ABSTRACT

HOLLAND, KIM S. Asian American College Students’ Use of Ethnic Backgrounds to Create a Sense of Belonging. (Under the direction of Dr. Sinikka Elliott).

Previous research shows that identity transformations often occur as students transition from high school to college, and furthermore, that racial/ethnic inequalities play a role in such transitions. I use 15 semi-structured interviews with Asian American undergraduates enrolled at a large, predominantly white public university who all participate in or have participated in Asian-interest campus groups in order to understand the ways students may use their ethnic backgrounds as a vehicle for college-life problem solving, as well as how students may create value from previously marginalized ethnic backgrounds. My analysis shows how Asian American students may establish friendships, develop networks, and gain leadership experience by embracing their ethnic backgrounds. My research additionally shows how participants establish their respective ethnic subcultural boundaries in the college space, and how these processes resist yet also contribute to power dynamics at a predominantly white school.
Asian American College Students’ Use of Ethnic Backgrounds to Create a Sense of Belonging

by
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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my husband Chris Ivey, who first encouraged me to attend graduate school, who always pushes me to pursue my dreams, and who supports me in all my endeavors.

Furthermore, it is dedicated to any racial/ethnic minorities in universities who have experienced marginalization or isolation.
BIOGRAPHY

Kim spent most of her childhood moving around the U.S., but she spent 5th grade onwards in Aiken, South Carolina. In 2010 she graduated with her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology/Anthropology from Washington & Lee University in Lexington, VA. In 2011 she earned her Teaching Certificate at University of North Carolina, Charlotte. In 2012 she studied abroad in Seoul, Korea, for 9 months at Yonsei University, learning her mother’s native tongue. From 2012-2014 Kim worked in an office job at UPS back in her hometown, and for nine months also worked as a K-5 science instructor at Ruth Patrick Science and Education Center. In December of 2016 Kim earned her Master of Science in Sociology at North Carolina State University.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES…………………………………………………………………………………………vii

INTRODUCTION…………………………………………………………………………………………1

LITERATURE REVIEW……………………………………………………………………………………2

   Ethnic Identity Model........................................................................................................3

   Symbolic-Interactionist Approach.....................................................................................6

   Ethnic Enclaves Serve as Subcultures in University Settings...........................................7

   Identity Work to Solve Young Adult Problems.................................................................9

   How Are Symbolic Boundaries Created in Subcultures? ..................................................10

DATA & METHOD……………………………………………………………………………………11

   Background/Methods........................................................................................................11

   Researcher Positionality....................................................................................................12

   Unit of Analysis: College Students..................................................................................13

   Sampling Procedure & Interview Process.......................................................................14

   Sample...............................................................................................................................15

   Analytic Approach...........................................................................................................17

ANALYSIS.............................................................................................................................18

   College-Life Problems......................................................................................................18

      Feelings of marginalization and isolation.................................................................19

      Lack of administrative support..................................................................................20

   Resolving College-Life Problems with Ethnic Enclaves................................................22

   Creating Value in One’s Ethnic Background Prior to College..........................................24
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Student Demographic Information……………………………78
INTRODUCTION

Previous literature focuses on how students integrate within the college campus by establishing relationships with peers, developing professional and social networks, and succeeding academically (Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Vue 2013; Tinto 1975). Research also extends to students of color and how they experience college life. For instance, Jones, Castellanos, and Cole (2002) find that ethnic minorities describe predominantly white universities as non-welcoming, as failing to adequately implement diversity training and diversity initiatives on campus, and as needing to hire more staff persons of color. Many researchers critique Tinto’s (1975) theoretical framework that student retention is linked to college students’ social and academic integration. Critics complain that such an approach fails to account for the additional struggles which students of color face regarding the university racial climate (Yosso 2009). In fact, research suggests that second-generation immigrants can engage in selective acculturation (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Zhou 1993), relying on their co-ethnic contexts for security and resources, and selecting traits from their parents and peers that can help them navigate a white college context.

I extend this research through an analysis of the ways in which Asian American students create a sense of belonging in a white university. There is little qualitative research that uses a symbolic-interactionist approach to examine the process of how minority groups, such as second-generation Asian Americans, might use their identities in resourceful ways to solve college-life problems, such as establishing peer relationships and social networks. My analysis reflects the notion of selective acculturation in that participants express their ethnic
identities in ethnic enclaves within predominately white schools. These students routinely described using their Asian-interest clubs and Greek institutions to create value from their ethnic backgrounds and to establish a sense of belonging in college. These enclaves allow students to find a safe space, free from discrimination and stereotypes, while also enabling them access to resources such as academic resources and social networks. In this way, the participants whom I interviewed are able to selectively choose aspects of their ethnic identities, which are useful to them during their college years.

Ethnic identity formation can reflect structures of inequality, and the power differentials within our social system (Link and Phelan 2001; Goffman 1963). As Callero states, “The self…is instrumental in the generation, reproduction and alteration of the social structures that sustain inequality” (2014: 273). Thus, by studying identities, we can also unpack structures of inequalities. By exploring how minority students create a sense of belonging within a predominantly white university, this research helps shed light on power dynamics linked to gender, class, and race/ethnicity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into five sections, focusing on an ethnic identity model, benefits of a symbolic-interactionist approach, previous research on ethnic enclaves in university settings, identity work to solve young adult problems, and the formation of

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1 By race I mean, a “socially defined category based on real or perceived biological differences between groups of people” (Ferris and Stein 2014:217). By ethnicity, I mean “a socially defined category based on common language, religion, nationality history or another cultural factor” (Ferris and Stein 2014:218). For the purpose of my thesis, sometimes race and ethnicity are synonymous, as Asian Americans are viewed as a race in America, despite consisting of differential ethnic groups. See Appendix 1 for list of key words and definitions.
symbolic boundaries in subcultures. First, I examine an ethnic identity model to review previous research on ethnic identity processes.

Ethnic Identity Model

Museus et al. (2013) critique existing models of ethnic identity for portraying identity as a linear process. By linear, they mean, the assumption that one must start at a specific stage then move sequentially through the proceeding stages (in a set order). Furthermore, they critique existing ethnic identity models for assuming separate, rather than overlapping stages. For this reason, they propose new processes, of which an individual might be “located,” including: enculturation to ethnic cultures, acculturation to the dominant culture, awareness of oppression, redirection of salience, and integration of dispositions (these are explained in more detail below). Their ethnic identity model is aimed specifically at Southeast Asian Americans, as they argue that Southeast Asian Americans share similar experiences. They maintain that many Southeast Asian Americans have generally arrived in the U.S. as refugees due to the Vietnam War, they often have less educational capital upon arriving to America, and they tend to face more racial discrimination.

I contend that their theory applies to my Asian American participants, even those who are not Southeast Asian. The participants that I interviewed are ethnic minorities in a predominantly white context. Furthermore, the pan-ethnic “Asian American” label, though socially constructed and historically politicized (Nagel 1994; Espiritu 1992), is an ascriptive label with existing conceptions, stereotypes, and consequences for its recipients (Cabrera 2014; Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014; Museus and Kiang 2009). For instance, Cabrera’s (2014) study showed that white male college students endorsed stereotypes that Asian
Americans (regardless of ethnicity) are forever foreigners and thus often perceived as not truly “American”, that they are model minorities with which to compare other minorities’ failures (e.g., blacks, Latinos), and that they are bad drivers, nerdy, and pre-med majors. Furthermore, Sue et al. (2007) found that one of the eight racial microaggressions that Asian Americans experienced included “exoticization of Asian American women.” One Chinese American respondent stated, “White men believe that Asian women are great girlfriends, wait hand and foot on men, and don’t back-talk or give them shit. Asian women have beautiful skin and are just sexy and have silky hair” (Sue et al. 2007:76). In contrast to the sexualization of Asian women, Asian men in American society are generally cast as asexual, linked to their historically perceived social and economic threat (Espiritu 2009; Shek 2006). Regardless of their distinct and diverse backgrounds, Asian American/Pacific Islander persons are classified into one large group and face similar stereotypes by non-Asian peers. For these reasons, I argue that Museus et al.’s theory is applicable to all of my participants’ experiences, not just Southeast Asians.

Museus et al.’s enculturation to ethnic culture refers to socialization within an ethnic culture, including values and cultural norms, food, and language; this process can occur at any point in one’s life. Acculturation to the dominant culture refers to the process of adopting the dominant group’s (i.e., white) culture, food, norms and values and often rejection of a minority ethnic culture, food, and values. Awareness of oppression refers to gaining increased awareness of the issues and injustices which Asians face. Redirection of salience refers to the process whereby an individual identifies with similarly subjugated minorities (e.g., Asian American students finding commonalities in their experiences with
those of black students on campus). The fifth process, called integration of dispositions, refers to the cooperative efforts to join with similarly subjugated minorities and proceeding with activism regarding the issues they face (e.g., Asian American and black college students uniting in solidarity).

Museus et al. urge future research to “examine this model with empirical data on the lived experiences of Southeast Asian Americans in college” (2013:59). My thesis provides data with which to examine how some Asian American college students may use ethnic enclaves to form ethnic identities. Furthermore, an aspect which Museus et al. spend little time addressing is how other dimensions of power and inequality might play into ethnic identity formation; for this reason, my thesis also expands on such theoretical analysis by examining how college students’ ethnic identity work intersects with racial, class, and gender inequalities. My research also improves upon Museus et al.’s identity model by paying attention to how the students talk about the context and various situations in which they engage in ethnic identity work. Without including context and power differentials in ethnic identity formation, Museus et al. overlook processes of inequality. Research shows that context matters—people of color in predominantly white spaces, experience distinct identity struggles. For example Evans and Moore (2015) show how their interviewees at predominantly white law schools must engage in emotional work as they confront racial ideologies and narratives in both the classroom and everyday interactions with peers (see also Wilkins 2014; Evans and Moore 2008; Gonzalez 2002; Lewis, Chesler and Forman 2000).
Symbolic-Interactionist Approach

While I appreciate Museus et al.’s ethnic identity model, as noted above, it overlooks the importance of context, as well as power dynamics, in shaping college students’ experiences (Warikoo 2005). Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock state, identity work is “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others” (1996:115). The symbolic-interactionist approach is a more comprehensive means of exploring ethnic identities and thus is the method I employ to understand Asian American students’ identities.

Research shows how identities are produced and reproduced through interaction (Callero 2014; Jenkins 2008; Goffman 1963). Individual and collective identifications are intertwined and come to life upon interaction. Identity is an internal/external dialectic process whereby we are continually shaping our own identity by interacting with others, and others are continually shaping our identity by how they identify and interact with us. In other words, whom one interacts with and how these interactions play out matter. Research also shows that people often form organizations to use as vehicles for their identity projects (Jenkins 2008; Wilkins 2008).

