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Negotiating the Model Minority Image: Performative Aspects of College-Educated Asian American Professional Men

Shinsuke Eguchi & William Starosta

This study is a chapter in a larger work, in which the authors explore how eight college-educated Asian American professional men negotiate the model minority image to present the performative constructions of their multiple identities within the racialized and gendered context of U.S. organizations where they work. The authors first discuss the participants' perceptions of how others view their social identities as part of a homogenized concept, regardless of their diverse Asian American subjectivities. Then, they examine how the participants engage in performative aspects of the model minority image to promote positive impressions on others and to empower themselves in U.S. organizations. Exploring the subjective standpoint of being the model minority in the context of mainstream organizations, the authors aim to further reconsider the concept of identity as relational in the context of intercultural interactions.

Keywords: Asian American Studies; Identity Negotiation; Intercultural Communication; Masculinities; U.S. Workforce

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The model minority image of Asian Americans as “successful,” “hardworking,” “subservient,” and “passive” people is powerfully embedded in today’s intercultural interactions (e.g., Kawai, 2005; Sun, 2007; Zhang, 2010). This positive model minority image plays as “constitutive of colorblind ideology in the sense that Asian Americans’ ‘success’ is used to deny the existence of institutional racism and to ‘prove’ that U.S. society is reasonably fair and open for racial minority groups to move up the social ladder” (Kawai, 2005, p. 114). The model minority image co-constructs with the yellow peril image. Ono and Pham (2008) view the yellow peril image as a threatening concept that Asians will someday take over America (or the West). As a result, the model minority image becomes necessary to celebrate Asian Americans’ contributions to mainstream American culture and to distinguish Asian Americans from the mainstream in order to maintain the structure of White heteronormative masculine superiority.

From the Asian American subjective standpoint, negotiating the model minority image has been a site of discursive struggle. Such homogenized labeling actually belies the extensive cultural and ethnic diversity among groups from Southwest Asia and Southeast Asia to East Asia (Wu, 1997). Furthermore, there are also considerable linguistic, religious, and/or class differences among the members of these groups (Hyun, 2005; Wu, 1997). In addition, such labeling incorporates a range of groups from recent immigrants to more than third generation American-born individuals (Hyun, 2005). Given the multiplicity of Asian American identity construction, such racial labeling clearly implies what is termed as Orientalism—“a construction of the Orient in terms of some cultural traits and homogenized differences” (Chou, 2008, p. 224). At the same time, diverse members who regard themselves as Asian Americans must negotiate the material realities of this model-minority image in their everyday interactions with others for the very reason that they live in the context of a racialized and gendered America.

The numbers of Asian American professionals are anticipated to grow in the U.S. workforce, particularly because of the increase in immigration (Chang, 2001; Cheng & Thatchenkery, 1997; Sun, 2007; Wu, 1997). At the same time, Varma (2004) maintains that “the mainstream [organizational] literature on the glass ceiling tends to concentrate on gender rather than race segregation. When mainstream scholars do focus on race segregation, Asian Americans are rarely included” (p. 290). In this sense, the mainstream organizational literature reveals a paucity of discussion about Asian American identities and negotiation in the context of U.S. workplaces.

This being so, a legitimate research question emerges. Given that there is a prevalent dual conception of “yellow peril” and the model-minority image and that there is a gap in the mainstream organizational literature, how do college-educated Asian American professional men negotiate the model minority image to present the performative construction of their social identity to promote positive impressions on others in the context of racialized and gendered American organizations? To attempt an answer, this study examines a segment of qualitative data emerging from a larger research project on college-educated Asian American professionals in United States organizations. By doing so, the study aims to generate a better understanding of

how identity is constantly co-constructed in relationships with others, taking a small sample of college educated Asian American professional men as an illustration.

Before moving on to an analysis, we shall first examine the concept of identity as relational.

Cultural Identity and Negotiation

Current understanding of identity negotiation emerged in the communication discipline when Ting-Toomey (1986) proposed the identity validation model (Jackson, 2002, 2009). Ting-Toomey then elaborated on this model to develop identity negotiation theory, where she integrated the theoretical sophistications drawn from symbolic interaction (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1978), social identity theory (e.g., Brewer & Miller, 1996), and relational dialectics (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Ting-Toomey (1999, 2005) maintained that *identity* is one's self-concept constructed within a particular cultural environment. An individual then revises, shapes, and/or strengthens his or her self-concept in interactions in a particular cultural environment. This process of transactional communication is *negotiation*. In this sense, a dynamic communication process whereby "at the same time the communicators attempt to evoke their own desired identities in the interaction, they also attempt to challenge or support the others' identities" (Ting-Toomey 2005, p. 217) is *identity negotiation*. According to Jackson (2002), the identity validation model (Ting-Toomey, 1986) and identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2005) are "the first interpretive framework[s] found in the literature which not only indicate that identity is relational but also explicitly note that identity is constructed via a negotiation process" (p. 360). From this perspective, identity is a relational and contextual product in a particular cultural environment. Therefore, identity becomes an explanatory window to understand the cultural dimensions of social interactions.

