Boundaries and Belonging: Asian America, Psychology, and Psychoanalysis

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BOUNDARIES AND BELONGING:
ASIAN AMERICA, PSYCHOLOGY, AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

By

NATALIE HUNG

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Asian America, Psychology, and Psychoanalysis

By

Natalie Hung

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ABSTRACT

Boundaries and Belonging: Asian America, Psychology, and Psychoanalysis

By

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This dissertation addresses a vexing problem. In psychology and psychoanalysis, Asian Americans are more often understood as a collective Other than as individual Selves, more frequently an object of study than a subject. Through two overarching aims, my dissertation sheds light on neglected aspects of Asian American selves, the meanings of the invisibility surrounding them, and implications for clinical practice.

First, the project challenges extant psychological perspectives on Asian Americans, which often implicitly assume a wide gulf of difference between Asian American cultural values and the Western epistemologies of psychology and psychoanalysis. Through the examination of academic research, clinical literature, and social scientific perspectives, my research outlines several contextual factors that contribute to this trend, including the structural binary between “the individual” and “the social” in psychoanalysis and psychology, ambivalent dynamics of anti-Asian racism, and collective anxieties about Asian Otherness. Second, influenced by relational psychoanalytic theory, my dissertation seeks to reconfigure and broaden perspectives on Asian Americans in psychology and psychoanalysis.
My foregrounded field of inquiry begins broad and becomes increasingly narrow, moving from international, to national, to interpersonal, to clinical contexts. Chapter 2 examines the three binaries—East-West, shame-guilt, and individualism-collectivism—that structure most psychological studies about Asian Americans. Chapter 3 brings to bear a psychological perspective on the histories and contemporary manifestations of racialization and cultural identities of Asian Americans. Chapter 4 reviews the subtle and ambivalent nature of anti-Asian racism through a close investigation and relational understanding of racial microaggressions. Finally, using empirical literature and case studies, Chapter 5 identifies and challenges the “culture gap narrative,” the overculturalized explanation for the underutilization of the mental health system by Asian Americans that assumes radical difference between Asian Americans and Western psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.
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Belonging means that we have a place in the world, but it also means that we find ourselves placed in the world. (Dalal, 2012, p. 408)

The impulse to write this dissertation is the culmination of a lifetime of reflection on my racial and cultural identity and the relative beginning of my socialization as a psychoanalytically informed therapist. This process led me to consider some painful questions as an American-born daughter of Taiwanese immigrants who is also a trainee, patient, and therapist. Where is my place in psychoanalysis in the United States? And relatedly, why does it feel like there is no such place? These questions guided many of my intellectual, theoretical, and professional interests. My pursuits led me to shame, to immigration, to studies about Asian Americans, to other disciplines like sociology, anthropology, and social psychology. My anecdotal impression was that culture (and attendantly, race, ethnicity, language, diversity, etc.) had failed to sufficiently infiltrate certain strains of psychoanalytic theory in the United States. Instead, “culture” was relegated to psychological disciplines apart from psychoanalysis, encapsulated by multicultural competence or approaches of a positivist psychology mainly devoted to identifying differences in psychological sequelae between Asian Americans and European Americans in a cross-cultural

1 Throughout the dissertation, I will focus mainly on people of East Asian descent (including those from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan) and Southeast Asian descent (those from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) because they share certain phenotypical characteristics that engage similar stereotypes, not because their cultural norms are homogenous. Thus, the familiar shorthand of “Asian American” will generally be used to refer to East Asian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans. Similarly, “Asian” will be used to specify East Asians and Southeast Asians. I do not include people of South Asian and Central Asian descent who have different cultures, histories, and phenotypes, and thus have related, but different racial identities in America. If I am departing from these definitions, I will specifically note it.
framework. These attempts, while a well-intentioned starting point, somehow lacked the dynamism and sensitivity that I found appealing about much of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory.

Upon reflection, I realized that it was not that I had no place, but that my place in psychoanalysis, psychology, and America was constricted by invisible lines that I could not seem to cross, let alone, articulate. My search led me to learn about a history of legalized exclusion of Asian people from America that had been more recently masked by the conditional inclusion afforded by the model minority stereotype. This history provided a context through which to articulate what I had always felt, in the way that bodies carry histories, but do not consciously “know” them. At the same time, this new information made me aware of how accustomed I had become to not having my experience represented.

Several strong impulses militated against my writing about this topic and seem important to mention here. First, a strong respect for hierarchy (both from within and without) led me not to want to “rock the boat.” Second, I was painfully aware of a fear that my experience would be explained away as something pathological. Third, finding words and frameworks for my experience was rather difficult and sometimes made me feel as though I better not speak at all. Rather than let these conditions throw me into silence, I used them to fuel my writing toward understanding these invisible tenets, their origins, their functions, and ways to deconstruct and reconfigure them.

**Boundaries in American psychoanalysis**

Psychoanalysis, taught and learned by people, practiced and received by people, written about and read by people, cannot escape the very phenomena it seeks to understand. Further complicating these layers of self-reflexivity, as a discipline, psychoanalysis has overlapping
areas of activity and goals: to treat patients, to train therapists, to teach and espouse theories, and to conduct research. Psychoanalytic practitioners, theorists, teachers, and students, grapple with the tensions of how to be both subject and object at the same time while understanding others who are both subject and object. Over time, psychoanalytic theory and practice in the United States have approached this central problem in different ways and in response to shifts in personal, historical, and political circumstances, demographic composition, and national identity.

A brief discussion of the sociohistorical context of American psychoanalytic theory and practice will provide a springboard to understand the current climate of psychoanalytic thinking in relation to race and culture. Despite the radical and contextual beginnings of psychoanalysis in central Europe, clinical psychoanalysis as it has developed in the United States has largely failed to consider culture in a dynamic and clinically useful way. As a field, it has been criticized for remaining beholden to Freud’s binary between the individual and the social. Broadly speaking, this criticism of psychoanalysis (usually cast from the relational school toward what has come to be known as the “classical” point of view), argues that the “individual” has historically been privileged and that “culture” and the “social” are conceived as being “outside” and “secondary” to the individual (Aron & Starr, 2013; Dalal, 2001; Guralnik & Simeon, 2010; Wirth, 2004).

Many authors argue that for several reasons, the split between the individual and social became even more polarized after World War II (Wirth, 2004). A growing body of literature views the focus on the individual as part of individual analysts’ responses to stressful sociohistorical and personal circumstances, including WWII, the Holocaust, the death of Freud, and immigration from Europe (Aron & Starr, 2013; Bergmann, 2013; Kuriloff, 2013; Thompson, 2012; Wirth, 2004). Additionally, the focus on the individual was concordant with the American
celebration of the individual at the time, further emphasizing the individual-social binary (Aron & Starr, 2013).

Another partial explanation for why culture has failed to permeate psychoanalytic theory and practice explicitly has to do with the identity of psychoanalysis itself during the second half of the twentieth century. “Cultural” issues (often a code word for dimensions of difference) took a backseat to the expansion of theories on what became known as “intrapsychic” forces. Importantly, it was the focus on the “intrapsychic” that distinguished psychoanalysis from other approaches to understanding the mind during the earlier part of the twentieth century in the United States (Makari, 2008). In this climate, the “social” and culture were seen mainly as “external” forces, which meant they were not a concern for psychoanalysis and became implicitly devalued (Aron & Starr, 2013; Dalal, 2001). Aron and Starr (2013) also point out that at this time, many psychoanalysts eschewed social and political responsibility, arguing that they could not change their patients’ environments, but could only help them accept and adapt to them. This sentiment is continuously repeated in some areas of psychoanalysis, both implicitly and explicitly, and contributes to maintaining the artificial divide between individuals and their social conditions, as well as a belief in psychoanalysts’ limited role in bringing about social change.

One of the areas in which the costs of this binary are most obvious is with respect to race and ethnicity. Aron and Starr (2013) note the racial and socioeconomic homogeneity of psychoanalytic practitioners and patients; the vast majority of them are White and middle-to-upper-middle class. Despite concerted efforts to recruit People of Color and socioeconomically disadvantaged people into psychoanalytic training, these recruitment efforts have been largely unsuccessful because of various structural and financial barriers (Aron & Starr, 2013). In
addition to these particular obstacles, other factors that maintain this demographic homogeneity are important to consider.

First, it is likely that this demographic homogeneity is mutually determined and maintained by both Whites and People of Color on many levels. The relative Whiteness of psychoanalytic practitioners and theoretical homogeneity could be off-putting for People of Color, adding to an expectation of feeling marginalized. At the same time, with relatively few ethnic and racial minorities joining psychoanalysis, thoughtful theorizing and practice about race is more difficult because there are fewer opportunities for what Aron and Starr (2013) call “dialectical marginality,” an insider-outsider position that fosters a creative interplay between the marginal and the mainstream (p. 8). This stalemate maintains the underdevelopment of cultural and racial concerns within psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Aron and Starr (2013) argue that dialectical marginality is the position where psychoanalysis is best located for its growth and survival. While psychoanalysis inhabits this position relative to mainstream psychotherapeutic modalities, it is evident that with respect to racial and ethnic diversity, marginality is unevenly distributed among psychoanalytic practitioners and patients. A fuller understanding of the perpetuation of this homogeneity and its implications is a first step toward change necessary for the survival of the field. In general, the “social” needs to be more fully integrated into our understandings of individuals. The fact that, in the United States, a huge part of our social context and, in turn, our subjectivities, is determined by race and ethnicity is grossly underappreciated in clinical psychoanalysis. There is increasingly a gap between the rich demographic diversity of the United States population and the comparatively sparse theorizing of racial and ethnic identity that psychodynamic therapists have available. If the diversity of America continues to go insufficiently articulated, the development
of psychoanalytic theory and practice will not keep up with the continually changing landscape of the United States.

**The individual and social in theory**

There are curious splits within and between academic disciplines and psychoanalysis. Within the social sciences, cultural concerns and race have been largely relegated to disciplines outside of psychoanalysis, such as social psychology, anthropology, and sociology. On the other hand, in other academic disciplines, such as ethnic studies, philosophy, comparative literature, and film studies, psychoanalytic concepts are often used as a social discursive tool to understand oppression and racial identity (Cheng, 2001; Oliver, 2004). This outsourcing of cultural and racial thoughtfulness has grave implications for clinical practice and for psychoanalysis as a discipline.

Effectively incorporating race, culture, and ethnicity into psychoanalysis will necessitate attention to how the individual and social exist in dialectical tension as well as the borrowing of ideas across disciplines. But working in the place between individual and social as an interdisciplinary endeavor is not without its challenges. There are language differences, cultural customs, and unspoken presuppositions that create potential for misunderstandings. However, transgressing interdisciplinary boundaries has the power to jostle us out of well-worn grooves of thought and to look anew at long-reified disciplinary languages and methods. It enables us to forge new paths and to expand upon more levels of experience and their interconnections.

Understanding the juncture between the “individual” and the “social” with respect to culture and race will necessitate the creation of a new language that surpasses or goes beyond the binary of the individual and the social into a kind of “third” space (Benjamin, 2011; Cheng, 2001; Eng,
Attempts to create this language, broadly speaking, involve one of two strategies.

One strategy involves importing psychoanalytic concepts (usually taken from Freud himself) into disciplines outside of psychoanalysis, such as literary studies, ethnic studies, and philosophy (Cheng, 2001; Eng, 2001; Eng & Han, 2000; Oliver, 2004). For example, Oliver (2004) attempts to create more social concepts of certain psychoanalytic concepts in order to reflect that certain processes, such as sublimation and melancholy, happen on both individual and social levels. Others, influenced by Judith Butler’s (1993; 1997) work on gender and melancholia, take up this strategy by theorizing about racial melancholia (Cheng, 2001; Eng, 2001; Eng & Han, 2000). In contrast to much clinical psychoanalytic literature, these approaches emphasize the importance of understanding sociohistorical positions of racialized and marginalized subjects as both products and expressions of different groups' histories. Second, they also emphasize that a crucial component of fostering progress in racial relations is an understanding of how racial identity and racism (ranging from more overt aggression to more covert forms) structure individual identities and interpersonal interactions. Their choice to use psychoanalysis as a social discursive tool is reminiscent of some of the radical spirit of psychoanalysis at its origins and Freudian concepts. Clinical psychoanalytic developments in understanding individuals since Freud could be a valuable supplement to this line of work.

The second strategy involves importing concepts from other disciplines into clinical psychoanalytic practice. From within the field of psychoanalytic psychotherapy and influenced as well by postmodernism, multiculturalism, political agendas, the civil rights movement, and rebellion against the orthodoxy of their theoretical “parents,” relational psychoanalysts began to embrace and celebrate subjectivities that, because of their differences from an invisible norm,
had previously been relegated to discourses solely devoted to “culture” and the “social.” They turned to discourses outside of psychoanalysis—of feminism, gender and ethnic studies, and philosophy—to inform their arguments. In contrast to their theoretical ego psychological forefathers who celebrated the ideal of psychic integration (and implicitly, cultural assimilation) as a hallmark of health, they celebrated a “healthy subjectivity” as “one of an inclusive abundance of experience” (Reis, 2005, p. 89).

I will review a few general trends in this vast literature. One line of research has focused on how race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration, ethnic identity, and class interact in particular therapeutic dyads, with a particular emphasis on the impact of the therapist’s social location (Layton, 2006; Yi, 1998). Others have elucidated the invisibility and privilege of Whiteness and highlighted the effects of racism on patients (Holmes, 2006; Leary, 2007; Moss, 2006; Smith, 2006; Suchet, 2004; Suchet, 2007; Yi, 1998). Some have focused on how dimensions of difference are intertwined with well-established psychoanalytic concepts, such as transference, countertransference, and enactments (Altman, 2004; Holmes, 1992; Layton, 2006; Leary, 2007). With respect to immigration, authors have highlighted technical considerations of working with immigrants, and theorized identity shifts associated with the experience of immigration (Akhtar, 1995; Halperin, 2004; Lijtmaer, 2001; Lobban, 2006; Smolar, 1999).

The book With Culture in Mind, edited by Muriel Dimen (2011), is representative of psychoanalytic literature that draws upon the work of other disciplines and imports it into the psychoanalytic lexicon through detailed case material. Though diverse in content, the authors are united in their aim to understand how the social, political, personal, and intrapsychic are intricately woven together. The structure of the book entails three sections of narrativized cases written by several psychoanalytic therapists. The stories often involve countertransferenceal
insights into the therapist’s own cultural or personal histories that induce increased 
understanding of the patient. Each section concludes with commentary on the stories by another 
psychoanalytic therapist. This dialogic structure of the book, itself mirroring a relational stance, 
mimics the conversation that the book fosters between the writers and the reader. The inclusion 
of commentary in the text also acknowledges the limitations of the work while opening up future 
avenues toward understanding the intentions between the individual and culture. As a whole, the 
book is an invitation to the reader to expand his/her awareness of some of the many ways in 
which the individual and social exist at the same site, skillfully taking history, context, and 
political quandaries into account. *With Culture in Mind* is impressive in its breadth and 
integration of critical social theory with clinical material.

At the same time, the book also highlights another way in which the bias toward the 
individual is built into the methodology of clinical psychoanalysis. Even as clinical 
psychoanalysis has begun to articulate how the individual and the social intersect, the focus on 
the individual is continually maintained in the structure of our clinical work, which takes place 
mostly within one-on-one dyads. Adding to this, there is relative comfort and ease in thinking 
only about the individual versus context. The physical boundaries of an individual are at least 
identifiable, whereas context is harder to identity, often operating invisibly in the air we breathe.

This structural limitation toward the individual contributes to several blind spots. First, 
looking at racial and ethnic identity largely in the context of therapeutic dyads can limit the 
field’s understanding of how racial and ethnic identities are context-dependent and shift over 
time. On top of that, the psychical intimacy fostered in the clinical encounter breeds the 
seductive notion that we clinical psychoanalysts *really* know our patients, that they reveal their 
“true” selves with us, a notion that further blinds us to the limitations of the dyad. This limitation
is particularly salient when trying to understand group phenomena such as racial and ethnic identity, which can only be partially glimpsed in one interpersonal relationship. The relative paucity of theory of larger group processes has been noted as an important gap to address in psychoanalytic theory (Dalal, 2001; Harris, 2009).

These blind spots lead to a number of consequences for patients. For instance, in his critical review of the psychoanalytic literature, Dalal (2001) elucidates the trend that socially generated processes, such as racism, are often conceptualized in the published literature as mere byproducts of individual processes. He argues that this implicitly held assumption spuriously leads to the notion that racist attitudes and feelings of victimization by racism are not part of the context of living in a racist society, but are conceived as originating within the individual patient. By continually treating racism as an individual phenomenon, clinical psychoanalysts can easily fall into the trap of perpetuating it, both in theory and in practice. Dalal (2001) suspects that the focus on the individual contributes to the dearth of Black analysts and patients in the U.K. He argues that “aspects of the actual troubled experiences of the marginalized and dispossessed are not understood for what they are” but rather “dissolved by a series of analyses that locates their source in the patient” (p. 64). Though the social context of the United States is different from that in the U.K., I suggest that a similar dynamic may be at play for many racial groups in the United States in relation to psychoanalytic therapy.

The focus on the individual can also absolve clinical psychoanalysts from knowing more about the contexts in which all racialized subjects live, and the ways in which they participate in those contexts. From the perspective of a therapist, an acknowledgement of complicity in the hegemonic processes of domination in tandem with a focus on the individual can feel individually threatening. The risk of appearing racist or ignorant might be too exposing to admit
or discuss without sufficient collective support. This can obstruct the ability of the field to come
to terms with its own complicity in maintaining racial and ethnic prejudice, disparities, and
impasses.

What is remarkable, and paradoxical, is that understanding marginality is at the heart of
the premises on which psychoanalysis is built. However, in the face of structural and institutional
injustices, and in relation to group processes, such as racism and prejudice, clinical
psychoanalysts often feel at a loss. The focus on the individual can protect us from painful
realities in many ways. It keeps us from considering the pain of our patients’ everyday experiences with racism. It protects us from having to reckon with how little we know about them, how uncomfortable we are to ask, and how ashamed we feel about not knowing how to ask. However, the protection from these realities and our own vulnerabilities comes at a price. In these moments, our theories fail us, and in turn, our patients. When we leave “the social” out of the picture, we are leaving out much more than theory. In concrete terms, we are leaving out people, swaths of individuals and their experiences. This continued neglect is a disservice to our patients, and ultimately compromises the dignity and power of our profession.

**Race: The unasked questions**

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

(Du Bois, 1903, p. 1–2)

In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois introduces several of the conflicts, challenges, and potential for creative growth that spring from speaking and theorizing racial
difference in America. In the above excerpt, which begins the essay, Du Bois describes the silences that “flutter” around the “unasked question,” highlighting perhaps the first barrier to consider when talking about race—the discomfort and shame it raises. The discomfort is so strong that it initially keeps Du Bois from speaking; he answers "seldom a word." However, from an unlocated space between him and “the other world,” he does speak through his writing and through his individual experience. What makes this possible in part is that he is freed from the evaluation and eyes of the (presumably) White audience he describes in the beginning passage.

As Du Bois’ opening lines suggest, race is difficult to speak about, particularly in mixed company, more often dividing people than bringing them together. Along the same lines, Sue (2013) outlines various interpersonal, disciplinary, and social factors that impede productive "race talk," frank discussions about race, racism, Whiteness, and White privilege (p. 663). Sue recognizes that talking about race potentially exposes People of Color to racial microaggressions and White people to accusations of being racist, guilt associated with White privilege, and the need to take responsibility for racial oppression. The composite result is a societal “conspiracy of silence” around race (p. 663). Sue hits the point home that unless we make room for the difficult emotions—anger, envy, rage, shame, guilt—often invoked in race talk, poorly handled discussions of race can contribute to further antagonism between people.

Wachtel (1999) argues that part of the difficulty around race talk is that it tends to be linear and mired in us-them thinking, often devolving into blame. Instead, he envisions the perpetuation of America’s “racial impasse” between Blacks and Whites as mutually constituted vicious circles that are maintained by individuals from both races through seemingly innocuous daily interactions, among other levels of experience (p. 4). Though Wachtel focuses on two
specific racial groups, his insights are also useful when applied more generally to racial relations in America. Wachtel emphasizes that the nature of these circles lies partially in history; or, as Wachtel puts it, “these circles virtually reek of their origins” (p. 10) and that acknowledging the historical origins of these circles is a necessary component of understanding and changing racial relations in the United States. This is by no means an easy task. More often than not, acknowledging these origins is painful because they flout American ideals of equality, justice, and meritocracy. Integrating these origins into collective consciousness is a reminder that the foundations of this supposedly egalitarian society were built on practices of racial exclusion, denigration, and injustice, practices that continue to fuel the inequities of racial relations today.

I wish to add to this conversation the theme of seeing and being seen, which Du Bois gestures toward with his description of “double-consciousness” of Black Americans, the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others [emphasis added], of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 8). Neutral positions in conversations about race are impossible because everyone has a race that is more or less visibly identifiable. When discussions of race begin, that feeling of being seen, depending on one’s position and the nature of the conversation, can feel intensely shameful as race talk makes people’s differences more salient.

This dynamic is dramatically played out in what I consider to be one of the most important and illuminating race texts in the United States, Spike Lee’s (1989) *Do the Right Thing*. Set in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, Lee’s movie takes place within the span of the hottest day of the year. The characters are racially and socioeconomically diverse—White business owners and cops, urban Black and Latino youth, two Black retirees, and an Asian couple running a grocery, among others—and provide a microcosmic slice of the country. Strictly from an aesthetic point
of view, but also from an important political one, it is impossible to feel indifferent to this film. The world within the film is constantly alive, visually stimulating, and shot in vibrant color, mimicking the racial diversity of the neighborhood and the intensity of the interactions involved in negotiating that diversity. Each scene seems to *vibrate*, necessitating an active viewing process. The dialogue and images seem to jump off the screen and the audience can *feel* how hot it is with the characters. In turn, the audience shares in the emotional heat that rises throughout the day as people of different races interact, become enraged, oppress each other, stereotype each other, and comfort each other.

In a hallmark sequence, popularly termed “The RACIAL SLUR MONTAGE,” Lee implicates the viewer in the drama unfolding on the screen, and in the broader context of racial relations in America. Five characters of different races and ethnicities—Black, White, Latino, Jewish, and Asian—each in turn lists a string of Italian, Black, Asian, Latino, and Jewish racist vitriol straight into the camera. The characters seem to be addressing the audience while also looking like the audience’s funhouse mirror image. The sequence makes the viewer hyper-aware of his/her own racial position and its attendant historical baggage while staring at an image of someone meant to represent his/her own race, or a different one. In a kind of mentalizing move, the spectator is forced to reflect on the similarities and differences between his/her own racial identity and the mirror image. As racial slurs are being lobbed at another racial group (maybe the viewer’s own, maybe not) on screen, the spectator also becomes the recipient of the vitriol. Forcing spectators to inhabit positions of both perpetrators *and* victims of racism, the sequence conveys a sense of inescapability from this mix of hate and implicates everyone in the maintenance of racial discord. Rather than silencing the uncomfortable affective tones of race relations, Lee places them front-and-center for the audience to look at, confront, and process.
The result is a multi-layered movie-watching experience that evokes complex and strong reactions in spectators that are inseparable from their own racial identities.

In short, talking about race is not an easy task, and frank discussion will often feel painful to all parties—both marginal and mainstream. Du Bois (1903), Lee (1989), Sue (2013), and Wachtel (1999) all speak to this point. Discussions about race in racially diverse groups can lead people to prefer silence in an effort to avoid shame, rather than navigating the thorny politics of who can speak (as well as when and how) and making places for everyone’s opinions. In an area like race, such a hot-button issue in the United States, the difficulty of talking and writing about it is eclipsed only by the pressing need to do so. Yet the continual silence around the topic persists, only compounding the problem.

Despite its difficulties, race talk and the conception of race in America as a collective issue, rather than an individual one or solely an issue for racial minorities to consider, is necessary for change to happen. Such a shift in thinking would involve honoring Du Bois’ conception of double consciousness as both a gift and a burden, and acknowledging that even double-consciousness is shared. Winant (2004) posits that Whiteness is also potentially doubly conscious. He posits a post-Civil Rights era “White racial dualism” in which Whites are divided between inheriting both the privileges and burdens of White supremacy and a commitment to egalitarianism (p. 3). White racial dualism bridges the gulf between acting as proponents of social justice and continuing to benefit from White privilege. Both the gifts and burdens of double consciousness need to be more evenly distributed among individuals of different racial groups.

Where do clinical psychoanalysts as purveyors of change and clinical psychoanalysis as a field fit into this negotiation? For psychoanalysts, the onus of change has long been on changing
the individual, with less of a commitment to changing elements of the contexts in which people live. Even if we work in individual one-on-one dyads, understanding the social contexts in which we work is a necessary precursor to understanding our patients and ourselves. At the same time, we need to envision that we can begin to balance racial inequities through our work with individuals by becoming less complicit in hegemonic practices, and taking up stronger commitments to social change.

**Asian America between the lines**

While the relational psychoanalytic project has begun to include various permutations of “difference,” there still exists a major lacuna. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Eng & Han, 2000), the specificities of Asian American subjectivities are still largely unarticulated in American psychoanalytic and psychological discourse. With immigration, race, and culture already occupying marginalized and invisible positions in psychoanalytic discourse, it is no wonder that it feels as if there is no place for Asian American experiences; Asian American subjectivities engage so many of these tabooed topics. That said, the silence that surrounds these experiences is multi-determined and leaves a person struggling to shed light on what exists “between the lines.”

It is not quite accurate to say that explicit mention and study of Asian Americanness have been wholly neglected, but rather that they convey an invisibility that begs for further understanding and articulation. On one hand, there is a methodological gap with respect to Asians and Asian Americans in the psychoanalytic and psychological literature. Psychoanalytic literature often occupies the position of the overly particular (epitomized by the case study). In the case study, authors can describe ethnic or “racialized” patients one at a time, taking care to preserve their specific subjectivities, yet not speaking to a level of group experience (Layton,
2006; Smolar, 1999). At the other extreme, cross-cultural studies run dangerously close to essentializing large groups of people and covering over within-group heterogeneity and between-group similarity. Both of these approaches still engage the conundrum of seeing one’s subjectivity as an object, that is, from another person’s perspective. This is no surprise, considering this is the primary technology of clinical psychoanalysis and psychology. However, it is further exacerbated by the dearth of Asian American psychoanalytically informed therapists writing about these issues. In short, Asian Americans end up being written about more often as an Other than as Selves, more frequently an object of study than a subject.

Furthermore, Asian American experiences are rendered relatively invisible because they do not quite belong in any of the categories in which they have historically been placed. Rather than occupying their own category, Asian American experiences have historically been thrust into pre-existing categories in academic discourse that do not sufficiently capture the fluid, shifting experience of being of Asian descent in the United States. Asian American experiences lie close to discussions of race and of immigration, but are not sufficiently captured in the well-traveled paths that have been laid in either discourse. In the racial binary of Black and White, Asian Americans, like Latino Americans, Native Americans, and multi-racial Americans, occupy marginal places in American racial politics (Cheng, 2001; Okihiro, 1994). In discussions of immigration, second-generation Asian Americans (and beyond) are often lumped wholesale together with Asian immigrants.

These misrepresentations are themselves an expression of the broader experience of Asians in America, who still lag behind other racial groups in political or media visibility. Both the absence from the psychological literature and the categorizing trend are not merely a matter of convenience; they reflect the marginality and tenuous sense of belonging of Asian people in
America. This trend speaks to mainstream America’s complex mechanisms of racism against Asians in the United States, which is continually both perpetuated and disavowed. Anti-Asian sentiment has been constant throughout American history and is inflected by the economic, legal, social, and international events and climates. At the same time—in contrast to the state of affairs regarding African Americans—this history of racism is largely lost to the American mainstream, socially dissociated from collective memory and covered over by the more visible educational and economic success, on average, of Asian Americans. Both Asian Americans and representations of their experiences have historically been ghettoized—physically, as in Japanese internment camps during World War II, and metaphysically, through the unapologetic perpetuation of stereotypes and microaggressions. The model minority stereotype is one salient example, but there are many others that engage tropes of Orientalism and a perpetual foreignness associated with Asianness.

And even as Asian Americans fight, long for, and try to create a category and place of their own, the category itself is extremely problematic. The term “Asian American” is a contentious one. Initially borne out of a political and strategic move during the Civil Rights movement to create a unified solidarity when the Asian population was much smaller\(^2\), the term “Asian American” may have outlived its usefulness and may even be doing harm\(^3\). The term has been criticized for eliding the heterogeneity of Asian cultures and Asian American individuals and playing into the very stereotype of homogeneity among Asian peoples. Nevertheless, it will be used here because this project is trying to tap into how Asian Americans’ subjectivities are mutually constitutive of the ways they are constructed by stereotypes and others’ expectations in

\(^2\) Asian Americans (including Central, East, South, and Southeast Asians) are the fastest growing minority population in the United States.

\(^3\) For more on this issue, see Chuh (2003).
interpersonal interactions. A more extensive discussion of the hazards and history of this label is included in Chapter 3.

In part, because this project is necessarily informed by my own history, this discussion of Asian American experiences will focus mainly on the histories of East Asian immigrants who arrived in the United States after the Immigration Act of 1965. However, inevitably, the discussion will also engage, if less directly, the histories of past generations of Asian diaspora in the United States. These histories, forgotten by many, comprise the larger sociohistorical context in which subjectivity is constructed for all Asian people in the United States. In order to understand all Asian American individuals, the contours of the contexts in which we/they live need to be brought to light.

I turn to other fields and languages in order to write a dissertation that, linked to my own experiences and histories, will encourage readers to explore and examine their own unconscious assumptions about difference, Asians, and inclusions and exclusions in America. I will provide some frameworks through which readers can look at the histories their own bodies hold and how they might affect the ways they see and understand others. This dissertation is an attempt to shed light on some of the invisible and unspeakable aspects of experience that are left out of psychoanalytic theory and praxis that pertain to Asian American selves. My foregrounded field of inquiry will begin broad and become increasingly narrow, from international, to national, to interpersonal, to clinical contexts. However, because it is the aim of this dissertation to exist at the nexus of individual and social experience, the entire project will engage these different levels as intricately interwoven. I attempt to take a broad enough view not to fall into the danger of explaining away collectively felt values and experiences as idiosyncratic to the individual. At the same time, I aim to take a specific enough view in order to avoid perpetuating notions of cultures
and subcultures (Asian American, psychoanalytic, etc.) as monolithic. Although it reaches much beyond the boundaries of psychology and psychoanalysis, this dissertation will always have an eye toward how these chapters can “translate” into how psychoanalysts think and write about clinical encounters. As it relates to clinical practice, the following chapters are not meant to be prescriptive. Rather, they are offered as entry points for articulating some of the dilemmas and paradoxes of identity for Asian Americans and for psychoanalysis in understanding individuals in society.

The next chapter explores three interrelated binaries: East and West, shame and guilt, and individualism and collectivism. These dichotomies structure most psychological studies about Asians and Asian Americans, which have yielded a number of cultural “truths” about Asian people and culture in psychology. This chapter will elucidate some of these claims, place them in sociohistorical context, and review their implications and consequences. I will begin by contextualizing the binaries in the broader discourse of Orientalism and trace how Orientalist dynamics continue to inform the repeated associations between shame and individuals of Asian descent (Said, 1978/1995). Next, I will review empirical literature on the individualism-collectivism dichotomy as a central theme of cross-cultural studies and research on Asians and Asian Americans, with a particular focus on Nisbett’s (2003) work. I will highlight methodological and conceptual limitations that contribute to the constricted representations of Asian people and cultures. To address these shortcomings, I offer several recommendations for a relational model of culture that may expand avenues of legibility for people of Asian heritage.

