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NAVIGATING FAMILIES, NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES:
ASIAN-WHITE MIXED FAMILY EXPERIENCES

by

HAYDEN DAESHIN JU

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2023

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APPROVAL

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Hayden Daeshin Ju

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Navigating Families, Negotiating Identities:
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by

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Advisor: Van C. Tran

This dissertation examines how White and second-generation Asian American heterosexual couples negotiate race, ethnicity, and gender as they come together and form families. While Asian-White intermarriage is often theorized as an endpoint of assimilation, this research concerns itself with the ways in which race plays a central role in shaping various domains of family life among mixed couples. Drawing on 62 semi-structured interviews with White and second-generation Asian American individuals, I find that race and gender jointly shape how the couples navigate household divisions of labor, in-law relationships, naming decisions, and transmitting ethnicity to children. By revealing the ongoing processes of racialization within mixed families, this study challenges the popular imagination of intermarriage as a symbol of racial transcendence. Instead, it argues that Asian-White mixed families are an important site to interrogate intersectional inequalities.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In 1965, the United States Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, the watershed piece of legislation that enabled Asians to immigrate to the United States (U.S. hereafter) in unprecedentedly large numbers. Fueled by the new immigration flow, the Asian American population grew from 1.5 million in 1970 to over 20 million in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Given their demographic importance, scholars have paid close attention to how Asian Americans have been racially incorporated into US society. Existing studies show that while there are some variations by ethnicity, second-generation Asian Americans have attained socioeconomic success (Lee and Zhou 2014; Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009; Sakamoto, Takei, and Woo 2012; Zeng and Xie 2004). Their socioeconomic success has led to their racial mobility—the change in status as a racial group (Lee and Zhou 2015). Once viewed by Whites as “unassimilable,” Asian Americans today are often described to be an “exceptional” group.

In addition to their socioeconomic attainment, several studies point to Asian Americans’ high rate of mixed marriages¹, specifically, the rate of marriage between Asian Americans and Whites. Mixed families have received a lot of media and scholarly attention because it is understood as a sign that individuals from two different groups have genuinely accepted each other as social equals. Asian Americans, particularly those who are native-born, have the highest intermarriage rate among different racial groups (Livingston and Brown 2017). About 35% of Asian Americans born in 1965 or later are married to Whites (Min and Kim 2009). Several scholars view a high rate of Asian-White mixed relationships as telling evidence that the Asian-White racial

¹ Hereafter, mixed marriage is limited to those between second-generation Asian Americans and third-or-higher generation non-Hispanic Whites.

boundaries are weakening. (Alba and Nee 2003; Hwang, Saenz, and Aguirre 1997; Kalmijn 1998; Lee and Bean 2010; Min and Kim 2009; Qian and Lichter 2007).

There are, however, qualitative studies that provide complicating evidence on whether mixed families signal a blurring of Asian-White racial boundaries (Chong 2021; Chou 2012; Chow 2000; Lee and Kye 2016; Nemoto 2009; Shiao and Tuan 2008; Song 2009). The gender asymmetry in the rate of mixed marriage—Asian American women having a substantially higher rate than Asian American men—reflects the pervasiveness of the controlling images of Asian American sexuality where men are depicted as effeminate while women are characterized as exotic and hyper-feminine (Chou 2012; Moran 2003). These negative stereotypes also shape some Asian Americans' racial preferences in dating and marriage. For example, some Asian American women prefer White men as romantic partners whom they perceive to be more attractive and caring than Asian American men (Chow 2000; Nemoto 2009). These findings suggest that marital preferences are developed at the intersection of racialized and gendered hierarchies. They also caution that the high Asian-White intermarriage rate does not necessarily signal that Asian Americans are experiencing “Whitening” (Kim 2016).

These studies reveal that we should devote more attention to unpacking the complicated meanings of Asian-White mixed families, and what it tells us about racial relations in the US. This study aims to tackle this question through qualitative explorations of the lived experiences of Asian-White heterosexual couples. There are some existing qualitative studies on Asian-White couples, but they mainly sought explanations as to why Asians and Whites came together as couples (Chong 2013; Chow 2000; Lee and Bean 2010; Nemoto 2009; Shiao and Tuan 2008; Shiao 2017). Meanwhile, relatively little attention has been paid to the everyday lives of Asian-White couples. Studies of Asian-White mixed families have neglected to examine how the couples

navigate their social relationships and transmit ethnicity to their children. These are serious oversights in the literature because these subjective dimensions are the key to understanding how and to what extent the Asian-White racial boundaries are being upended or retained through intermarriage. As the number of Asian-White mixed families continues to increase, we need to pay greater attention to how mixed families act as a site of negotiating race and ethnicity.

The Main Objectives

The main objective of this dissertation is to examine how Asian-White couples negotiate race and ethnicity in their everyday lives. I examine two aspects of Asian-White couples' experiences: societal responses and ethnic maintenance. Below are the specific objectives that have guided this research.