The next section will discuss the research protocol of this study.

Research Design and Procedure

To conduct in this particular study, we utilized the qualitative inquiry method of the in-depth interview. We first acquired the institutional review board's approval from the second author's university. Then we utilized the first author's Asian American identity membership as a point of departure to recruit Asian American professional participants. This approach is endorsed by Sun's (2007) and Sun and Starosta's (2001; 2006) rationalization that social capital is the core of Asian American communication. In doing so, 19 participants who were located according to four criteria selected for the study¹ participated in a larger research project.

The first author conducted interviews with the participants from very diverse backgrounds. All interviews were audio-taped and conducted in English, because the participants spoke English either as a primary language or as a second language with professional-level proficiency. The interviews lasted an average of 62 minutes and 12 seconds and ranged from 40 minutes and 26 seconds to 97 minutes. During the interviews, 21 pre-established questions were randomly posed to facilitate the

Table 1 Participants' Demographic Information

Co-researchers	Age	Cultural and ethnic identity	Citizenship or immigration status	Born in the U.S. or years in the U.S.	Gender and sexual identity	Educational level	Industry	Current residential city	Primary language
I	38	Chinese	U.S. Citizen	23	Gay Men	Bachelor's	I.T	Washington, DC	Cantonese Chinese
II	35	Japanese	H1-B	22	Heterosexual Men	Master's	Accounting	New York, NY	Japanese
III	36	Filipino	U.S. Citizen	26	Gay Men	Master's	Telecomm	San Francisco, CA	Tagalog
IV	27	Korean	U.S. Citizen	Born	Heterosexual Men	Bachelor's	Finance	Weehawken, NJ	English
V	27	Chinese/Singaporean	U.S. Citizen	Born	Heterosexual Men	Bachelor's	Finance	Valley Stream, NY	English
VI	40	Japanese	Permanent Residency	24	Gay Men	Bachelor's	Audio Production	Brooklyn, NY	Japanese
VII	26	Sri Lankan/Indian	U.S. Citizen	Born	Heterosexual Men	Bachelor's	Publishers	New York, NY	English
VIII	27	Chinese	U.S. Citizen	20	Gay Men	Bachelor's	Finance	New York, NY	Mandarin Chinese

process of interview. At the same time, participants were free to express their own perspectives regardless of the range of selected topic, in order to maintain the flow of the interview conversations. After the completion of all interviews, the first author transcribed each one.

The first author utilized Strauss and Corbin's (1998) inductive thematic analysis to examine the data from the interviews, which were audio-taped and then transcribed. Careful review of the transcripts and categorization of the narratives revealed the specific themes for the larger research project. In the next phase of coding, eight interviews with Asian American male participants (see Table 1) were selected for this study, because the data from these participants showed significant recurring patterns of narratives among others. Particularly, the emerging patterns illustrated these participants as college-educated Asian American men who worked in mainstream organizations where the majority of members are White Americans. During this process, the first author also explored other cases of these eight research participants that may contradict the emerging patterns. The cases emerged from this process showed preliminary contradictions. However, the connections later found were significantly supported the originally found recurring patterns. In the phase of coding that followed, the first author organized the recurring patterns in seeking to locate overarching larger themes. By doing so, two larger themes (i.e., others' perceptions of diverse Asian American male subjectivities and their negotiations of others' perceptions in professional contexts) emerged. To verify the emerging themes, the first author sent the completed manuscripts to the participants. There was no disagreement or request for clarification.

Findings

In order to address this study's research question, two themes emerging from the inductive analysis can be described as follows:

RQ1: Are we the *model minority*?

RQ2: Should we perform as if we were the *model minority*?

"Are We the Model Minority?"