The third chapter explores the racialization of Asian Americans, which is characterized by liminality, invisibility, and ambivalence, through several lenses. Using Wachtel’s (1999) idea that “vicious circles” of racism “reek of their origins” (p. 10), I situate the contemporary racial
dynamics of Asian Americans vis-à-vis other racial groups in the context of Chinese immigrants’ hostile reception in the United States in the mid-19th century, during which they were cast as a menacing “yellow horde” who posed a dangerous threat to American society. From there, I relate the development of the model minority myth in the late 1960s to vestiges of yellow peril discourse and the contemporaneous Civil Rights movement. With this context in mind, I will demonstrate how the ambivalent dynamics of Asian American racialization continue to be imperceptibly reproduced, particularly in psychology. Addressing blind spots in psychological literature, I discuss the metaphysical significance of “Asian eyes” and stereotypes of unsociability in the formation of Asian American racial and ethnic identity. I then discuss the mutually constitutive relationship between Asian American racial stereotypes and cultural identity. In order to exemplify the vexing nature of Asian American identity, I consider Asian American news anchorwoman Julie Chen’s eye surgery as a case study.

Chapter 4 examines the subtle, barely perceptible nature of the racial microaggressions as particularly characteristic of anti-Asian American racism. In this chapter, I review racial microaggressions literature as it pertains to Asian Americans, identifying both its strengths and areas for further development. Using the metaphor of a virus, I illustrate a relational understanding of racial microaggressions that addresses some of the limitations of the existing literature. In describing the phenomenological experiences of the parties involved in microaggressions, I conceptualize negative affects (particularly shame and anger) as symptoms that are propagated through vicious circles—unconscious, self-perpetuating relational patterns (Wachtel, 1999; 2014). Finally, stemming from this model, I offer several concrete recommendations for revising these interpersonal patterns and for sharing the burdens of racial microaggressions against Asian Americans more collectively.
The final chapter investigates the literature on Asian Americans patients in psychotherapy. It has been widely found that Asian Americans disproportionately underutilize mental health services and have lower retention rates in therapy than other racial groups. This service utilization gap has often been conceptualized as reflecting a “culture gap” between the values of Asian and Asian American patients and Western psychotherapy. I explore the empirical foundation and problematic consequences of this culture gap narrative in several different realms. First, I review relevant research in mainstream psychological and psychoanalytic literature and highlight conceptual and practical weaknesses of the culture gap narrative. I then argue that the narrative and associated notions of radical difference between East and West may have collective functions to relieve underlying anxieties related to the presumed Otherness of Asians and Asian Americans. In particular, I investigate some of the clinical consequences of the culture gap narrative in Layton’s (2006) therapy case with a young, gay Asian American man. To illustrate some of the complexities of Asian American racial identities that are left out of the culture gap narrative, I discuss a clinical vignette from my own training. Finally, I offer collective and individual recommendations for psychodynamic therapists to take on more social responsibility for addressing the concerns raised in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.
CHAPTER 2
THREE BINARIES

Understanding the world requires you to take a certain distance from it. Things that are too small to see with the naked eye, such as molecules and atoms, we magnify. Things that are too large, such as cloud formations, river deltas, constellations, we reduce. At length we bring it within the scope of our senses and we stabilize it with fixer. When it has been fixed we call it knowledge… Knowledge is distance, knowledge is stasis and the enemy of meaning.

–Karl Ove Knausgård, My Struggle: Book 1

The majority of psychological studies about Asians and Asian Americans are organized around three binaries—East and West, shame and guilt, and individualism and collectivism. These binaries, at the vexed intersections between “culture” and “self,” have been used to generate a number of central claims about Asian people and culture in psychology. This binary structure is further reinforced by the cross-cultural study, which often lends itself to exaggerated us-them dichotomies. Constricting the terms of “knowledge” about Asians and Asian Americans to these binaries has a number of functions and costs that have not been sufficiently explored. Building on Aron & Starr’s (2013) argument that oppositional dualism is a structure that provides a semblance of order while obscuring more complex and destabilizing currents, this chapter articulates how these binaries tend to portray Eastern and Western cultures as static, mutually exclusive, and diametrically opposed bodies, rather than dynamic and interrelated sociohistorical constructions. This chapter will identify and contextualize some of the central claims of the psychological literature on people of Asian descent and closely examine their implications.

4 The majority of the research in this chapter pertain directly to East Asians and East Asian cultures; however, many of the assertions in academic discourse are applied to understandings of Southeast Asian Americans. When research studies refer specifically to “East Asians,” this is specifically noted.
Unpacking these central claims necessitates grappling with a dilemma. On the one hand, meaningful differences in cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors exist between groups of people with divergent cultural origins. On the other hand, these claims often reflect and are reflections of pernicious cultural stereotypes of people of Asian heritage, who have historically been homogenized. Without falling into either trap, I suggest instead that these cultural “truths” say as much about context—for instance, the effects of American historical events, a xenophobic climate, racial dynamics, and the individualist positivist climate of psychology—as they purport to reveal about Asian cultural values.

First, using Said’s work (1978/1995), I will contextualize these binaries in the broader discourse of Orientalism. Second, I will identify how Orientalist dynamics have been and continue to be played out in the repeated associations between shame and Asians and in the structures of cross-cultural studies. Third, I will focus on the individualism-collectivism dichotomy as a central theme of cross-cultural studies and research on Asians and Asian Americans. I will review aspects of Richard Nisbett’s work in this literature, elucidate methodological shortcomings, and highlight problematic assumptions that limit the representations of the Asian people and cultures. Finally, I will make recommendations for how to move forward in re-configuring new paradigms of culture as relational, dynamic, historically situated, and multi-faceted, in the hopes of broadening understandings and expanding avenues of legibility for people of Asian heritage.

**Orientalism**

In *Orientalism*, Said’s (1978/1995) central argument was that the “Orient” and “Occident” are not naturally occurring entities, but human constructions of “imaginative geography” partially supported by intellectual disciplines generally, and by Orientalist studies, in
particular (Said, 1985, p. 90). He refers to Orientalism as three overlapping sets of ideas that cohere around notions of “East” and “West.” First, he argues that “East” and “West” are mutually constitutive entities related to the shifting historical relationship between Europe/North America and Asia over the course of four millennia. Second, he argues that what has been termed “the Orient” is partly a collection of “ideological suppositions, images, and fantasies” only distantly connected to the actual histories and lives of people in the East (Said, 1985). Finally, Said implicates various intellectual traditions, notably, Orientalist studies, in the replication and reification of existing power structures between East and West. In his view, academic disciplines create and disseminate representations of Eastern societies and cultures as “knowledge” without properly contextualizing them as embedded in the West’s fantasies and projections of the East. Thus, these representations, implicitly cast as inferior and antithetical to purported ideals of the “West” can take on the appearance of self-evident naturalness. Because the Orient was more frequently seen as an object of study by the West, Said argued that the “Orient” and consequently, Asian people have occupied a “kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent itself” (Said, 1978/1995, p. 283). He argues that, like any other text or “object” of study, the “Orient” needs to be understood in relation to the Occident and the political, epistemological, and social contexts surrounding both East and West.

Although often treated as a self-evident geographical and cultural division of the world, the East-West binary has a long history that informs various permutations of Orientalism. The construction of the “East” (initially only reaching as far as the Ottoman Empire) paralleled the formation of a Western (European) identity. As far back as the 5th century, in the Western
imagination, the Orient had become associated with qualities of heathenism, cold authoritarianism, and material abundance that contrasted with a consolidating European identity associated with Latin Christendom and supposed Greek values of individual freedom and progress (Hay, 1957; Tchen, 2007; Tchen & Yeats, 2014). By the 18th century, worldviews of European Imperialism and American Manifest Destiny justified Western dominance in Africa, Asia, and in the Americas as the unfolding of a natural, predetermined progression of history.

In conjunction with these global expansion efforts, and in part, to justify them, racial science codified hierarchical taxonomies of human races. In these classifications, different races (ranging in number from three to six) were defined by immutable psychological characteristics associated with physical features, such as skull and brow shape and skin color (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). The races were placed into a developmental hierarchy with Whites (“Caucasians”) at the top and Blacks (“Negros”) at the bottom. An excerpt from Chambers, (1844) “The Development of Color” illustrates the physical-racial developmental hierarchy adopted by eminent scholars of the time:

The leading characters, in short, of the various races of mankind, are simply representations of particular states in the development of the highest or Caucasian type. The Negro exhibits permanently the imperfect brain, projecting jaw, and slender bent limbs, of a Caucasian child, some considerable time before the period of its birth. The aboriginal American represents the same child nearer birth. The Mongolian is an arrested infant newly born…it is found that parents too nearly related tend to produce offspring of the Mongolian type, that is, persons who in maturity still are a kind of children. According to this view, the greater part of the human race must be considered as having lapsed or declined from the original type…The Mongolian, Malay, American, and Negro,
comprehending perhaps five-sixths of mankind, are degenerate. Strange that the great plan should admit of failures and aberrations of such portentous magnitude! (as cited in Tchen & Yeats, 2014, p. 133-135)

Chambers classifies non-White races as developmentally lower versions of the White race, hypothesizing that darker skin colors are associated with immaturity and that these racial mistakes need to be corrected by the spread of Caucasian progress throughout the world. Laying the groundwork for contemporary dynamics, Asians (“Mongolians”) occupied a liminal position between the supposedly most primitive Blacks and most advanced Whites (Tchen, 2007; Tchen & Yeats, 2014). These hierarchies also marked the beginnings of “geo-racial mapping,” a process in which East and West—and their associated cultural and psychological characteristics—began less tethered to a sense of place and became attached to racial categories and marked bodies (Tchen and Yeats, 2014, p. 126). For instance, as the Eastern boundary moved toward the Far East, by the early twentieth century, “Oriental” informally referred to the presence of a single eye-fold (Lewis & Wigen, 1997; Tchen & Yeats, 2014).

After the decline of European colonialism in the 19th century, East Asian countries (e.g. China and Japan) began to rise in economic and political power, threatening Western hegemony (Kawai, 2005; Tchen & Yeats, 2014). In the United States, this sense of threat was met with, and exaggerated by, a backlash among Americans against Asian immigrants, mainly from China. At its height, anti-Asian sentiment was powerfully encapsulated in the propagation of the term Yellow Peril to describe feared invasion by “yellow hordes” (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). At the same time, cheap Chinese labor was exploited by some Americans and seen as a threat to American jobs by others. Thus, while fears of Chinese invasion and xenophobia were articulated, Chinese
immigrants were simultaneously utilized to further White Americans’ goals, creating tensions between attitudes of explicit exclusion and conditional acceptance of the Chinese in America.

Over time, immigration patterns, increasing globalization, and availability of information have shrunk the metaphorical distance between “East” and “West,” muddying the boundaries between geography, racial lines, and citizenship. Orientalism plays upon these elastic boundaries. For instance, within the United States, discriminatory actions against ethnic minority groups of Asian descent often erupt in the context of broader “external” international dynamics. One salient example is the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Similarly, in the 1980s, there was an upsurge of racism against Japanese Americans (i.e. “Japan-bashing”) in the context of economic competition between the U.S. and Japan (Kawai, 2005, p. 116). Both of these incidences of racism rested on the assumption of homogeneity between Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans, casting the former as the enemy outside and the latter as the enemy inside American boundaries (Tchen and Yeats, 2014).

All told, these histories speak to the continual construction of Eastern people (those of East Asian, Central Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern descent) as immutably foreign in two senses of the word. Thematically, constructions of the East have been characterized by supposed strangeness, unassimilability, and inscrutability that range from benign and castrated at one extreme, to menacing and threatening at the other. Secondly, Asians, in their imagined embodiment of an unfree and semi-civilized horde mentality, have been cast as alien (and implicitly inferior) to Western values of civilization, progress, individuality, and freedom (Said, 1978/1995; Tchen & Yeats, 2014). Yellow Peril, the model minority, and tropes of exoticism and inscrutability are all examples of Orientalist stereotypes that carry both
connotations of foreignness, remain relatively fixed, and often stand in for cultural “truths” about people.

Shame, guilt, and cross-cultural studies

Strains of Orientalism are often unintentionally reinforced in the social sciences via the cross-cultural study, the default position of research about people of Asian heritage. This kind of study compares presumably culturally different groups on some measurable dimension. Based on the collected data, it is determined whether differences actually exist, and the meanings of these differences either support or contradict claims that have historically defined the cultures being compared (Burman, 2007; Cole & Scribner, 1974). Often, the contrast between cultures is interpreted as an opportunity for the principal investigators to reflect on their own previously invisible cultural values, which, upon contact with the obvious differences of the comparison group, are put into relief.

In general, cross-cultural psychological research has been criticized for presuming non-overlapping differences between cultures and representing cultures as self-contained, static, and monolithic (Betancourt & López, 1993; Cole & Scribner, 1974; Dalal, 2001; Fiske, 2002; Okazaki, David, & Abelmann, 2008; Stuart, 2004). Writing specifically in relation to Japan, Burman (2007) notes that cross-cultural studies perform double functions with respect to cultural bias. She argues that on the one hand, they appear to “ward off claims of cultural bias or specificity” by including non-mainstream populations’ values (p. 180). On the other hand, because studies are conceived from a “Western” point of view, “Western” perspectives become structured into the studies as implicit (superior) norms through measures and theoretical frameworks. As a result, Asian cultures appear to be included in psychology, yet, in the implicit
us-them/West-East structure of the cross-cultural study, they are kept separate, different, and at a distance from the West.

A prominent example of Orientalism in cross-cultural research is anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s (1946) ethnography *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, written in the wake of World War II. Benedict’s work characterized Japanese culture as a shame culture and the United States as a guilt culture. According to Benedict, people in both cultures feel both shame and guilt, however, they differently emphasized the two emotions. She stated that shame cultures, such as Japan, relied on “external sanctions for good behavior” and guilt cultures, such as America, by contrast, relied “on an internalized conviction of sin” to guide behavior (Benedict, 1946, p. 138). On an interpersonal level, she theorized that confessing one’s transgression to another person could bring relief from guilt whereas this kind of exposure to another person would only exacerbate shame. For instance, if a person had wronged a friend and felt guilty, she may be relieved from her guilt by confessing her transgression to her friend. On the other hand, if she were feeling shame, speaking to her friend would only exacerbate her shame because it would expose her vulnerability. Thus, she would be more likely to keep her transgression a secret and sink into isolation and self-recrimination.

Though Benedict’s work was well received by many American and Japanese people at the time, Japanese and American detractors have since criticized Benedict for overgeneralizations, cultural prejudice, and sloppy methodology (Creighton, 1990). For instance, Burman (2007) notes that Benedict’s book was written without spending a single day in Japan. Benedict extrapolated her ideas about the Japanese from speaking to Japanese Americans, a fact that indicates a still-prevailing homogenizing view of people of Asian descent, as well as the xenophobic climate of the time. Doi (1973) acknowledged some kernel of truth in Benedict’s
observation that shame is very important in Japan, but also criticized her work for largely ignoring the impact of guilt in Japan and shame in the West. Further fueling these criticisms, it is difficult to divorce her role as a White American writing about the Japanese right after WWII from her analysis. Though Creighton (1990) in many ways defends Benedict’s work, she also notes that Benedict’s internal/external distinction between guilt and shame is oversimplified.

It is easy to fall into the trap of categorizing Benedict’s ethnography as a standalone work of cultural prejudice contaminating her supposedly objective scientific stance (Creighton, 1990). But Benedict’s assertions are not simply a result of her being a culturally biased individual, they stem from her being entrenched in her sociocultural context, shaped by shame avoidance, unexamined Orientalism, and a school of thought in which cultures were treated like personalities (Davidson, 1988). And while it might feel more comfortable to disavow or dismiss Benedict’s work as an outdated mode of thinking, a mere artifact of an unenlightened past, echoes of her work and its context are still present in much of psychology in at least two ways.

First, there is still an avoidance of shame in the United States partially perpetuated by a hierarchical dichotomy between shame and guilt. The current manifestations of the hierarchy lie in conceptions of each emotion’s adaptive value. Shame is seen as a far less useful emotion than guilt in much of the mainstream psychological literature, so much so that these connotations have become built into the definitions of the respective terms (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In their comprehensive volume of empirical research, Tangney and Dearing (2002) describe shame as “an extremely painful and ugly feeling that has a negative impact on interpersonal behavior” (p. 3). In their view, “shame” refers to an acutely painful state with little adaptive value; thus, once it becomes adaptive, it ceases, by their definition to be shame. In contrast, they characterize
guilt as the lesser of two evils. They argue that guilt impels people to accept responsibility, own up to their mistakes, and to repair interpersonal behavior.

In gathering evidence to demonstrate that guilt is more adaptive and associated with higher levels of empathy and reparative interpersonal behavior than shame, many studies use the Test of Self Conscious Affect, a self-report measure that assesses shame-proneness and guilt-proneness (Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Tangney and Dearing, 2002; Tangney et al., 1996; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989). However, the connotations about shame and guilt’s relative adaptiveness are embedded in the scale itself. The items that measure guilt inquire mainly about mild and moderate forms of guilt and behaviors associated with repairing interpersonal ruptures (involve apologizing or thinking of apologizing to others). The more maladaptive consequences of guilt, such as regret, remorse, and rumination, are underrepresented in comparison to the more reparative items (Luyten, Fontaine, & Corveleyn, 2002). In contrast, the shame items include mainly maladaptive behaviors associated with chronic shame, such as negative self-esteem, negative affect, desire to hide the self, and negative self-appraisal associated with incompetence, cowardice, or stupidity (Fontaine, Luyten, De Boeck, & Corveleyn, 2001; Giner-Sorolla, Piazza, Espinosa, 2011; Luyten, Fontaine, Corveleyn, 2002; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989).

The purported relative adaptiveness of guilt and shame are often attributed to their supposedly divergent developmental origins. For example, Tangney et al., (1996) explicitly speculate that shame may be a more primitive emotion that served adaptive functions especially at earlier stages of development (either in earlier stages of evolution or individual development)… it seems likely that feelings of shame play a key role in inhibiting undesirable behavior among
young children, before the cognitive capacity to experience the more differentiated feeling of guilt develops. (p. 1267)

This conception implies that shame in adulthood no longer has adaptive functions and may be merely a vestige of childhood.

These connotations attached to shame and guilt are longstanding. Aron & Starr (2013) note that guilt has historically been associated with values of maturity, psychic depth, and individualism and attributed to members of groups who typically occupy superior positions in social hierarchies (e.g. men, Whites, heterosexuals). Shame, on the other hand, has been associated with immaturity, psychic superficiality, and collectivism, and attributed to members of stigmatized groups who are prone to being objectified both by others and themselves (e.g. women, racial minorities, LGBTQ people). Thus, individuals who have been noted to be among the “shame-prone” are doubly Othered—in their shame-proneness and in their lesser social status; simultaneously, the shame of individuals belonging to groups more often conferred “guilt-prone” status can go unacknowledged. The shameful associations attached to shame can compound its painfulness and continually perpetuate the apparatuses of shame avoidance, both individually and collectively.

The shame-guilt dichotomy also underemphasizes the ways in which shame and guilt often co-exist and interact in complex ways. Other perspectives on shame and guilt, which depart from this implicit hierarchy and involve a more contextual understanding of both emotions, are less well known. For example, Tomkins (1963/2008) views shame and guilt as emotions that are derived from the shame affect family; he views guilt as shame affect attached to a particular action. Others view shame and guilt as powerfully overlapping and often used defensively against each other (Lewis, 1971). For instance, someone could feel consciously guilty about an
action, but be warding off unnamed and unacknowledged shame about being “a bad friend” or “a bad person.” Lewis (1971) makes a powerful distinction between unacknowledged and acknowledged shame, noting that unacknowledged shame is much more destructive to self-esteem and interpersonal relationships than acknowledged shame, which has the potential to bring people together.

The second way in which Benedict’s legacy is still alive is in the continued linking of people of Asian culture with shame and shame-related phenomena. Social anxiety, which is commonly conceptualized as prominent among shame-prone people who fear negative evaluation or criticism by others, is a salient example (Hofmann, Asnaani, & Hinton, 2010). With regard to Asian Americans, several studies have reported a higher incidence of self-reported social anxiety compared to European Americans (Lau, Fung, Wang, & Kang, 2009; Okazaki, 1997, 2002; Okazaki, Longworth, & Min, 2002; Sue, Ino, & Sue, 1983; Sue, Sue, & Ino, 1990). Several studies have found similar results in Canada (Hong & Woody, 2007; Hsu & Alden, 2007; Hsu, Woody, Lee, Peng, Zhou, & Ryder, 2012).

The higher relative rate of self-reported social anxiety in Asian Americans is often attributed to different permutations of presumed Asian cultural values and behaviors. For instance, social orientation; face loss concerns; shame socialization practices; parenting practices associated with love withdrawal, shaming, and guilt induction; expectations of attunement by

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5 In contrast to questionnaire studies of Asians and Asian Americans, epidemiological data suggests that East Asians and Asian Americans are at lower risk of social anxiety disorder (Grant, Hasin, Blanco, Stinson, Chou, Goldstein, Dawson, Smith, Saha, Huang, 2005; Hofmann, Asnaani, & Hinton, 2010; Hsu & Alden, 2007). It is unclear the extent to which this elevation reflects cultural biases in assessment instruments, diagnostic biases, cultural differences in symptom expression, a Western conception of social anxiety overlapping with normative East Asian social norms, and/or other issues with clinical data among Asian Americans (Hong & Woody, 2007).
others; interdependent self-construal; and a skills deficit in understanding emotional expressions of others have been hypothesized as culturally informed explanations for these findings (Lau, Fung, Wang, & Kang, 2009; Okazaki, Liu, Longworth, & Minn, 2002; Hsu & Alden, 2007; Lee, Okazaki, & Yoo, 2006; Saw & Okazaki, 2010).

Related to this body of work is another line of research based on “Asian views of the self” (Hong & Woody, 2007, p. 1781; Norasakkunkit & Kalick, 2002; Okazaki, 1997; 2002). These studies assume Western and Eastern binaries between self-enhancement and self-criticism, independent and interdependent self-construal, and identity consistency and flexibility, respectively. For example, Hong and Woody (2007) compared a group of 250 Euro-Canadians and 251 Korean participants living in Canada. They chose Korean participants who strongly identified with Korean culture and had spent fewer than 4 years outside of Korea. They found that the Korean participants reported higher levels of social anxiety than the Euro-Canadians and that independent self-construal and identity consistency were full mediators of these ethnic differences in social anxiety. Though the authors did not directly measure self-enhancement bias, they interpret this finding as related to Westerners’ previously demonstrated self-enhancement bias.

Interestingly, interdependent self-construal only weakly mediated the relationship between ethnicity and social anxiety. Although this finding is consistent with past studies that found a minimal relationship between interdependent self-construal and social anxiety scales (Okazaki, 1997), the authors found it surprising given their conceptualization of a strong relationship between interdependence and social anxiety. In interpreting this surprising result, Hong and Woody (2007) posit several possibilities. They speculate that measures of interdependent self-construal may not accurately reflect the contextual nature of the
interdependent self-construal. Alternatively, they hypothesize that social anxiety for Korean participants may not be judged as impairing or distressing because it may overlap with culturally normative values of a less independent self-construal, identity flexibility, and self-criticism that may resemble Western conceptions of social anxiety. Hsu and Alden’s study (2007) provides some tentative evidence against this last point. They found that Chinese heritage participants living in Canada appraised impairment of social anxiety symptoms at a similar level to European heritage participants. However, this study is not necessarily generalizable to Korean participants. Additionally, it should be noted that both of these studies were conducted in Canada where racial dynamics may differ from those in the United States. Nevertheless, Hong and Woody’s (2007) speculations raise important avenues for future research to further unpack the complexities of the contributing factors to the higher rate of self-reported social anxiety in Asian Americans.

In addition to the impact of cultural values and selves, the impact of North American contextual variables and their interaction with Asian cultural values remains largely unexplored. Hsu et al. (2012), also conducted in Canada, is a notable exception. The authors tested two competing explanations of the higher incidence of social anxiety among individuals of East Asian heritage (first- and second-generation Asian Canadian, Chinese national, and Korean national students) compared to those of Western heritage (first- and second-generation White Canadian students). The East Asian socialization hypothesis suggests that East Asian cultural values (e.g. deference to authority, filial piety, and collectivism), and associated norms for social behavior (e.g. eye gaze aversion, low levels of assertiveness, and a tendency to be silent) may look similar to Western conceptions of social anxiety. Thus, this hypothesis predicts a linear relationship between exposure to East Asian cultural norms and social anxiety. The authors inferred that people of Western heritage would have the least exposure to Asian cultural values,
Asian North American participants would have a moderate amount of exposure, and Chinese and Korean participants would have the most exposure.

In contrast, the cultural discrepancy hypothesis posits that elevated self-reported social anxiety levels in Asian Americans may reflect distress stemming from being an ethnic minority and having to navigate discrepancies between cultural values of their country of ethnic origin and mainstream Western culture. Thus, according to this hypothesis, bicultural people (i.e. Asian Americans and Asian Canadians) would score more highly on social anxiety and potentially other measures of distress, compared to those who are unicultural (i.e. participants in Korea, China, and of Western heritage in Vancouver). Furthermore, they predicted that this difference would hold regardless of the level of socialization to East Asian cultural values.

The participants included 692 university students from Vancouver, Canada; Seoul, Korea; and Changshu, China. The participants from Vancouver included first- and second-generation White and Asian American students. The authors tried to obtain relatively culturally homogenous samples from Korea and China by including those who self-identified as having a Korean or Chinese cultural background, lived fewer than 4 consecutive years in North America or another Western country, and had lived fewer than a total of 7 years in any non-Asian country.

The findings of the study lent support for the cultural discrepancy hypothesis over the East Asian socialization hypothesis. The authors found no differences in social anxiety among the participants based on exposure to East Asian cultural values (as inferred based on group membership). However, the bicultural group of East Asian North American participants reported higher levels of social anxiety and depression, compared to unicultural groups. The relationship between social anxiety and cultural group was partially mediated by reports of lower self-efficacy in initiating social relationships, perceived social status, and submissive behavior. One
important limitation to the study, however, is that exposure to East Asian cultural values was not directly measured. Despite this limitation, this study points toward bicultural stress as an important contributing factor that merits further consideration.

Further emphasizing the neglect of American contextual influences on the elevated rate of self-reported social anxiety in Asian Americans, the relationship between race and elevated self-reports of social anxiety in Asian Americans has not been systematically examined in the literature. While several studies have found positive correlations between racial discrimination and negative mental health outcomes, such as depressive and anxious symptoms and disorders (e.g. Gee, Spencer, Chen, Yup & Takeuchi, 2007), only one study about Asian Americans and social anxiety explicitly raised the issue of race. Okazaki, Liu, Longworth, and Minn (2002) identified the links between race, racism, and social anxiety in Asian Americans as a potentially important area of inquiry, but did not directly study it. Racial identity and racism may be very relevant to expressions of social anxiety in several ways. The stereotypes of Asian unsociability, racial identity status, and mixed-race contexts may influence the intensity and frequency of social anxiety experienced by Asian Americans; these issues will be further explored in Chapter 3 (Cho, 2009; Chu & Kwan, 2007; Helms, 1997).

**Individualism and collectivism**

Related to shame and guilt, a major theme in cross-cultural psychological literature is the individualist-collectivist scheme (alternatively called independence-interdependence, idiocentrism-allocentrism, or private self-collective self) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Collectivism and individualism were originally conceived as polarized opposites on a continuum (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Takano & Osaka, 1999). Over time, conceptualizations have
shifted toward understanding that individualism and collectivism exist in different degrees in all cultures and represent ideal cultural types (Briley & Wyer, 2001; Miller, 2002; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). In individualist schemes, people are ideally conceived as separate and autonomous from others, derive their self-esteem from individual achievements and personal uniqueness, and have a strong sense of personal control (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, 2003; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). By contrast, in collectivist schemes, group membership is integral to self-identity, and group harmony and relationships to others tend to take precedence over individual needs and desires (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, 2003; Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier, 2002). These divergent structures are understood to shape and inform people’s patterns of thinking, feeling, self-perceptions, well-being, and relationships to others and the world (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto, 1999; Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

Comparisons between Asians/Asian Americans and European Americans are overwhelmingly overrepresented in IND-COL studies, making the IND-COL binary and Asian American racial identity important and mutually constitutive themes (Miller, 2002; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Among both cross-national and cross-ethnic comparisons, Asians (particularly East Asians) and Asian Americans comprise the bulk of representation on the “collectivist” side of matters, with Japan being a particularly popular subject (Burman, 2007; Markus, 2008; Matsumoto, 1999). On the individualist side, White Americans are assumed to be the most individualistic, representing the “gold standard” of individualism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002, p. 4). In sum, these assumptions suggest that the individualist-collectivist

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6 Given that “cultures” do not have clearly delineated boundaries, the “nation” and “ethnic group” have come to stand in for culture.
dichotomy is often implicitly regarded as a variation of the East-West dichotomy. Richard Nisbett, an important contributor to this body of literature, makes this trend explicit, stating: “The further to the West a given country lies, the greater, in general that country’s endorsement of independent values” (p. 70).

Nisbett’s work, epitomized by his 2003 *Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently...and why*, explores the relationships between cognition and social orientation in the East versus the West. Nisbett compiles data to overturn his previously universalist view of cognition, which assumed that all people think in the same basic ways and that observed differences between people in different cultures are caused by exposure to different aspects of the world. In contrast to this view, Nisbett argues that, on the group level, Easterners (whom he defines as East Asians and Asian Americans) and Westerners (Caucasian Europeans and North Americans) demonstrate distinctively different patterns in cognition on a fundamental level. Second, he argues that these differences are related to established differences between collectivist versus individualist social orientations and holistic versus analytic worldviews, respectively. He summarizes his main argument:

My research has led me to the conviction that two utterly different approaches to the world have maintained themselves for thousands of years. These approaches include profoundly different social relations, views about the nature of the world, and characteristic thought processes. The social practices promote the worldviews; the worldviews dictate the appropriate thought processes; and the thought processes both justify the worldviews and support the social practices. (Nisbett, 2003, Introduction, para. 20)
In building his argument, Nisbett relies on global-level distinctions between East and West based on his analysis of historical, philosophical, and ecological data. For example, he uses the ideas of Confucius and Aristotle to represent past and present Chinese/Eastern and ancient Greek/Western thought, respectively. Ecologically, he links the individualism of the West to modernization and the collectivism of the East to a relative reliance on agriculture. He uses these examples to support his assertion that East and West, and attendantly, Eastern and Western people, are fundamentally different and separate, and have been for thousands of years.

In addition to historical and ecological data, much of Nisbett’s two-part hypothesis (i.e. the “how” and “why” of his title) rests upon the findings from a variety of studies on cognition. In staying focused on a smaller field of inquiry, Nisbett’s cognitive work is the most successful in supporting his overarching argument. In one of his most novel experiments, Masuda and Nisbett (2001) showed animated scenes to a group of Japanese and American students and then asked them to report on what they saw. The participants were then presented with the previously seen and novel objects. These objects were presented either on the original or new backgrounds. Participants were then asked whether they had seen the objects before.