First, this study asks: how do Asian-White couples navigate relationships with their extended families? Put differently, do couples feel socially accepted by their spouses' families and friends? While past studies have examined whether Asian Americans and Whites perceive race as a barrier to forming long-term unions (Chong 2013; Chow 2000; Lee and Bean 2010; Nemoto 2009), there is no study, to my knowledge, that pays close attention to whether Asian-White couples receive a warm welcome or experience implicit and/or explicit forms of marginalization from the members of their immediate social circles. This is a serious gap in the literature because how people respond to individuals who cross racial boundaries to form families help us better understand the nuances of contemporary Asian-White racial relations (Childs 2005; Dalmage 2000; Osuji 2019). While I will pay greater attention to the Asian American spouses' experiences, I will also examine how White spouses are perceived by their Asian American extended families (and how they make sense of the familial responses) because the responses from both Whites and Asian

American extended families are needed to illuminate the mechanisms of boundary change (or maintenance) in the lives of Asian-White couples.

Second, this study investigates how Asian parents in mixed families utilize ethnic cultural elements in their parenting practices. In other words, which ethnic elements do they retain, what meaning do they give to those elements, and how does ethnicity shape their parenting choices? Gordon (1964) argues that intermarriage results in the loss of non-White spouses' ethnic distinctiveness. We need to revisit this assumption and examine to what extent it applies to contemporary Asian Americans. There are structural factors that may help Asian Americans retain their ethnicity while being intermarried (Min 1999): a continuous flow of immigrants from Asian countries, the US government's adoption of multicultural policies beginning in the early 1970s, and the post-1965 immigrant groups' stronger transnational ties to the homeland enabled by technological advances. How intermarried Asian Americans think about ethnic identity and incorporate ethnic cultural practices in their everyday lives will help unpack the relationship between intermarriage and ethnicity for the new second-generation Asian Americans.

Past studies on Asian-White families have focused on parental racial and ethnic identification of their biracial children (Hwang et al. 1997; Jiménez, Park, and Pedroza 2018; Qian 2004; Xie and Goyette 1997). This study, instead, examines actual parenting practices and the ways they construct ethnic contexts for their children. Parenting strategies reveal not only how ethnicity plays out in everyday life, but also how Asian and White spouses negotiate and make decisions about childrearing and their social environments. Thus, this study seeks to test the relational aspect of intermarriage—to what extent both Asian Americans and Whites change through mixed marriage (Jiménez 2017; Vasquez-Tokos 2017).

When exploring the experiences of Asian-White mixed families, I will pay close attention to the ways in which gender configurations of the couples—whether the gender of the Asian American person in an Asian-White couples is male or female—shape their experiences. While past studies have emphasized the gender asymmetry in the Asian American intermarriage rate, relatively little is known about how experiences within mixed families may differ by the gender of the Asian spouse. To fill in this gap, this study pays close attention to how race and gender jointly shape their everyday experiences.

Literature Review

Racial Position of Contemporary Asian Americans

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (also known as the Hart-Cellar Act) was a landmark piece of legislation that resulted in an unexpectedly large wave of immigration from Asia and Latin America. The size and diversity of this immigration wave posed two related theoretical questions: 1) how and how well are immigrants and their children adapting to life in the United States?; and 2) in what ways will they redefine race relations in the United States? Since immigrant adaptation is a multi-generational process, scholars have paid close attention to the adaptation processes and outcomes of the children of immigrants.

The experiences of contemporary Asian Americans have been largely studied through the lens of assimilation. There are three main theoretical perspectives on the integration of Asian Americans: neo-assimilation, second-generation advantage, and segmented assimilation. First, neo-assimilation posits that assimilation—a “decline of ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences” (Alba and Nee 2003:11)—will occur to post-1965 immigrants and their children as it has in the past. Alba and Nee (2003) view that the institutional government provides

opportunities for social mobility to contemporary immigrants, and as they pursue those opportunities, assimilation will eventually occur. The second-generation advantage perspective also holds an optimistic view (Kasinitz et al. 2009): the new second generation has a significant advantage for upward mobility because they not only can benefit from the programs originally developed for the native-born minority groups but also can deftly navigate between the immigrant and native cultures. Lastly, the segmented assimilation perspective has a more mixed view ((Gans 1992; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). It maintains that not all children of immigrants will experience upward mobility; rather, they can experience upward, selective or downward assimilation, depending on their race, parental human capital, familial and community ties, and contexts of incorporation. As for Asian Americans, the segmented assimilation approach posits that Asian immigrants' high class background and ethnic community resources will help them confront racial discrimination and achieve upward mobility.

Empirical evidence supports that second-generation Asian Americans have achieved socioeconomic mobility. They are the most highly educated group and are overrepresented in elite colleges (Lee and Zhou 2014). They have left the ethnic enclaves and entered the mainstream economy as professionals (Kim 2004). And more importantly, they experience much less disadvantage in the labor market compared to immigrants educated overseas (Zeng and Xie 2004). Kim and Sakamoto (2010) find that US-born and/or raised Asian American men are close to reaching earnings parity with their White counterparts when education is controlled for.