Thus, I use a symbolic-interactionist approach to identify and analyze the activities in which the students whom I interviewed say they engage, the interactions students describe having with others, and the ways students speak of establishing symbolic boundaries for their respective organizations. I examine how students use their respective Asian-interest clubs and Greek institutions as vehicles for their ethnic identity projects as well as how students use their ethnic backgrounds in order to solve university-student-life problems.
**Ethnic Enclaves Serve as Subcultures in University Settings**

Previous research on student organizations at universities shows that minority students often join and participate in ethnic enclaves (Vue 2013; Sidanius and Van Laar 2004). Sidanius and Van Laar (2004) use ethnic enclaves to refer to the student organizations, run by students within universities, that center around a particular ethnicity. Generally, such organizations have predominantly ethnic members, and student activities center around the respective ethnicity (e.g., members of the Vietnamese Student Association might perform a fashion show featuring traditional Vietnamese clothing; members of the Korean Student Association might celebrate the Korean holiday called *chuseok*). The term ethnic enclave typically refers to geographic spaces of ethnic communities in urban cities, where ethnic groups rely on one another’s networks and resources in order to prosper economically, politically, and socially. Similar to how ethnic enclaves are mobilized in urban locations in order to provide new immigrants with jobs, resources, and a safe network (Wilson and Portes 1980), ethnic enclaves on college campuses, in the form of ethnic organizations, serve as safe spaces while also providing resources and opportunities for minority students (Vue 2013; Sidanius and Van Laar 2004).

Ethnic enclaves help members better tackle social and academic issues in college, as well as enable students to feel more integrated within the social and academic systems of a university by having a support group (Vue 2013; Nagasawa and Wong 1999) and may lead to higher rates of college retention (Fischer 2007; Astin 1999). Whereas this form of self-segregation has its own set of problems, such enclaves may provide a safe haven for students of color to feel comfortable to be themselves.
While research has focused on the positive and negative consequences of ethnic enclaves within universities, the current body of literature fails to examine how students explore their ethnic identities using such organizations. In using the term ethnic identity, I rely on Museus et al.’s definition: “a sense of collective identity that is based on the notion that the individual shares a common heritage or experience with members of a specific racial group” (2013:51). Ethnic enclaves on campus serve as ideal locations to examine how students may embrace their ethnic backgrounds, and I contend that such enclaves can also be understood as subcultures within the university.

Understanding ethnic enclaves as subcultures can be conceptualized from Wilkins’s (2008) *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians*. Wilkins (2008) details three distinct subcultures in a northeastern university community. The Wannabes, Goths, and Christians are each subcultures that transform their members’ identities in order to help them become “cool” and also be successful at school (and long term). Wilkins defines subcultures as “the creation of a body of meanings, signs, and signifying practices that are distinct from, yet linked to, a larger culture” (2008:121). Wilkins states that the young people in her book want to feel accepted, to have friends, to have fun, and to be seen as authentic. She also examines social inequalities in student subcultures. Using an intersectional approach, Wilkins shows how the seemingly progressive sexual acts (e.g., support of polyamorous and bisexual relationships) of the Goths are in reality still restrictive to its female members and most beneficial to its straight male members (e.g., women are encouraged by male partners to engage in same-sex rather than heterosexual, polyamorous relationships, primarily because men enjoying seeing two women together and do not see them as a threat).
Following Wilkins, I argue that Asian-interest organizations function as subcultures within the university setting. My thesis builds upon Wilkins’s (2008) book by understanding how ethnic enclaves are also subcultures, and I apply a similar intersectional approach in my analysis. When examining student experiences within these Asian clubs and organizations, I find students engaging in identity work as they create value from their ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, they speak about gender, class, and racial/ethnic challenges they face.

*Identity Work to Solve Young Adult Problems*

Wilkins (2014) discusses the importance in examining identity shifts from high school to college and looks at how racial inequality may influence such identity transitions. Through in-depth interviews, she compares black men and first-generation-college white men’s transition from high school to a predominantly white college. Ultimately, Wilkins finds that the white men were able to utilize their same identity strategies from high school to college, whereas black men had to use additional identity work and strategies in order to fit in with their college peers and to deflect stereotypes that their peers held of them (e.g., that all black men are athletic). She finds that black students struggle to define their own identities, often against stereotypes held by their peers.

My research builds upon this literature on how students of color transition from high school to college, and the strategies they may use in such transitions. Similar to Wilkins (2014), I look at how students’ identity work intersects with racial/ethnic, class, and gender inequalities. I also attempt to unpack these processes in my analysis. As Wilkins notes, “Identities and identity transitions matter for academic success, social integration, and personal well-being” (2014:185). College is a place in which students attempt to balance
their academic, social, and personal growth (Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Wilkins 2014; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), making it a sociologically interesting site for examining identity work (Kaufman 2014). Furthermore, Asian Americans’ experiences of and responses to stereotypes, or controlling images to use Collins’ (2000) term, may provide insight into the processes of social inequality.

Inequality is apparent in everyday interactions (Callero 2014; Schwalbe et al. 2000). That is, we can see processes of inequality in everyday interactions where power differentials exist and when dominant groups restrict subordinate groups’ access to certain resources (Schwalbe et al. 2000). In order to understand how inequality is created and sustained, we must examine the ways in which individuals interact with one another. Thus, in order to unpack the constructions of individual and group identities and inequalities, we must look at how Asian Americans interact with one another within their subcultures, as well as the university culture at large.

_How Are Symbolic Boundaries Created in Subcultures?_

According to Jenkins (2008), ethnic identity involves creating an us/them boundary. Again, this process is dialectical. Members of an in-group (in my study: Asian-interest organization members) create a sense of commonality with one another while simultaneously creating a sense of distinction from the out-group (i.e., peers who are not part of their respective organizations). Jenkins notes how shared rituals and symbols enable emotional connections between members and promote the sense of “we-ness” for the in-group. The analysis section of my paper details the rituals my participants use to create and maintain both group and individual identities. My research focuses on how Asian American
students interact with one another through their respective clubs and organization and the types of activities they engage to develop a sense of “we-ness” among themselves.

DATA & METHOD

Background/Methods

I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with second-generation Asian American students at a predominantly white, large, public university situated in the South, hereby referred to as Southeast University. All participants either had participated in the past or are currently participating in Asian-interest clubs or Greek organizations. To explore the ways Asian American students create a sense of belonging in college, I used the semi-structured interview method for my research. I asked broad questions and followed up with probes in order to obtain detailed accounts of participants’ experiences and feelings in both high school and college (more about questions below).

Southeast University is situated in a predominantly white context; in such contexts, non-white minorities often grapple with stigma and marginalization in their daily lives (Evans and Moore 2015; Moore 2008; Lewis, Chesler, and Forman 2000; Goffman 1963). The state where I conducted my study is 61% white, 27% black, 12% Hispanic/Latino, and only 3.7% Asian. The university shares similar demographics, 73% white, 6% black, 5% Hispanic and 5% Asian American. Being non-white in this context complicates Asian Americans’ identity struggles, since context is a key component in identity work and identity shifts (Kaufman 2014; Wilkins 2014; Goffman 1963).

Interviews are a suitable way to approach my research topic, because they are useful to gain insight into social processes (Rowley 2012). I am trying to understand the social
processes the Asian Americans whom I interviewed engaged in as a way to establish a sense of belonging at Southeast University. During my project I initially struggled to define what exactly “belonging” meant. After data collection and analysis, I came to define “belonging” to mean: engagement with university affairs (e.g., academic growth, leadership experience) and the formation of friendships and relationships with others. Similarly, previous research defines belonging as students’ ability to become familiar with college campuses through (social) community formations (Attinasi 1989 & 1992). To understand such processes, interviews were appropriate, since they involve understanding how participants perceive their experiences with these social processes.

**Researcher Positionality**

While most of my thesis analysis and formal data collection consisted of my 15 semi-structured interviews, I was also active in the Asian American undergraduate student community during the semester of my data collection. I attended bi-weekly meetings of an Asian-interest group (the Pan-Asian Club) which all other Asian-interest clubs and Greek organization members were encouraged to attend. The purpose of the “umbrella” group was to enable cross-club communication and promote all of the Asian-interest activities to one another as well as the larger student body. In addition, I helped plan and facilitate two workshops during students’ Asian American/Pacific Islander celebratory month (one focused on the struggles that Asian American women face and the other on the challenges Asian American men face). My additional field involvement helped establish rapport with students and gave me additional knowledge about the student organizations in which they were a part. Furthermore, I consider myself a personal advocate for Asian Americans, and as a half
Korean woman who attended a predominantly white, upper-class undergraduate university, I experienced much social isolation and feelings of marginalization. Thus my thesis project, like many others, began from my own personal struggles.

Having said that, I recognize that as an Asian American with my own preconceived perceptions, I had to be mindful of my interviewing methods (e.g., not encouraging participants to answer in certain ways; not expressing positive affirmations when I heard something “interesting”) and data analysis (e.g., not assuming that participants felt how I feel) in order to avoid imposing my views on participants. Frequent memos, meetings, and email conversations with my thesis committee helped me to be more cognizant of my own personal biases.

Since I was an active volunteer in the Asian community and also physically possess Asian features (e.g., dark hair, almond-shaped eyes), I feel that this enabled a degree of trust with my participants, as I might have been perceived as an insider (Maramba 2008; Bettie 2003; Royster 2003; Baca Zinn 1979). I suspect students saw me as an insider because they would often mention peers’ names during interviews and say “I think you know them, right?” presuming I knew their networks well and also signifying that I was a person they could trust.

*Unit of Analysis: College Students*

In addition to my personal interest, I chose to interview Asian American college-aged students because little research examines how Asian Americans transition to college. Furthermore, research on Asian Americans in higher education is generally absent (Cabrera 2014; Museus and Kiang 2009). Museus and Kiang (2009) argue that Asian Americans are
overlooked in research, affirmative action policies, and grant funding largely due to the “model minority myth”—the generalization that all Asian Americans are academically successful and thus do not need academic support. Despite Asian American Pacific Islanders encompassing a large and diverse group of Asians, the model minority myth subsumes all Asians, including those who experience high rates of poverty and low rates of college attendance (Museus and Kiang 2009). For these reasons, I advocate for continued research on Asian Americans, and I hope that my project contributes to the sociological literature on Asian Americans’ experiences in college.

**Sampling Procedure & Interview Process**

To recruit participants, I advertised my project through the bi-weekly Pan-Asian Club e-newsletter, finding two participants through this method (See Appendix 2 for visual advertisement that I used). All other interviews were obtained either by emailing individual students (whom I had met at meetings) or through snowball sampling (e.g., asking participants after the interview: Do you have any peers who might be interested in participating in an interview?). When emailing students, I explained that I was a graduate student doing research for my thesis, and that I was interviewing Asian Americans to better understand their college experiences. Participants were also informed that the interviews were voluntary and confidential. Although student membership in Asian-interest organizations was not an intentional sampling procedure when I collected my data, all of my participants ultimately were or are part of Asian-interest organizations.

The 15 interviews were conducted and completed during the spring semester of 2016, shortly after I obtained IRB approval. Interviews were semi-structured, and I adjusted the
questions in the early stages of the interview process with guidance from my thesis committee, particularly Michael Schwalbe and Sinikka Elliott. Interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours and were all face-to-face except one, which was conducted via telephone. Interviews were held in a private office in the sociology department building. I asked students questions about their impressions of Southeast University, how they tried to make friends, what they liked about the student organizations they were part of, how their experiences differed from high school to college, and so on (see Appendix 3 for a list of questions used in interviews).