In performing this procedure with both underwater scenes and with wildlife, the researchers found that, on average, in comparison to the American students, the group of Japanese students reported more objects in the field (as opposed to the foreground) and remembered foregrounded objects better when they were presented on original backgrounds. The authors interpreted these findings as evidence that Japanese people demonstrate a more holistic style of cognition. They suggest that Japanese people are more likely to attend to the context and employ a cognitive strategy that binds objects in the foreground to the background, which may be more salient to them than it is for Americans. For example, a Japanese participant might have
remembered a fish in the underwater scene when on the original background because s/he had already encoded the background. In comparison, the authors argued that Americans exhibit an analytic style of cognition that is more attuned to foregrounded objects.

Ji, Peng, and Nisbett (2000) conducted two separate studies about attention to the field. The first study compared 54 White American students and 41 Taiwanese students (who graduated from high school in Taiwan) at the University of Michigan on their performances on a covariation-detection task. Participants were shown pairs of objects on a computer screen that were associated with each other to different degrees. After observing various pairings, participants were shown one object on the left and asked to predict what object would appear on the right. Next, they were asked to rate the degree of association between the objects and how confident they were about their judgments. They found that the Taiwanese participants performed significantly better at the task than American participants and appeared more confident in their predictions. The authors interpreted these data as possible evidence of a greater sensitivity to the relationship between objects in the environment for East Asians. However, they interpreted these findings cautiously because the Taiwanese participants were paid $10 for their participation, which may have motivated them to work harder at the task.

In the second study, Ji, Peng, and Nisbett (2000) compared the performances of 56 European American and 42 East Asian participants (mostly from Korea, Japan, and China with a mean time in the U.S. of fewer than 2.5 years) at the University of Michigan on the Rod-and-Frame test (RFT), which is a rough measure of field independence and field dependence. Those who perform well on the task are understood to be more field independent, that is, they are more prone to separating an object from the field. Those who are less adept at separating objects from the field are considered more field-dependent. The authors found that, as predicted, the East
Asian students made more errors on the RFT than the European American students. While Nisbett and his colleagues speculate that the demonstrated greater attention to the field may be related to social differences, there may be a number of factors that could interfere with their hypothesis. For instance, it is possible that a group of East Asian college students, relatively newly immigrated to the United States, might be more attentive to their contexts because they are adjusting to the unfamiliar cultural contexts around them.

Though the samples in these studies are relatively small and comprise university students, the authors identify some compelling associations between attention to field-ground relations and cultural/ethnic groups. Furthermore, the methodologies are useful in that they measure implicit or non-verbal cultural differences, addressing a weakness that has been indicated more generally in cross-cultural IND-COL research (Fiske, 2002). However, the question remains how these perceptual tendencies toward objects in an experimental situation translate to actual behaviors and attitudes in the contexts of social relationships. In other words, what does a propensity toward seeing the background mean in concrete terms? For example, attention to context may indicate, in the same individual, anxiety motivated by self-preservation or by curiosity about the world. Furthermore, there is evidence that attention to one’s social context may vary largely according to other factors, such as size of group or who is present (Matsumoto, Kudoh, & Takeuchi, 1997).

Furthermore, because social orientation in these studies is not directly measured, Nisbett’s argument for a causal relationship between perceived social orientations and perceptual style is supported only indirectly and requires two assumptions. The first assumption is that any East Asian (e.g. Japanese students) and Caucasian samples will generalize to other Asian heritage and Caucasian samples regardless of contextual variables, such as nationality,
personality traits, or level of acculturation. Second, they assume that people of Asian descent are more likely to have interdependent self-construals and Americans are more likely to have independent self-construals. In order to make these assumptions, Nisbett relies on claims from individualism-collectivism literature. However, for a variety of reasons and in a number of ways, the literature that supports notions of Western individualism and Eastern collectivism rests on an inconsistent empirical and conceptual foundation.

Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) article examining individualism and collectivism on an interpersonal level was one of the first and most influential IND-COL articles. It usefully expanded a framework previously dominated by Western individualism by conceptualizing two “very different” views of the self: independent and interdependent self-construals (p. 224). They describe the independent self-construal as “bounded, unitary, stable,” valuing uniqueness and promotion of one’s own goals, direct communication, and deriving self-esteem from “internal attributes”; they propose that independent self-construals are characteristic of people in individualistic cultures (p. 230). By contrast, they define interdependent self-construals as “flexible,” characterized by belonging, fitting in, and self-restraint, and deriving self-esteem from the ability to maintain “harmony with social context” (p. 230). They state that the interdependent self is “most clearly exemplified in Japanese culture,” but pertains to other Asian cultures, as well as African, Latin-American, and many Southern European cultures (p. 224-225).

Markus and Kitayama (1991) acknowledge that these are “general tendencies” that are present in all cultures and that the distinction between the two self-construals is more an organizational heuristic than a comprehensive cataloging of all types of self-construals (p. 225). To support their arguments, Markus and Kitayama (1991) cite numerous empirical studies to
elucidate a number of cultural differences in cognition, emotion, and motivation that may be plausibly linked to independent and interdependent self-construals. Importantly, Markus and Kitayama (1991) make it clear that their theory is speculative and do not directly empirically validate their premise that Japanese and Asian people tend to have interdependent self-construals and Americans independent self-construals (Matsumoto, 1999).

Despite Markus and Kitayama’s disclaimer, much of the research that their article inspired accepted its claims about Japanese and American individuals at face value, which had broader consequences for how IND-COL and East-West schemes are still studied. For example, Singelis (1994) developed a measure of independent and interdependent self-construals using Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) “characterizations of Asians as interdependent and North Americans as independent” to indicate construct validity (p. 587). Accordingly, he compared Asian Americans (of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino descent) and European American participants in Hawaii and found group differences in expected directions. In order for this comparison to properly indicate construct validity, however, Markus and Kitayama’s speculation would have to be empirically validated, and additionally, generalize to Asian Americans, not just Asians.

Additionally, the purview of IND-COL research has expanded so much that the concepts themselves have become diffuse and difficult to define clearly (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In their comprehensive review of IND-COL literature since 1980, Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) found that the literature lacks coherent and consistent definitions and assessment of the concepts, which span four broad areas: self-concept, well-being, cognition, and relationality. Whether or not differences between countries were found often depended on scale content. For instance, when COL included belonging to one’s in-group,
Americans were significantly higher in COL than Hong Kong Chinese participants. Thus, both constructs are multidimensional and complex and differences between countries need to be closely examined to see what is being measured, rather than being taken at face value as further evidence of the IND-COL binary.

The results of IND-COL studies, when aggregated, present a complicated picture. Oyserman, Koon, and Kemmelmeier (2002), measuring individualism and collectivism as separate constructs, found that, when taken together, many studies do support, in general, that Americans are more individualistic (moderate effect sizes) and less collectivistic (small effect sizes) than East Asians and Asian Americans. When broken down to country-level analyses, however, findings among the East Asian region were very heterogeneous and somewhat surprising. They found that among East Asian participants, only people in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong were found to be less individualistic and more collectivist than Americans and that effect sizes were large. Contrary to expectations, they found no differences in collectivism between Americans and Koreans. In light of the assumption that Japanese culture epitomizes collectivism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), it is of particular interest that Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) found that Japanese participants were found to be slightly less collectivistic than Americans. Furthermore, the effect size for this finding increased when more reliable scales were used.

Takano and Osaka’s (1999) review of 15 studies that compared the United States and Japan on individualism and collectivism also found surprising results. In order to reduce the amount of potential confounds, they chose studies that used conventional definitions of individualism-collectivism or independent-interdependent self-construals that placed these concepts on a “bipolar continuum,” thus excluding multidimensional constructs and plausible
consequences related to cognition, motivation, and emotion (p. 314). Furthermore, they chose to include only studies that compared the United States and Japan. Of the 15 questionnaire and behavioral studies, nine reported no clear or systematic differences between Japan and the U.S on independent or interdependent self-construals (e.g., Leung & Iwawaki, 1988) and five studies found that Japanese participants were more individualistic than American participants (e.g., Matsumoto, Kudoh, & Takeuchi, 1997).

Conceptually, focusing on comparisons between groups can be useful in making general cross-cultural claims, but it can also create blind spots on an experience-near, phenomenological level. There is little correlation between the group and individual levels in terms of collectivism and individualism and corresponding holistic and analytic modes of thought because these constructs are expressed differently for every individual (Varnum, Grossman, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2010). Furthermore, an emerging body of work that primes independent and interdependent self-construals suggests that all self-construals are dynamic, situation-dependent and do not appear to be country- or culture-specific (see Oyserman & Lee, 2008 for a review). Thus, group mean differences begin to lose their meaning and value at smaller levels of analysis. The conclusions drawn from many IND-COL studies may tell us that if we encounter an individual of Asian descent, s/he may be more likely to be more “collectivist”; it is unclear how this information might help us in understanding his/her personality. Furthermore, as I will discuss further in Chapter 5, I argue that such knowledge can actually interfere with getting to know a person.

**Relational approach to culture**

In the paradigm of universal individualism that dominated psychological academic discourse, the shame-guilt, individualist-collectivist, and East-West binaries have increased the
visibility of Asian and Asian American people in research. The individualist-collectivist
dichotomy, in particular, offered a parsimonious explanation for cultural differences between
East and West. However, as both psychology and notions of culture have evolved, it is
becoming clearer that empirical realities and dynamic interplays between and within cultures
believe the ostensible simplicity of these binaries. Furthermore, confinement to a framework of
binary oppositions constructs an Asian identity based around difference from perceived Western
norms of independence and individualism. Too often, these dichotomies reiterate oft-repeated
notions of frictionless cultural difference, rather than expanding on more complex, nuanced, and
conflictual narratives.

Increasing the avenues of legibility for people of Asian heritage requires the interrogation
of cross-cultural psychology’s interacting blind spots with respect to both culture and the “East.”
First, in focusing mainly on global-level comparisons (i.e. East-West or international levels of
analysis), many cross-cultural studies neglect cultural and sub-cultural contexts that exist on the
micro- and meso-levels, including the reciprocal influence of small groups, families, institutions,
cities, regions, and/or dimensions of social identity (e.g. gender, sexuality, class, ability). These
overlapping contexts shape meanings of phenomena, including even aspects of experimental
situations, in ways that are idiosyncratic and elude back-translation (Fiske, 2002; Miller, 2002;
Peng, Nisbett, & Wong, 1997; Stuart, 2004).

Relatedly, the focus on cross-national differences often comes at the expense of
overlooking within-group heterogeneity and exaggerating between-group differences. Other
historical factors may be at play in maintaining the structures of these studies. For instance,
Takano and Osaka (1999) posit that the continued beliefs in Japanese collectivism and American
individualism in the face of contradictory evidence may be partially derived from the lasting
influence of Benedict’s (1946) and de Tocqueville’s (1840/1945) work in characterizing Japanese and American cultures, respectively. The empirical research literature, in not explicitly acknowledging the sociohistorical contexts of these kinds of comparisons, or the potential for overgeneralization, can unwittingly perpetuate an uncritical stance toward homogenizing both Asian and Western cultures and individuals and placing them in opposition to one another (Burman, 2007; Matsumoto, 1999; Matsumoto et al., 1997; Takano & Osaka, 1999).

Finally, the false assumption of an “equal-but-different” stance between East and West allows for generalizations and exaggerated differences between groups, occluding the historical realities of various hierarchies between Whites and Asians/Asian Americans (Burman, 2007, p. 184). At a domestic level, this stance is exemplified by the widespread model minority stereotype, which conveys Asian Americans as high-achieving, psychologically healthy, and economically advantaged (Kawai, 2005; Sue, Sue, Sue & Takeuchi, 1995). The stereotype also operates to cover over the ways in which Asian Americans lag in political and media visibility, suffer from psychological vulnerabilities, and are victims of racial discrimination (Kawai, 2005; Sue, Sue, Sue & Takeuchi, 1995). This issue will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

My recommendations for approaching “culture” from a psychological perspective address these three sets of concerns. First, I recommend a relational approach to culture that emphasizes the complex ways in which individuals and their contexts interpenetrate each other. Such a view is similar to Wachtel’s (2014) cyclical psychodynamic point of view that recognizes that “the inner world, the intimate world, and the world of society and culture are reciprocally consequential for each other, continually maintaining and changing each other…None of them exists without the other or has meaning apart from each other” (Wachtel, 2014, p. 27). This perspective would acknowledge the ways in which cultures are not just self-constructed, but
discursively constructed by other people, institutions, and nations. This approach would recognize that a cultural ideal is not the same as the realities of individuals who exist under the influence of their various overlapping cultural spheres. Finally, it would appreciate that every individual has idiosyncratic and dynamic relationships to the many cultures that they inhabit and inform.

For example, a relational approach would view Orientalism as a mutually constitutive process of “counter-identification” between imagined West and East, in which the Other is imagined to be what the Self is not (Tchen & Yeats, 2014, p. 29). In this light, the East-West, shame-guilt, individualism-collectivism binaries reflect meaning for both East and West. For instance, for the West, Fiske (2002) argues that the IND-COL framework supports widely held beliefs about individualism as the defining qualities of the United States. To reinforce these ideals, the notion of collectivism functions as “an abstraction that formalizes our ideological representation of the antithetical other, a cultural vision of the rest of the world characterized in terms of what we imagine we are not” (p. 84). Similarly, Scheff (2003) argues that shame and dependency are pathologized because they conflict with American ideals of being self-reliant, independent individuals. The integrity of this Western imaginary rests partially on the recognition of contrast in a perceived collectivist Other, in this case, of Asian cultures. Furthermore, as Scheff suggests, the repetition of the imagined qualities of that collective Other deflect from confronting the realities of one’s own anxieties of not measuring up to purported individualistic ideals. Similar processes may be operating in relation to collectivism in Asian countries. For example, Matsumoto (1999) notes that Japanese people may have been generally more collectivist in the past than currently and that Japanese scholars and people may continue to be invested in the idea of Japanese collectivism.
To support a relational perspective on culture, a mixed methods approach of quantitative and qualitative methodology would help to tease out individual, subcultural, and cultural meanings assigned to various tasks in the study. This may include anthropological methods of participant-observation and fieldwork, informed by in-depth knowledge of cultures, to become part of the cultural psychological repertoire (Fiske, 2002).

Secondly, I propose that psychologists begin to more fully incorporate positionality and reflexivity, two related concepts that are central to social scientific inquiry in anthropology, feminist research, and qualitative methodology, into their work (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). Reflexivity is a method for “situating knowledges… as a means of avoiding the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge” (Rose, 1997, p. 306). A key component of reflexivity is the explicit acknowledgment of the researcher’s positionality, his/her place in a “multidimensional geography of power relations” and its effects on the knowledge produced and written about (Rose, 1997, p. 308). Positionality includes institutional privilege as well as aspects of social identity (e.g. race, nationality, age, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality). Explicit inclusion of the researcher’s positionality limits the possibility of false claims of universal knowledge. A second component of reflexivity involves situating the research within relevant sociohistorical contexts, including power differentials, which have bearing on the interpretation of the research. In doing so, the researcher explicitly accounts for the multi-layered origins of his/her research in order to avoid presenting it as natural and self-evident. Situating knowledge does not change the facts, per se, but limits the interpretation of the data to specific and partial claims to knowledge. Finally, reflexivity fosters a sense of responsibility for and acknowledgment of complicity in the ways power has been used to produce knowledge that subjugates other, less represented narratives.
While reflexive positions are more common in theoretical articles and meta-analyses (e.g. Burman, 2007; Markus, 2008; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Takana & Osaka, 1999), they could potentially contribute greatly to quantitative cross-cultural empirical research, which often lacks sufficient context about the hierarchies between East and West. Cross-cultural findings should be explicitly contextualized to acknowledge how they have been shaped not just by previous literature and findings, but by global conflict, political and economic tensions, institutions of power and privilege, and the researcher’s positionality in those contexts. If, for instance, an article is using the individualism-collectivism binary as a structure, the authors could be transparent about the limitations of using that structure and provide well-reasoned and solid justification for employing it. Furthermore, placing the individualism-collectivism binary in the context of Orientalism would foreground the risks of perpetuating stereotypes, thus enabling safeguards against reifying them. Finally, a researcher may acknowledge explicitly his/her positions of power and privilege and limit the generalizability of the data according to the various overlapping contexts in which the research is embedded.

Chung (2014)’s article, borrowed from the education field, exemplifies these recommendations. Using fieldwork and ethnography, she uses Said’s (1978/1995) *Orientalism* and Omi and Winant’s (1994) racial formation theory to bring racism to the forefront of her analysis of Asian American leadership in education. She demonstrates that literature in education focuses on cultural values as the major explanatory factor for purported qualities of Asian American leadership, which are conveyed as contrasting with “ideal” Western styles of leadership (p. 129). Literature on Asian American student leadership casts Asian American leaders as heavily influenced by “traditional Asian values” of interdependence to family, interpersonal harmony, and Confucian ideals of deference to authority, which make it difficult to
express emotion and bring up difficult topics (p. 121). Chung interviews several Asian American student leaders about their experiences at an American university. Using grounded data methods, she highlights experiences of racism in the daily experiences of several Asian American student leaders that contribute to perceptions of their competence and activity as leaders. For instance, she demonstrates how the repeated expectation of interviewees to recruit and speak for the entire Asian American community led them to feel alienated from the group and concomitantly to decrease their level of participation. Chung emphasizes that the behaviors of the interviewees did not stem from purported “Asian” values, but instead were understandable responses to microaggressive racism in their social contexts.

Chung situates her data within the overlapping contexts of the university where she conducts the interviews, previous conceptions of Asian American student leadership, and the history of anti-Asian racism in the United States. Importantly, in confining her analysis to the relatively small context of a specific university setting in the United States, Chung is able to interpret the data as a co-constructed process of her own experience in the university and the information that she collects from the interviewees. Adopting a reflexive position, she also explicitly positions herself in relation to the interviewees, “I encountered and reencountered my realities through the narratives of the interviewees. In addition, I recognize that their stories are represented through my interpretations” (p. 122). This explicit statement both makes the reader aware of her position and allows him/her to interpret the data according to this context. At the same time, her own awareness of her position signals that objectivity is not attainable, and that her own awareness is part of the matrix of these interviews. In short, she recognizes and takes responsibility for her own place in knowledge-making.
Further work in reflexivity might incorporate an ongoing inquiry into the complicity of psychology’s and psychologists’ deeply embedded assumptions about Asian American culture and people. Writ large, psychological studies need to explicitly incorporate racial issues into their notions of Asian American “culture.” Race has been neglected from these discussions for a variety of reasons. As I highlighted in the introduction, race and culture have largely been understood as external social forces that act unidirectionally upon the individual (Aron & Starr, 2014; Dalal, 2001; Wachtel, 2014). Such conceptions ignore the very powerful racial and racist mechanisms that play out interpersonally and intrapsychically, which reciprocally inform social dynamics. In other words, focusing on the social over the psychological aspects of race neglects how “social relations live at the heart of psychical dynamics and that the complexity of those dynamics bespeaks a wide range of complicated, conflictual, interlocking emotions” (Cheng, 2001, Melancholic Responses, para. 3). Understanding these psychological dimensions of racism will illuminate the sneaky, complex ways in which everyone becomes ensnared into the conundrums of race.

This lack of theorizing of the psychological aspects of race and culture contributes to a curious relationship between the two terms. Race, unlike culture, describes a socially shared set of assumptions associated with people’s phenotypes and implies a hierarchy between racial groups. However, culture and race are often used interchangeably in mainstream psychology, with Phinney (1996) even suggesting that the term race be subsumed into the term culture (Betancourt & López, 1993; Helms & Talleyrand, 1997). This confusion may indicate larger ambivalence in psychology about race that is insidiously reinforced in cross-cultural psychology (Markus, 2008). While on the surface, cross-cultural/ethnic and racial studies tend to occupy explicitly separate camps within psychology, closer examination reveals that they may be
implicitly related in complex ways. For instance, the individualist-collectivist binary has been mostly explored in cross-national comparisons between North American/European and Asian/Latin American/African nations and in cross-ethnic comparisons between White and minority groups within the United States (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). While the make-up of these comparison groups is ostensibly determined by so-called “cultural” or “ethnic” differences, these divisions are perhaps more accurately defined by an implicit hierarchical racial dichotomy between White and not. Thus, characterizing racial differences as “cultural” or “ethnic” may be underplaying the social hierarchies inherent in racial frameworks.

Further complicating matters, distinguishing race from culture with respect to Asian Americans presents unique challenges. Asian American racial socialization involves a widespread implicit assumption that Asian Americans are culturally and geographically bound to Asia, often more so than to America. There may be a kernel of truth to this assumption for many Asian Americans. At the same time, assumptions about Asian Americans’ foreignness can easily become fodder for overgeneralizations. By and large, the real, complicated psychological experiences of being Asian American, of trying to tease apart racial stereotype from cultural identity, remain largely unarticulated in psychology. The next chapter begins to unpack some of the hidden histories, mechanisms, and dilemmas informing the ambivalent positions of Asian American racial identity.
CHAPTER 3

ASIAN AMERICAN RACIALIZATION:
LIMINALITY, INVISIBILITY, AND AMBIVALENCE

Asian Americans are doubly absent in racial discourse. As discussed in the last chapter, race is largely absent from discussions of Asian Americans, which tend to be cast in cultural and ethnic terms. Asian Americans are also collectively absent in discussions of race, which is largely organized around the Black-White binary, the dominant structure of American racial politics. More recently, “Brown” has been added to this racial color spectrum to include South Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. Even within these revised racial categories, Asian Americans—most closely associated with the derogatory color Yellow—continue to occupy a peculiar outsider position in racial politics. They are excluded from both the Black/Brown-White binary and the oversimplified structural positions (i.e., disempowered and powerful, respectively) it often symbolizes.

Asian American racial identity has long been ill-defined; they have been given various racial labels—Black, White, non-White, “Indian” (i.e. Native American), Chinese, and Japanese—depending on legal and political contexts over the course of American history (Alcoff, 2002). As the Chinese population grew in the mid-19th century, there was confusion over how to place it into extant racial categories, and classifications were often strategic in nature. For example, based on a trial in which a Chinese man’s eyewitness testimony was submitted to convict a White man of murder, the California Supreme Court declared that Chinese people were “Indians” (i.e., Native Americans) in 1854 (Alcoff, 2002). The Chinese man’s non-Whiteness led his testimony to be excluded and the White defendant to be freed. Some years later, separate categories for people of Asian descent began to be carved out. In 1860, California added “Chinese” as a response category on its census, becoming the first state to recognize any
Asian response category and officially differentiating members of the Chinese population from Blacks and Whites; other states followed ten years later (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). In 1927, an official national consensus was reached when the U.S. Supreme Court declared Chinese people non-White, thus subjecting them to segregationist laws. By 1980, the first “Asian American” racial category was added to the census and included the current ethnic subcategories: Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Other Asian (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012).

This crossing back-and-forth between categories represents the liminality characterizing much of Asian American racialization, an in-betweenness that is both taxing and slippery. This existence on the peripheries is most evident in the model minority thesis, the widespread belief that, in contrast to other racial minority groups, Asian Americans have achieved a high level of academic and economic success in America (approaching and sometimes surpassing Whites). In this influential schema, people of Asian descent are precariously positioned as a kind of minority and a kind of White. They are denied full “minority” status because of perceptions of academic and economic success and denied full “White” status because of racial difference.

This chapter will bring to bear a psychological perspective on this suspended state, highlighting its historical referents and its braided individual and collective meanings. I first outline the model minority myth’s emergence in relation to the yellow peril and Civil Rights movements. With this context in mind, I will demonstrate how these ambivalent dynamics of Asian American racialization are imperceptibly reproduced, particularly in psychology. Addressing the blind spots in psychological literature, I discuss the metaphysical significance of “Asian eyes” in Asian racial and ethnic identity. In particular, I focus on the functions of racial stereotypes of unsociability and competence, and their interrelations with cultural identity. I
conclude with a discussion of Asian American news anchorwoman Julie Chen’s eye surgery as a case study that exemplifies the ambiguities, perils, and bodily manifestations of Asian American identity.

**Model minority myth, yellow peril, and civil rights**

Since its inception in the mid-1960s, the model minority myth has been hugely influential, casting Asian Americans as a hard-nosed, docile group of people whose diligence, frugality, and sacrifice has led them to high economic and educational attainment and achievement of the American Dream. Corollaries of the myth include the implications that Asian Americans exhibit low crime rates, few psychological needs, are apolitical, and are perceived as “honorary Whites” (Kawai, 2005; Pyke & Dang, 2003; Takaki, 1989; Tuan, 1998; Wu, 2002).

Despite its popularity, the myth has been extensively debunked as an inaccurate representation of the Asian American population on many counts. It is largely based on selective characteristics of a small portion of the Asian American population and falsely homogenizes roughly 17.3 million people of various ethnicities, immigration circumstances, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and personalities, among other factors (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim & Shahid, 2012). From an economic standpoint, the Asian American population is somewhat bifurcated. One group earns an above average salary and another portion lives in poverty at around the same rate as Whites (both 11.6 percent nationally) and slightly below the national average of 14.1 percent (McCartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). The higher median income of

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7 This figure includes: According to OMB, “Asian” refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It also included 2.6 million people who self-identified as Asian in combination with one or more other races.
Asian Americans compared to White Americans, which is often used to confirm the model minority myth, is also misleading for several reasons. Asian American families tend to have more income earners (both spouses and adult children who have stayed in the home longer) than White families and cluster in urban areas with higher costs of living, such as San Francisco and New York City (Takaki, 1989; Wu, 2002).

Contrary to the related belief that Asian Americans are generally psychologically well-adjusted, the extant epidemiological studies on Asian American mental health indicate that rates of psychopathology among Asian Americans do not appear remarkably low, with some subgroups at higher risk than the general population for suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety (Chu & Sue, 2011; Lee, Juon, Martinez, Hsu, Robinson, Bawa, & Ma, 2009; Leong, Leach, Yeh, & Chou, 2007; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Sue, Cheng, Saad, & Chu, 2012; Sue, Sue, Sue, & Takeuchi, 1995). Additionally, there is overwhelming evidence of the underutilization of mental health services by Asian Americans as a whole, making this population not only needy, but underserved (Chu & Sue, 2011; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Sue et al., 1995 Sue et al., 2012). This service utilization gap will be further explored in Chapter 5.

Despite efforts to present a more nuanced picture of the Asian American population, however, the model minority stereotype persists in overt and covert forms. Some of the reasons for its continuing influence lie in the collective functions the myth has historically served, even before its explicit emergence in the 1960s. In the mid-19th century, Chinese immigrants who arrived in America were termed a "yellow peril," characterized as unassimilable, dangerous, disease-ridden, and heathenistic hordes who posed a threat to the American economy and way of life. These attitudes were codified into restrictive laws that denied Chinese immigrants the rights

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8 Some of the studies in this paragraph include South Asian Americans.
to become citizens, vote, own property, or to marry. At the same time, their labor was exploited by White Americans who paid them lower wages than White laborers to do the same work, inciting resentment from White laborers. In this context, the precursors of model minority discourse were employed to neutralize domestic racist and exclusionary practices. Pro-Chinese defenders engaged in efforts to allay anti-Chinese (and by extension, anti-Asian) fears by “discussing various facets of Chinese civilization and by depicting the Chinese as a hard-working, harmless people” (Chan, 1996, p. 364).

One prominent example is George Seward, a diplomat to China who vocally opposed restrictions on Chinese immigration. Seward (1881) wrote a volume entitled “Chinese Immigration” that launched a two-pronged attack on yellow peril. First, he emphasized Chinese immigrants’ positive contributions to the railroad, farming, and manufacturing industries. Second, drawing on White Americans’ observations of Chinese immigrants, statistics, and his own analysis, Seward challenged predominant opinions that Chinese immigrants posed a vicious threat to American laborers and the economy, were secretly setting up their own government in America, and were naturally resistant to American customs. To do this, Seward established a view of Chinese immigrants in California as “a peaceable people, easily governed, whose forms of vice are of a less malevolent kind than those of White men, and less dangerous to the peace of a community” (p. 219). While Seward repeatedly emphasized that Chinese immigrants were a heterogeneous group, he strategically highlighted their common “faithfulness at work, their peaceable tendencies, their sobriety, etc.” in order to offset the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes (Seward, 1881, p. 210). Strongly foreshadowing current incarnations of the model minority myth, Seward also cited low incidences of crime and admittance to asylums relative to the Chinese population to further support his view of Chinese immigrants as exhibiting culturally
informed docility and quiet acquiescence. Such well-intentioned public relations efforts provided an important counterpoint to the dangerous images of Chinese immigrants at the time. Unfortunately, Seward’s efforts were largely unsuccessful in their stated aims. The Chinese Exclusion Act, the first federal immigration policy that prohibited immigration on the basis of nationality, was passed in 1882, effectively stopping Chinese immigration to the United States. The arrival of Japanese immigrants was similarly restricted with the 1907 signing of the Gentlemen’s Agreement. With the passage of these laws, yellow peril fears were dormant for several decades (Takaki, 1989).

The passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, an extension of the ongoing Civil Rights movement, overturned these anti-Asian immigration laws, ushering in a second wave of Asian immigrants to America. This group of Asian immigrants was a more heterogeneous population in terms of country of origin, assimilation, acculturation status, immigration status, and familial and individual variables. Furthermore, one group of these immigrants tended to be of higher socioeconomic and education status than the first wave of immigrants, partly because U.S. immigration laws favored highly educated, specialized workers.

The remnants of pro-Chinese advocates’ work from the late 1800s subtly influenced the image of these new Asian immigrants as a model minority. The model minority phrase first appeared in relation to Asian Americans in Petersen’s (1966a) New York Times Magazine article “Success story: Japanese American style” about the diligent work ethic and “totally unaided effort” of Japanese Americans that helped overcome racial discrimination in contrast to other “problem minorities” (p. 20-21). Later that same year, Petersen (1966b) published another article in U.S. News and World Report called “Success Story of One Minority in U.S.” that chronicled the achievement habits of Chinese Americans. Harkening back to the 19th century pro-Chinese
scholars, these articles appeared to celebrate this select group for their ostensible cultural values of hard work and sacrifice critical to their success.

The view of Asian Americans as model minorities reflected a shift toward more positive attitudes, a welcome reprieve from the hostile stereotypes of the 19th century. However, the yellow peril sentiment did not completely disappear. Akin to a palimpsest, model minority discourse was written over the yellow peril and the two discourses continue to be complexly and intimately connected in the contemporary racial landscape. For instance, building off Lee (1999) and Okihiro (1999), Kawai (2005) proposes a dialectical rendering of the yellow peril and model minority discourses, which become more or less salient depending on interpenetrating international, domestic, and racial contexts.

These two intertwining discourses also serve a protective function for the integrity of American nationhood in matters of both immigration and race. The model minority myth neutralizes yellow peril fears and makes Asian American groups appear non-threatening so that they can remain in the country, albeit under terms of conditional acceptance. At the same time, Asian American identity is also used as a tool to preserve the integrity of domestic racial hierarchies, uphold a colorblind stance, and corroborate the myth of meritocracy (Cheng, 2001; Kawai, 2005; Okihiro, 1994). For instance, conservative news anchor Bill O’Reilly’s recently argued that the existence of “Asian privilege,” success earned through keeping families intact and valuing education, substantiated his denial of White privilege and systematic racism against Blacks in the United States (O’Reilly, 2014, August 26).