Asian Americans' socioeconomic attainment significantly elevated their racial status(Lee 2015). Some scholars argue that the salience of race is declining for Asian Americans, at least in the labor market (Sakamoto et al. 2009). These perspectives on Asian Americans' racial position have important implications for the forecast of race relations in the US. Some scholars posit that

Asian Americans will experience “Whitening”, and their alignment with Whites and Latinos will result in the emergence of a new color line—the black/nonblack divide (Gans 1999; Lee and Bean 2010; Yancey 2003). Bonilla-Silva (2004) predicts that the traditional black-White racial hierarchy is evolving into a tri-racial one, and most Asian Americans will fall into the “honorary White” stratum, located in the middle.

There is little doubt that certain Asian American groups are socioeconomically successful, but some scholars strongly disagree that race is no longer salient for Asian Americans (Chou and Feagin 2008; Kim 2016; Lee and Kye 2016). They argue that Asian Americans are subjected to a distinct racialization process: Asian Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic and generational status, are racialized as foreigners, and thus are not accepted as legitimate Americans (C. Kim 1999; N. Kim 2016; Tuan 1998)². Moreover, Asian Americans continue to experience racial taunts, stereotyping, and hate crimes (Chou and Feagin 2008). These studies maintain that we cannot assume that Asian Americans are being “Whitened” based on the traditional indicators of assimilation. To better understand what it means to be Asian American in contemporary US society, we need to focus on the ways in which the processes of racialization shape everyday experiences of Asian Americans.

Racial Dynamics of Asian-White Intermarriage

In the media and scholarly literature, intermarriage has been treated as a measuring stick of social distance between different groups for a long period of time. Major social theorists such

² Tuan (1998) examined ethnic experiences of third or higher generation Japanese and Chinese American adults in California in the mid-1990s. Her study participants came of age between the 1950s and the early 1970s. Several decades have passed since then, and we need to reexamine to what extent Tuan’s (1998) analysis of Asian Americans’ racialization process is relevant to today’s second-generation Asian Americans.

as Merton (1941), Kennedy (1944), Gordon (1964), Lieberman and Waters (1988), Alba and Nee (2003), and Lee and Bean (2010) have used intermarriage to gauge social acceptance between different racial and ethnic groups. In their studies, intermarriage involving Whites is often described as the “litmus test,” “final step,” and “endpoint” of assimilation into largely White mainstream society. This is because marriage is often regarded as the most deeply-rooted bond between two people (Kalmijn 1998; Qian and Lichter 2007). If intermarriage is occurring at a large scale, it is interpreted that the boundary between two groups has broken down (Lee and Bean 2010). The case of European ethnics provides empirical support to this interpretation (Perlmann and Waters 2004). An important question is, then, whether intermarriage would bring a similar change to Asian-White racial boundaries. Lee and Bean (2010) would answer “yes” to this question: their interviews show that intermarried Asian-White couples do not view their racial difference as a barrier to their relationships.

Among different racial groups, Asian Americans have the highest intermarriage rate (Livingston and Brown 2017). One out of three post-1965 native-born Asian Americans are married to Whites (Min and Kim 2009). Their high intermarriage rate is understood as a result of their frequent interactions with Whites in educational institutions, workplaces, and predominantly White neighborhoods (Lichter, Qian, and Tumin 2015; Min and Kim 2009). According to Lee (2015), the high intermarriage rate reflects the changes in Whites’ perception of Asian Americans. Once “undesirable,” Asian Americans have become increasingly “marriageable” to Whites.

On the other hand, some studies question the assumed incorporative power of mixed marriages (Chong 2013; Chou 2012; Chow 2000; Lee and Kye 2016; N. Kim 2016; Nemoto 2009; Shiao and Tuan 2008; Song 2009). These studies emphasize the persistence of gender asymmetry in native-born Asian American intermarriage. My analysis of the post-1965 native-born Asian

Americans using the 2012-2016 American Community Survey shows that the intermarriage rate is 34% for women and 23% for men. Scholars explain that this gap is related to the controlling images of Asian American sexuality that help sustain White male power (Chou 2012; Pyke and Dang 2003; Moran 2003). As a result, White men are generally open to dating or marrying Asian women while most White women exclude Asian American men as potential romantic partners (Balistreri, Joyner, and Kao 2015; Robnett and Feliciano 2011).

The gendered racial preferences also influence Asian Americans' partner choices. Chow (2000) finds that some Asian Americans prefer Whites as marital partners because they believe Whites to be all around "better" than their co-ethnics. In addition, some Asian Americans' desire for White partners is often accompanied by their strong yearnings to "Whiten"—wanting to become "real" Americans (Chong 2013). Racial status inequality between Whites and Asian Americans can be a driving force for some Asian Americans to intermarry (Nemoto 2009; Shiao and Tuan 2008).

These studies caution researchers not to blankly accept intermarriage as a signal of racial progress. Rather, they reveal that we need more studies that unfold the complicated meanings of intermarriage. Currently, however, researchers have neglected to qualitatively examine the day-to-day experiences of Asian-White couples. While several studies ask who and why one intermarries, there are very few studies that explore what it is like to be intermarried, and particularly, how racial boundaries are negotiated within the context of mixed families. To address this gap, this study will ask how well Asian-White couples are accepted by the members of their immediate social circles (their extended families and close friends) in order to delineate the processes of boundary change that cannot be captured when we solely focus on the couple relationships (Childs 2005).