Along with the general interview questions, I asked demographic questions at the end of each interview to obtain additional data about student friendships and the race/ethnicity of those friends, their parents’ education and occupation, age, year, major, and so on (see Appendix 4 for final list of demographic questions). With my thesis advisor, Sinikka Elliott, I was able to obtain a departmental grant, in the amount of $1500, for transcription services. This grant paid for 11 transcriptions; the final 4 I transcribed myself. I repeatedly read the transcripts to maintain familiarity with my data and reviewed the professionally-transcribed transcripts with the audio recordings to make necessary corrections.

Sample

The final sample (see Appendix 5 for chart) consisted of 3 Hmong Americans, 6 Vietnamese Americans, 1 Chinese American, 1 Filipino American, 1 Indian American, and 2 Bi-racial persons (both were half Vietnamese, half white). Most (n=8) of the 15 participants were sophomores. Five were seniors and two were first years. Having students from varying years in their college experience was helpful for seeing different stages of college adjustment. For example, one Vietnamese second-year male student had just gotten into his
program of interest at the university and was struggling to pull up his grades (first and second year working-class students were still trying to acquire social networks and learn to balance their academic and social lives, as I detail later). In contrast, all (n=5) of the seniors had established networks and had leadership experience. For instance, one Filipina American senior had been actively involved in a dance group all 4 years of college, was president of the Pan-Asian Club, and was soon-to-be president of an Asian sorority. A senior Chinese American male student founded an Asian-interest organization for Asian/Asian Americans majoring in engineering. However, there were some exceptions to this pattern. One second-year male student had founded a pre-Greek organization² and was a representative for the student board of directors.

Of the 15 participants, two identified as non-heterosexual, with one man identifying as gay and one woman identifying as bisexual. Eight of my participants identified as women, 7 as men. Five students were from working-class backgrounds, and the remaining 10 students were from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds. I gauged social class backgrounds by asking students their parent’s highest educational level attainment and current occupation. For instance, if a student’s parents held high school diplomas and held a manual labor or low paying job (e.g., factory worker, farmer, machine operator), that student’s background would be considered working class. In comparison, if at least one parent held a bachelor’s degree and professional job (e.g., engineer, teacher, project manager), then that student’s background would be considered middle class. If both parents

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² An organization that starts as non-Greek with hopes of becoming an official Greek institution.
were college graduates and both held professional jobs, then I labeled them as upper-middle class.

The sample has strengths and weaknesses. All students are or were active in Asian-interest campus student organizations. This allowed me to focus specifically on their collective and individual experiences within these organizations. However, limiting the sample to only Asian-American college students active in Asian-interest campus groups means that my analysis is limited to only exploring the processes of ethnic meaning-making and campus belonging for this particular group of students. It may be that Asian-American students at Southeast University who do not join Asian-interest groups do not create value from their ethnic backgrounds as a way to find a sense of belonging and community on campus.

Analytic Approach

I began my research without a hypothesis, following an inductive, interpretive process known as grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strass 1967). During data collection, I continually wrote memos to “think aloud” and reflect on student interviews. My analysis came from writing memos, re-reading transcripts, then writing more memos. Sinikka Elliott and Michael Schwalbe both provided feedback on my memos and then I would reflect further on the data and rework the memos. Throughout the process I reviewed various literatures related to topics I identified through memo writing, including: student experiences in college, Asian American student experiences in college, Asian American ethnic identity, identity work, and university organizations. After reading Museus, Vue, Nguyen, and Yeung’s (2013) article about Southeast Asian American students’ identity, I
started to focus on how my participants created value from their ethnic backgrounds to solve college-life problems, which made a lot of sense when reviewing my data and seeing that my participants all discussed Asian American identities that were strongly shaping their college experiences.

ANALYSIS

College-Life Problems

My analysis centers on the ways in which this group of Asian American students create a sense of belonging while also managing the typical struggles of college life. Some of the problems that participants face are typical college-student problems, such as finding friends, developing networks, and succeeding academically (Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). However, being Asian American may involve grappling with stereotypes and controlling images about Asian Americans, which may affect how others view them as well as how they view themselves in the school context. Patricia Hill Collins refers to controlling images as symbols utilized as powerful ideologies in order to justify and maintain racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice (2000:76-77). Controlling images, which Asian Americans might face, include being perceived as the “forever foreigner” (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014; Murjani 2014; Tuan 1998) and the model minority myth (which I talked about earlier). The forever foreigner image suggests that Asians, no matter what generation, may not be perceived as being American, thus questioning their very citizenship status (Murjani 2014; Tuan 1998); this may lead to further feelings of marginalization.
Feelings of marginalization and isolation

Some students faced feelings of marginalization and isolation, which they perceived to be linked to their ethnic backgrounds. For instance, a few participants (e.g., Sarah, Luke, Hannah, Amit, and Mark3) described previous experiences with being teased or bullied by white peers in high school for having an Asian name, eating ethnic foods, and/or wearing ethnic clothes. Many (n=13) of my respondents also talked both directly and indirectly about the whiteness of Southeast University with frustration or as problematic. Some (n=6) explicitly said that the university was so white that they felt uncomfortable and out of place or that it promotes racial tensions or overt racism. Some (n=8) said that the lack of diversity made it difficult for them to find friends, feel like they belong, or feel like they have the same opportunities as their white peers. For example, Luke talked about how strangers sometimes assumed that he and his friends they were international students, because they looked Asian:

… after the beach trip we were walking down and went to the downtown Hmong town I think, and we went to this deli and these two alumni graduates from Southeastern University – we were wearing Southeast University gear so obviously we’re looking like a group of Southeast University students. And then they had the audacity to ask us, are we international students just exploring around the area and then we surprised them with our perfect English and then they were really amazed by that.

Luke’s account shows how the “the forever foreigner” controlling image might occur in everyday interaction with others. Although Luke’s experience was not at Southeast University, this passage reflects the types of controlling images he faced. Being perceived as international, despite being born and raised in America, added to his feelings of isolation and marginalization from non-Asian people.

3 See Appendix 5 for demographic information on each participant.
Lack of administrative support

Another problem participants faced was the overall lack of support from university faculty and administration in regards to emotional and academic success. Four of the Asian-American college students I interviewed said there was a general lack of faculty mentoring and/or support, and lack of, or limited guidance from professional advisors regarding academic success in college. Three students (e.g., Sarah, Luke, Kevin) complained about how their academic advisors were disinterested in them and their academic success or felt that their advisors could do better in providing support. First-generation college student Luke, for instance, said his grades prevented him from getting into his major’s program in his first year of school. Luke complained about how his academic advisor failed to provide suggestions beyond switching his major during this time:

He was a terrible advisor…when he told me you should consider other majors or transfer to different colleges…I just did not like that advice and so I took last semester and I grinded all my work (read: I worked hard) and I applied again and I got in, luckily, into my first choice and I never spoke to my old advisor again because I just did not want his advice and like that day he made me feel really shitty about myself.

Luke’s account highlights that first-generation college students may need additional guidance with academic success in college. He did not feel like his advisor provided him with the advice and resources that could have been useful to him. Later in the interview he talked about how an older peer mentor whom he met through VSA suggested he seek tutoring and reapply to his program of interest; with his mentor’s advice, Luke had just been accepted to his program of interest during our interview.
First-year Hmong student Kevin expresses concern for the Asian American student body. After he states that Asian Americans are often overlooked as persons of color at Southeast University, Kevin points out that Asian Americans may be overlooked for both academic and mental health resources:

…As far as Asian Americans go, I think that we are overlooked…So, take me, personally; I acknowledge that I’m not the greatest in mathematics or science, or the hard sciences. So…finding a tutor or someone who understands the struggle that Asian students go through, as far as, being over-looked academically…I think another resource that Asian Americans lack at Southeast University is definitely just a professional advisor… somebody who can definitely talk to Asian American students about, anxiety or, you know, mental health, or depression. Things along those lines which … Asian Americans, as students definitely have that burden, and we don’t always talk about it.

Kevin felt that the students needed more academic and mental health assistance at Southeast University, noting his struggles in some of his math and science courses. Kevin’s passage suggests that Asian American students’ struggles may be linked to the model minority myth.

Respondents’ dissatisfaction with university support is a general concern for large, public universities, stemming in part from the lack of sufficient staff to meet individual student needs (Hamilton and Armstrong 2013). Another potential factor in respondents’ complaints about advisors may be linked to the controlling image that Asians are model minorities and do not need academic support (Cabrera 2014; Museus and Kiang 2009). If students are perceived as model minorities, faculty and administration may overlook them. Moreover, staff may hold unconscious prejudices or biases linked to larger societal perceptions of students they mentor (Figueroa and Rodriguez 2015; McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, and Luedke 2015; Alvarez et al. 2009; Laden 1999). Additionally, due to the model minority myth faculty and administration may overlook the Asian American student body for mental
health resources. Previous research suggests that Asian Americans’ experiences with campus
discrimination may be linked to higher rates of mental health illnesses, including depression
(Hwang and Goto 2008) and reduced psychological well being (i.e., personal perception of
one’s life and how “good” or “bad” it is) (Kim, Kendall and Cheon 2016).

In addition to challenges, one’s ethnic identity may also provide a “ticket” into
friendships, networking, leadership opportunities, and access to other cultural and social
resources (Vue 2013; Wilkins 2008; Sidanius and Van Laar 2004). This was true at
Southeastern University. In what follows, I analyze how students used their Asian-interest
organizations and Greek institutions as vehicles for their identity projects and as a means of
resolving the problems they faced in college (Wilkins 2014; Jenkins 2008).

Resolving College-Life Problems with Ethnic Enclaves

Students discussed a number of ways that their participation in student organizations
resolved college-student problems. First, student clubs and organizations enabled
opportunities to develop friendships and networking. All respondents made most of their
friendships and met some of their romantic partners through Asian-interest
organizations/Asian Greek organizations (e.g., Craig, Luke, Amit, Mark, and Nicole met
their partners through an Asian organization). Furthermore, most of the organizations
provided extensive networking opportunities (e.g., out of state networking and/or networking
with nearby universities). I talk about these student-group networking opportunities more
later.

Second, student clubs and organizations gave students access to academic and social
support from other ethnic peers. For instance, first-year and first-generation college student
Nicole talked about a peer mentor in the HSA\(^4\) on whom she could rely. She listed her peer mentor’s positive qualities, including leadership experience, independence, and holding a job, and said she “can rely on her.” However, she also said she knows “when to stop” asking for help, suggesting that she may have felt guilty about relying too much on her peer mentor, perhaps because theirs is not an official mentor-mentee relationship. Notice that Nicole also observed that her mentor is “usually by herself”:

I don’t have an official mentor. I actually asked a friend to be my mentor here…She was part of HSA. She was a secretary fall semester and gave me her position for spring semester. She’s confident as a woman, confident as a student here, and she has a job here…She’s always looking out for me and she’s usually by herself, so I’m just kind of amazed by her. I can rely on her but I know when to stop and so I think she’s like a role model/mentor kind of thing.

Nicole’s account shows the importance of peer mentors in providing social and emotional support during the transition to college life and also highlights the absence of official faculty and administrative support she experienced. Furthermore, Nicole’s reluctance to fully rely on her mentor may reflect the individualist ideology of our nation—that Americans are “self-made” and do not need help from others. Desiring additional help while living in an individualist-centered nation may be challenging for students like Nicole who are also the first in their family to attend college.