The model minority and yellow peril discourses also operate in more pervasive and ironically more insidious ways. Kim (1999) schematizes the mechanisms of this ambivalent inclusion toward Asian Americans in her model of racial triangulation of Asian Americans
between Blacks and Whites. Kim elaborates a “field of racial positions” that maps Asian Americans, Blacks, and Whites on two axes: superior/inferior and insider/foreigner (p. 107). In this schema, Blacks are cast as inferior and insider and Asians as superior and foreigner. Through historical analysis, Kim (1999) demonstrates that the racialization of Asian Americans has occurred in relation to both Blacks and Whites on these axes through the processes of “relative valorization” compared to Blacks and “civic ostracism” compared to Blacks and Whites (p. 107). Thus, the American public simultaneously lauds Asian Americans as the “model minority” and marginalizes them as perpetually foreign. At the same time that Asian Americans are being touted as having achieved the American Dream, they fail to achieve full assimilation because of their implied unassimilability, exoticism, inscrutability, and racially marked difference.

This exclusion masquerading as inclusion has a number of costs for Asian American individuals in relation to those of other racial groups. Asian Americans are often expected to be unconditionally grateful for access to the American Dream, yet kept from achieving it because of their physical and presumed cultural difference from the implicit White American norm. This “contradictory racial complex” can also create tension between Asians and other minority groups, such as Blacks and Latinos, who have lower average levels of socioeconomic and academic success, and who are not as frequently conferred “honorary White” status (Xu and Lee, 2013, p. 1364). Consistently placed on the periphery of more clearly delineated categories, Asian Americans are often placed in a state of “suspended assimilation” that carries with it a host of social and psychological consequences (Eng & Han, 2000, p. 671).
**Psychological blind spots**

In the context of mainstream psychology, the contradictory dynamics of Asian American racialization are not often explicitly elucidated. Instead, they are expressed in barely perceptible slippages. For example, in an insightful article, Markus (2008) sketches out the sociohistorical context of psychology and race, highlighting the field’s ambivalence and general avoidance of race and ethnicity. She identifies the field’s lack of a coherent and integrated theory of race and ethnicity and outlines several propositions toward this end. Markus notes that race and ethnicity are “dynamic sets of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices” (p. 661). Although the two terms are often conflated, she emphasizes that they have important differences. She writes that racial categorizations are defined by others, implicate discrepancies in power between groups, and are constructed and reproduced by social systems and institutions. In contrast, ethnicity refers to group identity that is predominately defined by group members. These group members are thus presumed to embrace and identify with assumed qualities of the group. In short, she defines differences in “societal worth” as racial and “differences in frameworks of meaning, value, and ways of living” as ethnic (p. 661). Markus states that in contrast to racial discrepancies, ethnic ones do not presume a hierarchy between groups. She warns that while any group can be analyzed as a racial or ethnic group, how these comparisons are understood should be made cautiously to avoid reproducing racial hierarchies. As an example, she warns that differences between Blacks and Whites most likely indicate racial differences because the groups occupy differential amounts of power and prestige. As a point of contrast, Markus cites that comparisons between Whites and Asians/Asian Americans yield what can be safely and accurately understood as “ethnic differences” because both groups are presumed to be of similar status. Despite her insight into many of the racial biases in psychology,
she demonstrates a meaningful blind spot in her conceptualizations. Although Markus sets out to clarify the terms “race” and “ethnicity,” in using Asian Americans to exemplify an “ethnic,” as opposed to a “racial” group, in line with the model minority myth, Markus falsely assumes that Asian Americans are on par with Whites in terms of power and prestige. Markus’s assumption, however, is misguided on several counts.

First, even in education, where Asian Americans are believed to have achieved success, they are subject to subtle discrimination. Beginning in the late 1970s, Asian American students with high GPAs and SAT scores who were denied admission to selective colleges made claims of “negative action,” racial discrimination limiting the admission of Asian Americans to universities (Kidder, 2005; Kang, 1996). They charged that, based on their equal or superior qualifications (as measured by high GPAs and SAT scores), they were being subject to more stringent admissions criteria than they would if they were White (Kidder, 2005; Kang, 1996). In response, college admissions boards argued that Asian American students were not “well-rounded” enough or were overly invested in technical fields like math and science (Wu, 1995; Tsuang, 1989). Though there may be a kernel of truth to this for some of these students, this explanation may also serve to justify larger collective discrimination. The discrimination against Asian American students may represent a contemporary form of yellow peril in which college admission boards fear being overtaken by an Asian American majority, whereas a White majority in universities is acceptable.

Further supporting the existence of subtle discrimination in education, Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh (2015) conducted a large-scale field experiment exploring racial discrimination in academia. The experimenters sent identical emails from prospective doctoral students with ethnicized names (e.g. Chang Huang and Mei Chen to signal male and female Chinese students,
respectively) to 6,548 tenure-track professors in several academic fields (business, education, human services, health sciences, engineering and computer sciences, life sciences, natural sciences, social sciences, math, humanities, and fine arts). The emails inquired about a face-to-face meeting with the professors and the researchers measured response rates and times. They found that women and minorities received statistically significantly fewer responses than White males and that Chinese and Indian students were the most discriminated against groups.

Markus’s assumption also relies on a narrow definition of power as access to material resources, specifically money and education. However, power is implicated in racial politics in many ways. The assumption that Asian Americans have achieved power in these regards—in itself only arguably true for a subset of the population—obscures the many forms in which Asian Americans, even those who have achieved academic and economic success, experience racism. This may manifest in various forms, such as stereotyping, media and political invisibility, microaggressions, racial slurs, discrimination in school and the workplace, and hate crimes.

Compounding the invisibility of these experiences of racism, discussions of racism of other minority groups often involve issues of class, homelessness, incarceration, and violence, which are more clearly consistent with the conventionally accepted notions of racism as a social and institutional phenomenon. In contrast, Asian American racialization more directly engages several conventionally psychological arenas—interpersonal interactions, a compromised access to individuality, repressed expressions and representations of subjectivity, and notions of a suppressed and deficient internal life. Thus, Asian American racism is enacted largely within and between individuals. Yet, until recently, and as Markus’s (2008) assumptions can attest, psychology has tended to neglect the interpersonal and psychological aspects of racism, further marginalizing Asian Americans from racial discourse. These compounding layers of invisibility
make anti-Asian racism particularly prone to unacknowledged enactment and can hinder collective salutary efforts. In an effort to make these issues salient, the next sections will review some of the often contradictory psychological aspects of Asian American racialization, including the dimensions of stereotypes characteristic of the model minority myth and its confusing overlap with cultural identity.

“Asian eyes” and unsociability

Further highlighting Asians’ marginalization in racial discourse, the eyes, rather than the skin, take precedence in defining Asian American racial identity. A physical feature that frequently, but not exclusively, occurs in Asian Americans—the epicanthic fold (or monolids, as opposed to double eyelids)—often serves as a shorthand visual marker of the Asian American racial group. Brown, Dane, and Durham (1998) established some empirical evidence for this association. They asked 73 participants of different races to rate the importance of different facial features (eyes, nose, hair, cheeks, forehead, mouth, skin color, ears, and eyebrows) and their characteristics (color, shape, placement on face, and size) in determining a person’s race. Four-fifths of the participants were asked to make their ratings as if they were deciding whether a target was of a specific race (i.e. “African, Asian, Caucasian, or Hispanic”) (p. 297). The other fifth of the participants were asked to make their ratings in reference to an unspecified target as if they were “trying to figure out the race of a person” (p. 297). Although in general, skin color was the most used feature to determine race, for Asians, eye shape and size were used at a significantly higher level than they were for an unspecified target.

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9 Exactly what makes an eye visibly “Asian” is a source of contention: epicanthic folds, originally described as “Mongoloid,” are not unique to people of Asian descent (they can appear in Native Americans, Nordic people, etc.) and an estimated fifty percent of people of Asian heritage have double eyelids.
Facial recognition literature supports the notion that how we perceive others’ facial features influences our interpretations of their emotions and this appears to vary based on racial group (Zebrowitz, Kikuchi, & Fellous, 2010). For example, Korean faces have been judged by White Americans to appear more competent, less dangerous, less expressive, and less likeable than White faces (Zebrowitz, Bronstad, & Lee, 2007; Zebrowitz, Kikuchi, & Fellous, 2010). Thus, there may be a link between facial features, particularly those commonly associated with certain racial groups, and racial stereotypes. For instance, Blair, Judd, Sadler, and Jenkins (2002) found Afrocentric features (defined as coarse hair, dark skin, wide nose, and full lips) in African American faces were more associated with negative African American stereotypes. Their work suggests that people may have an idea of prototypical facial features characteristic of racial groups and may implicitly associate these more strongly with the stereotypes of that group.

In the absence of empirical research directly investigating connections between facial features and Asian American racial stereotypes, we might speculate about what Asian faces collectively embody by considering the broader significance of the eyes. Humans rely heavily on visual input to process, understand, and maneuver through the world (Tomkins, 1963/2008). Beyond helping us to see and perceive the world and others around us, the eyes also serve rich interpersonal functions. As the proverbial window to the soul, eyes are a passageway or boundary between people in reality and in the imagination. In collective fantasy, eyes reveal something to us about what we imagine the internal state of the other person to be; we imagine we can see into another by looking into their eyes. At the same time, we reveal aspects of our emotional lives through our eyes, by expressing, receiving, and interpreting affect and by attending to the objects that capture our interest. These postulations have found support from neuroscientific literature as well. Although the mechanisms are unclear, functional imaging
studies demonstrate that eye contact in humans activates the network of neural structures, often termed “the social brain,” that are foundational to human social interaction and communication (Senju & Johnson, 2008, p. 127).

In this context, the assumption that Asians have “different” eyes has subtle, meaningful implications for how people of Asian descent are seen, interpreted, constructed, and imagined. So-called “Asian” eyes are often perceived to be small and narrow and slurs about “slanted” and “squinty” eyes are often employed as racially derogatory epithets toward Asians and Asian Americans (Tchen & Yeats, 2014; Zebrowitz, Kikuchi, & Fellous, 2010). Figuratively, a narrow eye may imply a compromised ability to see others and a limited passageway into a person’s soul (Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004). Thus, the narrowness may connote the lack of a fully formed subjectivity and impairment of social connection. People of Asian descent may instead be merely looked at, implicitly objectified, with their eyes marking their visible Otherness. These connotations are manifest in a variety of stereotypes of Asian and Asian American people—for example, the submissive geisha and self-effacing and emasculated males—as emotionless, passive, and lacking capacities to connect socially (Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005; Wong, Owen, Tran, Collins, & Higgins, 2012). As a function of the model minority stereotype, these permutations of unsociability are often paired with perceived competence, and the two constructs are often placed in opposition to one another. On the one hand, Asian Americans are viewed as highly competent in school and work settings (Berdahl & Min, 2012; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Ho & Jackson, 2001; Wu, 2002). This competence, however, is often stereotypically perceived to be at the expense of certain psychologically valued qualities and interpersonal skills, which are coded as a lack of warmth, passion, individuality, leadership qualities, assertiveness, or in its extreme form, “a human soul” (Berdahl & Min, 2012; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske,
2005; Wu, 2002, p. 68). To further elucidate this issue, I will review two articles that empirically examine the relationships between the perceived competence and sociability (understood as warmth, dominance, and individuality) of Asian Americans (Berdahl & Min, 2012; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005).

Berdahl and Min (2012) conducted four related studies to unpack the relationships between three dimensions of Asian American stereotypes: dominance, warmth, and competence. They hypothesized that lack of warmth and heightened competence are descriptive stereotypes (i.e. beliefs about what members of a racial group are like), whereas non-dominance is both a descriptive and prescriptive stereotype (i.e. a belief about what members of a racial group should be like). Building on research about prescriptive gender stereotypes, they postulated that prescriptive racial stereotypes arise from “historic social roles and inequalities and function to preserve those roles and inequalities” by triggering negative social repercussions and discrimination if they are violated (p. 141).

In the first study, they asked 152 volunteers (57% of East Asian ancestry, 20% White, 23% other race/ethnicity) from a paid participant pool at a large North American research university to rate the degree to which a randomly assigned hypothetical Asian North American or White person was competent, warm, or dominant on Likert-scale assessments. As hypothesized, Asian North American people were rated as significantly more competent, colder, and less dominant than their White counterparts. In their second study, 169 different volunteers from the same participant pool were asked to rate societal values of how desirable it would be for an Asian or White person in North America to be competent, warm, or dominant. Results of this

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10 Berdahl and Min’s study did not include Pacific Islanders or people of Southeast Asian descent.
study supported the authors’ hypothesis that being dominant was significantly less desirable for targets of Asian descent than for White targets. They found no differences in warmth or competence ratings between groups. Thus, the authors concluded that while competence and coldness are descriptive stereotypes that are unrelated to social desirability, non-dominance is a prescriptive stereotype with potentially negative consequences if violated.

Studies 3 and 4 explored these potential negative consequences in workplace settings. In study 3, 178 undergraduate participants in management courses were asked to read a human resources record of a fictional consulting firm employee, which included the employee’s name, descriptions of his/her skill competencies, and comments from the employee’s supervisor. The employee records varied by name (first name was Jane or Mark, last name was Sutherland or Wong) to suggest variations in gender and race.

The comments from the supervisor either connoted dominance or non-dominance. The comments in the dominant employee condition stated:

[Mr./Ms. last name] is a proficient employee who perseveres until the task is done. [S/he] has a firm and assertive demeanor and likes to take the initiative on ideas and projects. [Mr./Ms. last name] is not afraid to express [his or her] opinions in meetings or make requests of [his or her] team members. [His or her] coworkers report that [s/he] is a considerate colleague. (p. 145).

The non-dominant description was:

[Mr./Ms. last name] is a proficient employee who perseveres until the task is done. [S/he] allows coworkers to take charge in making decisions and goes along with what the team decides. [S/he] rarely expresses disagreement with others and is willing to let others take the lead on projects. [His or her] coworkers report that [s/he] is a considerate colleague.
Based on this information, participants were asked to rate their impressions of the employee’s warmth, competence, and dominance, and how much they would like to work with him/her.

The results revealed no main effect of employee race or gender on likability. The study found that nondominance was preferred in both Asian North American and White employees and that dominant Asian North American employees were significantly less liked than the dominant White, nondominant White, and nondominant Asian American employees. This study suggests that dominant people of Asian descent who violate the prescriptive stereotype of nondominance may be less accepted by others and may suffer social consequences.

Berdahl and Min’s fourth study provided further support for this theory. They analyzed survey data from 150 employees in government-sponsored community service centers. Employees were asked to rate their own competence, warmth, and dominance, as well as the frequency of racial harassment they had experienced in the previous two years. Consistent with the authors’ predictions, Asian North American employees who were dominant experienced more racial harassment than other employees, including the 21% of the sample who were non-Asian racial minorities. They also found that warmth in Asian employees also predicted reports of more frequent racial harassment; by contrast, non-Asian racial minorities who were warm reported less racial harassment. The authors suggested that conscious or unconscious efforts to minimize racial discrimination for Asian North Americans through appearing non-dominant or cold may come at the price of being liked by others or attaining power and/or leadership positions, respectively.

Although this evidence and attendant conceptualizations are compelling, several competing hypotheses should also be considered. First, it is possible that warmer and more
dominant employees of East Asian descent may be more aware of or more sensitive to racial harassment, and thus, more likely to report it. The converse, that nondominant or colder Asians may be less likely to report racial harassment because they are less sensitive to it or are hesitant to label it as such, may also be true. The authors also recognized that it is possible (though unlikely, they posit) that racial harassment leads to more warmth or dominance and suggested that longitudinal research could address these concerns. Another possibility is that the 7-item scale used to assess racial harassment was not sufficient to capture other forms of racial harassment more likely to have been experienced by colder, less dominant Asian North American employees.

In their six related studies, Lin et al. (2005) examined how the assumptions of high competence and low sociability in Asian Americans function together in interpersonal interactions. In their first three studies, they developed a new scale for Asian American stereotypes that focused on interpersonal traits, which departed from the relative societal focus of extant scales (Ho & Jackson, 2001; Hunt & Espinoza, 2004). Their resulting Scale of Anti-Asian American Stereotypes (SAAAS) is a 25-item self-report scale based on a model of anti-Asian American prejudice as consisting of dimensions of excessive competence and deficient sociability. Sample items for excessive competence were “Asian Americans can sometimes be regarded as acting too smart” and “A lot of Asian Americans can be described as working all of the time” (p. 46). Items measuring dimensions of deficient sociability included “Asian Americans do not interact with others smoothly in social situations” and “Most Asian Americans

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11 Lin et al. (2005) did not identify the ethnic composition of their samples.
12 The initial 131 items generated by 76 Amherst undergraduates included items along three dimensions: competence, unsociability, and foreignness. The foreignness dimension was omitted because too few of the items met the .5 criterion for rotated factor loading.
are not very vocal” (p. 46). In studies 4 and 5, authors found evidence that scores on the SAAAS predicted actual social behaviors; among 222 participants, low-prejudice scores (rating Asian Americans as neither excessively competent nor unsociable) on the SAAAS were correlated with more friendships with Asian Americans and openness to Asian American cultural experiences.

Finally, in study 6, they tested their “system justification” hypothesis. This theory posits that Asian Americans are ostensibly perceived as competent and deserving of success based on an ideal of meritocracy, however, perceptions of their low sociability may indirectly serve to justify interpersonal rejection, hostility, and envy of Asian Americans for this competence and success. Thus, if Asian Americans are unliked because of their unsociability (and not for their competence), then they are deserving of being unliked and rejected based on their individual personality traits and the system of meritocracy is not threatened. Thus, according to the system justification theory, perceptions of unsociability are more likely to predict interpersonal rejection or unlikability than perceptions of excessive competence.

To test this theory, authors analyzed data from 76 undergraduate participants who were first asked to complete a number of filler items. During these tasks, three Asian American female confederates entered the room, one after the other, and each made a brief announcement about different topics. To assess negative impressions of and attention to the confederates, participants were then asked to rate each confederate on personality scales and to match the content of each confederate’s announcement to the confederate. Finally, the participants completed the SAAAS.

As predicted, the authors found that low sociability ratings on the SAAAS were correlated with more negative impressions of the three Asian American confederates. Additionally, participants who rated the confederates as having lower sociability made more mistakes when asked to match the content of announcement to the speaker, suggesting that they
paid less attention to the announcements and, according to the authors, had more negative impressions of the confederates. High competence did not reach significance in predicting negative impressions or poor attention, but the relationship was in the predicted direction. The authors interpreted these results as support for their system justification hypothesis because negative impressions of the speakers were predicted by perceptions of unsociability of Asian Americans, but not by excessive competence.

Some limitations and other possible interpretations should also be considered. The authors posited that another alternative to the system justification hypothesis is that the competence itself predicts discomfort in others. The authors discredited this possibility because unsociability was a stronger predictor of negative attitudes towards the confederates. However, this conceptualization may still be valid when the results are considered on a micro-level. For instance, given that the measures were self-report and that negative attitudes toward Asian Americans were embedded in the items measuring excessive competence (e.g. “Asian Americans enjoy a disproportionate amount of economic success”), it is possible that participants may have been reluctant to report their own envy and hostility. Thus, they may have unconsciously used unsociability to hide and disarm these feelings. Another limitation is that although Lin et al. (2005) tried to test their theories in real-life interactions by including actual Asian American confederates, there was very little interaction with these people. This may have helped to tap into the participants’ attitudes because there was an absence of interfering knowledge of the confederates’ personalities. However, the fact that participants witnessed the confederates making announcements and not performing a task requiring mastery may have more easily elicited evaluations of sociability than of competence.
Finally, there may be other ways in which perceptions of unsociability relate to perceptions of presumed success and competence of Asian Americans (Ho & Jackson, 2001; Lin et al., 2005; Maddux et al., 2008). For instance, the perception of unsociability may function to attribute Asian Americans’ supposed success to unimaginative, technical knowledge. Thus, “Asian competence” may be implicitly seen as less valuable or legitimate in comparison to success generated from more generally valued qualities in American culture, such as innovation and individual agency. The devaluation of “Asian competence” compared to these “American values” may serve to disarm, neutralize, or deny feelings of envy, resentment, or threat toward Asian Americans (Lin et al., 2005; Wu, 2002).

**Racial stereotype and cultural identity**

Focusing more on the subjective experiences of being stereotyped, Chu and Kwan (2007) conceptualize stereotypes as co-constructed relational processes that are internalized and influenced by the people that they purportedly describe. They examined links between sociability and individuation in self-perception and meta-stereotypes—a person’s beliefs about how others view stereotypes of his/her own group—in groups of European Americans and Asian Americans (Vorauer et al., 1998). The authors asked 143 Princeton students (69 Asian Americans, 74 European Americans) to complete questionnaires on self-perceptions and meta-stereotypes of sociability and individuation. Sociability was operationalized as referring to “social graces and conviviality” (p. 272). Assessment items were adapted from the SAAAS to reflect a first-person point of view for self-perceptions (e.g. “I tend to be shy and quiet in a group context”) and third-person points of view for meta-stereotypes (e.g. “Others tend to view my ethnic group as shy and

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13 Chu and Kwan (2007) did not identify the ethnic composition of their samples.
quiet in a group context”). Individuation was conceptualized as “acting in such as way as to make oneself distinct in the social context” and was assessed using a 12-item questionnaire created by Maslach, Stapp, and Santee (1985) (Chu & Kwan, 2007, p. 272). A sample self-perception item for individuality was “I am willing to give an informal talk in front of a small group of classmates or colleagues” (Chu and Kwan, 2007, p. 272). The authors postulated that meta-stereotypes stem partly from target group members’ own beliefs and self-perceptions, in addition to the expectations imposed upon them by others.

The authors found that Asian Americans rated themselves as lower on individuation and sociability than European Americans rated themselves. Asian Americans reported that they believed others had low expectations of individuation and sociability for their ethnic group. The reverse was observed in European Americans; they reported that others had high expectations of individuation and sociability for their ethnic group. Thus, European Americans viewed themselves as less individuated than they thought others perceived them to be, suggesting that they may be stereotyped as individuated. Asian Americans viewed themselves as similarly individuated to how they thought others saw their ethnic group. In relation to sociability, both groups saw themselves as more sociable than they thought others perceived their racial groups, but this difference was significantly more exaggerated for Asian Americans. This finding suggests that Asian Americans viewed their own sociability as higher than that suggested by the unsociable stereotype, but still generally lower than European Americans’ self-reports of sociability.

Chu and Kwan (2007) point out that meta-stereotypes can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which, without meaning to, Asian Americans confirm stereotypes of unsociability. They suggest two mechanisms by which meta-stereotypes may perpetuate the unsociability
stereotype. First, they theorize that Asian Americans who believe others will see them as unsociable may be pessimistic about interaction with members of other races and avoid social contact, which may then confirm the perception of unsociability to others. In conjunction, Asian Americans may be afraid that they would confirm the unsociability stereotype, which may inhibit their social capacities, particularly with people of different racial groups. The authors appropriately identify some ways in which the unsociability stereotype against Asian Americans are both constructed by self and other and bi-directionally influence behavior, unpacking some of the complex ways that stereotypes are relational phenomena and interact with cultural influences. One of the uncomfortable truths about these self-fulfilling prophecies is that the behaviors that they describe are, in fact, unsociable, meaning that no matter what the mechanisms, stereotypes can sometimes be accurately descriptive.

Both groups had moderately positive correlations between self-reported individuation and self-reported sociability, with no significant differences between groups in the size of these correlations. This finding suggests some relationship between these two constructs when self-reported across racial groups. With respect to meta-stereotypes, however, sociability and individuation were positively correlated for Asian Americans and this correlation was significantly higher than it was for European Americans. This suggests that for Asian Americans, but not as much for European Americans, individuation and sociability are seen as “inseparable expectations” that others hold for them (Chu & Kwan, 2007, p. 274). The authors attributed this link between meta-stereotypes of sociability and individuation to an internalized “collectivistic cultural imperative” while functioning in an “individualistic culture” that pressures Asian Americans not to individuate. They suggest that they may also feel under pressure to disconfirm the unsociable stereotype, which is made even more difficult by their collectivist cultural values.
In making this argument, Chu and Kwan (2007) rely on a binary opposition between collectivistic Asian culture and individualistic American culture, based on Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) assumptions. Extrapolating from this framework, they assume that Asian American individuals’ collectivistic influences stem from Asian culture. However, in attributing the collectivist influences to Asian culture, Chu and Kwan (2007) neglect the ways in which American society-at-large, its institutions (e.g., the field of psychology), and interpersonal interactions also reinforce this perceived collectivism, which may itself be a form of stereotype, even if it is endorsed by many Asian Americans.

As discussed in Chapter 2, empirical literature suggests that Asian Americans are more collectivistic than White Americans on self-report measures (Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier, 2002). The origins, reinforcements, and functions of this finding, however, are much less clear. Given that the empirical IND-COL literature does not support this finding as consistently between people in Asian countries and White Americans, then it is possible that the relative collectivism of Asian Americans may be partially attributable to Asian culture and partially attributable to the interacting influences of American society. For instance, as Berdahl and Min’s (2012) studies suggest, individuation may be discouraged for Asian Americans because it may be met with racial harassment or envious backlash. These complications make it difficult to locate collectivist imperatives squarely in “Asian culture” (itself mediated through geographical distance, family, interpersonal relationships, media representations, institutions) when there are oppressive social injustices and racial stereotypes (also mediated through the same lenses), that reinforce and mirror it. In other words, subtle racism may be masquerading as a collectivistic cultural imperative and vice versa.
The inability to disentangle the two, and the inherent frustrations of trying to and coming up short, reveals an important aspect about Asian American experiences, where “subjectivity as a discrete realm has been fundamentally compromised” (Cheng, 2001, Race and psychoanalysis, para. 12). In a hallmark quotation from her novel *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston captures this dynamic:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (Kingston, 1975/1989, p. 5)

Applying the quotation to psychological approaches to dimensions of difference that seek to deconstruct them into separable categories, Cheng asks: “how do we separate ontic and familial ‘selves’ (an assumption and a preoccupation inherited from psychoanalysis) from the subject positions invented by society, culture, and politics?” (Cheng, 2001, Race and psychoanalysis, para. 13).

Cheng (2001), Chu and Kwan (2007), and Kingston (1975/1989), are all describing the uncomfortable overlap between culture and race for Asian Americans and that these aspects of identity that can never be fully delineated from one another. This is, of course, to some extent true for everyone. However, the impossibility of teasing out what are strategies to overcome racial discrimination, from racial stereotypes, and from cultural identity, has historically been central to Asian American identities as defined by themselves and others. For example, Asian Americans began to organize politically around a more coherent pan-Asian American identity (including all Asian cultural subgroups) in the 1960s, a strategic move to present a unified voice in the context of Civil Rights activism. On an individual level, adopting the pan-Asian American
identity had a number of benefits, granting Asian Americans potential sources of ethnic and cultural pride, a sense of shared community and solidarity, and a certain cultural legibility and visibility. While these efforts were somewhat successful in creating a political coalition, the Asian American movement also unwittingly undermined Asian American political and cultural visibility by reinforcing yellow peril rhetoric of Asian Americans as a monolithic, homogenous group. This ran the risk of homogenization and stereotyping, and, more perniciously, of justifying those acts by granting them an air of “authenticity” because the label was endorsed by those to whom it refers. In these ways, access to a personal ethnic identity can insidiously make Asian American people complicit in their own subjugation. As Cheng (2001) notes, the indistinguishability between race and culture for Asian Americans powerfully “informs us that social and psychological cathexes work in collaboration. Social forms of compulsion and oppression may have their hold precisely because they mime or invoke ontic modes of identification” (Cheng, 2001, Race and psychoanalysis, para. 13).

A recent high profile instance illustrates and corporealisizes the reflexive loops between Asian American cultural and racial identity. On a recent episode of The Talk, Asian American anchorwoman Julie Chen disclosed that, at the beginning of her career, a producer questioned how relatable she was to the community, citing the city’s small Asian population. Her employer added, “because of your heritage, because of your Asian eyes, I've noticed that when you're on camera, when you're interviewing someone you look disinterested and bored because your eyes are so heavy, they are so small” (Mitropoulos & Silverstein, 2013, September 11). Chen developed an obsession with her eyes, re-watching videotapes of herself and trying to determine whether her boss’s perception was correct and that he “had a point” (Mitropoulos & Silverstein, 2013, September 11). In the midst of her turmoil, an agent told her that he could not represent
her unless she got plastic surgery on her eyes and that doing so would guarantee her commercial success.

She began to consider undergoing blepharoplasty, a plastic surgery procedure that converts monolids into double eyelids. This surgery is an increasingly common practice, and is a concrete manifestation of how racialized shame attached to the eyes has taken hold in many Asian American women’s minds. In Kaw (1993)’s ethnographic study, Asian American female participants who elected to have double eyelid surgery expressed “a racial ideology that associates their natural features with dullness, passivity, and lack of emotion” (p. 74).

Chen’s family was “divided” about her choice (Mitropoulos & Silverstein, 2013, September 11). Her parents supported her decision, while half of her family “threatened to disown her” for denying her heritage. In parallel with her family’s dynamics, Chen’s disclosure polarized the wider public as well. Her cast-mates responded in ostensible support of her decision, one of them telling her that she looked “fabulous” and “more expressive” (Mitropoulos & Silverstein, 2013, September 11). Publicly, many media outlets interpreted her surgery as trying to look “less Asian.” Similarly, backlash from members of the Asian American community accused her of denying her heritage.

Chen’s eye surgery dramatizes the tough choices, uncomfortable compromises, and conditions for visibility for Asian Americans who live under the constant specter of racial stereotypes. Choosing or rejecting those conditions is far from simple, involving complicated calculations of individual and collective costs and gains. In keeping her “Asian eyes,” Chen was met with vicious racial discrimination and threats of professional limitations. In her attempt to work around those racial stereotypes and pursue professional success, she was charged with sacrificing her cultural identity and heritage.
The discussion reveals as much about Chen as it does about the contexts in which she, and all of us, are operating. The subtext of messages of support was that her decision to change her appearance was the “right” one, and that assimilating, or, becoming “less Asian” is an acceptable price to pay for success, visibility, and recognition. On the other hand, charges from the broader public as well as parts of the Asian community that she was trying to look “less Asian” implied that she was betraying her race by caving to mainstream norms. This is further complicated by the reality that Chen’s career began to take off after her surgery.

Chen’s decision and the controversy surrounding it powerfully demonstrate how powerfully binary thinking can defend against acknowledging more destabilizing truths. The polarized responses of acceptance of her decision on the one hand, and derision for her betraying her heritage on the other, skirt the uncomfortable ambiguities of Chen’s “struggle,” as she called it, with the racism she experienced, with the choices she made, and the mixed emotions of living with their repercussions (Mitropoulos & Silverstein, 2013, September 11). Focusing on the question of whether she should have or should not have had the surgery keeps us from confronting the ways in which we are all complicit in Chen’s predicament in which she was placed. Ultimately, in neglecting these complexities, we are blinded to the ways that Asian American faces and minds have been imbued with collective anxieties and the painful psychological toll of those emotional investments.
CHAPTER 4

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AND ASIAN AMERICANS

In the second half of the twentieth century, the manifestations of racism shifted from overt to more insidious and subtle forms (e.g., aversive, modern, and symbolic racism) (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988). In parallel, psychological discourse shifted from conceptualizing racism as a politicized, abstract, macro-level phenomenon of structural and institutional inequality, to emphasizing how racism inconspicuously informs people’s concrete lived realities, individual identities, and interpersonal interactions (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja & Sue, 2013; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014). In this context, the term racial microaggressions has usefully advanced a psychological and interpersonal understanding of racial discourse in a number of ways. Racial microaggressions are verbal or non-verbal mundane communications that subtly and often invisibly convey messages of aggression, invalidation, or denigration associated with race (Pierce, 1970; Sue et al., 2007). The term resonated with the experiences of many racial minorities, creating a collective identity based on burdens that had long been unnamed, and unacknowledged, and borne mostly by individuals.