All participants in this study agreed that diverse Asian and Asian American members are perceived in a homogenized manner across their workplaces. Other people generally perceive Asians as the *model minority*. A 35-year-old Japanese heterosexual male participant (II) who has been living in the United States for 22 years and who holds a H1-B visa to work in an accounting firm perceived that the Asian body appearance matters in how others perceive him in the workplace. He said:

I think that appearance is first. So they look at me. And they say 'Asian.' Because I speak English, they first think I'm an Asian American or something. Then I tell them I speak Japanese on a regular basis when my boss comes. Even though I speak with an American person and say, oops, sorry, my boss is calling, I speak Japanese. They go, oh, Wow! You speak Japanese. And then that's when they know that I'm Japanese.

A 27-year-old Chinese American gay male participant (VIII) asserted, "For me, the term 'Asians' describes the way is more physical feature." Then, he explained the particular images associated with Asian Americans at his workplace. He said:

In my work place [which is a major American mainstream financial company in New York City], there are a lot of Asian Americans. They are perceived as people who are good at math, calculating, working hard, and not very good at presentations.

Another 27-year-old Chinese/Singaporean American heterosexual male participant (V) in the financing business mentioned:

[Non-Asian Americans in general] exploit our women and make all the Asian men look like they're weak, they're non-existent, they're not around, and if they are, then they're nerds or they're nerdy businessmen.

These participants' perceptions reinforce what Nakayama (2002) observes with regard to Asian American masculinities, saying that "earlier fears of Asians as sexual demons have given way to more 'domesticated' images of Asians" (p. 94). They illustrate how the model minority image is a powerful performative factor and is determined and restricted by what others in the workplace consider to be "Asian American male." In this way, the social construction of Asian racial classification can suppress the range of possible multiple performative dimensions of Asian American male identities.

At the same time some participants (I, II, VI, VII, and VIII) also stated that the perceptions of Asian Americans are constantly changing through individual, regional, and transnational aspects of intercultural communication. For instance, a 27-year-old Chinese American gay male participant (VIII) argued, "Because I see myself as a person first, I do not see the fact that I am male, gay, and Asian. I do not see that those factors are affecting me as to whom I choose to hang out with at work." A 40-year-old Japanese gay male participant (VI) who holds permanent residency and works in an audio production company said, "It is very different living in NYC (New York City)." He continued by saying, "Most people in NYC are open-minded, open to new ideas, open to new lifestyles," and thought that "In New York, people respect the talent." A 35-year-old Japanese heterosexual male participant (II) supported this regional aspect of intercultural communication by saying that "I think going back to New York being New York; I think they don't really care [about racial category as much]." Then, he continued to mention:

I think, while we [he and his Japanese colleagues] are dealing with Japanese clients [at his accounting firm], we have a lot of respect because that's where the other races or people can't really come in. They can't really share their opinion because they don't understand it [Japanese culture].

A 26-year-old American heterosexual male participant (VII) who has a Sri Lankan/Indian heritage said:

The Asian Americans are becoming a much larger part of the American business force. The more we play a role in American lifestyle, the more we are culturally accepted. It becomes a lesser issue that we are Asians and we are different and we are minority.

Thus, some participants perceived the dynamic nature of Asian American identity images. At the same time, they still observe the powerful influence of the model minority image in their intercultural interactions at work.

Since individuals may have unique and different approaches to intercultural interactions in the context of globalization, careful consideration needs to be given to how the data are interpreted. However, what also emerges here is that there is a relational dimension of transnationalism in the United States that warrants further study.

Should We Perform the Model Minority?

All participants feel that Asian Americans live up to the model minority image to move up the social ladder. Even though each Asian American is unique, the participants perceive that Asian Americans base their performative behavior on the model minority image to survive at work. A 40-year-old Japanese gay male participant (VI) said, "I fit into the Asian stereotype. Someone who is smart and works hard. I kind of fit into the over-achiever image," while he worked in the audio production company based in New York City. He mentioned:

When you are expected to perform at the highest level [at work] because of race or racial expectation, when you do not return, I think that the opposite could be true that you get the severe reaction.

Consequently, he must work hard to deliver assignments of great quality all the time to fulfill his Asian American identity description in his racialized and gendered American organization.

Participants IV, V, and VIII stated that Asian Americans work longer hours because of the racial expectation. A 27-year-old Chinese American gay male participant (VIII) perceived that his Asian American colleagues received more job allocations in his major financial company. At the same time, he viewed that "moving up equals working hard and presenting yourself to others." Then, he posited that many Asian Americans whom he met did not know how to demonstrate how hard they worked to others. A 27-year-old Chinese/Singaporean American heterosexual male participant (V) asserted, "[Asian Americans] get more responsibilities and everything does not mean that they [organizational members in positions of power at his workplace] are not still just using us for their purpose." In this sense, some participants view that Asian Americans as the model minority members are socially used to "assisting" the White heteronormative masculine normativity in the racialized and gendered American organizations.