A third college problem which student clubs and organizations resolved included providing opportunities for students to gain leadership experience. With the exception of Hannah (a sophomore) and Marie (a first-year), respondents currently hold, or previously held, leadership positions within their respective organizations. Organizations that students were part of also sponsored professional development workshops as a means of gaining

\(^4\) See Appendix 1 for acronyms of student organizations.
social/cultural capital needed for academic and future career success. In addition to academic and social support, Asian American students in these ethnic enclaves also described learning to value their ethnic backgrounds.

*Creating Value in One’s Ethnic Background Prior to College*

Students talked about how they found value from their ethnic backgrounds. Being ethnic minorities in a predominantly white space, where students discussed feeling marginalized or isolated—the Asian Americans that I interviewed chose to utilize their ethnic backgrounds (the “source” of their marginalization) as a resource to solve their college-life problems (e.g., making friends and establishing a network, as noted above). As Goffman notes in *Stigma* (1963), individuals may choose to use the source of their stigma as the basis of their life, especially if their stigma is visible (i.e., you have no choice in how others may view your ascriptive features; if you look Asian, then given the “forever foreigner” controlling image, this may also mean that others may not view you as American). Previous research also suggests that individuals may choose to perform identities that have perceived social rewards and enable a degree of personal satisfaction and meaning to their lives (Thoits 2012).

I find that most of my participants began to see value in their ethnic backgrounds upon entering college. For many, this was the first time that they felt comfortable embracing their parents’ native culture through associating with ethnic peers, eating and cooking their ethnic foods, learning and performing ethnic dances, learning about their culture through holidays, and speaking their parents’ native tongue. Although they experience some of these
activities with their parents prior to college (e.g., eating ethnic foods, speaking parent’s language), college is the first time they actively chose to embrace their ethnic backgrounds.

Only two respondents said they found value in their ethnic backgrounds prior to college. Marie and Mark both discussed coming to see value in their ethnic background in middle school. Marie said that she started to explore the Vietnamese culture and history in late middle school and early high school. In middle school, she said she had many peers who shared her ethnicity, but her new high school had very few Asians. She decided that since her high school had few Asians, they needed to band together to avoid getting “lost”: … We are all in this together, so might as well. I think it was a need for the Asian community at my high school to not get lost”. She described learning more about Vietnamese language, history, and culture to maintain an identity and a presence in her majority white high school.

Mark began to value his ethnic background primarily through his travel abroad experiences to the Philippines, where he visited 3 times with his family before attending high school. Mark’s travel experiences helped him to bond with and understand his father. Mark also discussed these trips as an opportunity to learn more about his father’s background. He spoke with pride about Filipinos when sharing his father’s childhood memory:

In the Philippines, it’s—you are—you’re a self-made man, so your achievement is only because of what you’ve done, and I really appreciate that. And that’s why I think—you know, I’m kind of annoyed with a lot of people here in America that there’s—there’s so much opportunity. In the Philippines, my dad woke up when he was a kid at 3 a.m. every morning, just to sell rice cakes for, three cents each, and then he only got to keep one of those cents, because the rest went to his, boss. So, he would wake up before school to sell rice cakes until school happened, and then he had to go to school, and then, after that, he had to work in our family’s, convenient store. So he’d always be working, and working and now he’s a nurse here in the U.S., and I’m, like, you know, kids these days don’t have to wake up at, 3 a.m. in the morning—when they’re children—before elementary school, before middle school,
and after school have to work until late night, and then just keep on repeating that, you know? They have so much, and, you know, if you’re poor, you can get free lunch, so you don’t even have to worry about that, just worry about your academics, right? I don’t know; it just seems to me that people are wasting so much here, when—if you could take all the Filipinos, bring them here, we’d have a nation of the hardest workers.

Mark’s respect for Filipinos shines through in this passage. We see that Mark valued hard work, motivation, and self-reliance—all qualities that he perceived in his father and other Filipinos. He suggested that Americans have it easy, implying that Filipinos are superior workers who must work for anything that they have (and assuming that many Americans do not). Previous research confirms that visiting one’s parent’s native culture may spark renewed cultural interests (Kelly 2000).

Mark and Marie’s accounts are two cases in my sample of participants who saw value in their ethnic backgrounds prior to college. Both of their accounts show that identity is not a linear process and that not all the participants I interviewed embraced their ethnic backgrounds only in college. The next section, however, focuses on interviewees who described seeing value in their ethnic backgrounds only once they came to college. By value, I mean, that participants were able to perceive worth in their ethnic backgrounds. Whereas previously their ethnic backgrounds were associated with marginalization and stigma, in college, participants talked about how their ethnic backgrounds became linked to positive experiences, such as bonding with ethnic peers.

Creating Value in One’s Ethnic Background During College

A number of respondents mentioned being bullied in high school (e.g., Luke and Amit), feeling isolated or marginalized as Asian Americans (e.g., Hannah, Amit), and
wanting to be white so as to be members of the “normal” students in high school (e.g., Sarah and Emily). These students said they sought to distance themselves from their ethnicity prior to coming to the university. It was only once they arrived at Southeast University that they began to engage in a process of creating value from their ethnic backgrounds.

In high school Sarah was made fun of when she brought in ethnic foods to eat at lunch and when she wore traditional ethnic clothes to a cultural fair. She said others thought she was weird for being different, so she wanted to be “white”, because whiteness meant being normal. Similarly, Emily was reluctant to tell friends or peers that her parents worked at a nail salon, because that was a stereotypically Asian job in American society. She said:

A really common one that I bond with people over would have to be wealth or class, and our parents’ jobs. A lot of people like to make – I mean before in high school I didn't like to say that my mom worked in a nail salon because it seemed like oh, that's so typical. You're so Viet –I'd be embarrassed. But meeting people at VSA were a lot of them, a lot of their moms and dads did nails. I was just like yeah, did you go through a period where you were kind of embarrassed? And they were like, yeah…

Emily’s account highlights the shame she experienced in telling her peers about her parents’ career. Although Emily does not directly say this, she may also have felt that her parents’ working at a nail salon might have served to reinforce stereotypes about Asians.

Kang’s (2010) ethnographic study of Korean nail salons shows the intense emotional work required of Asian female workers as they interact with nail salon clients. Perhaps due to controlling images of Asian women as docile and subservient, as well as the “bamboo ceiling,”5 Asian women may find themselves with limited career options in the U.S.

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5 Similar to the glass ceiling metaphor, the bamboo ceiling is used to refer to the structural barrier for Asians to move up the social ladder in their respective jobs or just in the general social world (Chin
Poignantly, Kang states in regards to nail salon work: “This form of labor enforces the treatment of white women’s bodies as both special and normative, thereby upholding these women’s racial and class privilege. Simultaneously, it disciplines Asian women’s bodies to display deference and attentiveness in line with the controlling image of the Asian ‘model minority’” (2010:9). While other immigrants and racial minorities also perform menial or domestic work, this docility/subservience controlling image is specific to Asian/Asian American women and is linked to the historical treatment of Asian immigrants. For these reasons, it is unsurprising that Emily felt embarrassed by her parents’ occupation.

Other respondents also mentioned experiences of marginalization. For instance, Luke was made fun of in high school by mostly white peers for packing “ethnic” lunches but also for having an Asian last name; he said that his teacher made a joke from his last name. When talking about his high school experiences in bringing Vietnamese food to school, he said:

And so I just get a bunch of stupid things about that and then just whenever like, oh I brought from home what's called a “goikom” in Vietnamese it's summer rolls. It's wrapped in clear and then it has this peanut sauce. And it's mixed with “hoisom” and peanut butter, but it looks dark brown and everyone is like, oh you're dipping it in shit. And so that's some of the stuff I grew up with.

Luke’s experience of having peers refer to his food as “shit” emphasizes the marginalization that some participants talked about experiencing when cultural aspects of their ethnic backgrounds were visible to others. Luke also perceived a white classmate with whom he became friends in high school as rejecting him for being Asian in elementary school, which led him to feel angry and upset:

2016). Despite some of the women holding college degrees, Kang notes that they somehow end up in the field of nail salons, due to their lack of success in non-stereotypical Asian fields.
And one day we had to do a partner project and this one Caucasian kid— he's my good friend now in high school but for some reason in elementary school he didn't want to work with me 'cause I was Asian. And so I got really mad about that, why don't you want— I was, as a kid I'm so confused like, why is this the reason and I'd break pencils and flip desks, and it got to the point where the assistant principal had to drag me out and calm me down and I got angry a lot and in middle school I broke my door just punching out of frustration and it would just be things like that.

Luke’s violent reaction reflects the pain he experienced for what he perceived as being denied a friendship due to being Asian. Participants like Luke said that, prior to college, their ethnic backgrounds brought feelings of shame and marginalization in large part because their predominantly white peers used their Asian ethnicity to stigmatize and marginalize them, highlighting the power differentials within experiences of stigmatization (Link and Phelan 2001; Goffman 1963).

Several participants (e.g., Sarah, Hannah, Emily, Luke, Amit, Mark, Marie) talked about how their high schools were mostly white, and that being in college, and being able to see other Asians made them feel “comfortable” and like they had a “place” to which they could belong. For instance, Hannah talked about how college and attending the VSA was the first time that she was surrounded by other Asians:

I've never really seen that many Asians, because where I grew up it's mostly black or white, so but there's nothing wrong with that but it just felt different I guess 'cause it was like somebody to-- that I can relate to about cultural stuff and certain problems...having people to kind of share my identity and share certain jokes that– or foods, it was really nice. I've never had that.

Hannah enjoyed having peers who understood her culture, jokes, identity, and food and said it was a refreshing change from being made fun of for being different. Although Southeast University has a small total percentage of Asian Americans, Asian-interest student groups provided opportunities for students like Hannah to connect with ethnic peers. Luke
expressed similar sentiments and talked about being comforted by being able to see other Asian Americans:

And like I got a feeling like – I feel like I'm equal here even though, yes, we are only, there's only 9 percent\(^6\) Asians here, Asian Americans here, I still feel like I can just look around and there's someone I know that's Asian American and I can relate to them. But back at home I would have to look miles away just to find someone.

The simple experience of seeing others who looked like them made students feel like they had allies in the otherwise large university, which some described as intimidating.

When students spoke of college as intimidating they refer to having to find friends, balance their academic and social lives, and gain access to leadership roles and professional development. In short, they mean the challenge of having to navigate a whole new world. Furthermore, due to many of their previous experiences with bullying and isolation for their ethnic backgrounds, they may have worried that college would be a repeat of such experiences. For instance, Luke talked about how when he was searching for colleges, that he wanted a university that was more “liberal.” He seemed to view conservatism as synonymous with racism and he said his high school was full of “ignorant” people, so he wanted a university that was more accepting of diversity:

…”when it came to junior year in high school I– I still did identify myself as Asian American, but still I wouldn't have someone to connect to because there is rarely any other Vietnamese people (my emphasis). And so in high school when I was starting to plan college I was like, I want to aim for a more liberal college ’cause many of the colleges that I explored in South Carolina like Clemson, USC, they're very conservative still and so I have to explore my options…in South Carolina a lot of people are ignorant. In my high school I grew up with what you'd call rappers and hillbilly farmers, like we had a whole week dedicated to farmers. And my high school, after my class, my graduating class was probably the last saving string of a good amount of students because now my high school is full of cocaine, teachers are

\(^6\) Southeast University has only 5% Asian students.
getting fired left and right, the principal got fired because of racial comments. So you can see where I grew up like it's not the greatest.