In this chapter, I will briefly review the racial microaggressions literature as it pertains to Asian Americans, identifying both its strengths and areas for future development. In order to address some of the gaps, I will introduce a relational understanding of racial microaggressions that compares their transmission to a virus. This conceptualization emphasizes the conscious and unconscious functions of microaggressions that are often at odds, as well as the vicious circles—unconscious, self-perpetuating relational patterns—that play a crucial role in their dissemination.
(Wachtel, 1999; 2014). Finally, stemming from this model, I will offer several concrete recommendations for revising these interpersonal patterns and sharing the burdens of racial microaggressions against Asian Americans more collectively.

**The topography of racial microaggressions**

Though the term microaggressions first appeared in Pierce's (1970) work, the publication of Sue et al.’s (2007) article instigated a renewed interest in the term and a proliferation of microaggressions research in psychology. The authors presented a taxonomy of racial microaggressions that has now become a template for many other studies of racial microaggressions (e.g., Ong et al., 2013). Working from semi-structured qualitative interviews with a variety of racial minority participants, Sue et al. (2007) divided microaggressions into four categories: microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, and environmental microaggressions. Similar to overt racism, microassaults are conscious and explicit efforts on the part of the perpetrator to put down another person by invoking denigrating messages associated with his/her racial category (e.g., the use of racial slurs). Environmental microaggressions include subtle denigrating messages about a racial group that arise from one’s macro-level context (e.g., policy, law, racial minority invisibility).

Microinsults and microinvalidations, which capture the original spirit of microaggressions as distinct from overt and structural racism, will be the focus of this discussion. Both microinsults and microinvalidations shape interpersonal interactions in barely perceptible ways, have insidiously harmful effects for recipients, and are often unconsciously enacted by perpetrators (Lin, 2011; Sue et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2014). Microinsults are “subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Microinsults might involve telling an Asian person...
s/he is too quiet, thus implicitly pathologizing a culturally informed style of communication that may differ from a “dominant/White culture as ideal” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276; Wong et al., 2013).

Microinvalidations unconsciously “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). For example, explicitly asking an Asian American, “Where are you really from?” or complimenting his English are microinvalidations because the perpetrator assumes that an Asian American is a foreigner, even if he is not. These types of microaggressions appear to be particularly psychologically harmful because, unlike overt microassaults, they are often only noticeable to the recipient, requiring him to perform a series of mental and emotional operations to process the meanings of the event, consider the intentions of the perpetrator, and respond, all while possibly feeling strong emotions. Adding insult to injury, even when a recipient participates in this guesswork, there is usually no resolution as to whether the “perpetrator” intended to make a hostile remark or was commenting on one’s race. The lack of clarity around racial attributions in these situations can leave recipients vulnerable to harmful internalizing emotions (e.g., shame and guilt for reacting to a seemingly “innocuous” incident), rumination, and isolation (Nadal, 2011; Ong et al., 2013; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011).

Microinvalidations are particularly relevant to the dynamics of anti-Asian racism. In their study of Asian American participants, Ong et al. (2013) found that microinvalidations were the most commonly occurring type of microaggression for their sample of Asian Americans (which included Asian Indians) arising on 14% of the study days and comprising 75.2% of the reported incidents. Furthermore, consistent with the ambivalent and hidden nature of anti-Asian racism, microinvalidations are more likely to contain mixed messages (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino,
They can be on the “surface” positive messages, such as ascription of (high) intelligence, but they simultaneously convey an implicit message about being treated differently from others (and as implicitly inferior) because of race (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009).

Despite their detrimental impact, there is limited research on microaggressions specific to Asian Americans, with extant studies focusing on the content of commonly experienced microaggressions. Using data generated from two focus groups of Asian Americans (4 Chinese Americans, 2 Filipino Americans, 1 Korean American, 1 Japanese/German American, and 1 Asian Indian/European American), Sue et al. (2009) identified eight major themes of microaggressions against Asian Americans: being treated like an alien in one’s own land; the ascription of intelligence; denial of racial reality; exoticization of Asian American women; invalidation of interethnic differences; pathologizing cultural values/communication styles; second class citizenship; and invisibility. Of these, denial of racial reality, exoticization of Asian American women, invalidation of interethnic differences (which includes both the homogenization of ethnic differences and assuming similarities between Asian individuals), and invisibility were unique to Asian American participants as compared to other racial minorities. As a complement to exoticization of Asian women, the theme of immasculinity or desexualization may be a common and unique theme of racial microaggressions for Asian American males (Eng, 2001; Lin, 2011; Ong et al., 2013). Other studies found that the most common microaggressive themes for Asian Americans (including South Asians) were alien in one’s own land/perpetual foreigner, assumptions of model minority, exoticization, and assumptions of similarity (Forrest-Bank & Jensen, 201; Lin, 2011; Ong et al., 2013).

In large measure, microaggressions research has succeeded in raising awareness of
recipients’ perspectives of microaggressions with the ultimate aim of lessening or eliminating microaggressions (Sue, 2003). Still in its relative incipiency, racial microaggressions literature has a number of areas for development, particularly with respect to Asian Americans. First, much of the literature adopts a categorical approach to microaggressions based on Sue et al.’s (2007) original taxonomy. Actual microaggressions are much more complicated than these categories would suggest and this methodological homogeneity neglects meaningful connections between types and themes of microaggressions. For instance, Nadal, Escobar, David, and Haynes’s (2012) study, conducted with Filipino American participants, identified the microinvalidation theme, use of racist language, to refer to derogatory anti-Asian slurs used either directly toward or in the presence of a Filipino person. One of Nadal’s participants stated that a friend introduced the participant to others by casually remarking that he “liked to call him ‘rice paddy’” (p. 166). Such an incident is an oblique delivery of an overt racial slur, constituting an interesting hybrid between microassault and microinvalidation and an interpersonal dynamic worth unpacking.

The communicator is sending a provocative message of hostility and aggression through the racial slur, and, at the same time, disavowing those affects (evident in the casual, overtly jocular tone and public forum). The additive effect for the recipient is a stunning mix of confusion and surprise that can be paralyzing. The participant in the study described his evocative visceral reaction: “And immediately there was like a chill went through my entire body. And, I kept thinking I cannot believe he just said that!” (p. 167). Such a confusing mix of emotions places the recipient in a double-bind. On the one hand, staying silent could seem like he is tacitly agreeing to be denigrated; on the other, speaking up runs the risk of being further invalidated (particularly if the perpetrator is cavalier about the comment) and criticized as being
overly sensitive. This interpersonal process speaks to the widespread tolerance of anti-Asian racism and, as discussed in Chapter 3, the covert ways in which Asian Americans have long been recruited into their own subjugation. These interpersonal and affective processes and broader collective meanings are not sufficiently captured in the microaggression categories and themes, which tend to focus more on content.

Secondly, stemming from the previous climate in which subtle racism was largely unnoticed by those who unknowingly inflicted it, the categorical approach was largely focused on validating the phenomenological experience of recipients (usually People of Color and other minority groups) in an attempt to tip the balance of power. However, explicating the identification of microaggressions without a nuanced understanding of their mechanisms or strategies for amelioration, is not sufficient for change, and, in some cases, can actually forestall it. One consequence of this approach is that it can turn the commission of microaggressions into shameful and guilt-inducing acts or personal failings, rather than collective shortcomings. This shameful connotation is highlighted in the “aggression” part of the term itself, which implies an intent to harm. It is unclear whether this is always, or even typically, the case in microaggressions. Furthermore, the accusatory connotations of the term can make microaggressions difficult to broach for both Whites—who may harbor fears of appearing racist and confronting their own complicity—and People of Color who may fear being criticized as oversensitive (Sue and Constantine, 2007; Sue, 2013). These fears ultimately promote silence and foreclose dialogues, especially among mixed-race company (Sue et al., 2010; Sue, 2013).

In some ways, the microaggressions literature has become another iteration of the adversarial People of Color-White binary, wherein POCs are seen as victims and Whites as perpetrators. This view is partially supported by Sue and colleague’s (Sue et al, 2007; 2009; Sue,
Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008) popular definition of microaggressions as exclusively received by racial minorities. Some empirical research lends some support for this notion, showing that racial minorities experience microaggressions at a significantly higher rate than Whites (Forrest-Bank & Jensen, 2015). However, while receiving racial microaggressions appears to be a common aspect of most racial minorities’ lives, Whites can experience microaggressions and POCs can also commit microaggressions, even against people of the same race (Jernigan, Green, Helms, Perez-Gualdron, & Henze, 2010; Murphy-Shimegatsu, 2010). Furthermore, such a black-and-white view does not incorporate intersecting (age, class, ability, gender, and sexual orientation) and multiracial identities into account (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Sriken, Vargas, Wideman, & Kolawole, 2011). More fully reconfiguring these binaries requires a relational approach that recognizes the interdependence between recipient and perpetrator and that race alone does not dictate who occupies these roles.

**A social virus**

In order to illustrate my relational approach to microaggressions, I open with a de-identified vignette from my experience as a psychology trainee. During morning rounds on a hectic, inpatient substance abuse unit in an urban hospital, the multidisciplinary staff was sharing relevant updates about each patient on the roster. The staff included social workers and substance abuse counselors (a mix of White, Latino, and Black males and females) who acted as case managers and mostly White psychiatrists and medical residents. The unit chief who ran the meeting was an Asian American woman in her late 30s/early 40s. I was the only other Asian American staff member and only psychology trainee (and representative of the psychology field) in the room.
In a rare occurrence, there was not one, but two Asian American patients on the unit, both of whom were admitted for recovery from heroin dependence. A group discussion ensued about the fact that the two knew each other through family friends. One White female substance abuse counselor in her 60s remarked, “I thought they were brother and sister.” The Asian American unit chief retorted, “Why? Because we all look alike?” Taken aback, the White counselor stated, “I cannot believe you just said that to me.” The unit chief continued the meeting, then paused and offered to the counselor, “I’m sorry.” The White counselor did not say anything and the meeting continued as usual. Red-faced, I stayed silent, stewing in anger, confusion, and shame.

The above vignette illustrates the many complicated factors that arise in microaggressive situations, their inherent relationality, the emotionally driven interpersonal cascades that they can incite, and ultimately, the impossibility of conclusive resolutions. Several questions arise regarding the interaction, many of which ran through my head after witnessing the interaction. Was the counselor’s initial comment a veiled racist remark (categorized as invalidation of interethnic differences/assumptions of similarity), or was she merely voicing an innocuous observation? Was the unit chief’s reaction to the counselor’s initial comment justified or was she being overly sensitive? Was the counselor justified in her response to the unit chief, or was she overreacting out of her own shame and anger? On the one hand, a case could be made that the White counselor microaggressed the Asian American unit chief and, indirectly, the Asian American patients and me. In her unself-conscious manner in which she speculated about the patients being siblings, she assumed similarity or relatedness between them, seemingly based on their racial similarities. On the other hand, it could also be argued that, in a tit-for-tat manner, the Asian American unit chief microaggressed the White counselor with her retort. Did the White counselor mean to microaggress the unit chief, and, more importantly, does that matter when
faced with the fact the unit chief’s feelings were likely hurt, and that these painful feelings had been similarly provoked in the past? In short, I was left to wonder: who microaggressed whom, whose responsibility was it to repair such a situation, and what would such a repair even look like? These are typical of the kinds of questions that microaggressions may provoke in their participants and observers, driving gestures toward a fantasied, hypothetical resolution by choosing whose responses are more “justified,” who has been more victimized, who is to blame. However, as Schact (2008) aptly states: “whenever two people engage in an unconsciously hostile interpersonal dance, neither party is merely a perpetrator, and arguably, in meaningful ways both are victims” (p. 273).

A relational approach to microaggressions seeks to understand this choreography as ego-dystonic and each partner’s role as embedded in nested sociohistorical, macro-, meso-, and micro-level contexts. For instance, the above vignette occurred in several overlapping contexts, all of which informed the interaction. The exchange occurred against the backdrop of the historical homogenization of Asian Americans reminiscent of yellow peril discourse that was used to exclude and dehumanize Chinese immigrants by White Americans, and more contemporary reiterations of those events. Macro-level contexts—the nation, the mid-Atlantic region, and the urban environment—and meso-level contexts—the hospital, organization, and disciplinary dynamics between substance abuse counseling and psychiatry—all affected the events that transpired. Finally, micro-level contexts relevant to the particular situation include staff dynamics and hierarchies, events that occurred in previous staff meetings, the personal relationship and histories between the two parties, and the individual learning histories of each party. All of these levels of experience are operating simultaneously in any interaction and are mutually constitutive of one another; thus, the distinctions between them are merely artificial.
Taking into account these mutually constitutive realms, I propose a model of microaggressions as relational events akin to the transmission of an incurable virus. Microaggressions are conduits by which society’s ills (i.e. messages of structural inequalities, histories of oppression, exclusion, denigration, and dehumanization) are imperceptibly transmitted between people. In this model, all people are “infected” through socialization, which exposes the parties involved to messages attached to their own and others’ phenotypes. How each person experiences the virus also varies largely—but not exclusively—according to their role as perpetrator or recipient. These roles, however, are not clear-cut; they are not mutually exclusive or trait-like, nor are they necessarily attached to racial categories. A person’s role varies according to situation, and even from moment-to-moment within a single exchange. I will sketch out the main contours of the development and vicissitudes of each role in order to elucidate the mechanisms of the model.

Recipients of microaggressions are symptomatic hosts, born into racialized bodies prone to infection because of sociohistorical events. For example, an Asian American’s phenotype is akin to a diathesis that makes him vulnerable to certain infections; it is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. Infection necessitates exposure to sociohistorical events and racialized ideas as mediated through social interactions and institutions. Once infected, the virus takes on a life of its own within a recipient’s body and mind, depending on a variety of risk and protective factors (e.g., less or more social support around racism, respectively) and contextual factors (e.g., geographical region). The virus differently inhabits and manifests in each individual recipient as symptoms, an idiosyncratic emotional cocktail of shame, resentment, anger, and confusion. The accumulated experiences of receiving racial microaggressions and associated symptoms can,
over time, create a sensitive pathway that, without intervention, may make the recipient even more vulnerable to subsequent exposure and infection.

Like the recipient, the perpetrator has been exposed to the virus by living in society and absorbing noxious messages through various means—_institutions, media, and other people. However, the perpetrator is comparable to an asymptomatic carrier, largely unaware of this infection, but continuing to hold and transmit its symptoms to others. Thus, the carrier holds and transmits society’s ills unawares, but is no less infected than the recipient. The carrier does not take into account the other person’s reality because s/he does not have conscious access to it. Without awareness of the infection, the carrier cannot put the appropriate prophylactics or salutary measures in place and thus, continues to enact microaggressions.

The virus metaphor has several implications for conceptualization and intervention. It demonstrates how everyone is implicated—unequally and uniquely—in the transmission and manifestation of microaggressions. Put another way, microaggressions put into relief the experiential gaps between different racial realities dictated by our phenotypes and our past experiences. Our different measures of responsibility and vulnerabilities are associated with these individual differences and shifting intersections of privilege. In the vignette, for instance, the White counselor was older and occupied a lower professional position of power than the unit chief, but was in a position of privilege with her Whiteness.

The virus metaphor also de-emphasizes the motivational aspects of microaggressions, instead framing microaggressions not as unconsciously hostile, but as byproducts of the varying degrees of access to others’ experiences. While the White counselor likely did not mean to convey something about the unit chief personally or about Asian Americans, her comment was unconsciously invalidating of the Asian American unit chief’s (and my) vulnerabilities stemming
from a long history of emotionally fraught “exposures” to similar experiences. The microaggression may have been painful for the unit chief because it evoked past shame-inducing experiences. Adding insult to injury, the counselor did not acknowledge that her comment might have been painful in light of these experiences, presumably because she was unaware. At the same time, somewhere in the mix, the White counselor may have been articulating some of her own unconscious, dissociated reactions of hostility and resentment (as well as those of some of the rest of the staff’s) to having an Asian American professional superior.

Finally, this model illustrates how the burdens of microaggressions are unevenly borne by recipients because of the lack of conscious access to certain histories more collectively. Yet, the idea that we are all infected shows how we are all implicated in the transmission, and thus, are all responsible for shifting these dynamics. Thus, even if people do not have conscious access to other people’s racial realities, they are not absolved from taking responsibility for learning or understanding them, or, in other words, in understanding the ways they, too, are inflicted with social disease.

**Phenomenological experiences, vicious circles, and complementarity**

One of the most common microaggressive themes experienced by Asian Americans is being seen as an alien in one’s own land or a perpetual foreigner (Huynh et al., 2011; Ong et al., 2013; Sue et al., 2007). Commonly cited examples of this microaggressive theme include being asked where one is “really” from (either explicitly or implicitly conveying a belief that the recipient is not “truly” American), or being complimented on his/her mastery of the English language (Huynh et al., 2011; Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004; Lin, 2011). I will use this theme to sketch out the phenomenological experiences of microinvalidations for carrier and recipient, their dynamic interconnectedness, and some of the counterproductive consequences that often result.
The gap between racial realities is especially pronounced in this type of microinvalidation, making it both particularly tricky to understand and particularly illustrative of the insidious mechanisms of microinvalidations. Generally speaking, asking a person where s/he is from is seemingly innocuous, a perfunctory part of getting to know a person. The question, “where are you from?” can seem utterly benign to a carrier, especially because it is often asked of Whites without ceremony. However, it can take on much more sinister meanings to an Asian American recipient. It is likely filtered through a long individual history of similar microinvalidating experiences fortified by unarticulated remnants of more obvious xenophobic yellow peril sentiments. Several studies demonstrate overwhelming evidence that widely held implicit attitudes that being Asian and American are diametrically opposed, and that Asian Americans are less American than Whites (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos & Heng, 2009; Devos & Ma, 2008; Devos & Mohamed, 2014; Huynh et al., 2011; Lin, 2011). Remarkably, the link between American nationality and Whiteness is strong even in the face of explicit evidence to the contrary. One study found that participants implicitly associated White British actress Kate Winslet more readily with American cues than Asian American actress Lucy Liu (Devos & Ma, 2008). In this context, to Asian Americans, the question “Where are you from?” is often received less as an invitation than an exclusionary message, repackaged from an earlier era, and redelivered in contemporary times.

Like the recipient, the carrier’s identity is shaped by history and repeated interpersonal interactions with others, an often neglected, yet crucial part of why and how microaggressions are perpetuated. It follows that if one is faced with what she perceives (and/or society and its institutions portray) as a perpetual foreigner, she might easily slip into an “ambassador” role. In this role, a carrier might go to great lengths to welcome a foreigner, to demonstrate an
appreciation and knowledge of what the carrier imagines to be his culture. These interpersonal maneuvers ostensibly militate against exclusion of the perpetual foreigner through explicit or implicit mention of a culturally recognizable reference to Asian cultures or people, with the assumption that the recipient will recognize and connect to it. I term these transactions *ambassador microinvalidations*.

Ambassador microinvalidations fall into two main categories. The first type, “origin questions,” usually takes the form of questions that elicit, in different ways, access to the recipient’s ethnic identity, and insinuate that the recipient is un-American. Common variations include questions such as, “What is your nationality?,” “Where are you (really) from?” or hazarding a guess of ethnic identity based on facial characteristics and/or name (e.g., “Are you Chinese?”). Sometimes the direct question, “What is your ethnicity?” also falls into this category, not because of its manifest content, but because of its inappropriateness in certain contexts, particularly upon first meeting someone. In these situations, the question can strike an odd note for recipients for two reasons. First, it can feel like an overly familiar question that demands more information than befits the relationship, particularly ethnicity is not a benign topic for many Asian Americans. Second, the overfamiliarity may be experienced negatively, amplified by the long history of similar experiences for the recipient.

The “cultural reference” type is often, but not always, deployed as a follow-up to the origin question. In the cultural reference microinvalidation, once a carrier has been made aware of the recipient’s ethnicity, she makes authoritative claims to knowledge or admiration of the recipient’s “home culture” (implicitly discounting the recipient’s claims to American culture). Common manifestations of this type are discussions of trips to that particular Asian country or the appeal of its cuisine, making unapologetic and unqualified generalizations about the
characteristics of its people, or mentioning a person of the same ethnic origin as the recipient. Ambassador microinvalidations encompass several microinvalidation themes, such as Sue et al.’s (2009) alien in one’s own land theme. Nadal’s (2012) study described a microinvalidation theme he termed "assumption of universal Filipino experience," which referred to a carrier attempting to use participants’ ethnicities as “common ground to form a connection” with the “underlying assumption that all Filipinos could relate to the same experiences” (p. 167-168). For example, a White American woman, upon meeting one of Nadal’s female participants, told her that her best friend was Filipina and that her Filipina housekeeper was “gentle and kind” (p. 168). Despite having different content, these microinvalidation themes may share similar unconscious emotional and interpersonal functions for the carrier and provoke similar reactions in recipients, which I will further elaborate.

By and large, ambassador microinvalidations are not conscious attempts to marginalize Asian Americans; in fact, they are more likely driven by the opposite intent: a conscious way to connect. The microinvalidating aspects occur between the lines. As a result of socialization, encountering the recipient’s Otherness could trigger several dimensions of discomfort. First, the socially derived and widely held implicit perception of radical difference associated with Asian faces and names could provoke multi-layered anxieties. The carrier may be concerned about the perception that she does not know the presumably different rules and customs at play when interacting with a person of Asian descent and thus may be nervous about how to connect. To alleviate this feeling of uncertainty, the carrier may fall into information-seeking with origin questions, with the implicit expectation that knowledge of ethnic origin may dispel some of this anxiety and partially orient the carrier by making the other person somewhat “knowable” or “locatable.” Simultaneously, it may offset fears of appearing racist by sending the message that
the carrier understands that not all Asians are alike. The carrier may expect that she *should* have some knowledge about what the carrier perceives as the recipient’s culture, which only compounds her anxieties. Thus, if she does happen to have some knowledge, no matter how irrelevant to the recipient’s experience, she may appear overeager to demonstrate what she sees as her expertise in order to dispel her multi-determined internal discomfort.

This well-intentioned attempt to connect may paradoxically backfire. The carrier uses the Asian American’s visible racial/ethnic identity as an opportunity to forge a connection, presumably in the hopes of fostering a mutually beneficial cross-cultural experience. However, the exchange can be a one-way affair in several ways. First, the carrier has made an (often false) assumption that the recipient has a direct connection to Asia. Second, the carrier has recruited the recipient into an interaction about the recipient’s racial phenotype. Because the recipient cannot choose to expose or hide his phenotype, the recipient then loses control over whether or not he wants to bring up this topic. The ambassador microinvalidation may also trigger matrices of sociohistorical and personal associations that amplify the intensity of the moment. As discussed earlier, microinvalidations are extremely common for Asian Americans and are likely to have become structured into the recipient’s identity, but made no less painful. Additionally, as discussed in the last two chapters, the repeated attribution of a horde mentality, Orientalism, and Eastern collectivism to Asianness has established a contradiction between Asian group identity and individuality. In the face of the carrier’s anxieties, the recipient’s phenomenological experience of the question/reference is not acknowledged. For all of these reasons, ambassador microinvalidations can have the effect of interrupting, rather than facilitating, the interpersonal process by making the recipient’s Asian group identity salient at the momentary expense of the recipient’s *personhood*. 
In the face of these implicit demands and residue of past experiences, a microaggression may initially register to a recipient as a sudden visceral reaction (e.g., a wince, jolt, or “chill”), strong emotions, and rumination (Nadal, 2011, p. 167). The recipient is then faced with a “catch-22” of how to respond in the face of a number of countervailing impulses (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). The recipient may be simultaneously experiencing feelings of shame associated with identified difference and group homogeneity, anger at the carrier, and guilt for feeling angry despite the carrier’s well-intentioned attempt to connect. Recipients are placed in an uncomfortable dilemma: they are asked to confirm the carrier’s claim to the recipient’s heritage through engagement in the conversation or to deny it by protesting or identifying the negative impact of the microinvalidation.

On one end of the spectrum, engaging in the conversation despite internal discomfort avoids a potentially uncomfortable interpersonal interaction for both parties and makes the recipient legible to the carrier. However, accepting the carrier’s terms also reinforces the idea that the recipient’s claim to America is contingent on certain stipulations—for example, to offer up one’s racial and cultural difference and to allow it to be defined by others. The price of this choice is that the recipient is left experiencing his microaggressive symptoms alone—at least during the interaction—while the carrier remains unaware of the emotional burden that has been imposed upon the recipient. Of note, the interaction I describe here is different from a person willingly and comfortably engaging in a conversation with the other person about various cultural references. This microinvalidating dynamic pertains specifically to the recipient engaging in silent suffering—he feels uncomfortable in the interaction, but hides it from the other person and does not seek support afterwards.
At the other extreme, an overwhelming amount of anger may spur the recipient to counterattack the carrier for her perceived racism or insensitivity. This strategy might offer the satisfaction of sharing feelings and sticking up for oneself. However, it also has the potential to invite and even seem to justify backlash because it violates the politeness protocol, “a ground rule stating that potentially offensive or uncomfortable topics should be (a) avoided, ignored, and silenced or (b) spoken about in a very light, casual, and superficial manner” (Sue, 2013, p. 666). Such a dynamic may have been evident in the opening vignette.

Each choice—subject to individual and contextual variation—is also influenced by the broad social expectations of the model minority myth for Asian Americans, to be apolitical, unsociable, and unconditionally grateful for access to the American Dream (Cheng, 2001; Eng & Han, 2000; Tchen & Yeats, 2014; Wu, 2002). These expectations place implicit conditions on the acceptability of certain affects for certain people. These racialized emotional rules are invisibly reinforced internally, as in metastereotypes of unsociability and the internal suppression of anger. They are simultaneously reinforced externally, as evidenced by backlash after identifying the negative impact of microinvalidations.

Both silent suffering and angry counterattack are part of vicious circles that drive the perpetuation of microaggressions (Wachtel, 2014). If an Asian American recipient chooses silent suffering, he may be unwittingly reproducing these racialized expectations, condoning the microaggression, and leaving himself to bear his discomfort in solitary silence. Furthermore, he may later experience regret or self-blame for not speaking up about his discomfort. On the other hand, if he resists these expectations by acting on his anger through attack, he is also caught in a circle. Sue et al. (2007) powerfully demonstrate this dynamic in his retelling of a racial microaggression Sue experienced. A White flight attendant asked Sue and his colleague, two
People of Color, to move to the back of the plane in order to more evenly distribute the passengers’ weight, despite having arrived on the plane before three other White passengers in suits. Sue and his colleague both had similar responses, marked by several questions:

First, balancing the weight on the plane seemed reasonable, but why were we being singled out? After all, we had boarded first and the three White men were the last passengers to arrive. Why were they not being asked to move? Were we being singled out because of our race? Was this just a random event with no racial overtones? Were we being oversensitive and petty? (p. 275)

Although Sue and his colleague complied with the request, Sue experienced “resentment, irritation, and anger” (p. 275). As he tried to convince himself not to be angry, his anger intensified:

While I kept telling myself to drop the matter, I could feel my blood pressure rising, heart beating faster, and face flush with anger. When the attendant walked back to make sure our seat belts were fastened, I could not contain my anger any longer. Struggling to control myself, I said to her in a forced calm voice: “Did you know that you asked two passengers of color to step to the rear of the ‘bus’”? For a few seconds she said nothing but looked at me with a horrified expression. Then she said in a righteously indignant tone, “Well, I have never been accused of that! How dare you? I don’t see color! I only asked you to move to balance the plane. Anyway, I was only trying to give you more space and greater privacy.” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275)

The phenomenological intensity of Sue’s anger may have been internally amplified partly because it violated the implicit discouragement of Asian Americans’ anger, as well as his own
internalized version of the rule. Both of these restrictions likely motivated his self-talk to “drop the matter,” which was counterproductive because the restriction ironically compounded his anger. Eventually, his intensifying anger finally erupted in a hostilely delivered message, the content of which was already likely to be threatening to the flight attendant. Sue’s “forced calm tone” may only have amplified the sense of threat, inviting backlash and defensiveness on the flight attendant’s part. Without validation of his reality from the carrier, Sue was left to bear his anger privately and he reported that he “stewed over the incident and it left a sour taste in [his] mouth” (p. 275). Such adverse reactions—both from the flight attendant and Sue’s rumination on his anger—may further discourage the outward expression and compound the internal experience of anger, further widening the gap between recipients’ and carriers’ experiences.

Benjamin (2004; 2006; 2009) conceptualizes such interpersonal enactments as having a doer/done-to dynamic in which people adopt apparently opposite, yet complementary stances, occupying different sides of the same coin. Similarly, Ogden (2004) formulates these two positions as either submission or resistance, subject or object. In these impasses, “each person feels done to, and not like an agent helping to shape a co-created reality” and the two parties are stuck in a stalemate (Benjamin, 2004, p. 9). Aron (2006) uses the metaphor of a seesaw to convey these locked-in, yet unconsciously symmetrical positions. When on a seesaw, the two people are caught in a line and “literally cannot step to the side,” which would create “a triangular space with room to think and relate” (p. 355). Instead, the only available movement is for the two parties to exchange respective positions in which they both “unconsciously recognize that they are locked together in this binary relation, however polarized” (p. 355).

This stance of complementarity, in which “only one person can be right, only one narrative of suffering can exist, only one side can ever be held responsible for injurious actions,”
may have been enacted in the interaction in the opening vignette as well (Benjamin, 2006, p. 139). The Asian American unit chief’s rash response to the White counselor’s comment may have been amplified by strong emotions associated with past microinvalidations. Her defensive reaction fell into the seductive appeal of blaming that oversimplifies the endlessly complicated, ongoing, painful negotiations of microaggressions and momentarily directs the painful emotional symptoms outward. The relief was short-lived, however, as indicated by the unit chief’s remorseful apology, which in itself was only a partial resolution. Thus, the White counselor and Asian American unit chief flip-flopped between one experience of suffering trumping the other, with no space to think or reflect on the interaction or for both narratives to exist simultaneously. Notably, the unit chief was the only one who claimed responsibility while the initial microaggression remained unaddressed and the White counselor’s complicity unacknowledged.

As Benjamin (2006) notes, and as is illustrated in the two frustrating stalemates described above, a simple reversal of “oppressor and oppressed has all too often been the prescription that reproduces the disease,” forestalling opportunities for meaningful, albeit difficult, dialogue (p. 135). These unresolved stalemates often leave carriers feeling confused, blindsided, and unfairly attacked. In the absence of explicit acknowledgement of shared responsibility by carriers, recipients can wind up disproportionately shouldering the emotional burdens of microaggressions. In the midst of racial microaggressions, both people lose their individuality, falling prey to repetitive, socially dictated scripts driven by emotional investments that are deeply entrenched in society, interpersonal interactions, and identity. The next section will propose concrete interventions and conditions for changing some of these scripts.
Revising microaggressive scripts

Revising microaggressive scripts involves breaking out of complementarity and shifting toward intersubjective thirdness. Although conceptualizations differ, intersubjective thirdness is broadly conceptualized within the psychoanalytic literature as space in a dyad characterized by mutual recognition between two subjects with the ability to think and feel together, while seeing each other as being “a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception” (Aron, 2006; Benjamin, 2004, p. 5; Benjamin, 2006; Benjamin, 2009; Ogden, 1994).