Transmission of Ethnicity in Mixed Families

The second goal of this study is to clarify the relationship between intermarriage and ethnicity for Asian Americans. The classical assimilation approach, formulated by Gordon (1964), assumes that mixed marriages leads to an eventual loss of ethnic distinctiveness. This assumption, however, is criticized for being ethnocentric (Alba and Nee 2003; Song 2009; Qian and Lichter 2007; Vasquez-Tokos 2017). It suggests that the minority spouse not only will change but will want to change—to shed his or her “old country” ways and adopt the largely White mainstream culture. Also, it does not acknowledge the benefits of practicing and maintaining ethnicity given the demographic realities of today’s American society (Portes and Zhou 1993). In the current era of multiculturalism and globalization, familiarity with ethnic cultures and fluency in different languages are important assets.

Classical assimilation theory also assumes that only the minority spouse will change as a result of intermarriage while the White spouse remains the same. This approach provides only a partial account of the boundary-crossing processes because it overlooks the changes that take place among the members of the mainstream (Jiménez 2017). Vasquez-Tokos’ (2017) study of Latino-White interracial couples provides empirical evidence that challenges the applicability of Gordon’s (1964) assumption on the ethnicity of post-1965 non-White immigrants and their offspring. She finds that Latino-White intermarriages do not necessarily result in the loss of Latino ethnic culture and identity. Instead, Latino-White couples exhibit a spectrum of biculturalism where they engage in different levels of ethnic maintenance. Additionally, she finds that intermarriage affects not only

the Latino spouse but also the White spouse. Through intermarriage, White spouses gained a greater awareness of race³ (Vasquez-Tokos 2017).

Although scholars have revisited the theoretical assumption on the link between intermarriage and ethnicity, we know very little about how intermarried Asian Americans engage in ethnic maintenance. Chong (2013) finds that intermarried Asian American parents want their children to maintain critical consciousness of racism, know where their family came from, and speak ethnic languages. Her study suggests that the question of ethnicity remains relevant to intermarried Asian Americans. The next step in the research is to ask what specific ethnic elements are practiced by intermarried Asian Americans, how they negotiate the transmission of ethnicity to the children with their White spouses, and what is the role of social context in ethnic transmission. By addressing these questions, this study aims to expand our understanding of how Asian-White intermarriage influences ethnic maintenance.

The Gender Asymmetry in Asian-White Mixed Relationships and Its Consequences

The day-to-day experiences of Asian-White couples are likely to vary by several factors, including but not limited to: generation, gender, class, and ethnicity. For the purpose of this study, I focus on how gender matters for Asian-White couples because gender asymmetry is one of the most striking features of Asian-White intermarriage. As described in the earlier section, much attention has been given to interpreting the gender disparity in intermarriage rates among Asian Americans. On the other hand, relatively little is known about how the gender configurations of

³ However, intermarriage does not always result in increased racial consciousness; some couples adopt the color-blind discourse, downplaying the issue of race in their relationships (Childs 2005).

the couples (whether the gender of the Asian American person in Asian-White couple is male or female) shape their experiences.

To my knowledge, there are only two studies that identify the ways in which gender matters for Asian-White couples. First, Wright and his colleagues (Wright, Holloway, and Ellis 2013) find that the gender configurations of Asian-White couples are related to neighborhood diversity: Asian female-White male couples are less likely to reside in racially diverse neighborhoods than Asian male-White female couples. Lee and Bean (2010) point out that gender configurations can influence the integration of the couples' mixed children. Since different-sex couples typically pass the father's surname to their children, mixed children with White fathers will generally have non-ethnic surnames whereas those with Asian fathers will have ethnic surnames. Lee and Bean (2010) posit that their surnames—whether it becomes identifiable ethnic marker—may shape the racial experiences of mixed children.

These studies suggest that we should consider how the relationship between intermarriage and integration is moderated not only by race but also by gender. Thus, one of the main objectives of this study is to investigate the race-by-gender effect on Asian-White couples' lived experiences. This study has two specific goals. First, this study explores how social acceptance of Asian-White couples differs by their gender configurations. It is reasonable to expect gender differences in social acceptance of Asian-White couples because historically, the legal and social sanctions of interracial unions were different for Asian male-White female and Asian female-White male couples (Moran 2003). The relationships between non-White men and White women were seen as a threat to White male privilege and thus were subjected to punishment (Pascoe and Pascoe 2009). By asking whether Asian men face greater opposition than Asian women from White families, this study contributes to a gendered understanding of the permeability of the Asian-White boundary.

While Asian American women married to White men are not seen as a threat to the White power structure, they may experience stigmatization from the Asian American communities. In a recent article in *The Cut*, an award-winning, Chinese American author Celeste Ng revealed that she has been harassed on social media by Asian American men for being married to a White man. After speaking with other intermarried women, she realized that she is not the only person being called names on the internet for marrying a White man. The women she interviewed were receiving hateful messages that accused them of being “White worshippers” and “self-hating Asian females.” Language use on social media is often extreme, and what goes on the internet does not represent everyday reality. Nonetheless, the views expressed online suggest that the social acceptance of Asian-White couples by the Asian American community may depend on the couple’s gender configuration. Given how the existing attitudes toward interracial couples are gendered, an examination of the interaction of race and gender in the everyday lives of Asian-White intermarried couples is needed.