Luke’s account suggests that he wanted to be somewhere more racially accepting than his high school was. Fortunately for the participants whom I interviewed, Southeast University had preexisting Asian-interest student organizations for them to join. As first-year students, most of them found their organizations of interest through the annual club fair where all existing clubs at Southeast University could showcase their organization to incoming first years (for others, they found their organizations of interest by word-of-mouth through friends).

As part of their respective Asian-interest subculture, students whom I interviewed said they were able to find a safe space to create value from their ethnic backgrounds. This process included establishing symbolic boundaries between members and non-members of their subcultures and participating in ethnic activities such as eating ethnic foods and speaking their parents’ native language. When examining student accounts of their subcultures, we also see power and inequality structures woven within their experiences and interactions with others. The ways in which students established their ethnic enclaves’ boundaries are discussed next.

**Ethnic Enclave Rituals: Forming Group Boundaries**

As Jenkins (2008) notes, a group’s collective identity is established by creating a sense of commonality and similarity among its members, while simultaneously establishing distinctiveness from non-members. This sense of community, or union, can be established through various rituals used by the collective’s members, enabling a sense of emotional
connection with one another (Jenkins 2008). For my interview participants, shared rituals were an integral aspect of establishing links with co-ethnic peers. One popular ritual involved preparing and eating ethnic foods together. Another was speaking their ethnic language with one another. Below I discuss each of these in turn in order to show how various ethnic activities allowed the participants I interviewed to embrace their ethnic backgrounds as well as reflect their dedication to their respective subculture.

*Deeper meaning of food: ethnic connections and ties with inequality*

Food came up a lot when interviewees were prompted about what they liked about their Asian-interest organization. Guptil, Copelton & Lucal (2013) talk about how food preparation and consumption is a way to express one’s social identity; countries and regions of countries have specific cuisines which use select ingredients and flavors unique to that area. In turn, food comes to represent a geographic location and the people who live there (in the case of my interviewees: their parents’ home countries). Although some of my participants had never been to their parents’ countries of origins, they knew the food that was associated with their culture and spoke knowledgably about the flavors and the ingredients.

Fish sauce is a popular ingredient for the Vietnamese cuisine, and several participants brought up fish sauce in their interviews. Fish sauce has a distinct flavor and smell, which participants also mentioned. Hannah, a second year student, talked about how it was nice to be able to eat ethnic foods, including fish oil (a k a sauce), without feeling judged by non-ethnic peers, who previously made fun of her for doing so. She said:

Hannah: So it was good to– that we could just eat the fish oil – I don't know if you know about that, yeah. It's– because it smells really bad, and we just eat with each
other without anybody judging and that kind of thing. And this year we cooked together a lot, so that's nice.

Interviewer: Did you have an experience where someone judged you for what you were eating before?

Hannah: Yeah, in high school every time I pack my own lunch and they'd be like, what are you eating? And then they made jokes like, oh are you eating dog, are you eating cat? I was like no, and I'd just kind of brush it off because they were my friends.

Hannah’s peers’ reaction to her bringing ethnic foods to lunch may tie back into constructions of Asians as the forever foreigner (Murjani 2014; Tuan 1998). Asian Americans might be perceived by non-ethnic peers as strange and peculiar in their ways, eating dogs or cats or foul-smelling fish foods, as seen in Hannah’s quote above. Hannah’s experience suggests that the consequences of eating ethnic foods with non-ethnic peers previously led to ridicule and feelings of marginalization. In contrast, she and other Vietnamese persons shared a familiarity with fish sauce. She also implied that non-Vietnamese persons cannot share this affinity, establishing an us/them boundary.

Craig, a senior Vietnamese student, also brought up fish sauce when asked for examples of cultural similarities between him and his ethnic friends. Like Hannah, he also drew group boundaries. Craig observed that there are a lot of white people at Southeast University compared to his ethnically-diverse friend group in high school, so it was nice to find co-ethnic peers:

Craig: …By coming over here [Southeast University], it just felt weird at first, you know. There's a lot more white people here and less Asians and so just kind of when I set out to look for just to, you know, all my friends over at San Jose, they kind of felt like the same friends over here in a way. You know not the same people, but, you know, the same way we act together and it was more to, you know, they're the same –
they know more about my culture and they share the same things with me and I'd say that's why…

Interviewer: All right. You mentioned that you had similar backgrounds and even small references only other Vietnamese families would understand. Do you have an example of that?

Craig: Yeah. I just can’t, think of a good one. So there's always– well I guess one of the big things is always how our families always use fish sauce for everything, cook everything and we always just joke how smelly it is but, you know, we just love it.

When asked about a reference that only other Vietnamese friends would understand, Craig mentioned fish sauce. Again, it is a distinction between Vietnamese people and non-Vietnamese people. Notice that shortly before mentioning this he talked about how Southeast University was very white. In this context, he may have felt particularly aware of his ethnicity (as reflected in his use of the word “weird” to describe his early impressions) and aware that he was a minority. Given past experiences, he and others may have also believed that they shared different experiences and interests than their white peers. Both Hannah and Craig were members of the VSA, and they established a sense of “we-ness” through such food references. Of course non-Vietnamese persons can appreciate fish sauce and Vietnamese cuisine, but taking note of that would not serve in creating a sense of connection with one another. Making it seem like only Vietnamese persons can enjoy such foods together reinforces the sense of emotional connection with other Vietnamese peers.

Another example of the importance of food in establishing a sense of connection with ethnic peers is seen in Emily’s description of how to eat pho (Vietnamese noodle dish) and roll egg rolls. Notice that she asked her Vietnamese friends how their moms cook pho:
Interviewer: Is there an example of a custom, a cultural thing that you felt like you all have in common?

Emily: Oh my God, this sounds so dumb. But it's how people roll spring or summer rolls or something. Or how people like to eat their pho. It's just oh, your mom cooks it that way? Oh, my mom does that too. It's just small things like that.

Interviewer: And you also mentioned how you eat pho. How do you eat it?

Emily: A lot of people like to make this bird's nest thing where they put a lot of—what do you call it? Bean sprouts and then they put sauce on top. Or people just put sauces. It's just small things like that, that's pretty funny…

By talking about how she prepares and eats traditional Vietnamese foods—do you put the “bird’s nest” of bean sprouts on top or just put sauces—Emily and others can find a sense of commonality with one another and promote their sense of “we-ness.” Student accounts also show that previous experiences with non-ethnic peers often led to feelings of shame or marginalization about aspects of their ethnic backgrounds. Thus, by separating themselves from non-ethnic peers, they find community and acceptance.

Amit, an Indian student, also shared how the Indian fraternity was a place where he could be himself, through rituals like food preparation and eating. He talked about how cooking and eating was often parts of a larger social event, enabling a means of bonding with peers. Note that Amit explicitly stated that the college environment was foreign, and that being around Indian peers enabled a sense of belonging. Also, notice how he perceived more in common with his Indian peers as he also made references to the language—Mausi (“auntie”) and Mama (“uncle”)—as a means of connection:

Interviewer: You said that you felt connected because you all [fraternity brothers] had similar experiences growing up. What are some of the similar experiences that you had?
Amit: Food was actually a big part of it. Because one of the rush events was actually cooking at the house. So once you started doing, or showing people what they're familiar with, that really makes you feel like you kind of belong there (my emphasis), especially when you're in such a foreign, I want to say foreign environment, at college. So that's kind of how it started, was with the food. Then you would start sharing your stories and stuff like that. [For example], I would tell my mom not to give me more food, but she will. That's sort of a cliché thing to happen in the Indian culture; your moms always want you to eat. And from there it just kind of went on to— I don't know. Like ways that— so we call our relatives Mausi and Mama and all that. So we sort of—I don't know how I should say this. Sort of mimic them in a way, to create experiences. I would share a story about my Aunt and then somebody else would share their story. It was just (a) chain reaction, sort of where we just keep sharing anecdotes and stuff like that. You just got to know them better through their own personal experiences.

Although mothers from many cultures want their children to eat more food, Amit perceived this as a uniquely Indian behavior, establishing a “we-ness” with his fraternity brothers. He also referenced the language, citing the terms Mausi and Mama, knowledge which only he and others in his culture can understand. With the initial connection of cooking Indian cuisine with one another, the event extends into meaning-making through discussions about Indian parents—does your mom also always tell you to eat more?—and then this can lead to other stories which fraternity brothers share.

Again, we see an us/them boundary being established—Amit’s Indian peers allowed him to feel comfortable because they shared in the preparation of, and discussions linked with, food; they perceived this as a means of connections and similarities amongst themselves (and differences between themselves and non-members). As Jenkins notes, it is through what people do together that helps establish their symbolic universe (2008:138); by cooking with one another, these students were able to establish their “we-ness” as a subculture. Similar to Hannah, Craig and Emily, who felt like only Vietnamese peers could
appreciate the fish sauce in Vietnamese cuisine, Amit felt comfortable with Indian peers, whom he could cook with and share cultural and familial anecdotes.

As shown with Emily, Craig, Hannah and Amit’s accounts, food can be a way to bond with ethnic peers through this mutually shared ethnic experience, which they believed (and some have experienced) non-ethnic others might not appreciate or necessarily want to engage in. Guptil et al. state, “…many food rituals, from everyday practices to special occasions, create and sustain distinctive social identities…” (2013:19). Preparing and eating ethnic foods, and eating with co-ethnic peers, are both means of expressing one’s ethnic identity. Furthermore, food is infused with cultural meanings; as ethnographer Abarca notes about a Mexican dish: “Each person’s sazon, therefore, carries personal, cultural, and social messages” (2006:72). Eating food is not simply a physical act, but carries with it emotional responses and cultural meanings. Abarca also argues that, “Food and literature…feed our intellect while nourishing our creative expression helping us claim our cultural, social, political, and personal space” (2006:135). The participants I interviewed may similarly be able to carve out a space of ethnic belonging—within their ethnic enclaves—by preparing and eating their ethnic foods with one another.

*Other ethnic connections and ties with inequality*

Another cultural connection that participants brought up often was the ability to speak their parents’ native language with similar-aged peers. When asked about an example of cultural things that she shared with Vietnamese peers, Emily cited music, specifically one song that everyone who is Vietnamese is likely to know.
And a lot of it was like also music, because our parents like to do karaoke; yeah, I bonded over how our parents do like drum karaoke. [Vietnamese song] is what they always sing there from the '90s, and everyone knows that song.

As with food and cultural anecdotes, shared knowledge of language and music can be a way to establish similarity with ethnic peers; a sense of “we-ness” can be created through these commonalities.

Similarly, Sarah talked about how she was drawn to VSA because it was a space where she could finally speak but also appreciate the Vietnamese language:

Interviewer: Okay. So, you said one of the things you really liked about VSA was that you get to learn—you got a chance to learn about your culture, and you mentioned learning more about the Vietnamese holidays, and just about the clothing, about the traditional clothing, and the food. Was there anything else you can think of that you learned, that you really appreciated about VSA?

Sarah: I’m gonna say language.

Interviewer: Language.