Taking these insights to a more collective level, Benjamin (2006) envisions an “expansion of thirdness” beyond individual dyads as involving “repeated experiences of rupture and challenge followed by the negotiation of some version of shared understanding and “reparative experiences of sustaining the tension” between “each partner’s need to preserve his own mental space and his acknowledgement of the other’s perspective” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 140). Benjamin (2004) proposes that this balance requires two crucial aspects. First, she posits that each involved party must take responsibility for their failure and complicity in the complementary stance. Acknowledgement of failures will allow other involved parties to be able to own their portion of the responsibility. Second, she acknowledges that taking on responsibility will require a fair amount of working through “fears of blame, badness and hurtfulness that lead to a simple reversal of the power relations one is trying to oppose” (p. 135-136). In other words, carriers must be able to take on responsibility without attacking themselves or disavowing all responsibility. Similarly, recipients “cannot be relieved of their responsibility to recognize the humanity of the Other” in order to avoid falling into counterproductive complementary positions of victimhood or “reactive rebellion and defiant demand” (p. 136).

Part of freeing up room to think and feel about such charged issues may be cultivating
greater awareness of racially charged power structures, how they arose, and the contours of their everyday, contemporary manifestations, such as racial microaggressions. This awareness should include explicit histories of practices and arrangements of racism, oppression, and exclusion of different groups in the United States. This understanding of racial dynamics should extend beyond Black and White, beyond oversimplified binaries of victim and perpetrator, or the complementarity of the doer-done to relationship, toward intersubjective thirdness (Benjamin, 2004; 2006; 2009). With respect to Asian Americans, it is important not only to be skeptical toward content (e.g., unqualified overgeneralizations), but also to turn a critical eye toward so-called “cultural” attributions and strains of Orientalism in various realms—for instance, in books, television shows, and academic discourse. Cultivating this awareness may help individuals contextualize their roles as carriers or recipients into these histories and potentially recognize potential microaggressions before they happen.

An ongoing, nondefensive, and nuanced engagement in self- and other-learning will help to determine the ways in which we are all both victim and perpetrator. This will require first noticing what internal assumptions about racial groups arise during interpersonal reactions, and without acting on them, to acknowledge and be curious about them. In the moment of a microaggression, remembering the histories and collective attitudes may also create a third point of entry into the interaction. This may potential open up space for thirdness, distance from the difficult emotions of self- and other-blame that may arise, and acceptance of the inevitability of microaggressions when living in a stratified society. Acknowledgement of these histories may highlight that despite each individual’s unique and shifting constellations of visible and invisible power, privilege, disadvantage, stigma, we are all ensnared and partly responsible for the
identification and amelioration of unjust racial dynamics, and each have responsibility both for perpetuating them and for transforming them.

More pragmatically, however, in the throes of microaggressions, people may lose sight of what to do and say and can find themselves falling into automatic, scripted responses. Some authors have provided practical recommendations for addressing microaggressions in therapeutic relationships (Gatzambide, 2012; Keenan, Tsang, Bogo, & George, 2005). However, there is a lack of guidance for handling microaggressions in common social settings or that are specifically tailored to microaggressions against Asian Americans. These social settings are not explicitly therapeutic, yet, depending on how they are handled, they hold potential for some kind of psychological transformation for both parties. Heavily influenced by Linehan’s (2015) and Wachtel’s (2011) clinical approaches, I offer practical suggestions on anticipating and managing emotional responses, and how to craft verbalizations that minimize, avoid, or repair microaggressive damage. To be clear, these suggestions are not, strictly speaking, “therapeutic”; they remain in the realm of normal social protocol. However, they do share with these practical clinical guides an eye toward creating small and important shifts in interpersonal interactions that may elicit change of a therapeutic nature, broadly defined.

I use the two main types of ambassador microinvalidations—origin questions and cultural references—to illustrate these guidelines and, when appropriate, include personal and anecdotal examples. However, these principles may have applicability to a wide variety of microinvalidations. These guidelines are not meant to be prescriptive, nor do they promise to obviate microaggressions altogether. As with all communications, these strategies will work best when consistent with one’s personality, temperament, and the situation at hand. These principles will hopefully jumpstart a process of expanding the repertoire of available options to avoid
slipping into default modes of perpetuating racial microaggressions, and when they do occur, how to transform them into sources of growth, rather than become paralyzed by anxiety, shame, and guilt.

Since a major determinant in the initial steps in handling microaggressions depends on whether one is carrier or recipient, I will outline some respective choice-points, dilemmas, and suggestions for each in turn. Finally, a number of important relational factors, such as role, power dynamic (status in hierarchy), race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, level of comfort with the other person, and competing goals of the interaction, will inevitably influence what to say or do. These infinite permutations are beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is my hope that these recommendations can act as guideposts during these often-destabilizing experiences.

Given their complex and evocative nature, microaggressions do not lend themselves to ideal solutions or easy answers. Breaking out of microaggressive scripts necessitates choice, courage, patience, and practice. Following a different path involves some vulnerability since, like in all interpersonal interactions, there is no guarantee that the other person will hear the message without anger or defensiveness or that the conversation will result in the desired outcome. At the same time, racial microaggressions, though difficult and unpleasant, can also be a significant source of learning. Like therapeutic ruptures, racial microaggressions create distance between people when repeatedly enacted, and hold potential for growth when transformed and repaired (Safran, 1993). Mounting empirical research suggests that therapeutic ruptures are common and that the resolution of therapeutic impasses, in addition to removing blockages from treatment, may actually be an intrinsic part of the change process (Safran, Muran, & Eubanks-Carter, 2011; Safran, Muran, Samstag, & Stevens, 2001). Safran (1993) sees inevitable ruptures in the
therapeutic alliance as “opportunities for negotiating the fundamental issues of human
separateness versus relatedness in an ongoing and creative fashion…to explore and work out
authentic modes of attaining human contact in the face of separateness” (Safran, 1993, p. 22).
For patients, expressing their negative feelings toward the therapist may be corrective and
salutary (Safran, Muran, & Eubanks-Carter, 2011; Safran, Muran, Samstag, & Stevens, 2001).
Capitalizing on this therapeutic potential and increasing the chances of repairing the alliance is
associated with therapists responding in an open and nondefensive manner, acknowledging
responsibility for the interaction, and empathizing with their patient’s experiences (Safran,
Muran, & Eubanks-Carter, 2011; Safran, Muran, Samstag, & Stevens, 2001).

In line with this perspective, these guidelines may offer greater degrees of freedom from
the familiar, repetitive cycles of anger and recrimination on one hand, and excessive shame and
self-blame on the other, thus taking a small step toward shifting racial dynamics from more
adversarial to more empathetic. They will hopefully illuminate more fully racial
microaggressions’ circumstances and consequences, foster bidirectional empathy and recognition
between recipients and carriers, and lead to more refined ways of intervening on an interpersonal
level. Finally, on a more collective level, these guidelines begin to shift these burdens from
certain individuals and groups of individuals to being shared more evenly and collectively
among the population as a whole.

**Carrier: Tolerating discomfort and expanding racial reality**

In general, the carrier is the more privileged party in a number of ways, a position that is
a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the carrier has the power to trigger the microaggressive
interaction and thus has opportunities to intervene before, during, and after a microaggression
has been committed. On the other hand, the number of opportunities can also introduce a series
of emotionally laden traps that can trigger shame, anxiety, and guilt, especially in the face of not
knowing what to say or do. In the face of these strong emotions, avoiding such traps through
indifference may seem especially appealing.

Before an interaction, a carrier may feel like she is tightrope walking between getting to
know someone and offending him. The urge to ask a question, such as “What is your ethnicity?”
or “Where are you from?” or to make a reference to something related to an Asian American
person’s stated or perceived ethnicity may be an early signal of a potential microaggression.
Once such an urge arises, the first decision-point involves whether or not to act upon that urge.
In making this decision, it is important to consider contextual factors as well as internal factors
that may be motivating the carrier to make the comment.

The factors inherent in the conversation may help determine how the comment is likely
to be received. Importantly, not every instance of a person asking an Asian American where he is
from or commenting on his ethnic heritage is experienced as a microaggression. In addition to
idiosyncratic factors of the recipient, whether or not an interaction is interpreted as
microaggressive depends on the quality and hierarchical status of the relationship, and the
manner and timing of the comment. Some conditions that decrease the chances of an interaction
being interpreted microaggressively include the question/comment being germane to the
conversation, the Asian American person verbally or non-verbally indicating that he is open to
speaking about it, or the two people knowing each other very well.

A self-examination of motivations for wanting to know the answer to a question or to
make a comment can be equally edifying. This inquiry will require noticing, but not immediately
acting on, the impulse to speak and then engaging in non-judgmental curiosity toward the
anxieties and emotions elicited. Likely culprits might be a desire to “locate” the other person, to
dispel anxieties about foreignness, or to respond to an internalized expectation to “know,”
domesticate, or contain that foreignness by showcasing cultural interest and knowledge. When
possible, cultural comments should be made out of genuine curiosity, as a way to get to know the
other person as an individual. Using an individual as a way to understand a culture runs the risk
of asking that individual to be an expert on something he is not necessarily an expert on, or does
not want to be an expert on. Furthermore, learning about a culture can be accomplished in other
ways that do not jeopardize interpersonal relationships or marginalize others. Once these
motivations are laid out and the carrier has determined that her motivation arises from genuine
interest, the carrier may want to ask whether satiating the curiosity is worth the risk of a racial
microaggression at this point in the relationship and situation.

If a carrier ultimately decides to proceed with the cultural reference/question, then
another question presents itself: what can the carrier say to the person about his ethnicity without
appearing to co-opt or make assumptions about his relationship to it? Several phrases may help
to couch the carrier’s message as a question rather than a demand. For instance, proceeding the
question with phrases such as “Can I ask...?” or “You don’t have to answer this, but...” These
prefacing phrases help convey an acknowledgement that the topic may be sensitive to the other
person, and give the recipient room to decline and steer the conversation elsewhere. These
should be delivered in a straightforward, polite, but not overly apologetic or “precious” manner.
Another safeguard against microaggressions is to recognize and manage emotional reactions to
the conversation, which are likely to be quick and automatic. For instance, very brief feelings of
shame for being perceived as not knowing or guilt associated with privilege may arise. A desire
to dispel this internal discomfort may drive a desire to exhibit knowledge about Asia. Close
monitoring and tolerance of internal discomfort may be necessary in order to be mindful of these urges without reflexively acting on them.

As the conversation continues, a rule of thumb is to maintain a balance between both parties’ interests and desires. Open-ended questions that inquire into the individual’s relationship to his ethnicity can continue to allow space for the other person to stop or re-direct the conversation. For example, questions such as, “What is that like for you?” will open the conversation and are more likely to be received as genuine interest than co-opting. In contrast, questions that are overly shaped by the carrier’s assumptions, such as, “Are your parents really traditional? Do they take their shoes off at home? A friend of mine was Chinese and her parents were like that” are more likely to be experienced as microaggressive.

After a comment with microaggressive potential has been made, the carrier should be attentive to the recipient’s non-verbal and verbal indications (looking down or away, hesitation in conversation, etc.) of feeling potentially microaggressed. If the carrier feels as if the recipient has felt microaggressed, or notices something within himself that indicates the possibility, she then faces another dilemma: whether to explicitly mention the possible offense. On the one hand, it may feel safer to stay silent and to avoid a potentially uncomfortable interaction for the carrier. On the other hand, mentioning the potential microaggression may be an admission of guilt, vulnerability, and other uncomfortable feelings, but it also has the potential to share the burden of racial microaggressions.

Regardless of one’s structural position in a hierarchy, it is generally easier for a carrier to speak up about a potential microaggression, because she has the opportunity to acknowledge her own actions rather than leaving the recipient to metabolize his feelings and to muster up the energy to compose and deliver an accusation of sorts. However, it is a challenging task, because
it takes time and effort to understand what is happening. Furthermore, carriers may feel at a loss for what to say, walking the thin line between making a mountain out of a mole hill and downplaying its effect.

Upon choosing to explicitly acknowledge the microinvalidation, the carrier should aim to acknowledge the microaggression to the recipient and open up a dialogue about it by gesturing toward the recipient’s experience as well as her own. One tactic is to name the hazard inherent in bringing up the microaggression; for example, one might say, “At the risk of appearing overly sensitive, did what I say just offend you?” The use of play and humor can also help to temper the comment. For instance, a well-placed “Oops!” may smooth over any social awkwardness. Finally, another option is to be straightforward and direct about the microaggression, stating, “I’m sorry, I think I just microaggressed you.” If the person is open to talking about his experience of the incident, the next step is to listen to the other person’s reactions and validate his racial reality. If he is not open to discussing it further, then the carrier should respect the recipient’s choice.

Throughout each step of this process, a significant challenge is tolerating and managing internal discomfort. Realization that one has committed a microaggression may evoke intense feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety. It may invoke inappropriately amplified self-blame or, conversely, defensiveness and anger, especially if the recipient raised the issue. High levels of these emotions may interfere with being able to listen to the recipient’s experience in a productive manner or to accept an appropriate amount of responsibility. In explicitly acknowledging the microaggression, a significant challenge is to manage this internal discomfort, which requires acknowledgment of whatever feelings may arise (e.g., guilt and shame) and associated black-and-white beliefs that may be compounding those emotions (e.g.,
“I’m a bad person because I’m racist”). Consistent with aversive racism, it is natural and understandable to endorse those beliefs and thoughts. However, without intervention, they may be barriers to productive interracial dialogue and action, particularly for carriers (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, 2013). Instead of viewing racial microaggressions as necessarily shameful acts, these interactions can be framed as opportunities for rupture and repair, and an unavoidable part of the current racial realities of America. Adopting such a nonjudgmental stance will allow both parties to have more degrees of freedom to discuss its impact.

In the face of overwhelming discomfort, initial silence may be a wise choice until the carrier has metabolized some of her feelings and has more capacity to listen to the recipient’s experience. Importantly, depending on the relationship between the parties, the carrier may be able to revisit the incident more productively later and with some advanced planning for the interaction. Regardless of whether the carrier decides to explicitly identify the microaggression to the recipient, tolerating and reflecting on this discomfort (alone or in the context of safe relationships) is valuable; it is a small taste of the emotional symptoms that are triggered by racial microaggressions for recipients, which, for many people are a daily occurrence. In tolerating these emotions, the carrier can gain insight into recipients’ experiences and shoulder part of the emotional, collective load of racial microaggressions in a small, but potent way.

**Recipient: Feeling caught and opening other options**

The first challenge in managing the strong visceral and emotional reactions—shame, guilt, anxiety, and rumination—immediately following a microaggression is not to allow them to paralyze the recipient. Often the initial question is whether the recipient has a right to be offended by such a seemingly innocuous, well-intentioned comment or question. This conflict
between a strong bodily and emotional reaction and the cognitive second-guessing of that reaction may be a sign that a microaggression has occurred.

Rather than engaging in the typical self-doubt, understanding microaggressions as embedded in a larger collective experience in which both parties are ensnared can offer other options. Conceptualizing the incident as part of a larger pattern helps to honor the discomfort as indicating something amiss, while also leaving the interpretation of the event somewhat ambiguous. This suspended state can keep the recipient from automatically slipping into the extreme default positions of Catch-22 dynamics: crippling shame, self-blame, and engaging in the conversation with the carrier without reference to the upsetting feelings of the microaggression, or, alternatively, falling into other-blame and lashing out at the recipient. Even if a carrier does respond in a way that feels invalidating, delivering a message to the carrier that preserves the recipient’s self-respect may raise the chances that his perspective will be heard, whether in the moment, or upon later reflection. Within these limitations, recipients can help break out of vicious circles of microaggressions and access their agency, which remains intact despite whatever negative affects may seem to threaten its efficacy in the moment.

The nature of the response should be calibrated to the perceived safety of the situation, a “best guess” based on the recipient’s limited knowledge of the carrier’s idiosyncrasies and an evaluation of his own fears of backlash. This second point is particularly important. Although it is not uncommon to have aversive experiences when bringing up racial microaggressions (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, 2013), these fears can take on an automatic nature and propel overgeneralized avoidance of speaking up in all microaggressive situations. Thus, the recipient bears partial responsibility for breaking out of patterns of avoidance and testing his beliefs about likely reactions from carriers to identifying microaggressions. Additionally, although a carrier
may not respond in the manner that the recipient wishes, her reaction alone does not dictate whether or not the recipient “should” have spoken up.

The response should also reflect an appropriate amount of investment of time and energy according to the nature of the relationship and the recipient’s in-the-moment capacity for vulnerability and emotion tolerance. This is especially important because recipients often suffer the short- and long-term consequences of racial battle fatigue, “the result of constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments” (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007, p. 555). Thus, recipients need to protect themselves when necessary from investing more energy than they are willing or able to give, which would only perpetuate the vicious circle of microaggressions. For example, recipients who are committed to social justice may choose to address and engage in long conversations about the impacts of microaggressions in the context of safe, personal, and meaningful relationships at times when their emotional capacity allows it. However, in the context of passing interactions with strangers, recipients may choose to draw some kind of boundary that would preserve self-respect without sacrificing a significant amount of time and energy that could more effectively be invested elsewhere. The amount of investment is based on a host of factors and is very individual.

Given the repetitive and surprising nature of microaggressions, it can be helpful to generate a variety of responses to commonly received microaggressions in advance. While it is not possible to come up with prepared responses for all possible permutations of microaggressions, this process is helpful on behavioral and emotional levels. From an exposure perspective, planning for microaggressions may help to inoculate the recipient to some of the powerful emotions elicited by microaggressions, providing a sense of stability that makes it
easier to respond in-the-moment and according to the limitations and demands of each particular situation. This is an especially useful exercise to do with another person who can help to generate communications and to perform role-plays to heighten the chances of calm delivery and decrease anxiety. In this spirit, I offer a few ideas as starting points that would need more targeted refinement.

The first two kinds of responses are designed to end the conversation while staying firmly within the confines of social protocol. The first type attempts to do so indirectly, without explicitly mentioning the microaggression or its impact. These responses include deflective strategies, such as changing the subject, or remaining silent, which may be particularly helpful in response to ambassador invalidations of the cultural reference variety. Another variation is to provide a short, perfunctory response to an origin question that slightly subverts the carrier’s implicit expectations. For example, in response to the cluster of questions probing for ethnic origin, a recipient might respond: “My parents are from Taiwan,” or “Maryland.” While both responses are technically true, they each add some information that makes an implicit statement about the question. The first tells the carrier where the recipient’s parents are from, which answers the carrier’s tacit question about the recipient’s ethnicity, but also makes a distinction between the recipient’s origins and his parents’. The latter does not answer the tacit question about ethnicity and truthfully answers the question and stakes a claim to the United States as opposed to Asia, as the carrier might otherwise presume.

The next group of responses acknowledges the carrier’s good intentions while expressing some part of the recipient’s experience of the microinvalidation: “I understand that you are trying to connect, but I am not sure how that is relevant and I would prefer not to talk about it.” Alternatively, in response to a cultural reference, the recipient might state, “I think that you are
trying to relate to me, but I don’t know anything about that [topic].” These strategies attempt to preserve the relationship by framing the microinvalidation as an understandable, but misguided attempt to connect to the recipient. Although it may come across as defensive to the carrier or as if the recipient is “overly sensitive,” the intervention ends the conversation and draws a boundary, which can protect the recipient from taking on the burden of responsibility for making the microaggression into a teachable moment for the carrier. This is an important option to have available as a preventive measure against the aforementioned effects of racial battle fatigue discussed earlier.

The next three kinds of replies attempt to turn the microaggression into a teachable moment with varying degrees of directness. These require a greater amount of time and energy and are designed to jumpstart conversations and/or thinking about the microaggression. Given their quasi-therapeutic nature, these interventions sometimes flout normal social convention and can have powerful salutary effects for recipient and/or carrier.

A direct approach clearly identifies the impact of the microinvalidation on the recipient. For example, in response to an origin question, a recipient might say, “I think you are trying to get to know me, but your question implies that I cannot really be from the United States, which is the only home I’ve ever known.” In response to a cultural reference, the recipient might state, “I’m not sure why you’re telling me that, but I think that you assume that I will connect to it because I am Asian, and I don’t.” These responses require a great deal of courage, assuredness, and conviction, as they may feel risky for the recipient for several reasons. First, they may appear jarring in the context of relationships between relative strangers, where origin questions often arise. Second, they seem to violate the “politeness protocol” by bringing up race in social situations where it is often perceived taboo (Sue, 2013, p. 666). More specifically, such
Interventions may subvert collectively held expectations of passivity stemming from the model minority stereotype. In turn, these expectations may be internalized, and thus, difficult to overcome for the recipient. For these same reasons, they can also be quite liberating and curative. Alienating a relative stranger is a low-risk situation that can also act as an effective behavioral experiment, exposing the recipient to his own anxieties about voicing his experience directly and surviving the outcome, learning which could apply to other contexts. As a bonus, it is also possible that the intervention may stimulate some reflection in the carrier because she clearly understands the impact of her question/cultural reference on an Asian American.

A less direct method of turning microvalidations into teachable moments is to “flip the script.” These responses address the carrier’s cultural reference or origin question while also jostling the conversation out of the script in an effort to stimulate reflection. For example, the recipient could say, “I’m wondering why you think that was important to mention” or “Why are you telling me this?” in response to a cultural reference. Similarly, possible responses to the origin questions include “I wonder why it feels important for you to know the answer to that” or “Why do you want to know?” These responses aim to stimulate the carrier’s thinking about her own anxieties that motivated the question or comment. In these cases, it is possible the carrier will not want to or may not be able to articulate her thinking about it. Nevertheless, the carrier may later think about the incident when she is less emotionally activated and vulnerable.

The final category of replies is similar to Linehan’s (2015) irreverent communication, which “is used to push a client ‘off balance,’ get the client’s attention, present an alternative viewpoint, or shift the client’s affective response” and is characterized by an element of unexpectedness, “an ‘offbeat’ flavor” or “unorthodox manner” (p. 96-97). In this context, this emotionally playful intervention also metabolizes the recipients’ various affects and delivers
them to the carrier using play and/or humor. This category is possibly the trickiest and most idiosyncratic to the situation, and comes across mostly in the delivery. The basic principle is that the message delivers a slight sting or bite to the carrier, but the element of play may make it more palatable to the carrier. This balance is accomplished through a discrepancy between tone and content. For example, in response to an origin question, a recipient might dryly say, “My ancestors are from Asia” or “I’ve never been asked that before.” In response to a cultural reference about food, for instance, a recipient might state, “Oh yeah, we just call it food.” The danger of this method is that play can easily slip into veiled aggression and/or be excessively shaming to the carrier. This dynamic may have occurred in the opening vignette, in which the potential for the carrier’s shame may have been amplified by the public setting and the professional hierarchy between recipient and carrier. Thus, this kind of intervention is more useful when driven by an attempt to start a conversation, not to end one in a “hit-and-run” fashion.

During conversations about microaggressions that ensue, strong emotions may threaten to heighten defensiveness for the recipient. Thus, being mindful of these emotions is important, as is knowing when to cut the conversation short as a matter of protection, if necessary, for the sake of both parties involved. In the face of defensiveness and repeated invalidation or one’s own impulses to counterattack, it may be necessary to accept that further discussion would only escalate conflict. If that is the case, it may be appropriate to politely end the conversation.

Aside from intervening in the moment of a microaggression, reparative mechanisms can also occur within each person’s networks of relationships. For instance, whether or not a recipient has decided to explicitly confront another person about a microaggression, there are strategies to help alleviate the emotional burden afterwards. Hernandez, Carranza, & Almeida
(2010) identified the following adaptive strategies used by mental health professionals who were recipients of racial microaggressions: self-care, spirituality, seeking support from White allies, documentation, mentoring, organizing public responses. In addition, social support from others who have experienced similar microaggressions may help to validate the recipient’s experiential reality (Sue et al., 2007).

**Broadening racial awareness**

As many authors have noted, interracial dialogues about racism and microaggressions are often emotionally fraught and a necessary part of fostering social, group, and individual change (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, 2013). More structured training programs can also be a promising avenue, though there are significant barriers to facilitating fruitful dialogues in these settings. Such groups, when poorly facilitated, can be counterproductive. Research on diversity training can often lead to reproduction of extant power struggles where People of Color are asked to share their experiences of racism in order to educate White people who then focus on trying to get acceptance or forgiveness for past wrongdoings (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010; Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009; Sue, Rivera, Watkins, Kim, Kim, & Williams, 2011). Observing this phenomenon in mixed-race training settings, Katz (2003) began running all-White workshops focused on changing their own internal attitudes and reactions. Similarly, Kulik (1998) cautions that in facilitating mixed-race diversity training groups, racial minority students should not be held responsible for teaching majority students about racism or of having to speak for their race or ethnicity.

Based on their research, Sue and his colleagues posited several recommendations for
facilitating difficult racial dialogues (Sue, 2013; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010; Sue, Rivera, Watkins, Kim, Kim, & Williams, 2011; Sue, 2013). First, various forms of “inaction”—ranging from allowing for too much heated silence, not intervening in a “heated exchange,” allowing students to dominate the discussion, or cutting the dialogue short—were the least helpful interventions (Sue, 2013, p. 670). In line with intersubjectivity theory, professors’ willingness to share their racial biases and limitation was helpful for students to acknowledge their own responsibility in ongoing racial interactions. Finally, both students and faculty highlighted the importance of making room for discussion of feelings, the explicit identification and validation of emotions, and directly addressing racial tensions. The ability for professors to do this depended largely on their tolerance for strong emotions associated with racial dialogues, as well as their comfort with having emotions in the classroom.

Collins and Pieterse (2007) argue that mainstream multicultural competence approaches emphasize “fixed goals” and demonstrable behavior as indicators of competence, at the expense of attention to open-ended internal processes involved in cultivating racial and cultural awareness. Second, they argue that many of the common interventions to train counselors in multicultural competence rely on roleplay, hypothetically placing oneself in the position of a person of a different group, or immersing oneself in a different cultural perspective. They posit that these exercises insert an artificial level of removal that keeps racial and cultural awareness cordoned off from the realities of every day life. They argue that this may foreclose valuable learning opportunities and convey the message that actual racial realities are unapproachable outside of these training situations.
As an alternative, Collins and Pieterse (2007) adopt a critical incident analysis approach to raising racial awareness, which they define as “as ongoing engagement in grappling honestly and openly with the multicultural realities of daily life experiences” (p. 17). Critical incident analysis is grounded in two components. First, it revolves around an actual personal experience shared by participants. Because the learning involves a real situation, participants may see themselves as more invested in the events that transpired and their outcome. The second component involves affective and cognitive reflective examination of the incident, which is usually facilitated by an outside party, especially at first. This process includes an analysis of what occurred from all participants’ perspectives. After the analysis, there is a discussion of how the analysis may have transformed participants’ attitudes and how any shifts may translate into future behavioral change in similar incidents. Critical incidents that might be chosen for analysis may include microaggressions, but they may also include even more subtle or benign incidents that are marked by “awkwardness, uncertainty, denial, a need to appear aware, the experience of being silenced,” the whispers that flutter around uncomfortable racially inflected interactions (p. 18). The authors provide this example of a critical incident:

Three counseling students are in a small office. Two of the students, a man and a woman, are Black, and the third student, a woman, is a White. A White male student, well known to all the others, walks in and makes a humorous comment implying that the Black female student is trying to get some money from the Black male student. The Black female student responds, “Money? . . . No, he’s a Black man,” resulting in much laughter by the Black students and a stifled unsure laugh by the White students. The incident ends with the students returning to their prior activities with no comment about the interaction. (p. 18)
The reflective analysis has four major stages. First, acknowledgment involves someone making explicit that something important just occurred and inviting discussion from others. The second element, confrontation, requires participants to describe their internal processes of what occurred. This phase is generally quite affectively charged, yet all participants are invited to share, thus fostering a shared vulnerability. In the reflection phase, some understanding is generated that may involve using racial identity theory as a grounding framework. Each participant might reflect on how their individual behavior collectively contributed to the incident. Finally, in the commitment phase, participants acknowledge and participate in each other’s efforts to understand the incident and commit to ongoing racial and cultural awareness in the future.

Perhaps in an ideal world, the staff in the opening vignette might have been able to participate in a similar process to increase understanding of the above critical incident. Such an experience might have improved racial/cultural awareness for individual staff members and fostered team cohesion, which was sorely needed in the face of significant disciplinary and racial diversity and the unspoken divisions it created. Several factors militated against a shared, reflective dialogue taking place, such as time constraints, competing priorities, and the lack of financial or personnel resources. Adding to these external and logistical barriers are the shared attitudes, inflected by individual histories, that contribute to the collective avoidance of race. For me, the thought of revisiting this interaction with my co-workers is extremely aversive, provoking feelings of shame, anger, and anxiety. It is difficult to imagine being able to articulate the way I felt simultaneously enraged, silenced, and unentitled at the time of the interaction without also feeling excruciatingly exposed and unsure of where I stand with my peers. I understand this aversion as partly a product of my own history and of the level of safety in the
group, a calculation in which the emotional costs seemed to outweigh the potential therapeutic benefit. I chose to get support through other avenues, in speaking with supportive people in my life and, of course, writing about it here. Over time, the intensity of the emotions has decreased and my ability to consider others' perspectives has increased.

But what remains unsettling to me is the unfathomability of having a more direct experience of mutual understanding with my coworkers. It is indeed ironic that as mental health professionals, we could not make room for this potential therapeutic potential and instead allowed it to pass by unspoken. Taken together, such tiny missed opportunities add up to something much larger. They contribute to an attitude of indifference in the field. They prevent us from taking responsibility for creating conditions of safety for meaningful conversations about race and racism for us and for our patients. They keep us from using our inner reserves of courage and learning that we can survive and tolerate each others’ diversity and even grow from it. I do not mean to suggest that every interaction needs to be directly processed with others involved; such an edict could ultimately be counterproductive. But if we continually avoid these difficult experiences, continue not to make time, continue to do the bare minimum to meet certain “diversity” requirements, then we must reckon with a pressing question. If we cannot tolerate aspects of our own experiences with respect to race, how can we fairly expect our patients to feel safe with their vulnerable parts, to take the risks from which we continually excuse ourselves?
CHAPTER 5
PSYCHOTHERAPY AND THE CULTURE GAP NARRATIVE

It has been widely documented that Asian Americans disproportionately underutilize mental health services and have a higher dropout rate from therapy than other racial groups (Abe-Kim et al., 2007; Akutsu, Tsuru, & Chu, 2004; Chu & Sue, 2011; Hu, Snowden, Jerrell, & Nguyen, 1991; Kearney, Draper, & Barón, 2005; Lin & Cheung, 1999; Matsuoka, Breux, & Ryujin, 1997; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Sue, Cheng, Saad, & Chu, 2012; Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997). This trend holds for the entire Asian American population\(^{14}\) after controlling for ethnic group, gender, and socioeconomic class and does not appear related to a lower overall level of need for mental health services (Chu & Sue, 2011; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Sue et al., 2012; Takeuchi et al., 2007).

This service utilization gap has been partially conceptualized as reflecting a culture gap between Asian American patients and Western psychotherapy (Chu & Sue, 2011; Kim et al., 1999; Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Kozuki & Kennedy, 2004; Leong & Lau, 2001; Lin & Cheung, 1999; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Shea & Yeh, 2008; Spencer & Chen, 2004; Sue et al., 2012; Takeuchi, Mokuau, & Chun, 1992; Uba, 1982). According to this body of work, Asian Americans may be influenced by Asian cultural values (filial piety, interpersonal harmony, emotional restraint, family orientation, conformity to norms, collectivism, and deference to authority), shame, stigma, and face loss (Kim et al., 1999; Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Shea & Yeh, 2008). In addition, they are believed to favor non-verbal communication styles and somatization of emotional distress (e.g. Chu & Sue, 2011;

\(^{14}\) In line with the majority of studies cited here, the term “Asian Americans” throughout this chapter will refer to all Asian Americans, including those of South and Central Asian descent.
These tendencies are believed to contrast with the practices and premises of Western psychotherapy that emphasize verbalization, emotional vulnerability and expressiveness, and individualism (Kozuki & Kennedy, 2004). Authors posit that the gap between these attitudes and values leads to misunderstandings and mistrust that keep Asian American patients from seeking professional sources of help and from staying in treatment (Uba, 1982). The lack of racially or ethnically similar, culturally competent, and Asian-language proficient providers is presumed to further widen this gap (Chu & Sue, 2011; Leong & Lau, 2001; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Spencer & Chen, 2004; Sue et al., 2012).