Second, this study also explores how ethnic maintenance/transmission differs by the gender of the Asian spouse since 1) the household division of labor is highly gendered and 2) the bargaining power usually tilts in favor of the male spouses in different-sex couples. Mothers typically spend more time with their children than fathers. Moreover, women are often the carriers of cultural traditions in the family (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2009). Thus, the ethnic contexts of the family are likely to differ depending on whether the Asian spouse is male or female.

While mothers may play a greater role in childrearing than fathers, parenting strategies undoubtedly reflect the views of both parents. Gender disparity in the household decision-making power may influence how parents transmit ethnicity to their children. This is particularly pertinent to interracial couples because the spouses are more likely to have different understandings of race

and ethnicity than those in endogamous unions (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). Also, while studies point out that Asian American women perceive White men to be more egalitarian than Asian American men (Chong 2013; Chow 2000; Nemoto 2009), little is known about the salience of race and gender privileges in marriages between Asian American women and White men. Considering that a new gender dynamic emerges in marriage and is reconfigured when couples become parents, it is important to examine how gender configurations affect the ways in which mixed couples negotiate family cultural practices.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative method, semi-structured in-depth interviews, as the principal tool for data collection because the main goal of this study is to examine how race is lived today by looking at Asian-White couples' experiences. Qualitative methods are particularly "suited to understand the meanings, interpretations, and subjective experience of family members" (Daly 1992:3-4). Qualitative interviews helped uncover how Asian-White couples and their children "create, sustain, and discuss their own family realities" (4).

Sample

I conducted interviews with 62 White and second-generation Asian American individuals. I limited the Asian sample to those who were either born in or came to the U.S. at a very young age. I identified potential interviewees by advertising my research on online and local message boards. Also, I combed through the New York Times wedding announcement to find Asian-White couples and contacted them through email and LinkedIn. After each interview, I asked the participants to introduce me to other mixed families.

Table 1 shows the racial and gender distribution of the sample. I stopped interviewing more participants after my sixty-second interview because I noticed that similar themes were repeating for the last several interviews. I had hoped to interview to have a same number of interviews with Asian female-White male couples and Asian male-White female couples, but it was much harder to find the latter, which was somewhat expected given that Asian American women intermarry at a much higher rate than Asian American men.

Table 1. Race and Gender Distribution of the Sample

	White	Asian	Total
Men	16	12	28
Women	14	20	34
Total	30	32	62

Aside from race and gender, most of the interviewees were residing in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan areas and had children. All but one of them had at least college education, and most of them worked in professional/managerial occupations. It is important to note that every interviewee had middle-class background if not higher. Thus, my interview sample is a highly selective group, but so are average Asian-White mixed families as shown in (Alba, Beck, and Basaran Sahin 2018).

Interview Protocol

When both spouses agreed to participate in the study, I interviewed each spouse separately rather than interviewing them both at the same time. Given the nature of the research topic, one spouse cannot speak for the experiences of both spouses. Also, joint interviews may have generated one “official” account of the family experience and may not provide the nuances and complexities of the racial and gender dynamics that exist between the spouses. Conducting two

separate interviews with the spouses (when available) provided unique and valuable perspectives on their family relationships (Hertz 1995). For example, some White male interviewees did not reveal to me that they have dated (sometimes almost exclusively) Asian women, but I would learn about their past dating history through their Asian partners.

The semi-structured interview had three sections. I started with family backgrounds and childhood upbringing with a focus on friendships and romantic relationships. Then, the next set of questions was about how they met their current partners and what was it like to introduce their partners to their families. I also asked how their relationships with the in-laws evolved over time. The next set of questions centered around their parenting practices, specifically their ethnic transmission and racial socialization. The interview guide changed over the course of data collection. For instance, new themes about the spousal name change and children's name emerged, so I started to ask questions about how they made decisions about names. Progressive focusing was helpful to discover new themes and narrow down the research focus (Marshall and Rossman 2014).

The first thirty interviews were conducted in person mostly at the participants' homes or offices. Visiting the participants' homes allowed me to meet other members of the family and observe how they interact with each other. During the pandemic, however, I conducted interviews virtually using Zoom. Online interviewing did not allow me to make ethnographic observations, but it gave greater flexibility for scheduling interviews.