As a result, all participants view that Asian Americans are not often placed in positions of power in U.S. workplaces. For example, a 36-year-old Filipino American gay male participant (III) in his telecommunication company in San Francisco observed that "the people on the top, like the CEOs and the CFOs, are White male." Similarly, a 35-year-old Japanese heterosexual male participant (II) mentioned:

I only see diversity in dealing with different culture at a very lower staff [in his accounting firm]. But if you really go high up, I still see a glass ceiling because it's an American company.

He argued that organizational power is still concentrated around predominantly White heterosexual men. In this sense, a 26-year-old American heterosexual male participant (VII) who was of combined Sri Lankan and Indian heritage asserted, "I have to accept that I might be relegated to a lesser class." This comment reinforces what Chesebro (2001) alluded to when he said that the American hegemonic masculinity emerging from the Whiteness subordinates Asian American men as feminine in the racialized and gendered hierarchy.

For these reasons, all participants felt that Asian American men are socially expected to present the performative constructions of the model minority at work. A 27-year-old Chinese/Singaporean American heterosexual male participant (V) said, "I try to keep more of a stereotypical Asian look [at work] because if they find out who I am, I feel like they're gonna try to stop me, and tap me for my career."

There is evidence from the responses that performing the model minority image may become a way for the college-educated Asian American male professional participants to obtain or maintain a privileged job position. At the same time, presenting the model minority image may create a disadvantaged status that ultimately prevents them from moving up the organizational ladder because they have to grapple with prevailing attitudes in racialized and gendered American organizations.

Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

We have examined how eight college-educated Asian American male professionals view that others perceive their performative construction of identity according to the model minority image in the context of racialized and gendered American organizations. At the same time, they also view that the individual, regional, and/or transnational dimensions of intercultural communication engender a dynamism in how others relate to them at work. However, the participants consider that they act out the model minority image as a kind of survival tactic in the workplace. Furthermore this then results in difficulties experienced in moving up the organizational ladder.

Before concluding this article, it is important for us to mention the limitations of this study. The limitations of this research originate from the sampling design. The first limitation stems from availability and accessibility of the participants, which read to rest in a one dimensional view of the industry while the research participants work in various industries. Each industry has each own unique and different culture; therefore, future studies may take the multiple dimensions of industrial cultures into consideration. Also, the second limitation can be located in the background of the participants such as Asian American men who have college degrees, speak English as a primary language or as a second language with professional-level proficiency, and are assumed to enjoy the middle to upper class lifestyle. It is critical to expand this line of study beyond these demographic backgrounds to bring multiple voices of Asian American male working experiences. Finally, this study utilizes the first author's social capital as a point of departure to recruit the research participants. Given the methodological procedure, however, the findings emerged from this study should be considered as a single dimension of multiple Asian American organizational

experiences. In other words, this study aims to explore the material realities of racialized and gendered knowledge embedded in the participants' experiences rather than seeking to project the findings into the general population.

In conclusion, analysis of the participants' responses appears to confirm that the concept of identity is relational, and that individuals develop their subjectivity in a particular cultural context. At the same time, persons must alter, shape, and/or reinforce their sense of subjectivity according to how others relate to them in a particular environment. In this process of communication, the material realities of structural elements such as race, gender, and class play a role in how persons negotiate their own subjectivity. There is sparse documentation on the standpoint of Asian American professional men working in mainstream organizational contexts, vis-à-vis the perceptions of others in those organizations; the current study has yielded interesting evidence on this topic. It follows that this area warrants further attention from intercultural communication in the development of social and performative constructions of identity.

Note

- [1] Participants in the larger research project were recruited based on the following four criteria: (a) Asian Americans who identified as Asian Americans and/or identified with specific cultural/ethnic groups under the Asian American identity category defined in the U.S. Census (2000); (b) Asian Americans who lived and worked in the United States with legal work permits (e.g., U.S. citizens, U.S. permanent residents, and U.S. non-immigrant working visa holders such as H1-B and O-1); (c) Asian Americans who worked in organizations that are not comprised of predominantly Asian American members; and (d) Asian Americans who have obtained college degrees (e.g., BA or BS).

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