Sarah: That one’s probably the biggest one, and I’m surprised I didn’t actually didn’t write that one down, or say it. I’ve had the chance to communicate with a lot of the Vietnamese, leaders in [city]. They have—they have an organization here in [city], I think it’s the [name of organization], or something like that. And being able to speak Vietnamese to these older-generation, people, really helped me appreciate my language a lot more. I’ve been able to speak more Vietnamese at home, as well, and I can definitely attribute that to—to VSA…And my parents, even though they’ve really tried to push language on my--they—they would speak in Vietnamese, but I would always respond in English. So, VSA kind of helped me more with that—being able to, like, actually want to speak Vietnamese is a lot different from, oh, I have to speak Vietnamese [chuckles].

Being able to speak the Vietnamese language together, allows students like Sarah a safe space to express their ethnic backgrounds.
Sarah’s excerpt below emphasizes that “white is normal,” emphasizing racial power dynamics. Similar to students’ experiences with eating ethnic foods, Sarah explained how speaking one’s parent’s language made you “weird” and different from your peers. Speaking a language other than English made you stand out, look less American, and more like a foreigner (Tuan 1998). When asked why she did not speak Vietnamese in high school, Sarah cites the discomfort she felt in doing so with an audience of mostly white peers:

… I think going to my school, being in a predominantly white school, anything that had to deal with my culture felt weird (my emphasis). I was ashamed to bring Vietnamese food to school even though my—that’s what my mom cooked, so when I’d bring it to school and people were, like, oh, that smells, or it looks weird, you don’t wanna bring that food in anymore. Or, if we’re, doing, a cultural show, or something, and I’m bringing in my—my ethnic clothes, and they were, like, oh, that looks so different, it doesn’t necessarily make you feel great, either, when they don’t know how to appreciate it, either. So I guess, in that way, I kinda just moved away from it. I wanted to be more white, I guess you can say.

If participants had mostly non-Asian friends in high school, they did not feel like it was safe to engage in activities emphasizing their ethnic backgrounds. But now, at Southeast University, where ethnic enclaves exist, these students discussed feeling more comfortable embracing their ethnic backgrounds.

Emily, too, talked about wanting to be white. Since her father was part white, she felt she could embrace the “whiteness” in her heritage. She said: “And I wanted to be more white, so I was always leaning towards that quarter side of me in high school. So it's not that I hid being Asian; I liked being Asian but I just didn't like being Vietnamese.” Emily’s desire to be white reflects the normalcy of whiteness, emphasizing our society’s binary thought process where whiteness is normal and all else is not (Collins 2000; Goffman 1963).
This type of adaptive response (i.e., accepting the notion that whiteness is normal) may unintentionally reinforce the forever foreigner image, as it implies that only those who are white can be American.

Emily also brought up an experience in high school of being directed by her writing teacher to write from her social position “as a female of color.” She talked about struggling with this assignment, because she had never read or really been exposed to an Asian American woman’s perspective in literature class or media:

So I was reading my poems and short stories, and *I've always written as a white dude* (my emphasis) and I was so freaked out... *And then I realized it was because all my favorite TV shows and movies were in that perspective.* And then when she asked me to write in that clearly opposite one I was too embarrassed to write as a female of color. And I was thinking about why, and *I think I ran across this quote which said men can always write about themselves and it's considered great; but when women do they are seen as conceited or something.* And that's how exactly I felt. I couldn't write in my own perspective because I didn’t want people to think I'm writing about myself. Which is okay, but in my head it was like oh, that's conceited or something.

This excerpt further emphasizes the power structure in our society. Emily’s sense of embarrassment may reflect Goffman’s (1963) concept of “spoiled identity” where a person’s identity (here, Emily’s ethnic and gendered identities) leads to stigma, or feelings of devaluation. Bartky also notes that, “Shame is the distressed apprehension of the self as inadequate or diminished” (1990:86). Emily’s spoiled identity might explain her discomfort and embarrassment in trying to write from the perspective as a woman of color. When considering the assignment to write from her own perspective, she worried she will be seen as “conceited.” This thought process highlights that we often view gender and race as binary constructs—white males constituting the norm and all others being Others (Collins 2000; Goffman 1963). Emily’s and Sarah’s experiences show the complexity of identity, and how
everyday situations can reveal power and inequality. Each of them discussed feelings of marginalization due to their ethnic backgrounds.

Other students also talked about a symbolic separation from their white peers. Second-year Mark said that he had more in common with Asians, and therefore he claimed he would never join a white fraternity. He said that he is not racist, but he just naturally flocked towards other Asians, who understood his Dragon Ball Z\(^7\) references. Mark also mentioned that in high school the only friends who stuck around were Asian, and perhaps this is another reason why he prefers Asian friends.

Interviewer: Did you ever, so you never considered joining a white fraternity?

Mark: [Chuckles] No. For a multitude of reasons, but I just—I mean, for me—, the friends I choose are based on similarities, and you can’t ignore the fact that cultural upbringing is a huge part of why a person is how they are. So it’s not like I’m racist and I don’t want white friends, it just so happens, the people who are more similar to me are Asians. I mean, it makes sense. [Chuckles]…I just feel like, even in high school all my best friends—the only friends that stick around were my Asian friends (my emphasis)…So, I’ll—I don’t think that was, a conscious effort, I just think it’s just because we have so much in common. All—even the jokes I make— I make, stupid references to Dragon Ball Z—most white people don’t get that…

By perceiving that he has more in common with Asian friends, Mark was able to justify the separation he seemed to experience from white peers, as implied by him saying only Asian friends stick around. By creating similarities between himself and other Asians, Mark also reinforced the symbolic boundary between Asian and non-Asian peers. My data suggest that students who were part of Asian Greek life, too, remain largely isolated from the white student body.

\(^7\) Traditional Japanese anime series that also became popular in America; the TV series aired in the mid 1990’s, likely during Mark’s childhood.
One of the foundational features of college life is “Greek life”; it is often seen as the embodiment of university life. Greek institutions were historically racist: Blacks and Jews were explicitly not allowed to join\(^8\) (Horowitz 1987). Although legal sanctions now prohibit outright discrimination in main Greek organizations, research suggests that traditionally white Greek student bodies remain homogenous and that white students who are members of Greek institutions are less likely to embrace (cultural/ethnic) diversity (Pascarella et al. 1996), and more likely to oppose affirmative action and interracial dating (Sidanius and Van Laar 2004). As Hamilton and Armstrong (2013) suggest, even without racial restrictions, the “personality” assessments used to recruit (i.e., recruiting students with similar personality to current members) ultimately result in racial/ethnic, class, and religious biases.

Research from the National Longitudinal Study of Freshman showed that 97% of white fraternities and sororities had mostly white members (Park 2014). As Higley states in reference to rich, elite social groups including fraternities at universities, “The upper class has a distinct set of institutions that provide social and physical separation from the rest of society, and these institutions inculcate an intricate set of values and beliefs…they affirm cultural and group solidarity” (1995:30). When considering Greek life, we must keep in mind that the Greek system is set upon a hierarchy, with white organizations at the zenith of the pyramid, having the most resources and power within the Greek system (Hamilton and Armstrong 2013).

The participants I interviewed at Southeast University were only part of Asian-interest Greek institutions. When I asked second-year Kevin why he never considered a non-
Asian fraternity, he said that he was never actively recruited by non-Asian Greek institutions. This alone is a significant point; as noted above, traditionally white Greek institutions remain predominantly white, even today. If you look Asian, members of these institutions may not reach out to recruit you; reinforcing the idea that Asians are different and perhaps viewed as the “forever foreigner” (Murjani 2014; Tuan 1998). When examining the types of events the Asian Greek institutions engaged in, I noticed that the Asian sororities paired only with Asian fraternities. As an active campus leader for the undergraduate Asian student body, I never observed any cross-racial interaction between Asian and non-Asian Greek organizations. These patterns of social interaction (or lack thereof) underscore the largely separate racial spaces at Southeast University of the participants I interviewed.

With such racial separation from white peers, it is unsurprising that some participants acted as “gatekeepers” of the ethnic enclave boundaries. Similar in establishing symbolic boundaries between ethnic and non-ethnic peers, Luke used the language “white-washed” (i.e., this term refers to Asians who mostly associate with whites; used often as derogatory slang to criticize Asians who do not associate with other Asians) to refer to his brother who associated with white friends, joined a white fraternity, and dated a white woman. While his brother did not attend Southeast University, Luke’s dialogue around the term “white-washed” reflects the boundary maintenance of members within ethnic enclaves at Southeast University.

Gender as a Resource or Barrier to Belonging

Participants’ accounts also show that gender, too, can be used as a resource or a barrier in establishing a sense of belonging with peers. Participants’ gendered accounts also
reveal the larger structure of gender inequality in which we live. Gender inequality refers to the system of patriarchy, or male domination, where men have greater access to social, political, and economic benefits in society. Men are more valued and more rewarded within society, and they may engage in behaviors that serve to maintain their dominance (Schwalbe 2014). In some cases, women also engage in behaviors that serve to maintain men’s dominance.

Asian-American women face controlling images of being hypersexual (Sue et al. 2007), submissive, and docile (Kang 2010; Pyke and Johnson 2003). Furthermore, they face the controlling images of the model minority myth (Murjani 2014; Museus and Kiang 2009) and forever foreigner (Murjani 2014; Tuan 1998). My analysis demonstrates how some Asian female participants were able to use their gendered identities as resources. For others, their gendered identities served as barriers in creating a sense of belonging with their Asian peers.

Marie’s perception of Asian women enabled her to establish a sense of belonging with one of the Asian sororities. For instance, when Marie talked about why she joined her particular sorority, she mentioned that it did not fit the stereotypical Asian woman. Here we get a sense of what Marie felt it meant to be an Asian woman by what she said it was not—it was not being tattooed, not having streaks in your hair, not majoring in film. Marie struggled with the controlling images of what Asian women “should” look like, and this perception determined which Asian sorority she ultimately decided to join. She stated that she wanted to be a positive model for the Asian-American woman, but she also rejected the stereotypical image of the Asian woman:
Marie: Yeah. I just felt, because, some of the sisters didn’t fit what the standard of beauty or standard of an Asian-American woman would be, I was like, okay, this is really cool. Because I mean, you know, because I want to join an Asian-interest sorority obviously I want to be a positive representation of the Asian community but I don’t want to feel like it’s my job to limit myself to be this representation. So.

Interviewer: So not wanting to be a stereotype of what the typical Asian woman is?

Marie: That’s not saying that [sorority] does, it’s just like, looking at [other Asian-interest sorority], and being like, oh man, they have tattoos, one of them has streaks in her hair and she wants to be a film major, okay, they’re, they’re very, not, the stereotypical Asian. And I feel like, not just on an individual basis, but the group as a whole had that same vibe. And I was like, that’s something that I would want to be a part of.

Since she did not want to narrowly fit the stereotypical Asian-woman mold, Marie created her sense of belonging by associating with the other Asian-interest sorority that she felt was more diverse and “outside of the box.” Marie’s account is also important in showing the larger power structure; Asian women are viewed as homogeneous in American society, fitting specific controlling images (Collins 2000) such as docility, submissiveness, and caregiver (Kang 2010; Pyke and Johnson 2003). Marie did not want to be limited to this Asian-American woman caricature, and because of this, she decided to join what she perceived as the less stereotypical sorority. In this way Marie was able to create a sense of belonging through the sorority she saw as matching her own gendered identity.