I employed a flexible coding strategy developed by Deterding and Waters (2021) to manage the interview data. After each interview, I organize the data by 1) transcribing the interview (if the audio recording is available), 2) writing a respondent-level memo, 3) entering the characteristics of the interview participants into an attribute table, which is in the form of an excel

spreadsheet, and 4) indexing the interview transcripts with codes derived from the interview questions. This strategy helped me not only maximize the utility of the data but also improve the transparency of the analysis. Also, throughout the data collection process, I wrote cross-case memos to identify concepts and themes that appear across different participants. After the data collection, I analyzed the data by applying analytic codes that emerged from the memos using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five substantive chapters. Chapter 2 explores how second-generation Asian Americans develop racial preferences for friendship and romantic relationships in their formative years. Many second-generation Asian Americans responded to pressures to assimilate and negative racial stereotypes by actively distancing themselves from Asianness. As a result, by the time they entered romantic markets, they have normalized White preferences for intimate relationships. These findings point out that experiences of both assimilation and racialization shape Asian Americans' marital choices. Moreover, they highlight the importance of placing intermarriage within one's life course rather than treating it as an isolated event to better understand what it signals about immigrant incorporation and racial boundaries.

In Chapter 3, I situate Asian-White intermarriage within the larger context of the family and explore how Asian and White partners navigate family expectations from their parents. I find a sharp difference by race: Asian participants had more rigid expectations from the parents and thus had greater difficulties introducing their White partners to the parents. How do we make sense of this discrepancy? Does this mean that Asian parents are “more racist” than White parents? I argue that marriage is a trickier subject within Asian families because it is often perceived as a

vehicle for social mobility while sustaining ethnic heritage. Marriage, in other words, is an overlooked piece of the Asian success frame that sheds light on how the immigrant family adapts to the U.S. society's capitalist and racist realities. The second generation, whose own views of marriage often depart from their parents, navigate these expectations as part of the “immigrant bargain.” Most participants have managed to strike a balance between seeking personal happiness and making familial sacrifice worthwhile. However, some rejected this narrative, fracturing relationships with their parents. These findings collectively emphasize the need to consider diverse meanings of marriage to unpack the familial responses to intermarriage accurately.

While the couples did not feel like there is much of a cultural gap between them, they often did not have a clear idea of what to expect regarding in-law relationships. Chapter 4 uses emotion work as a conceptual framework to examine how gender and race construct the extended family life of mixed couples. I find that women, overall, performed more emotion work as daughters-in-law than men, but the nature of their work differed by race. White women had to balance between being a good daughter-in-law and giving into patriarchal cultural norms. They also had to manage the guilt imposed by their in-laws that their children are not Asian enough. While both Asian men and women experienced racial microaggressions, Asian women could not solicit as much spousal support as Asian men. Despite the disproportionate burden, the women actively negotiated and developed strategies to construct a more inclusive family life. The gendered processes of and resistance to racialization challenge the assumption that intermarriage is an endpoint of assimilation. Instead, it is a key site where structural inequalities intersect.

Naming is a highly gendered practice. But how does race factor into this practice? Chapter 5 explores how Asian-White couples decide about marital surname change and come up with their children's names. I find that White female-Asian male couples were more likely to adopt non-

traditional naming practices (wives keeping their birth surnames and children having hyphenated surnames) than Asian female-White male couples. This difference in naming patterns suggests that the former is more gender-egalitarian than the latter. Gender imbalance, however, was not the only driving factor. Some Asian women chose to adopt their White husbands' surnames as a strategy to resist being pigeonholed and rebrand their identities. They decided not to give hyphenated surnames to their children so that they do not have visible ethnic markers in their names. Meanwhile, White women chose to keep their surnames so as not to be mistaken as Asian. Also, surname hyphenation allows White female-Asian male couples to signal Whiteness while downplaying Asianness of their children. These findings suggest that the naming decisions reflect the couples' view of the U.S. racial landscape and how they perceive their location within it.

Assimilation theory posits that intermarriage results in the loss of ethnic distinctiveness. Chapter 6 examines to what extent this assumption applies to Asian-White couples by focusing on their parenting practices. Specifically, Chapter 6 identifies three main ways intermarried Asian Americans incorporate ethnicity into their parenting tools. First, highly assimilated parents acknowledged the value of ethnic tools for new immigrants. But they find mainstream middle-class parenting tools to be more conducive to upward mobility and overall superior for child development. On the other hand, some parents were comfortable picking and choosing between ethnic and mainstream tools to create a custom package, which they hope will give their children a leg up in the global economy. Defying the rigid definition of success, the third group of parents identified and recreated tools that highlight communitarian aspects of Asian culture. The findings illustrate that intermarriage can lead Asians to rediscover their ethnic culture and help their White partners become affiliative ethnic during the process.

Chapter Two: Navigating White Social Worlds

On a cold winter evening, I met Jinny for an interview at her office in midtown Manhattan. Four months into the study, I have grown to enjoy interviews conducted at offices as they allowed me glimpses of corporate New York. Many interviewees had hectic schedules, so the interviews took place during or after work hours. I got to see various offices ranging from old ones with their pre-war charm to brand-new ones with open lounging spaces. Jinny worked as a lawyer at one of the country's largest law firms. Her office ran several stories in a tall, large building. It had that old grandeur, which was easily matched by people dressed in business formals.