I will critically examine the premises and consequences of this culture gap narrative in several different realms. First, I will review the extant research associated with cultural competence approaches in mainstream psychological literature and in the psychoanalytic literature, where it is especially prominent. Synthesizing these two areas, I will highlight conceptual and practical limitations of the culture gap narrative and elucidate how it functions to relieve underlying collective anxieties related to Asians and Asian Americans. Capitalizing on the psychoanalytic case study, I will investigate some of the clinical consequences of the culture gap narrative in a case write-up by Layton (2006). Using a clinical vignette from my own training, I will illustrate some of the complexities of Asian American racial identities often excluded from the culture gap narrative. Finally, I conclude with some collective and individual recommendations for psychodynamic therapists to address the concerns raised in this chapter.

**Bridging the culture gap**

Concern with cultural competence originally arose out of an attempt to equalize disparities in the utilization and quality of health and mental health care to ethnic minorities as compared to Whites. Over the last few decades, cultural competence has evolved from an
attitude, sometimes termed cultural responsiveness or sensitivity, into an institutionalized aspect of training programs, professional associations, and licensing boards (Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009). Cultural competence interventions are wide-ranging and occur on the provider/treatment, institutional, and systems levels (Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009). On the provider/treatment level, several models of cultural competence have emerged, all of which place differing emphasis on cultural self awareness, dissemination of cultural knowledge, and the acquisition of culturally sensitive skills (Lakes, López, & Garro, 2006; Schoen 2005; Stuart 2004; Whaley & Davis, 2007). Cultural self awareness refers to the clinician’s awareness of his own values and biases and their influence on the client, the client’s problem, and the therapeutic relationship. Cultural knowledge refers to the clinician’s awareness of the client’s “culture, worldview, and expectations for the relationship” (Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009, p. 528). Culturally sensitive skills refer to the ability to intervene in a culturally sensitive and relevant manner. These skills include the ability to conduct psychotherapy in different languages as well as employing cultural adaptations of technique and interventions (Stuart, 2004; Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009; Whaley & Davis, 2007). The most salient approaches to cultural competence are based on a “content model” of culture that mainly emphasizes dissemination of cultural knowledge and skills (Dalal, 2001; López, 1997).

In reference to people of Asian descent, cultural competence approaches generally aim to narrow the culture gap through adjusting treatment to better suit Asian American populations. One formal method is a cultural adaptation approach that includes cultural symbols in interventions (Sue et al., 2012; Whaley & Davis, 2007). For instance, in a cultural adaptation of

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15 In addition, the content model is the most easily researched, which may contribute to its predominance among research studies ((Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009).
a CBT protocol for refugees and ethnic minorities, Hinton, Rivera, Hoffman, Barlow, and Otto (2012) had Southeast Asian patients imagine a lotus bloom circling in the wind as part of a relaxation exercise.

Another tactic to bridging the culture gap emphasizes tailoring psychotherapeutic intervention to promote rapport with Asian Americans. In this spirit, many authors seek to identify variables associated with more positive client ratings of sessions and providers. Many authors speculate that ethnic match between patient and therapist, which may be related to a shared underlying cultural value orientation, will foster stronger perceptions of rapport, counselor credibility, and cultural competence (Coleman, Wampold, & Casali, 1995; Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Kim & Atkinson, 2002). A corollary of this hypothesis is that ethnically similar counselors would be more strongly preferred by Asian patients who are more adherent to Asian cultural values (Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Kim & Atkinson, 2002). Following from these claims, non-Asian clinicians are presumed to have a better chance of building rapport and narrowing the perceived culture gap if they endorse Asian cultural values (Kim & Atkinson, 2002; Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Kim, Ng, & Ahn, 2005; Kim, Ng, & Ahn, 2009). The empirical research on these claims has yielded mixed results (Kim & Atkinson, 2002; Kim, Ng, & Ahn, 2005; Kim, Ng, & Ahn, 2009; Li, Kim, & O’Brien, 2007). I will review the contributions and limitations of three studies that reveal increasingly complex relationships between patient-counselor ethnicity, value orientation, and quality of working alliance than these hypotheses suggest.

Kim and Atkinson (2002) explored the relationships between Asian American client adherence to Asian cultural values, counselor expression of cultural values, counselor ethnicity, and Asian American clients’ evaluation of empathy and credibility in a career counseling
They recruited 112 Asian American undergraduate students to attend a one-time 30-minute career counseling session. Using the Asian Values Scale (AVS), fifty clients (45%) were assessed as having high adherence to Asian values and sixty-two clients (55%) were in the low adherence to Asian values group. Participants were then placed into one of four conditions of treatment with an Asian American counselor endorsing Asian values, a European American counselor endorsing Asian values, an Asian American counselor endorsing U.S. values, or a European American counselor endorsing U.S. values. Counselors were trained to deliver scripted sessions in ways that felt realistic and genuine. The “Asian values” script emphasized collectivism and filial piety. For instance, counselors in this condition suggested that Asian American students consider their families’ needs and preferences in their career choices. In the “U.S. values” condition, counselors emphasized individualism and a duty to satisfy personal needs by suggesting that Asian American students consider their own needs and preferences in career decisions. After the session, participants were asked to rate the counselor’s ethnic similarity, empathy, and credibility.

Contrary to expectations, the results of the study yielded no main effects for expression of “Asian values” versus “U.S values” or for ethnic similarity/dissimilarity. Given the surprising result, the authors speculated that this study’s findings reflected a more realistic counseling situation than in previous studies and that there may be “a multitude of other variables that can overpower the effects of value and ethnic similarity on counseling process” (p. 11). The authors did find significant interaction effects between adherence to Asian cultural values and ethnic similarity. Specifically, Asian American participants who were high in adherence to Asian cultural values rated the Asian American counselor more highly in empathy and credibility than those who endorsed low adherence to Asian values. Asian American clients who were low in
Asian cultural values rated White counselors higher in empathy and credibility than those who adhered highly to Asian values.

The research study also yielded the unexpected result that, across the whole sample, the sessions were rated higher on positivity and arousal when the counselor was ethnically dissimilar than when she was ethnically similar. The authors hypothesized that participants may have implicitly expected Asian American counselors to speak about cultural issues, but not European American counselors. Thus, the higher level of positivity may have been due to European American counselors subverting clients’ expectations by talking about culture. Thus, this study lends some support for the notion that ethnic similarity may be implicitly or explicitly preferred for some Asian Americans, particularly those with high adherence to Asian cultural values; however, the mechanisms for a preference for ethnic similarity are unclear and likely multidimensional. Furthermore, this study is based on a single career counseling session. Therefore, these preferences may not generalize to other kinds of counseling or psychotherapy and may only apply to an initial impression of a counselor.

In Li, Kim, and O’Brien’s (2007) study, 116 Asian American college students were asked to watch a video of a dramatized counseling session by a European American woman with an Asian American female patient. During the session, the counselor either expressed cultural values consistent with Asian values (i.e. “I see counseling as a tool that helps people understand the roles they play in their families and communities and how important it is to be responsible to those roles”) or inconsistent with Asian values (e.g. “I see counseling as a tool that helps people to uncover what is unique about their own perspective on life separate from what other family members or society may think”) (p. 93).
The counselors then either acknowledged or did not acknowledge racial differences and opened up a discussion about differences. In the acknowledgment of racial differences condition, the counselor stated:

I am a European American, and you are an Asian American. Sometimes having different backgrounds makes it difficult to work together as a client and a counselor. Maybe we can discuss any concerns you might have about our racial difference and us working together... Since I am not an Asian American, I wonder if you might have any concerns that I will not be able to understand your difficulties. (p. 93)

Contrary to the authors’ hypotheses, there were no main effects for European American counselors’ expression of values consistent with Asian values or acknowledgement of racial differences. That is, counselor credibility and cultural competence were not rated more highly in these conditions compared to the inconsistent with Asian values and non-acknowledgment of racial differences conditions. However, the researchers did find an interaction effect: counselors who both expressed cultural values inconsistent with Asian values and acknowledged racial differences were rated more highly on credibility and cultural competence measures. In terms of patient-oriented variables, they found that Asian American patients who scored highly on the conformity to norms subscale of the AVS also scored counselors as higher on credibility and cultural competence. The study’s generalizability is limited because it involves audiovisual analogues of a single counseling session.

Several possibilities likely contribute to why acknowledging racial differences and simulating value similarities on their own did not yield any main effects. Despite what the culture gap narrative suggests, the simulation of Asian values appears problematic as it may come across as both disingenuous and as perpetuating stereotypes about Asian culture. The
acknowledgement of racial differences also has the potential to be construed as Othering because it highlights potentially emotionally charged difference in the absence of a solid therapeutic alliance. In contrast, the observed interaction effect of endorsing values inconsistent with Asian culture and acknowledging racial differences may convey a genuineness that emphasizes the tolerance and negotiation of differences between patient and counselor, rather than the denial of difference through feigned similarity or the exaggeration of difference based on visual racial identities.

Kim, Ng, and Ahn (2009) used a naturalistic research design in which 61 Asian American participants were seen for a single counseling session at a university counseling center. Rather than manipulate conditions, Kim, Ng, and Ahn (2009) asked participants to rate the extent to which the counselors’ formulation of the patients’ problem etiology was consistent with their own and to rate their impressions of the session. Contrary to their expectations, the authors did not find a statistically reliable relationship between adherence to Asian cultural values on session outcome. Instead, they found a positive relationship between counselor-patient agreement on problem etiology and positive ratings of the counselor and the session. These positive ratings occurred on six of the seven measures, including counselor cross-cultural competence, and effect sizes were large.

The results of this study suggest that some of the same principles that guide clinical work with all patients may be more important than patient’s adherence to Asian values. For instance, Kim, Ng, and Ahn (2009) recommended that one way to build rapport is to explore in great detail the ideas their clients have about the source of the problem before coming to their own conclusions about the cause. This process might allow counselors to formulate their ideas about the cause of the problem in a way that is not inconsistent with
the clients’ beliefs. (p. 139-140)

Such recommendations could easily apply to all clinical work, suggesting that cultural competence, and, by extension, working with Asian patients successfully, may rely largely on general clinical skills.

**East and West in psychodynamic approaches**

The culture gap narrative is even more pronounced in the psychoanalytic literature. Asian Americans as a group are believed to prefer directive, cognitive, and experiential approaches as opposed to insight-oriented, non-directive, and language-focused approaches characteristic of psychodynamic approaches (Atkinson, Maruyama, & Matsui, 1978; Atkinson & Matsushita, 1991; Exum & Lau, 1988; Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001; Li & Kim, 2004). These ostensible treatment preferences are based on the hypothesis that Asian American patients, particularly those who are more enculturated and less acculturated, value deference to authority, favor nonverbal communication, and are less open to expressing emotions (Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001).

The research into these claims yields some limited support. Kim, Li, and Liang (2002) found that Asian American clients in an immediate resolution condition rated the client-counselor working alliance more strongly than did those in an “insight” condition. Similarly, Li and Kim (2004) found that Asian American college students in a directive counseling style condition rated the counselor more highly on empathy and cross-cultural competence and perceived the client-counselor working alliance and session depth as stronger than those in sessions with counselors who used a non-directive counseling style. Importantly, however, these studies were conducted using a single session of career counseling, and, as Li and Kim (2004) acknowledge, these results have limited generalizability to the counseling process. It is possible
that, given the limitations of the length and type of treatment, most clients would find an immediate resolution of a problem more helpful than insight. Notably, in both studies, the level of adherence to Asian values had no relationship to a preference for immediate resolution or more directive counseling style, respectively. This result suggests that within-group differences in preferences are not accounted for by enculturation levels. Finally, in a study about the helpfulness of therapist self-disclosures in the context of a single personal counseling session, Kim and Omizo (2003) found that Asian American clients rated disclosures of strategies to be more helpful than disclosures of approval/reassurance, facts/credentials, and feelings. Disclosures of insight were perceived as intermediately helpful. Consistent with Kim, Li, and Liang (2002) and Li and Kim (2004), the authors found no relationship between adherence to Asian values and what types of disclosures by therapists were found to be helpful.

Despite the absence of strong empirical evidence, the purported general incompatibility between Asian patients and psychodynamic approaches is often explicitly attributed to inherent fundamental differences between Eastern and Western epistemologies. For instance, Kozuki and Kennedy (2004) contend that contrasting philosophical traditions, linguistic differences, and divergent separation-individuation processes between East and West can result in cultural incommensurability between Western therapists and Asian American patients. They argue that these differences, when unacknowledged, can lead to unavoidable misinterpretations by Western therapists. They argue that the divide may be further exaggerated because Japanese clients (the participants in their study) lack the cultural awareness to explain these differences to therapists. Accordingly, a number of adjustments to psychodynamic theory, concepts, and practice have been suggested in order to make them more compatible with “Asian” values, customs,
separation-individuation processes, and views of the self (Doi, 1963/2004; Gu, 2006; Roland, 1996; Roland, 2001; Roland, 2005; Roland, 2006; Slote, 1992; Tung, 1991).

I will closely examine the implications of the culture gap narrative in psychodynamic research and clinical literature in two articles, respectively. Kozuki and Kennedy (2004) and Roland (2006) illustrate how blind spots for culturally informed issues (i.e. conceptualizations of relationships, expression of emotions, and the effects of immigration) can lead clinicians to overpathologize that which they do not understand. At the same time, Kozuki and Kennedy (2004) and Roland (2006) cannot fully circumvent the use of comparative frameworks, which sometimes subtly undermines their conclusions.

Kozuki and Kennedy (2004) used a retrospective aggregated case-study method to investigate the cultural incommensurability that occurs when “Western models of psychodynamic psychotherapy and psychopathology are applied in mental health treatment of Japanese clients” (p. 30-31). They conducted an in-depth analysis of eight psychotherapy cases with Japanese clients who had poor treatment outcomes with Western therapists and were then seen by a Japanese psychotherapist. The cases were chosen from the only bi-lingual Japanese-English private practice setting in the region (of the Northwestern United States). Data from treatments with the Japanese and “Western” therapists were retrospectively collected from medical records, which included socio-demographic information, mental health treatment history, patient’s impressions, family mental health history and background, and changes in symptoms and insight. Additional data on the “Western treatments” were obtained through conversation at the time of referral to the Japanese therapist. Data were then coded line-by-line and similar concepts were grouped into themes.
The authors identified seven salient themes in these cases that exemplified the hazards of unacknowledged cultural differences between Western and Japanese clinicians in psychotherapy: only observable data were valued in diagnosis and treatment, cultural stereotypes hampered treatment, individuation and separation were seen as dependency, culturally unique concepts in mental health were not taken into account, psychological effects of immigration were minimized or ignored, culturally unfamiliar behaviors were pathologized, and ethnocentric biases were evident in interpreting the effects of immigration.

The authors saw these cultural misunderstandings as stemming from the use of a Western taxonomy of psychiatric illness that led to cultural stereotypes, overpathologizing of culturally specific behaviors, and inappropriate treatment. For instance, one female client was married to a White American man for 20 years, suffered from conflicts with her family, and was hospitalized for suicidal ideation. According to Kozuki and Kennedy (2004), Western therapists conceptualized her as being oversensitive to her adolescent daughters’ efforts to individuate and as possibly having borderline personality disorder. Their treatment recommendations included antidepressant and antipsychotic medication, as well as individual and family counseling. The Japanese therapist, by contrast, understood her as extremely socially isolated and lonely in her family because she was misunderstood by her American husband and her “gradually Americanized child” (p. 33). The Japanese therapist noted that the patient internalized her problematic relationships with her family, interpreting these difficulties as stemming from her failure as a mother. As a corrective, Kozuki and Kennedy (2004) suggested an acknowledgment of the incommensurability between Westerners and Japanese that results in culturally determined “meanings and manifestations of emotions and symptoms” (p. 37).

While this is certainly a point well taken, several limitations undermine the authors’
conclusions about the gap between Japanese and Western cultures and psychotherapy. For several reasons, it is unclear how representative of Western psychodynamic therapy their selected cases are. One of the criteria for case selection was “poor treatment outcomes” with Western therapists. There may have been many other treatments with more positive outcomes that would militate against the purported general incommensurability between Western therapy and Japanese patients. Furthermore, the treatments by the Japanese therapist were all outpatient treatments at the same practice. The “Western treatments,” by contrast, appeared to come from a variety of settings and modalities, including inpatient hospital units. Thus, the cited Western treatments, aside from being delivered by non-Asian therapists, also had very different goals and limitations, such as time constraints, more severe impairment of functioning, and a prevailing psychopharmacological/medical model, all of which would impact the ways that patients are conceptualized and treated. Therefore, the apparent biases in the Western treatments, may not characterize all, or even most, psychodynamic or “Western” treatments, and may be largely context-dependent. Kozuki and Kennedy (2004) fallaciously subsume all of these contextual factors under the large umbrella of “culture.” These serious limitations bring into question the validity of a globalized cultural incommensurability between Western psychodynamic psychotherapy and Asian American patients that does not take into account more fine-grained interpenetrating contexts and variables.

Turning now to a more directly clinical perspective, Roland (1996; 1998; 2001; 2005; 2006) is one of the few psychoanalysts to focus specifically on integrating psychoanalytic concepts and Asian cultures. Writing from his perspective as a “North American therapist,” Roland (2006) argues that cultural misunderstandings between patients of Asian descent and Western therapists are potentially harmful and that empathy alone is insufficient to work with
this population, whom, he contends, are from a “radically different psychological universe” (p. 454). He posits that, in order to avoid overpathologizing Asians or Asian Americans or viewing them as developmentally or “psychologically inferior,” psychoanalytic therapists must become aware of their own “cultural selves” as they differ from those of people of Asian heritage (p. 454).

Drawing upon his points of contact with Asian patients and supervising therapists for a year in India, a few months in Japan, and subsequently treating Asian American patients in New York, Roland (2006) offers recommendations on how to handle the difficulties in psychoanalytic therapy with Asians and Asian Americans. Roland (2006) cautions readers that:

…in working with someone from a radically different culture, such as those from an Asian background, a Euro American therapist can feel not only uncertain but at sea. This is because there is a different normality/psychopathology continuum from the one we are used to, and indeed from the norms of development, structuralization, and functioning that we have been taught in our psychoanalytic training. (p. 456)

After becoming acquainted with the different continuum, Roland suggests that Western therapists are then faced with the even more difficult task of how “to ascertain the idiosyncratic, disturbed family relationships that have given rise to the patient’s emotional problems” (p. 289). In other words, Roland advises therapists to identify how Asian and Asian American patients, in their own, very different, cultural context, may depart from their cultural values in ways that indicate emotional problems and distress. He covers various clinically relevant topics, including anger and communication in the therapeutic relationship, the bicultural self, the magic-cosmic self, and trauma and immigration. Like Kozuki and Kennedy (2004), Roland brings some badly needed attention to Asian culture and patients. He is one of the few people within the
psychoanalytic world to write extensively on Asian culture and patients and potential clinical pitfalls between White therapists and patients with an Asian background. Furthermore, he points out that one of the major reasons there is not more interest in patients of Asian descent lies in anxieties surrounding the recognition that one’s way of living is not universal.

Roland’s work does have several limitations, however. He often relies on a globalized notion of radical difference and binary oppositions to support his arguments. For instance, his idea that North America and Asia have two different “normality/pathology” continua falsely homogenizes North American culture and Asian culture and keeps them separate from one another. On the other hand, at certain points, Roland appropriately emphasizes the heterogeneity of Asian Americans based on ethnicity and immigration status. However, rather than going further into those differences, or acknowledging other important factors, such as family constellations, individual temperament, gender, or socioeconomic status, he immediately emphasizes the ways that Asian Americans are similar to one another in their difference from Westerners: “All of them have a bicultural self, often with considerable turmoil as the value systems and makeup of the self are significantly different from that of Euro-North Americans” (p. 460). With this statement, Roland homogenizes the differences he had carefully laid out among Asian Americans, as well as those among Euro-North Americans. In so doing, he presents a falsely uniform version of the split “bicultural” self of Asian Americans and, by extension, the cohesive, unicultural self in Euro-North Americans. Both of these conceptions are based on an imagined gulf of radical difference between East and West.

Roland also tacitly establishes a binary relationship between psychic and cultural experience, rather than viewing them as inextricably linked. For example, he recommends that therapists become aware of “the cultural part of oneself” that he distinguishes from “the usual
psychoanalytic one of delving into the unconscious” (p. 454). He describes the Western “cultural part of oneself,” as having the following traits: “emphasis on autonomy, self-direction, verbal communication, an I–self, a relatively constant identity and much more are far more rooted in modern Western civilization and its culture of individualism than we realise” (p. 455). He asserts that these "cultural" aspects are scarcely visible until one has an interaction with “a radically different culture,” namely, Asia and people of Asian descent. For Asian heritage patients working with Euro-North American therapists, Roland’s posits that “intercultural conflicts” must first be worked through, after which “deeper and more familial sources of emotional conflicts then become accessible” (p. 455-456). While there are often intercultural conflicts that arise in intercultural dyads, these are not cordoned off from intrapsychic conflict, as Roland implies. They are threaded throughout the person’s experience and the therapeutic relationship. Intercultural conflicts may reflect important interpersonal and emotional information about the patient’s family life, subjective experience, or transference dynamics.

Separating cultural and psychoanalytic investigation into discrete entities runs the risk of leaving perceived cultural differences at face value without further inquiry. For instance, Roland observes: “I have never once in over 30 years of working with a few dozen Asian and Asian American patients been called by my first name. It is always “Dr. Roland” in contrast to most of my other American patients” (p. 458). He uses this data to demonstrate the importance of the hierarchical relationship in therapy relationships for Asian patients. Without a bigger sample size, it is difficult to determine how accurate this observation is for the Asian and Asian American population. Even if it were a general trend, one wonders what it could signify beyond corroborating a hypothesis about the hierarchies in inherent in Asian cultures and what the idiosyncratic meanings for every patient may be. Even when we find that a person—any person,
from any cultural/ethnic background—endorses a statement that we might find “normal” or concordant with prevailing cultural beliefs, the psychoanalytic tradition might ask us to be curious about its many layers, the multiple pathways of its origins, and the many adaptive and defensive functions it might serve. Could calling Roland “Dr.” still signify fears of intimacy, a desire for a more directive authority, an ease with looking at him as an expert? Rather than fostering that inquiry, however, taking the East/culture-West/psychoanalytic binaries as self-evident can leave these levels of further understanding at bay.

Furthermore, his general claims about characteristics of Asian selves rely on a small amount of anecdotal evidence, mostly from his own experiences. He presents his impressions of Asian patients as objective knowledge that could apply to billions of people, rather than the result of his co-constructed interactions with a relatively small number of patients. Elsewhere, he takes a more nuanced view of Asian selves. For instance, in relation to the presence of magic-cosmic beliefs by Asian patients, Roland (2006) states that his approach is “to put aside the issue of the validity or not of these notions but rather see how the patient responds to them and what effect it has on the patient. It is after all what we do in therapy with any experience” (p. 462). This last point is a crucial one that, in the overemphasis on perceived radical differences between East and West, can often get lost.

**Limitations of the culture gap narrative**

As demonstrated above, there is inconsistent and methodologically limited empirical research support for the culture gap narrative. Additionally, the culture gap narrative has several conceptual shortcomings. The culture gap narrative explains only a small part of the complex dynamics that contribute uniquely for every individual to his/her attitude toward seeking mental health services. These other variables could include, but are not limited to, the influence of his
shifting network of interpersonal and group relationships, the unique dynamics of the therapeutic relationship, current level of distress or functioning, financial realities, and availability of services.

The overemphasis on “culture” also obscures the additional, but not necessarily competing, influence of racial dynamics between therapist and counselor. For instance, findings that support preferences for an ethnically similar counselor are often interpreted as an affinity for someone who can understand one’s Asian cultural values (Kim & Atkinson, 2002). Another possible interpretation of this preference for some Asian Americans may be that a same-race dyad may buffer against discrimination and be a relatively safe place to speak about anti-Asian racism. Conversely, depending on their relationship to their racial identities, some Asian Americans may have an internalized preference for interactions with a European American counselor. For example, using Helms’ (1995) racial identity framework, an Asian American in the reencounter phase may seek to assimilate and thus, rate a White therapist more positively. By contrast, those in the Encounter or Immersion/Emersion stages may prefer to work with an Asian American counselor. Relatedly, in the context of past microaggressive experiences in which they have been assumed to be similar or related to other Asian Americans, some Asian Americans may feel uncomfortable being paired with an Asian American therapist or relief upon being paired with a White therapist.

Furthermore, although the effects of explicit and implicit racism are often mentioned as a factor in the service utilization gap, empirical research on their effects is scant (Takeuchi, Mokuau, & Chun, 1992; Uba, 1982). Spencer and Chen (2004) directly studied the associations between racial/ethnic discrimination and the use of formal or informal mental health treatment among a representative sample of 1,747 Chinese American households. They found that while
self-reported racial/ethnic discrimination was not associated with service use, those who had reported language-based discrimination (defined as unfair discrimination due to speaking another language or having an accent) were more likely to use informal services than formal services for help as compared to those who had not reported language-based discrimination. There may also be subtler forms of discrimination in the mental health system and its practitioners that merit examination. For instance, Zane, Enomoto, and Chun (1994) found that therapists initially judged Asian and lower SES clients as “less suitable for therapy” and rated Asian psychosocial outcomes as lower than that of Whites (p. 188).

The continued endorsement of the culture gap narrative is also problematic on practical levels. Clinical recommendations derived from the culture gap and radical difference narratives, in one way or another, imply that the effects of that gulf need to be narrowed either through cultural adaptations of psychotherapy, through the application of knowledge about aspects of “Asian selves” and treatment preferences, or through the explicit endorsement of “Asian cultural values” in treatment. However, there is little empirical research to clarify that these actual treatment preferences are endorsed by Asian Americans, even on a distal level; they are mainly derived from cross-cultural research findings.

Paradoxically, the constantly reiterated perception of radical difference between American and Asian cultures, and efforts to overcome it, may contribute to the service utilization gap in unnoticed ways. The tacit implication of cultural adaptations to therapy or Asian versions of standard psychoanalytic concepts is that Asian Americans need to be treated “differently,” that they play by a whole different set of rules from the ones that are used in “normal” therapy. In tandem, the assumption of these adjustments is that these differences need to be "overcome," instead of tolerated and negotiated. Similar to the dynamics of the ambassador microaggression,
assuming that Asian people need special modifications of “Western” cultural norms implies that without appropriate adjustments and “welcoming” by the clinician, that there is no place among “practice as usual” for Asian American norms or people. While it may be true that some departures from “practice as usual” may be necessary, one also has to question what exactly “practice as usual” is. Responsible clinicians tailor treatment to every individual, dependent on a weighted assessment of an almost infinite number of factors, such as personality structure, diagnosis, affect tolerance, cognitive ability, financial resources, and treatment goals. Creating a special category for Asian treatment adjustments makes them more salient than those made for every person. This heavy-handedness could be subtly alienating and, as discussed earlier, potentially experienced as insincere and distancing. In other words, assuming that Asian people need “Western” therapy customs adjusted to their “radically different” cultural values implies that they would otherwise be unable to assimilate to or understand Western norms. This presumption of separateness comes dangerously close to unintentionally reinforcing assumptions of unassimilability of Asian people in America, which, as discussed in Chapter 3, have historically been used to both perpetuate and justify anti-Asian racism and exclusion.

Being sensitively aware of the cultural assumptions that the patient brings to treatment may inform therapists’ working hypotheses about a person, but they should not define the person, nor should therapists assume that patients of Asian descent would have a homogenous understanding of these values. The norms themselves are under contention and subject to interaction with other dimensions of difference and personality variables. Since each person has his/her own relationship to his/her overlapping cultural spheres, patients of Asian descent may very well endorse Asian cultural values (as conceived by the AVS) wholeheartedly, feel conflicted about them, find them stereotyping, and/or push them away in not-me fashion while
also unconsciously identifying with them. Furthermore, such attitudes may shift over time. Thus, Asian cultural values and preferences may comprise a part of treatment if relevant, but they should not overly define the treatment or the patient.

Despite their limitations, the culture gap narrative and radical difference are still the major explanatory frameworks for understanding the relationship between Asian patients and psychotherapy. Similar to the binaries discussed in Chapter 2, the culture gap narrative can conceal more nuanced perspectives on the psychologies of Asian and Asian American patients. Hook (2005) argues that assumptions of radical difference are driven by a “double paradox” wherein the Other’s differences from a normative ideal are amplified, and, at the same time, made “stable” and “reliably knowable” (p. 701). Much like the central argument of Said’s (1978/1995) Orientalism, Hook (2005) and Bhabha (1996) hypothesize that constructions of the “radically different” Other are partially based on a fantasy of what the Self is not, that is, disavowed parts of the self (not-me) or group identity (not-us). Thus, keeping the “radically different” distant, static, and identifiable simultaneously fends off the perils of possible identification with an Other and reaffirms the imagined opposite qualities of the self in a reinforcing feedback loop. Thus, an Asian identity based on radical difference from the normative ideal becomes “concretiz[ed] or evidenc[ed]…into actual people, situations, experiences, a means of making the truth,” and runs the risk of mistaking assumptions about the Other (i.e. stereotypes) for cultural or personal knowledge (Hook, 2005, p. 713). On the micro-level, this process can militate against crucial therapeutic processes of identification and curiosity, consequences that have yet to be closely and candidly examined.
Cultural anxieties: Countertransference or lack of expertise?

Turning now to a clinical vignette by Layton (2006), I will further examine the impact of the culture gap narrative on the clinical psychodynamic process. I begin by first recognizing the difficulties of trying to encompass a rich, multi-layered treatment into a case study, which is, by its nature, a limited narrative with only one access point (through the therapist). Thus, there are shortcomings to using a clinical vignette to illustrate and make claims about therapeutic process or broader cultural dynamics. At the same time, we cannot fall into the trap of overparticularity, of taking each case as so singular as to be disconnected from broader, collective experiences. I strive not to mistake Layton’s (2006) particular psychoanalytic case vignette as fully representative of all psychoanalytic therapists, but consider it a useful entry point into broader unconscious dynamics, anxieties, and transference/countertransference paradigms evoked by Asianness, race, and ethnicity in psychoanalytic discourse and clinical practice. I will begin with an orientation to the treatment and discuss Layton’s interpretations and struggles with the case, including a crucial therapeutic rupture. Next, I will provide some alternative interpretations of the treatment and rupture and elucidate broader blind spots that may have contributed to some of Layton’s confusions and therapeutic choices.