Unlike Marie, who was able to use her gendered identity as a resource, Melanie’s gendered identity became a barrier, and limited her access to certain ethnic enclaves. Melanie was a working-class, first-generation sophomore majoring in Business Administration. Melanie talked about how the Asian women at Southeast University were too feminine, whereas she liked to get “down and dirty”: 
I feel like a lot of the [Asian] girls are very feminine. Whereas back at home everyone's kind of, it's a small town, a rural area, it feels like everyone is out to get down and dirty; they're not afraid to do anything. Even the feminine girls back at home aren't afraid to get down and dirty.

Melanie felt distinctly different from other Asian women; she said they were too feminine and afraid to get down and dirty. When I probed further about these women, Melanie said that they tended to squeal in high-pitched voices and liked to hug one another:

Interviewer: So these very feminine girls, where are they at?

Melanie: I would say there's a lot of Asian feminine girls. The Asian attitude, it's very different.

Melanie: …But then, when we [she and other Hmong students] join Pan-Asian Club or ASA, and there's all these other Asian girls, they're very feminine. They're very--they like to hug, talk really high, they like to scream a lot, squeal a lot, I don't know it's very I don't know, it's weird. I can't connect with that.

Interviewer: So you said it's like Pan-Asian Club, ASA...so you feel like they're very different than the kind of girls you were with at high school. What were the girls at high school like?

Melanie: We were very tough, very prideful, tough and kind of like, a more dominant player. I don't want to say ghetto [laughs] but the way we talk is, like the way I am talking to you now is not the way I’d talk back at my apartment because we're like, what's up or dude, or we just like to talk like one of the guys. At home everyone had that ingrained in them, the American, Asian, and African-American girls.

Melanie critiqued the Asian women at Southeast University who were not proud, tough, or dominant, but they were girly and liked to hug. In this way she disparaged feminine qualities (e.g., humility, weakness, dependency) that are often viewed in opposition to men’s more valued qualities (e.g., proud, tough, dominant). In this way, she is reinforcing the dominance of men by valuing traits associated with masculinity. Similar to Marie, she rejected stereotypical notions of Asian femininity, however, her gendered identity served as a barrier
between her Asian peers. Melanie’s rejection of these Asian women limited the networks she could access at Southeast University. In her interview she said that she spent most of her time with her two sisters who also lived in the same city, showing that she perhaps had not been able to immerse herself in the ethnic enclaves to the same degree as other participants. Thus, we see that one’s gendered identity could serve as a resource or a barrier in creating a sense of belonging.

Some of the men’s accounts also highlight gender inequality and show the ways in which males might attempt to signify manhood, a presentation of self which serves to support men’s power (Schwalbe 2000). Schwalbe (2014) discusses how males must signify that they are men by dressing, speaking and acting in ways that reflect social constructions of manliness and maleness. Males have certain rules to follow if they want to be perceived and accepted as men. In our society, men are expected to be aggressive, in control, and independent, and males engage in manhood acts in order to show that they are such men. Schwalbe defines manhood act as the “interactional rituals that produce the cultural objects that we call ‘men’” (2014:56). Manhood is thus something that can be exhibited by a male’s actions with others, and participants whom I interviewed attempted to display such manhood acts, in ways that either helped or weakened their connection with ethnic peers.

One way that men can establish masculinity is by conveying a stoic exterior. Yet studies suggest that men often rely on women for their emotional and mental well being in romantic relationships. Research also shows that women often exert more emotional energy in supporting their partners than men (Erickson 2005), highlighting the larger structure of gender inequality. Fourth-year Chinese-American Max mentioned how his girlfriend
provided much of the emotional support he needed when coping with his father’s hospitalization and ensuing physical condition. After Max’s father left the hospital, he was largely incapacitated, leaving Max and his mother responsible for caregiving work (and his mother was undergoing cancer treatment at the time of his interview). Max moved off campus to stay at home and help out more his senior year. He said his girlfriend and friends from church were major support groups and noted that he largely kept things to himself after he and his girlfriend broke up. He did not want anyone’s pity so felt like he could not share his life challenges with others:

   Interviewer: You mentioned your dad had a stroke and your mom is undergoing cancer treatment, clearly both are stressful life circumstances to cope with. I was wondering who/what has been your support during this time period?

   Max: I would say my girlfriend and guys from my bible study. Besides them, I've mentioned my situation to friends and such, but it was informative and not me coping. …At one point my girlfriend and I split up. So during that time I didn't really share my worries with anyone. …I didn't give myself any time to stop and think. I also had the mindset that I didn't want anyone's pity or to burden them because of my situation…especially more recently as I have been looking for full-time jobs, I always question myself whether it's okay to describe it as a hard time in my life because I didn't want their pity and I figured everyone goes through stressful life circumstances.

   I guess it kinda falls back to me saying I noticed many Asian Americans do not ask for help, in situations like job references, or my own. I think talking it through with someone like maybe a friend or mentor definitely would've helped relieve more stress at the time.

Max’s difficulty in sharing his problems with others once he and his girlfriend broke up highlights the degree of emotional support that she was providing. Men who are stoic and self-reliant are rewarded in our society—they can reap social benefits of masculinity by doing so. However, Max’s struggle of whether or not to reach out to others during this
stressful time shows the challenges men can face in trying to engage in such manhood acts. Although Max may have been able to signify masculinity with stoicism, his actions ultimately prevented him from opening up to others and made it difficult for him to feel connected during this stressful time period. Thus, his attempts to engage in manhood acts ultimately prevented him from gaining a sense of belonging with those around him.

Mark is another participant who discussed gendered-identity work in his interview. Mark’s account shows that he desired to be viewed as a man who has status and is owed respect. For instance, when talking about his relationship with his mom, he said that it was important that she recognized/validated him as a “tall, handsome, strapping young man”, and no longer the “short fat kid she once knew”:

I can see the love, and how proud she is in her eyes…But with my mom-- whenever, you know, last time I went home, I wanted to work out outside, so I brought, a bench and our dumbbell set outside on our porch. And you know, I’m not, the fat, short kid that she once knew—I’m this, I guess, tall, in my opinion handsome, strapping young man. I don’t know—who’s changed a lot, and—she’s like wow. So.

In Mark’s account, we see the value he placed on physical beauty and strength, both qualities that men in our society may strive for when attempting to gain certain privileges in gendered relationships. Perhaps a benefit to endorsing such notions of masculinity is that Mark was accepted into the Asian-interest fraternity. Mark also mentioned physical strength when he talked about how the fraternity helped improve himself as a man:

It’s [being in a fraternity] changed my life in so many ways; it’s made me a better man mentally, physically—it’s made me more understanding (my emphasis). Its’ definitely improved my already—what—what I thought was already good social skills, and it’s continuing to improve that. And it’s really made—it’s—it’s humbled me to be confident rather than cocky, which I think I once was. So there’s a difference, and I just—I just don’t know. I’ve met so many people who—it’s cheesy,
but now, there’s [fraternity] brothers, and then there’s just friends, and I didn’t think that that difference was that tactile.

Mark’s endorsement of masculinity, embodied in physical strength amongst other qualities, enabled him to create a sense of belonging with his Asian fraternity. Mark’s account, in comparison to Max’s, shows how engaging in manhood acts can serve to establish a sense of belonging.

In both the men’s and women’s accounts, gendered identities served either as a resource or barrier to their sense of belonging. The next and final section examines how participants may use their subcultures flexibly, meaning they may leave their ethnic enclaves if they can establish a sense of belonging elsewhere. Participants’ flexible entry and exit of the subcultures emphasizes how identity work is fluid and continually changing, both by context and time.

Flexible Use of the Subculture

Individuals who joined the ethnic enclaves may choose to eventually leave them—highlighting the flexible use of the subculture. For example, fourth-year Heather talked about how once she started dating a white man, she found it more difficult to maintain a sense of belonging with her Asian networks. Heather’s explanation indicates the social power white men have, as she suggests “it’s always really weird with Asians hanging out with one or two white people.”

Heather: Dating someone within it [the Asian group] was easier for everyone to kind of hang out with, and I don't know if this has ever been said about anyone, but I feel like it's easier for a group of Americans to hang out with some Asians but it's always really weird with Asians hanging out with one or two white people.
Interviewer: Why do you think that's the case?

Heather: I don't know. Maybe a mixture of Americans not being used to being a minority and maybe a mixture of Asians kind of get cliquey.

Interviewer: How do they get cliquey?

Heather: Not in a bad way at all but it's just, you know the same people so you talk about the same people, you eat similar foods and Americans don't – haven't even heard of, just things like that. If my boyfriend came he wouldn't know – a lot of the guys from that group, they talk about Starcraft, my boyfriend would be like okay, I've heard of that but I don't know how to talk to you guys about it. And if they ever talked about their parents he wouldn't have the same – I don't know, then all the guys talk about the same things and…

Interviewer: And what would they say about their parents?

Heather: I don't know, whether it's they want to go – if they go home and say that their parents have been stressing them out or I don't know. I can just – I envision things like that, yeah.

Heather perceived dating a white man as creating a symbolic barrier between her and her Asian friends. Her choice of dating a white man symbolizes her choice to disengage from Asian peers and also emphasizes the importance of dating someone within the group (i.e., maintaining that us/them boundary) in order to remain in the group. She listed reasons of how her white boyfriend would not be able to connect with her Asian friends, mentioning the computer game Starcraft and also talking about how Asians faced specific issues with their parents, which a white man would not be able to understand. One would not necessarily see Starcraft as uniquely Asian, nor having complaints about one’s parents, however, Heather perceived her white boyfriend as making her different from her Asian friends and creating additional social distance between her and them. Heather’s perception of distinct differences
between Asians and non-Asians reiterates the importance of that us/them boundary, in that she does not see commonalities in Asians and non-Asians.

Heather also criticized the group that she was once part of, saying that it left her only associating with other Asians and prevented her from growing professionally. Since she had a university scholarship in order to study abroad, she talked about how studying abroad became more important to her than her leadership in the Asian-interest organizations.

Further, she emphasized that only hanging out with other Asians did not seem to help her grow professionally the way that her study abroad involvement could:

Heather: … because I got to study abroad for free and I didn't want to throw that away and that studying abroad kind of became a larger part of who I was and then, you know, wanting to find a group of friends was great, but at the same time I felt like it really pushed me into a circle where I only hung out with Asian people (my emphasis) and I didn't feel like I was growing and [the sorority] took up a lot of my time where I felt like I wasn't becoming–growing professionally. I felt like–I know some sororities grow up and you still are a part of them and they help you, but I felt like it wasn't really helping me grow as much as doing other things would.