I approached the security person at the front desk and told him that I am here for an appointment with Jinny. He checked my ID, dialed Jinny's office, and informed her that I have arrived. Then he let me through the turnstile and pointed me to an elevator that will take me to her floor. As I got off the elevator, I saw Jinny—a small-framed woman with short hair, and barely any makeup, dressed in a dark grey two-piece suit. My first impression of her was that she looked not just professional but stoic. I could not tell if she was looking forward to the interview. She greeted me with a low voice, and we shook hands, and I was surprised by the unexpected firmness.

Walking over to her office, I noticed that the spacious, personal offices were on the left side of the hallway, and the cubicles were on the right. It was around dinner time, but several people were still working. We got to her office, a professional, corporate-like space. She kept picture frames of her children next to her computer. Sitting behind her large, well-organized L-shaped desk, she seemed comfortable occupying a space carved out for her in this maze of a building.

Once we broke the ice, I moved on to one of my usual early questions about childhood. Jinny told me that she grew up in the “very white and WASPy” suburbs of Connecticut. Then, she took a pause and then told me that the night before the interview, she found herself wondering whether she is an ideal candidate for my study. She felt like she was not Asian enough—sure, her parents are from South Korea, but she does not speak Korean nor has ever been to Korea. She has never been that attached to ethnic or Asian culture, and therefore, she feels like she does not quite fit into the Asian American narrative. Plus, she rarely thinks of her marriage as an interracial one. Of course, she sometimes feels like she and Nolan, her White husband, are so different—in the ways they approach parenting and just life in general—but she reasoned that is because she comes from an immigrant family. In contrast, Nolan's family has been here “forever.” Of course, she is Asian, and her husband is White, but she was not so sure if they are racially all that different. Yet, for some reason, she responded to my cold call requesting an interview, and I was here at her office after a couple of quick exchanges of emails.

Jinny described herself as an “anomaly” who does not dwell on her Asianness. But several others whom I have interviewed for this study have echoed similar sentiments. Sometimes, during separate interviews, the White spouses would comment on how little attachment their Asian spouses have to Asian/ethnic culture. Jinny's husband told me that they joke about him being “more Asian” than her and Jinny being “more White” than him. From the interviews with Asian-White couples in California, Lee and Bean (2010) found that the couples defined their observed differences in cultural terms rather than racial terms. The spouses found each other to be too culturally similar for their relationships to be an interracial one and did not experience racial barriers, which were often brought up by the Black-White couples.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Asian-White couples perceive fewer racial differences than Black-White couples. Several socioeconomic indicators (education, income, residential location, etc.) suggest that Asians are closer to attaining parity with Whites. theorizes that the U.S. racial structure is transforming into a tri-racial one where Asians occupy the middle strata. Asians who are lighter-skinned and have attained middle-class status will be perceived as “honorary Whites.” Several theorists predict that Asian Americans will get closer to Whites. Jinny may not be an anomaly after all. The literature suggests that her experience may indicate the declining significance of race for Asian Americans similarly situated as her.

But as the interview with Jinny went on, I found myself wondering that perhaps the way she understands her marriage is shaped by colorblind discourse, which has been the dominant racial narrative growing up in a White social world. I got the impression that Jinny and Nolan are very compatible, but at the same time, I felt that there is a possibility that she tends to downplay the issue of race or somehow learned to drop race from the equation. The social contexts of her adolescence—curated by the assimilationist parents in a predominantly White neighborhood—may have played an important role in the ways she formed interracial relationships (whether they be friendship or romantic relationships) and how she made sense of them.

This is why, although this study is about adult interracial couples, I begin with a chapter that explores the social contexts of Asian participants during their formative years. Specifically, I explore how they approached three types of relationships: high school friendship, college friendship, and dating in early adulthood. In doing so, I find the pervasiveness of Asian American stereotypes in school settings and the strategies that the participants employed to evade being consumed by these stereotypes. Managing the pressure to assimilate while undergoing racialization had a lasting impact on how they attach friendship and romantic relationships.

Chapter 1, thus, aims to contribute to the growing body of literature that views intermarriage as a part of a life-long process of managing interracial contacts rather than as an isolated event (King and Bratter 2007). It builds on the existing studies that pay attention to interracial contacts preceding intermarriage and how they are connected to one another (Chong 2021; Kao, Joyner, and Balistreri 2019; Shiao 2018).

This chapter, which focuses on Asian partners, has three sections. The first section illustrates how growing up in predominantly White neighborhoods entailed receiving implicit and explicit messages about the inferiority of Asianness, which had a significant impact on how the Asian interviewees made friends in high school. In the second section, I show how the racial composition of close networks was largely maintained during the college years, despite the opportunities to diversify the networks. Lastly, I illustrate how feelings of equality and inequality translate into racialized preferences in romantic relationships. Taken together, this chapter elaborates on the experiences of navigating White social worlds during formative years and how they are interconnected to the ways people build relationships as adults.

Growing up in Suburban America

Most Asian interviewees grew up in predominantly White suburban neighborhoods, with only a few who grew up in urban, ethnic communities. Their childhood residential locations were closely related to their parents' socioeconomic background. The parents are all immigrants, and most of them came to the U.S. as adults. But most parents were college-educated and have attained middle-class, if not upper-middle-class status through pursuing professional careers or small-business entrepreneurship. We often hear stories of immigrants who start from zero, but that was not the

story of my participants' parents. They came to the U.S. with much more human and financial capital.

