the latter years of college. She became more interested in her panethnic Asian American identity and sought to learn more about it. In describing this period of shedding her own self-hatred, Ava notes,

I was taking the classes and understanding the structural aspects of racism and the history of it—that really was so empowering to me. I became very aware of being Asian American and wanting to do something about it and be with other people who felt that way.

For Ava, who is currently a 38-year-old self-defined “Asian American,” this was her period of “healing.” She explicitly states, “I kind of felt like all the stuff—the healing I did after that—happened when I went to college.” Ava’s journey captures the fluidity of self-perceptions and how practices of internalized racism can exist but can also minimize or diminish over time. We find in this research that, at the individual level, change (or “healing”) is possible when racial subordinates are critically exposed to their own racialized and oppressed position.

Currently, the issue of internalized racism is still an extremely relevant topic that cuts across all racialized and marginalized communities. As long as racial inequality exists, practices that perpetuate internalized racism will persist. It is pertinent for future scholars to further investigate how internalized racism reproduces in other settings, for all racial minorities outside of higher education. This is necessary work toward the dismantling of systems that perpetuate racial inequality.

Appendix A. Selected Questions from Interview Instrument.

III. Neighborhood Context

Please describe the place(s) that you grew up in.

What type of people lived in each neighborhood? (Ethnicities, class background)

How were you and your family treated growing up? Did you get along with your neighbors?

Who were your friends? Did you seek out coethnic (similar ethnicity) friends?

When you were growing up, how conscious do you think you were of being X ethnicity?

In what ways do you think your experiences were similar and/or different from your non-coethnic and coethnic friends?

Overall, do you think where you grew up shaped how you view yourself? Probe if yes.

V. Education

[K-12]

Can you describe the K-12 schools you've attended?

Who were your friends? What were their ethnicities? Did you seek them out? Did you seek them out?

How did you identify during this time? What influence this identification?

(If applicable, POST-SECONDARY)

Where did you go for college?

Some say that college is when people explore their ethnic identity, would you say this is true for you?

Did you take any ethnicity or race specific courses? To what extent did you look for these courses?

Why or why not? [If yes, why and what was your experience like? Did it affect your identity?]

Were you a member of any ethnic clubs?

VI. Relationship

And how do **YOU** feel about these issues?

How important is it for you to marry someone of the same ethnicity? Same race? Same religion?

Have you ever been involved in an interracial relationship? [Probe]

IX. Discrimination

As an adult, do you feel that you have ever experienced discrimination?

How often do people ask or comment on your racial or ethnic background? How does it make you feel?

Can you think of any instances where you felt uncomfortable about being [ETHNICITY]? When, what happened, reaction?

Do you ever feel pressured to have a strong ethnic background and identity?

Has anybody ever said to you, "your English is good?" Your response?

Has anybody ever asked you "where are you from," meaning to ask, "what is your ethnicity?" Your response?

Have you ever been told that you were "FOB," "White-washed," or "Americanized"?

What are your views of co-ethnics who recently arrived?

NOTES

1. Although we are identifying various factors of exposures that can possibly trigger shifts away from behaviors that perpetuate IRO, we acknowledge that this might not be the outcome for everyone. As Mike's case exemplifies, exposure to ethnic organizations did not alter his perceptions associated with IRO. However, for the majority of our study participants, these were the dominant reoccurring themes that contributed toward an emerging critical consciousness—which is a key factor in influencing shifts away from perceptions and behaviors that perpetuate internalized racism.
2. Andy describes it as "essentially a government-sponsored thing that the overseas Chinese kids basically—well, young adults from 18 to like 23—that

go back to Taiwan, for the summer. They teach us cultural stuff." It is dubbed "The Love Boat" because it is held on a large ship, and parents who send their children hope that their children find potential future spouses on this trip.

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