Layton (2006) describes her psychoanalytic treatment of Michael, a young, gay Asian American male. Michael presents with persistent thoughts about his White, middle class ex-boyfriend and fears that these thoughts would interfere with his new relationship. He hopes that therapy can help him stop comparing himself unfavorably to his ex-boyfriend, particularly with regard to adeptness in social situations, and can help him improve his self-esteem. As Layton notes, Michael organizes much of his identity and relations to others in terms of East-West binaries and struggles to straddle them. Michael both wants to be included in the “White in-
crowd,” and, at the same time, joins his Asian friends in denigrating their behaviors (p. 248). Among his Asian American friends, he concludes that he is alone in his longings to be part of the White group, heightening his sense of alienation and perceived social ineptitude. Layton notes that feeling caught between Asian Americans and Whites leaves Michael feeling “quite uncertain—both about what he felt, and about the value of what he felt, for it pulled him into denigrating the very things he longed for” (p. 249). Layton views the East-West divide as a defensive narcissistic structure for Michael that largely originated from his earlier experiences of racism.

Throughout the therapy, Michael’s assumption of the East-West binary is aligned with binaries between politeness and self-absorption, and between reason and emotion, respectively. He views his immigrant parents as espousing the “non-Western” parts of him, such as a strong focus on family and education and a superior capacity to be private, in comparison to “Westerners,” whom, the parents felt, “talk too loudly, too publicly, and too long about their private business. They also make far too much of their emotions” (p. 248). At the same time, in Michael’s childhood, his mother was prone to outbursts of emotion—“yelling, screaming and imposing rules that to Michael made no sense” (p. 248). The contradiction between his early experience of his mother’s emotions and his parents’ stated emphasis on reason ironically intensified Michael’s disavowal of “Western” emotion and identification with “Eastern” rationality. Michael makes a habit of associating anger with Westerners and complaining about the extent to which Westerners become angry because they have personalized events beyond their control.

Like Michael, Layton often feels uncertain of how she feels and how to interpret Michael’s experience. For instance, Michael finds the idea of starting sessions difficult because
he feels “pushy” talking about himself, feeling as if he were intruding upon Layton (p. 258). Layton’s clinical sensibilities, her work with Michael, and Michael’s stated goals to improve his self-esteem all support the notion that he may have a problem with self-assertion. However, Layton is hesitant to fully embrace this working hypothesis for several reasons.

In trying to understand his experience, Layton reports that she frequently interprets some of Michael’s attitudes and behaviors and the East-West binary as being similar to what she terms a male-female binary, and that if Michael were a Western female, she would feel assured that he has a problem with self-abnegation. However, given that Michael is a gay, Asian male, she wonders if her convictions are merely byproducts of her "Western" embeddedness and that Michael may be operating under different norms that would presumably require different interventions.

Layton is made even more uncertain of her opinions, “for this case and perhaps for all,” upon reading an article by Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, and Morelli (2000) contrast Japanese and Western attachment styles (p. 257). Rothbaum et al. (2000) argue that Japanese parents foster dependency and responsiveness to social cues whereas Western parents foster autonomy and exploration. In light of this new information, which she assumes applies to Michael, Layton begins to worry that Michael’s hesitance about asserting himself is a cultural attribute better left intact, rather than a problem that needs to be understood and changed. In making these assumptions, Layton mistakes Rothbaum et al.’s supposed cultural expertise for working knowledge of Michael. She then questions her own impressions of Michael (she

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16 Rothbaum et al. (2000) was erroneously cited in Layton’s article as “Rothblum et al. (2000)” (p. 257).
exclaims, “perhaps it was not that at all!”) based on time spent in actual, real encounters with Michael, including knowledge of his history, and his own thoughts and feelings (p. 258).

Second, in line with cultural competence approaches and content models of cultures, she interprets her insecurity as stemming from a lack of cultural expertise. This assumption may partially lead her to give too much credence to Rothbaum et al.’s (2000) article, which ultimately interferes with her understanding of Michael and of their therapeutic relationship. However, her not knowing Michael’s culture or the meanings of his behavior likely has less to do with a lack of cultural information than it does with the fact that cultures, like people, cannot ever be fully known, and that they are most directly known through actual encounters with people, languages, customs, and places. In searching for ostensibly objective factual information about Michael’s culture to help guide her interventions, Layton fails to use the most important resource for understanding the meanings of Michael’s statement: Michael himself.

In tandem with this doubt, she also wonders about her appropriate role in therapy. She reveals anxieties about being over-aligned with her own Westernness:

Am I, then, to be the cultural agent that makes Michael more comfortable operating within Western norms, in effect taking a side of the conflict? Or is my job merely to point out the diverse norms, the conflict, and let Michael find his own path? Consciously, I believe my job is the latter, but I fear I fairly frequently perform the former, relying on the ideals of health that my Western training has championed, ideals incorporated not only in technique, but even in the treatment frame… Repeatedly performing the norms of my profession, I maintain the approval/love of my peers while sustaining a certain distribution of power. (p. 258)
Of note, Layton has made herself quite vulnerable in exposing her anxieties and attempts to understand her patient’s cultural values rather than pathologize them. It is clear that she is well-intentioned in not wanting to maintain the hierarchies inherent in East-West frameworks. She also courageously reveals how her own sense of belonging within the psychoanalytic community may be at odds with understanding Michael’s “path.”

At the same time, some of the assumptions that motivate her fears lead her further astray from Michael’s experience. She worries that her reliance on “the ideals of health” of her “Western training” do not and should not apply to Michael, that in making him more comfortable operating within Western norms, she may be doing him a disservice. In her wondering whether Michael should stay the same, that is, aligned with what she thinks of as his Eastern culture, she may be stalling therapeutic change that could be valuable to him. Ironically, her self-consciousness about whether she is pathologizing an Asian norm keeps her from being able to reflect on her anxieties. She is momentarily blinded to the ways in which the East-West binary is part of the way Michael organizes his experience to keep more conflictual feelings—shame, envy, resentment, disappointment—at bay and how they are enacted in the transference-countertransference paradigm. In a way, Layton overculturalizes both Michael and herself; both of them become cultural representatives, rather than two individuals with a shared task.

Layton’s misattunements become more apparent as Michael begins to question and complicate the parallel East-West, reason-emotion binaries. He tells Layton that his ex-boyfriend had noticed that when walking down the street, Michael always “deferred” and moved out of the way to accommodate people walking in the opposite direction (p. 257). He wonders why he does not get angry in situations in which his “Western friends” would be angry (p. 257). At the same time, Michael dissociates himself from them, noting that Westerners seemed to get angry too
much, needlessly and irrationally personalizing events that are clearly not personal attacks. Later in the treatment, Michael inches further toward increasing comfort with expressing his anger and with his own “Westernness,” albeit not without an understandable amount of conflict. Michael expresses that he would sometimes like to get angry, but is unsure he “should” (p. 259).

Eventually, he admits that he does, in fact, get angry.

As Michael’s relationship to the East-West binary and his own self-assertion and anger become more complicated, Layton struggles privately with her mounting confusion about how to intervene. In one session, Michael describes the good time he had with a visiting friend who laughed at Michael’s jokes, stating that he generally felt responsible for making sure his guests were enjoying themselves, regardless of whether he was enjoying himself. Layton silently interprets this statement as self-abnegation, but, worried that she is pathologizing Michael’s Eastern framework, again becomes uncertain about her impressions. This time, she chooses to verbalize her confusions with Michael:

I told him I was concerned that, like the ex-boyfriend, I might have been pathologizing something about these values of civility and duty that guided his behavior, and I told him that my therapy culture tends to understand some of these ways of being as self-abnegation. I mentioned I was pretty sure that, if I were treating a Western female, I would move in the direction of seeing such behavior as self-abnegating. I said, “I suppose what matters is whether or not you find that these ways of being get in your way; do you want things to be different?” (p. 259 -260)

In response to Layton’s comment, Michael associates to the ways in which his “civility and duty” bother him and how the relationship between East and West and between civility and self-serving intentions are more than mere opposites. He tells Layton that it bothers him when he
pours tea for others and that, if there is only a little remaining, he might not get any. He also sees the responsibility for making guests happy not as self-abnegating, but as self-focused; he states that he feels devalued and guilty if a friend does not enjoy what he thinks would be a good time.

Michael then associates to his ex-boyfriend:

He then noted how frequently his ex-boyfriend used to leave him alone at parties, and how the boyfriend would rationalize his behavior by asserting a value on independence and a disdain for clinginess. But, Michael said, “I told him more than once that I was uncomfortable in those situations, and he shouldn't have left me alone.” (p. 260)

Layton, picking up on Michael’s sense of aloneness, steers the conversation to her upcoming vacation and the possibility of Michael feeling abandoned by her. Michael then speaks about his conflicts about remaining in therapy and whether he needs to be there any longer.

Acknowledging that the exchange can be interpreted in many ways, Layton offers her own “best guess” as to what transpired between them (p. 260). Layton speculates that her comment connecting Michael to a Western female may have inadvertently feminized him, which is made potentially even more hurtful in the context of the historical feminization of Asian men (Eng, 2001). In this interpretation, she views Michael’s subsequent comments about his discomfort with not getting any tea and his “self-focused” responsibility to make others happy as ways of asserting his masculinity after being feminized. Finally, she views Michael’s comments about being left alone at parties and perhaps stopping therapy, both of which she describes as having “a hostile edge,” as expressions of how Michael had been wounded by Layton (p. 261). During the session, Layton seems to half-realize Michael’s pain in his comment about his ex-boyfriend when she thinks to herself “this was not about which value system was right; it was about being in tune with your partner, conscious of his vulnerabilities” (p. 260).
I depart slightly from Layton’s interpretations of the meanings of her uncertainty and her ensuing exchange with Michael. In an act of translation, Layton likens Michael’s experience to a more familiar concept for her, the male-female binary, with Michael occupying the position of a White female. It can be orienting, particularly in clinical work, to perform small translations that relate to one’s subjective experience and the application of the male-female binary does have some useful applicability. Being a White woman herself, the translation into White male-female terms also establishes an implicit, momentary identification between Layton and Michael. However, in her covert and overt questioning of the veracity of the comparison, Layton, in the face of her perceived lack of cultural expertise, wonders if it is wholly “incorrect” to assume any similarity between Michael’s Asian experience and her experience as a White female. Rather than sitting with the partial applicability, Layton oscillates into a stance of radical difference, assuming that the male-female binary cannot apply at all to Michael’s presumably altogether different (and unknowable) cultural context, and her sense of uncertainty intensifies. In adopting this stance, she also, perhaps unconsciously, forecloses the identification between her as a White female and Michael as an Asian male.

Her choice to verbalize these confusions to Michael is not in and of itself objectionable, but the way she does it reveals some of her implicit attitudes. Although Michael may have been hurt by Layton’s implicit comparison of him to a White female, as Layton posits, I suggest that Layton’s preceding comment—that “[her] therapy culture” tends to understand his Asian values of “civility and duty” as self-abnegation—is even more relevant to what transpired. The comment signifies an attempt to facilitate a quasi-cross-cultural encounter, between East and West, and between Michael and therapy/Layton, respectively. However, this cross-cultural
encounter occurs at the cost of understanding Michael’s idiosyncratic relationship to his cultural values through his own perspective.

Perhaps more importantly, Layton’s remark also implies that despite the intimacy and progress cultivated between her and Michael in the treatment, Michael does not fully belong to Layton’s (Western) therapy culture. Michael has been operating within Western norms for his whole life, and within therapy’s for the length of their treatment and his previous psychotherapy, yet Layton’s comment treats Michael as a visitor who needs an explanation of these cultural customs. Layton subtly and unintentionally places Michael outside the boundaries of both Western culture and therapy, keeping him in the East, and radically different from the West, and by proxy, from Layton. In this context, Michael’s associations to his resentment and feelings of abandonment take on other meanings. Michael’s comments about his distress over his pouring tea or guests not having a good time are not merely comments on his ability to be masculine and self-assertive, as Layton speculates. They are also statements about being Western, of being like Layton, of needing help to be more assertive and less self-abnegating, and of needing to be in therapy after all.

In momentarily framing her relationship with Michael in permutations of East-West terms, Layton misses and enacts the pain of exclusion inherent in Michael’s identity. In the context of the treatment, Michael seems to ask, “Where do I belong?” In this light, his organization of the world (and to a large extent, his relationships with his White ex-boyfriend and with Layton) into binaries partially defends against the pain of having to ask those questions, and even more so, of not having an answer. Layton’s misstep was not her experience of confusion, but her failure to reflect upon that confusion as potentially holding valuable
information about Michael’s experience and their dynamic. Layton’s gaffe, however, is not her responsibility alone.

Several aspects of broader psychodynamic and psychological discourse on Asian patients are directly and indirectly implicated in Layton and Michael’s enactment. Most broadly, Layton’s anxieties about lacking cultural expertise may have been amplified by historical constructions of the Asian Other as inscrutable. The inscrutable Asian Other is a person who is not just unknown, but incapable of being known and understood, making authentic psychodynamic engagement seem especially daunting and anxiety-provoking. Furthermore, these anxieties related to the Asian Other are often normalized, rather than historically contextualized. For example, Roland (2006) states that clinical uncertainty when working with a person from another culture, particularly Asians, may be heightened to a feeling of being “at sea,” which he attributes to the different normality/pathology continuum with which he presumes most Euro North American therapists are unfamiliar (p. 456).

In trying to overcome uncertainty, Layton also had a large body of literature available to support the idea that clinicians could and should attain a level of Asian cultural expertise from “objective” sources, such as academic articles. Some argue that “factual” information about a culture, when read flexibly, can be orienting for the analyst (Smolar, 2000, p. 145). Kim (2000), on the other hand, argues that the patient should be the one and only source of cultural information. While there is no “right” or “wrong” way to approach this matter, Layton’s case illustrates the detrimental consequences of considering cross-cultural research literature as both factual and as having more authority than clinical experience.

On the one hand, “objective” expertise can cultivate a false sense of security in knowledge and expertise that appears complete, but is, in fact, always partial. This illusion of
uncertainty can also take the deceptively opposite form: an illusion of absolute uncertainty, of not knowing at all the meaning of a patient’s experience because of his different cultural background. Both extremes temporarily ward off the anxieties surrounding authentic engagement with an Other. However, this relative level of security comes at a cost. It forecloses the possibility of the partial (but extremely valuable) knowledge that comes from identification, empathy, and getting to know another with another. To honor these central elements of psychodynamic perspectives in working specifically with Asians and Asian Americans, we must begin to consider what keeps us from being able to personally and intimately understand patients from “different” cultures, and to begin to take individual and collective responsibility for these barriers.

**Psychoanalysis: a culture of belonging**

Through a clinical vignette of a psychodynamic case with Tracey, a 33-year-old single Southeast Asian American female veteran who was adopted by a White family early in her life, I will illustrate some dimensions of what the ubiquity of the culture gap narrative leaves out, including, but not limited to, the consideration of several overlapping contexts. I adopt a reflexive position, attempting to capture not only Tracey’s experiences, but the ways in which my own experiences may have influenced my interpretations of her experiences and interactions with her. After presenting the case, I consider several therapeutic dilemmas stemming from the specifics of my own sense of belonging within the training setting, psychoanalysis, and America more broadly. Finally, although this case is an idiosyncratic co-constructed interaction, I will

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17 Identifying information has been changed to protect the privacy of my patient.
conclude with broader reflections on how the field can begin to confront some of the problems posed here.

Tracey presented with anxiety and depression in the context of several recent transitions. She had recently relocated from the South for a new job along with her two preteen daughters. In addition to managing her demanding work and home lives, she was also attending school part-time and hoped to excel academically. When she first came to my office, Tracey seemed wary of opening up emotionally and focused mainly on the medication she was prescribed from her other provider. After a few minutes, her barriers broke down as she recounted all of the transitions she had been through, the overwhelming number of tasks that she had to accomplish for work, school, and her daughters, and her fleeting thoughts of suicide.

Driving a large portion of her turmoil was her belief that she had made several “wrong” decisions. In particular, she regretted her hasty decision to move after receiving a job offer at a higher salary. Now that she was here, she had no friends in the area and felt alienated. She spent a lot of time thinking about or visiting her previous hometown where her Black boyfriend and White adopted family still lived. I noted to her that she seemed only half-invested in putting down roots here and had trouble focusing on where she was in the moment. Tracey agreed and stated that her indecision was taking a toll on her mood, energy level, and ability to concentrate. Our initial sessions were theoretically integrative; we focused on exploring her ambivalence coupled with a mindfulness practice that could help calm her down, increase her awareness of the present moment, and give her a sense of stability and empowerment. She left each session saying she felt calmer.

It was not lost on me that Tracey’s indecision about where she was in the moment also applied to the therapy itself. She continually cancelled and rescheduled appointments, citing
other obligations (i.e. her children and her job) that were invariably more urgent, more pressing than her own sense of well-being. Between sessions, I was never sure whether she would show up for our next appointment. Upon seeing her in the waiting room before our appointment—on time to boot—I always felt an internal sense of surprise. My countertransference was confusing: I had a feeling that she liked me, maybe “too much,” maybe so much that it frightened her. On the other hand, I felt a need to prove myself to her, to want to grab her and keep her from slipping away, an impulse sometimes expressed in my eagerness to give her the “gift” of mindfulness.

I was also acutely aware of how unusual our pairing was. Not only were we the same race and gender, a fact made all the more improbable at the VA where both Asian patients and staff members were rare, we were also the same age. My experience as an Asian female therapist in this setting thus far had been decidedly mixed; I was hyperaware of being microaggressed for my race and gender on an almost daily basis by veterans and staff, which had made my training experience somewhat disappointing. At times, this led me to want to disavow my own racial identity, or at least to hide it somehow. On the other hand, I felt that, for the collective good, my presence, along with a few other Asian American trainees’, indicated that I was not willing to back away from spaces where I felt unwelcome, strange, or objectified. In these ways, the VA was an evocative forum of American culture where I was determined to make a place for myself despite my discomfort. My sense of alienation extended to my theoretical orientation, where I had become the “token” psychoanalytic trainee in a setting that was becoming increasingly dominated by “empirically validated” approaches. This trend increasingly marginalized the “old guard” psychoanalysts, one of whom was my White male supervisor. Complicating matters even further, Tracey was the first patient that this supervisor had assigned to me. I had a nagging
hunch that he had paired us together because of our racial similarities, a suspicion I never had the courage to confirm or deny directly with him.

All of these factors, to lesser and greater degrees, bore on my relationship with Tracey. At times, my own sense of racial marginalization made me want to mentally differentiate myself from her. I reminded myself: she had children, I did not; she came from the South, I came from the mid-Atlantic region. I had socioeconomic privileges and social supports she did not. At the same time, I was reminded of the ways in which I identified with some of her struggles. Like Tracey, I was still finding my way socially after my recent relocation. I empathized with her sense of isolation and occasionally with her harsh self-criticism.

When Tracey did show up to appointments, I felt a natural enjoyment and ease in our work together. When she allowed herself to slow down and think about her life, Tracey demonstrated tremendous insight and a rich emotional language; she was able to note, without excessive self-judgment, the genuine remorse for the ways she was too hard on her children, and areas where she could develop, such as nurturing her bonds with her daughters. She was also able to connect many of her challenges as a mother with her disappointing, hurtful experiences with her own White adoptive parents. She described a critical, misattuned mother and a preoccupied, neglectful father. Often left to her own devices, Tracey had managed to adopt a perfectionistic approach to her life that bordered on masochistic self-sufficiency.

In our fourth session, Tracey had discovered that her boyfriend of several years had been cheating on her. She was rageful and hurt. She was planning a trip to confront him and remove her belongings from her home in the South where he was still living. Although the trip would worsen her already strapped financial situation, she felt that she needed to go there right away. I
validated her urge to do this, while also asking her to consider the hastiness of the decision. Tracey reflected on my point, but determined, felt that it was the right thing to do.

After Tracey’s trip, she cancelled and rescheduled our appointment. When she came to my office, I asked about her feelings about therapy. I noted that she frequently rescheduled, and that I thought this reflected some ambivalence about treatment, and perhaps, about working with me. Tracey stated that she felt therapy was important but agreed that she placed it behind other priorities, such as her job and her daughters. She told me that she liked working with me, but was concerned about my leaving at the end of the training cycle. I explored her thoughts about having only a year to work together. She stated that she did not want to have to “start all over again” with another therapist. I told her I understood and that her concerns were common and normal. I also emphasized that even in our limited time together, I felt that we could accomplish important and meaningful work that could help her to weather the transitions she was undergoing. After some thought, she agreed to meet consistently on a bi-weekly basis.

Tracey then recounted to me the struggles of her trip. She had stood her ground with her boyfriend. She told him that he needed to start paying rent and that she wanted him to move out so that she could sell the house. Tracey also discussed the difficult interactions she had had with her mother at a family barbecue. Tracey had felt markedly uncomfortable there, partly because she and her biracial daughters were the only non-White people. When Tracey wanted to leave the gathering, her mother was visibly disappointed. Tracey noted, with a trace of disgust, that her mother just “doesn’t get it. She doesn’t get me.” I asked her to say more. Tracey’s speech began to take on a frenetic, wandering quality. She expressed her concerns for her children growing up half-Black and half-Asian. She had felt they had an easier time in her more racially diverse state in the South; the relative racial homogeneity of the state we were in
made social interactions more difficult. She began to talk about her own sense of alienation growing up with White parents and being one of a few Asian American students in her middle and high schools. Tracey said she sometimes hung out with “the Black kids” and at other times with “the White kids,” but felt like she acted differently around each group in order to fit in.

Although Tracey was speaking very quickly, speeding through time and space, the common message of her associations was clear to me. I said to her, “You’re talking about a lot of different things, your parents, your children, growing up, and I’m just hearing that you’ve never really felt like you belonged anywhere.” Tracey immediately broke down crying, a departure from her usual, keeping-it-together self. She nodded and said, “I’ve never told anyone that before.” We gazed at each other for a moment, our racial similarity suddenly becoming salient to me. I said, “Well, look, obviously, I’m Asian too. We're the same age. What is it like to be working with me?” She paused and then asked, “Where are you from?” My first impulse was to answer her question factually. Then a number of countervailing questions entered my mind. Am I being microaggressed? Does she mean to ask what my ethnicity is or where I grew up? Should I explore the meaning of the question? What would I be gratifying if I just answered?

My gut won out I gave her the full answer, to cover my bases: “My parents are from Taiwan. I was born in Maryland, but I lived in New York for a long time and then moved here recently.” “Why did you move?” “For this job.” “How long do you have left in your training?” “I am done after this year and then I have to finish my dissertation.” We were nearing the end of the session and the questions continued, "Are you married?" "Do you have children?" I answered them, one after the other, without ceremony, because I felt that was what she needed. “You can belong here in this place, with me, if you like,” was the message I was trying to deliver.
But her questions persisted, one after the other, spilling out with a fervor that I was not prepared for or expecting. I was beginning to wonder if they would end, fearing I had led us down a slippery slope of self-disclosure that I could not stop. I was rattled by my potential therapeutic misstep: was I telling her too much? What of the analytic frame? I laughed and attempted, playfully, “My! You have a lot of questions!” She was taken aback, “Oh, no, it’s fine, you don’t have to answer, I don’t care.” Silently, I kicked myself, fearing that I had lost her again. I tried to recover by answering her question and normalizing her curiosity about me. We said goodbye and I told her I would see her in two weeks. I left that session finally feeling confident that the inroads we had made had cemented a secure therapeutic foundation. But, to my surprise and chagrin, Tracey never came back to treatment or returned my calls.

This vignette might seem like an odd one to offer. Having lasted only five sessions over the span of three months, the treatment could hardly be called a resounding therapeutic success, which is partly why I chose it. Tracey’s treatment illustrates some of what is ignored when we talk about early treatment termination largely in terms of its relationship to Asian cultural values, or, conversely, of treatment adherence in terms of “ethnic match.” Clearly, there is no straightforward relationship here between Tracey, her ethnicity, and her ending treatment prematurely. Nor could our connection be summed up as an “ethnic match” or of shared Asian cultural values. Instead, I believe this vignette powerfully illustrates the inseparability of “individual” and “social” dynamics.

Complex sociohistorical, racial, cultural, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapsychic dynamics inextricably shaped Tracey’s experiences, our co-constructed interactions, and the therapeutic dilemmas I found myself facing. In some ways, Tracey's estrangement from her White adopted family, and her feeling of being out-of-step from Black and White students was a
reflection of the in-between quality of inclusion and exclusion so characteristic of being Asian American. At the same time, she also described a chronic lack of emotional understanding and aloneness stemming from the relationships she was in. No one had been available to help her to know who she was, to make a place for her, or to help her make a place for herself in unwelcoming spaces. Instead, Tracey was left to come up with her own adaptations. In her moving from group to group, from location to location, Tracey seemed to me, without fully knowing it, to be searching desperately for a place where she could belong. In her running toward, she was also running from. Her frenetic pace served as a fruitless distraction from a crucial and hidden part of herself, from this feeling that had plagued her, perhaps beginning even before birth. In articulating and staying with Tracey’s lack of (and implicitly, her desire for) belonging, I could speak to and to an extent, share, the racial and emotional alienation that characterized so much of her subjective experience.

For better or worse, amplifying the intensity of this moment was the sight of each others’ racialized faces together in the therapy room. For Tracey, the absence of racial and ethnic sameness in her life may have been a poignant reminder of an early, unknown, deeply felt loss of her birth mother and family and continued experiences of abandonment and neglect. Our racial similarity stood in for much of what had been missing from Tracey’s life. Perhaps I represented a ghost of her biological mother, family, and culture of origin, a figment of a life she could have known, and may never have dared to allow herself to imagine.

I do not know, nor will I ever know, why Tracey cut off contact; I can only generate post-hoc hypotheses. One possibility is that she was afraid of the intimacy in the room and that in the context of the end of my training year, she did not want to invest in someone who could not stick around, like so many others in her life. Perhaps, in my zeal to explore our relationship, I
foreclosed the opportunity to explore her experience of not-belonging, which may have reinforced her avoidance of it. Another possibility is that my doorknob intervention driven by a fleeting fear that in answering her question, I wasn’t being “true” to psychoanalysis, created a barrier between us, one from which there was not enough time in the session to recover. Perhaps she had acknowledged her pain—a reminder of what she had been deprived of throughout her life—with me, and there, she wanted it to stay. Maybe she was compelled to abandon me preemptively or, to communicate her past losses in a projective identificatory manner. Most likely, it was a complicated combination of some or all of these dynamics, mixed with elements beyond my purview.

Had I had more time with Tracey, I would have wanted to understand what her questions and my answers meant to her. I would have wanted to help her understand that her sense of belonging was only partially something to be found in a place, that she would have to begin to look at her own contributions to her feeling that she did not belong. I might have helped her to see that living with regret about “what could have been” feels easier than grieving what was not. Perhaps partially reflecting part of Tracey’s psychic experience, I will always be left wondering what happened and what could have been. My hope for Tracey is that our limited interaction may have started an ongoing process of seeing that belonging was at least a possibility, something to be partly found, and partly constructed.

**Conclusion**

As outlined by many, psychoanalysis in the United States in general has tended to separate the individual and social/cultural realms (Aron & Starr, 2013; Dalal, 2001; Guralnik & Simeon, 2010; Wachtel, 2014). Beyond just separating the two domains into discrete entities, psychoanalytic approaches have implicitly and explicitly propagated hierarchical relationships
between them. For instance, it has tended to privilege the individual over the sociocultural or to view the sociocultural as an outside layer, “icing on an already baked cake” that needs to be explored in order to reach the “real” core individual and intrapsychic issues (Dalal, 2001; Wachtel, 2014, p. 27). Thus, the very identity of psychoanalysis is based on this myopic focus on the individual, often at the expense of acknowledging broader sociocultural dynamics at play. Focusing on the “individual” in this manner disregards how culture mutually informs intimate subjective experiences of all individuals, not just those termed "culturally different."

Pragmatically, it is more accurate to say that psychoanalysis's official focus on the individual ends up focusing on a fantasied homogenous norm of certain individuals, largely White, middle to upper middle class people (Aron & Starr, 2013).

In a kind of symbiotic mirror image, the relationship between individual and social is often reversed in relation to Asian and Asian American patients in psychoanalysis and mainstream psychology. Case studies and clinical research related to Asians and Asian Americans often overculturalize attitudes and behaviors, at the expense of exploring the effects of individual, familial, socioeconomic, racial, and personality factors that uniquely define people of Asian descent, as they do everyone. For instance, I have illustrated above how the culture gap narrative, when rigidly applied, limits our understanding of Asians and Asian Americans as unique, complicated individuals. In reality, there are an infinite number of tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions that arise from being in the vexed Asian American identity category. These concordances and discordances become patterned into identities and change over time, generating a wide array of complex emotional scripts.

Even as clinical psychoanalysis is often placed in opposition to Asian culture and individuals, it is also particularly poised to elucidate these identities as they arise in relationships
with others. Through microinteractions in a relational context, clinical psychoanalysis can help people to understand and rewrite these emotional scripts, to enliven the vicissitudes of “who” Asian Americans are, rather than “what” they are (Arendt, 1958, p. 181). To do this, Arendt (1958) suggests, we must rely on the “revelatory quality of speech and action...where people are with others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness” (p. 180).

The limited avenues of legibility for Asian Americans within psychoanalytic and psychological discourse impede this process. To counteract these longstanding trends, psychoanalysts will need to take responsibility for their complicity in maintaining racial hierarchies and for correcting the field’s blind spots regarding Asian Americans. First, we need to contextualize the constricting binaries within which Asian Americans are typically cast. In the clinical domain, we need to expand our lenses on Asian Americans beyond the culture gap narrative and a narrow focus on “cultural competence.” For instance, an attitude of “cultural humility,” borrowed from the medical field, may provide a more flexible framework. Cultural humility explicitly seeks to reverse the impact of “power imbalances” between patient and practitioner and acknowledges the limitations of cultural knowledge and the importance of reflexivity through “lifelong...self-evaluation and critique” (Turvalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 123). Thus, unlike cultural competence, which implicitly focuses on achieving a goal and disseminating knowledge, cultural humility implies that understanding cultural differences is necessarily open-ended, limited, and dynamic (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013).

Additionally, we need to be more aware of the overt and covert forms of racism and each practitioner’s shifting position in relation to those realities. Regarding Asian Americans, this may require an ongoing inquiry into contemporary manifestations of tropes of exoticism,
unassimilability, unsociability, and inscrutability. Practitioners working with Asian American patients may need to be able to reflect on their assumptions and countertransferenceal anxieties about Asian Americans as potentially carrying important pieces of information about the patient, therapist, and the therapeutic relationship, rather than taking them at face value. In addition, this may necessitate awareness of the racialized and political messages reciprocally evoked by the sight of faces in everyday interactions and in the therapy room.

All of these interventions will require the tolerance of uncomfortable affects related to Asian American identity. It will put clinical psychoanalysts in touch with the largely unacknowledged histories of anti-Asian racism otherwise hidden by the field's culture gap narrative and associated binaries. It will require openness to the dissatisfaction of not being able to fully separate what is attributable to “Asian culture” versus the “individual.” These frustrations in and of themselves may partially reflect Asian Americans’ experiences of trying to discern cultural identity from racial stereotype in getting to know themselves among others. In tolerating and metabolizing these experiences of uneasiness, psychoanalysts can begin to inhabit and bear painful and growth-inducing places with Asian Americans.

In honoring the complexities of the process of getting to know another with another, in all its discomforts and rewards, clinical psychoanalysts can help create “alternative ways of belonging” and identities for a group of individuals whose psychological experiences are so often narrowly defined for them (Dalal, 2009, p. 80). Such therapeutic relationships can stimulate both powerful individual and social change by becoming small places of resistance against broader contexts that are persistently rejecting, discriminatory, alienating, and neglectful. Finally, these efforts may carry on the relational movement’s endeavors in shifting
psychoanalysis from being one of those problematic contexts, slowly shifting clinical psychoanalytic thought and practice back toward its radical and socially conscious origins.
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