At a predominantly white university, Heather may have initially felt the need to utilize her ascriptive Asian status to establish friends and networks. However, as a senior, who had a white boyfriend and focused much of her energies on her college major and study abroad interests, she could recede from her ethnic identity. Her ethnic identity had less value to her than it may have as a first-year in college. Though she physically looked Asian, meaning she will always carry an Asian American ascribed status, she chose to not use it as the primary source of her identity or university experience. Heather’s account emphasizes that membership in these ethnic enclave is not necessarily permanent, and also shows how one’s ethnic identity may adjust over time.
CONCLUSION

There is immense research on college students. Research on college students is important, as college is a time when students are grappling with academic, social, and professional development (Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Wilkins 2014; Hamilton and Armstrong 2013). Research extends to show that students of color may face distinct struggles in the college transition, requiring more identity work than white peers (Chou, Lee and Ho 2015; Wilkins 2014; Vue 2013), especially as they grapple with stereotypes and controlling images embedded in everyday social interactions. Research also shows that second-generation immigrants may engage in selective acculturation (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Zhou 1993), using ethnic enclaves to feel safe and also gain access to resources (e.g., social, political, economic resources). This paper expands the literature on college students, students of color, and second-generational immigrant experiences by examining ethnic identity formation.

Identity work is important to examine since it is critical in unpacking larger structural inequality in our society. Everyday interactions reveal power inequities, emphasizing the importance of social exchanges (Callero 2014; Schwalbe 2000). Wilkins’s (2014) research shows how black high school students engage in more identity work than their first-generation white peers as they respond to stereotypes and discrimination from university peers. Further, Evans and Moore (2015) show how students of color at an elite law school must engage in identity work as they navigate white peers’ racial ideologies in both classrooms and everyday interaction.
Furthermore, research shows that Asian Americans may face distinct controlling images, which Collins (2000) defines as symbols used as prevailing ideologies in order to legitimate racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice. Asian Americans in U.S. society might face the forever foreigner image where others might perceive them as foreigners who cannot speak English (Murjani 2014; Tuan 1998). They may also deal with the model minority myth that leads others to perceive them as high-achievers with no need for administrative support (Museus and Kiang 2009). Asian American women may face sexualization, exotification, and images of docility and subservience (Sue et al. 2007; Kang 2009; Pyke and Johnson 2003), while Asian American men may face controlling images of emasculation and asexualization (Espiritu 2009; Shek 2006).

My analysis focuses on ethnic identity formation and shows how Asian Americans might use their ethnic backgrounds as subcultures to solve college-life problems while simultaneously navigating controlling images that they experience in both high school and college. Here I showed how Asian students created value from their ethnic backgrounds through Asian-interest clubs and Asian-Greek life on campus. By focusing on perceived similarities between their in-group members, Asian students found commonalities with one another and formed subcultures. By engaging in rituals, such as preparing ethnic foods, students valorized their ethnic backgrounds and created a positive sense of distinction for themselves. This in turn helped them resolve college-life problems by making friends, finding peer mentors, and gaining leadership experience.
My analysis of how Asian students established a sense of belonging highlights larger patterns of inequality linked to their race, class, and gender. Museus et al. (2013)’s ethnic identity model fails to consider how Asian American’s ethnic identities might be influenced by the contexts in which they live and the power relations that they experience day-to-day, so my thesis sheds light on such processes in regards to ethnic identity. For instance, students like Sarah and Emily talk about wanting to be white, as they see “whiteness” as being normal. Luke talks about being made fun of for bringing ethnic foods to lunch, and Hannah mentions feeling ashamed of her parents’ work at a nail salon. By considering student accounts, we can see that power at Southeast University is still largely situated with white, middle-class men.

Implications

Students’ abilities to use their ethnic backgrounds to resolve college problems prove beneficial. However, with such subcultural formations, there are perhaps unintended consequences. Students’ self-segregation into these ethnic enclaves reflect Tilly’s (1998) process of adaptation, which refers to the everyday actions that people engage to cope with inequalities, but by doing so, simultaneously reinforce inequality. By self-segregating within ethnic enclaves, students may inadvertently restrict their access to resources and preserve the current social and political hierarchy (Callero 2014). For instance, much research shows how networking is important for finding jobs (Granovetter 1973; Blau, Duncan, and Tyree 1967), especially higher-level, well paying management jobs (Lin and Ao 2012; McDonald and Day 2010; Enns, Malinick, and Matthews 2008; McDonald and Elder 2006; Lin 1999).
Furthermore, white men are known to have the most valuable networks (i.e., networks that are linked to high-level positions). If Asian Americans’ networks are not racially diverse, then they may lose out on valuable networking opportunities with white peers. Furthermore, they may face additional struggles outside of college if their ethnic identities prove less valuable in different contexts (Chin 2016). Having said that, the burden cannot be placed on minority students. As previous research suggests, assuming that minority students are responsible for their own integration or that they are the ones who must choose to integrate, to often very different cultural (white) norms, is both unrealistic and unfair (Tierney 1992). Rather, educators and politicians should examine our educational institutions and engage in reform.

Racial/ethnic climates in universities should be further studied. How do minorities perceive the racial climate of their universities? In what ways might racial/ethnic tensions be alleviated in university settings? These are questions to consider in future research. Educational reforms should encourage interracial student interactions, facilitate acceptance of diversity, and provide more formal administrative support systems (e.g., formal mentors, workshops to lessen the cultural capital gap between students, etc.) for students particularly “at risk” in college, including less privileged student groups and students of color. Furthermore, institutions that are known to be historically racist and continue to maintain racial homogeneity (i.e., Greek organizations) may need critical restructuring or removal from college life (Hamilton and Armstrong 2013).
Future research might examine Asian-American college students’ experiences when they do not participate in Asian-interest campus organizations. Additional research may also explore relationships between white and non-white students, how these relationships form and what types of interactions occur within these friendships. By taking further steps to understand inequalities within college-student relationships, we can continue to unpack larger systemic inequalities in U.S. society.
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Appendix 1

Key Terms Defined:

Ethnic enclaves-In the college context, this term refers to the ethnic student group clubs and organizations which cater to ethnic activities and interests (Sidanius and Van Laar 2004).

Ethnicity- “a socially defined category based on common language, religion, nationality history or another cultural factor” (Ferris and Stein 2014:218).

Ethnic identity- “a sense of collective identity that is based on the notion that the individual shares a common heritage or experience with members of a specific racial group” (Museus et al. 2013:51).

Race-“socially defined category based on real or perceived biological differences between groups of people” (Ferris and Stein 2014:217).

Subculture- “the creation of a body of meanings, signs, and signifying practices that are distinct from, yet linked to, a larger culture” (Wilkins 2008:121).

Valorization of ethnic identities-Process I use to describe Asian American students’ creation of value from expressing and embracing their ethnic backgrounds.

Acronyms:

VSA-Vietnamese Student Association

HSA-Hmong Student Association

ASA-Asian Student Association
Appendix 2

Advertisement placed in Pan-Asian Club e-newsletter:

Call for Participants

- Junior or Senior Asian American volunteers needed for interviews.
- Share your experience at NC State while helping a graduate student with her research.

Contact Kim Holland:

kshollan@ncsu.edu Graduate Student of Sociology at NC State
Appendix 3

Interview Questions (final copy):

Opening statement to participant: *I am trying explore how minority-group students adjust to college life, so the questions I ask are aimed at figuring that out.*

1. Tell me how you came to NC State. (Probe: How did you learn about NC State? Was it your top choice? Did you have any concerns about coming here? Did you know other students who went to State?)

   i. What were your first impressions of NC State?

   ii. How did you come to make friends here? Who was your first friend?

   iii. Have you ever felt like you did not fit in at State?

   iv. What was the racial/ethnic make up of your high school? Did your high school differ to your college experience in regards to how you viewed your ethnicity? How so?

   v. What’s a typical weekday like for you here? Tell me what it looks like (e.g. who do you hang out with, where do you go?)

      1. Do you have a favorite place on campus? What do you like about it?
2. When looking at the organizations that you are part of here at NC State:
   a. Which group are you *most* involved with?
   b. What are some things that you like about this group?
   c. for Greek students:
      Why did you decide to join a Greek organization?

3. Would you say that you have a mentor here at NC State?
   a. If Yes, how’d you meet them?
   b. What do you appreciate about this mentor?
   c. What makes them a mentor?

4. Are you close to any faculty here at NC State?
   a. Who? How did you come to know them?
   b. What kind of support does this person provide?

5. Are you currently in a relationship with someone? How did you meet?
6. Have you ever experienced verbal abuse at NCSU in relation to your ethnicity? (If no, Probe: Have you ever experienced a microaggression, such as being asked “where are you from”?)

7. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we haven’t covered, that was important to your adjustment to college life?
Appendix 4

Demographic Questions (final copy):

1. What is your ethnicity? ___________________
2. Gender? ___________________
3. How do you identify in terms of sexuality? ___________________
4. What year in school are you? _________________
5. Age? _______
6. Which setting best describes your hometown (or where you spent most of your K-12 years)? Where is that?______________
   a. Large city (more than 50,000 residents)
   b. Medium city (approximately 30,000-50,000 residents)
   c. Small city (less than 30,000 residents)
7. Which best reflects your current living situation?
   a. On campus, with roommates
   b. On campus, without roommates
   c. Off campus, with roommates
   d. Off campus, without roommates
   e. Off campus, with parents
   f. Other: _________________
8. What is your anticipated/current major? ___________________
9. What is your (average) GPA? ______

10. What is your intended future occupation/career? ___________________________
    a. Any future interests in attending graduate/professional school?
       Yes ____ No ____ (please check one). Subject area (if known): ______________

11. Have you ever studied abroad in college or traveled abroad? If no, skip to #12.
    a. If yes, where? __________________

12. I’m trying to get a sense of student’s backgrounds. Tell me about your family? Who did you grow up with?
(Probe: Did siblings attend college?)

13. What was your mother’s highest educational attainment? _________________
    a. Mother’s occupation? ____________________________

14. What was your father’s highest educational attainment? _________________
    a. Father’s occupation? ____________________________

15. Were you born in the US? If no, then where? ________________

16. Were your parents born in the US? If not:
    a. Mother’s native country: ______________

    b. Father’s native country: ______________

17. What language did you speak in your home growing up? _________________
    Your parents? ____________________
18. I am trying to get a sense of people’s networks and friendship circles on campus.

Think of your top 5 current friends on campus.

**Friend 1:** Ethnicity______________? Gender____________? Would you say that this friend’s social class background is higher ____ , the same____, or lower____ than your own? (Check one).

**Friend 2:** Ethnicity______________? Gender____________? Would you say that this friend’s social class background is higher ____ , the same____, or lower____ than your own? (Check one).

**Friend 3:** Ethnicity______________? Gender____________? Would you say that this friend’s social class background is higher ____ , the same____, or lower____ than your own? (Check one).

**Friend 4:** Ethnicity______________? Gender____________? Would you say that this friend’s social class background is higher ____ , the same____, or lower____ than your own? (Check one).

**Friend 5:** Ethnicity______________? Gender____________? Would you say that this friend’s social class background is higher ____ , the same____, or lower____ than your own? (Check one).
19. So I will read out 4 items, and just let me know if you ever talked to a faculty member about any of these topics.

Have you ever talked to a faculty member…

a. About academic matters____

b. About career matters____

c. About personal matters____

d. I have not talked with faculty about any academic, career, or personal matters____

*End recorder.*

8. Is it okay for me to follow up with you later, if I think of additional questions?

9. Do you know of anyone else who might be interested in an interview? Could I get their email?
### Appendix 5

Table 1. Student Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Year in school</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>First generation college student?</th>
<th>Social class (estimated)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle/upper middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Half Vietnamese, half white</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amit</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>2nd year; transfer student</td>
<td></td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Half</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese; half white</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Filipina</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td></td>
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