There is some selection bias in my Asian sample, as they had more class advantages than the average child of Asian immigrants growing up. But the class background observed from this group is not too surprising either. Post-1965 Asian immigrants are noted for their hyper-selectivity, where they are “more highly-educated than their coethnics who stayed behind, and are also more highly educated than the U.S. average” (Lee and Zhou 2014:8). With their class-based resources, the Asian respondents did not follow the residential trajectories predicted by the spatial assimilation model: moving into urban ethnic enclaves upon arrival, but with linguistic assimilation and socioeconomic mobility, one gets to move out to the suburbs (Alba et al. 1999; Massey and Denton 1985). Instead, they settled straight in the suburbs because that was where their parents worked as professionals, and they could afford to choose the school districts. They have spent much of their childhood in the suburbia with occasional weekend visits to ethnic neighborhoods for grocery shopping, language classes, and religious activities. When possible, they kept the ethnic communities at arm's length.

Given the residential locations, their schools' racial composition was predominantly White (some went to private schools, which, not surprisingly, had mostly White students as well). Jinny, who I introduced earlier, said she was one of three Asians in her class:

I felt like we grew up in a very candidly White environment, not even mixed with other kinds of races. [...] I don't think I can even...there was one Black girl in my class, and I don't remember any Hispanic kids at all. I'd say it's mostly Italian, Irish, and Jewish communities. And there just wasn't really much of an Asian community.

It was “very White and WASPy” that even the White ethnics—Italian, Irish, and Jewish—stood out. She further elaborated:

It's kind of odd. In some ways, you almost think about yourself as one of them, or you don't see a differentiation necessarily. There were certainly situations where people would make fun of you. But I felt like most of my recognition of my Asianness was more so into adulthood rather than at a time when I was an adolescent. Because you don't have things like affinity groups or discussions about different races.

Keenly aware of the challenges of being the “only Asian,” I expected to hear a similar trope from Jinny. But, to my surprise, she seemed more ambivalent than hurt or upset. She found her upbringing to be “odd.” Navigating a racially homogenous environment as an adolescent, Jinny “almost” saw herself as White. There were situations where she was made aware of her racial difference from White peers. But she lacked the tools and resources to explore her identity and make sense of the racial hierarchy. Understanding Asianness was not on the to-do list her parents had for her. It was just not a thing back then. The parents had what Jinny described as the “assimilation mindset” where they stressed the importance of fitting in with their White upper-middle-class peers, not just by excelling in academics but also by adopting their mannerisms. They made America their new home and were eager to follow what they perceived as the key to success. Thus, she could not turn to her parents for advice on race-related matters. The success that her parents framed for her entailed not just going to elite colleges and having a promising career; it was more about reaching a certain status that was jointly structured by class and race. She had to get close, if not be a part of the White upper class.

To that end, it felt to me as if she learned to put the questions about race and ethnicity and the associated feelings on the back burner. She made sense of her experience by framing it as one of the cultural differences—that the challenges stemmed from her parents being immigrants and having parenting approaches that are different from those of U.S.-born parents. For her, it was not

a racial issue but a cultural one that she should be able to bridge eventually via acculturation. In other words, she coped by adopting a color-blind approach.

Colorblind discourse, which allows racist power structure to persist in the U.S., is adopted not only by Whites but also by racial minorities. A study conducted in higher education settings has found that Asian Americans resort to colorblind discourse to make sense of their racialization experience (Chou, Lee, and Ho 2015). Adopting color-blind attitudes is associated with lower race-related stress among Black college students (Coleman, Chapman, and Wang 2013). Ironically, the color-blind approach may help one to remain oblivious to various forms of racism they may encounter in daily lives. So, in a way, it can be a personal coping mechanism. Perhaps the pervasiveness of colorblindness and its ability to win over racial minorities are what make fighting racism so difficult. Jinny's experience suggests that for some, adopting color-blindness can take place earlier during high school. It was almost as if Jinny, the high-achieving person that she is, was a few steps ahead in mastering the art of navigating White institutions (if such a thing exists).

Not One of Those “Hardcore Asians”

Having more Asians at school did not always make it easier for Asian participants to navigate racialized institutional spaces. Jeff, a Korean American data scientist, grew up in Staten Island, the least diverse borough in New York City. In the year 2000, around the time Jeff was in high school, 71 percent of the Staten Island population was non-Hispanic White, which is twice as large as that of New York City. Asians made up 6 percent of the borough's population (compared to 10 percent for the city during the same period). So, he was one of the few non-White students during the elementary and middle school years. But when he got to high school, he saw that it was slightly

more diverse. He was excited to see more people who look like him, but he quickly learned how race works in his school. He described how he was made to see race:

In high school, there were enough Asians, and I ended up seeing that there was like an Asian lunch table. There was a Black lunch table, and then there were like different kinds of subgroups of nerdy kids, sporty kids, popular kids, you know. And only the popular ones with different ethnicities crossed these lines.

He described how segregation at the cafeteria occurred almost like a natural phenomenon. Such segregation was not unique to Jeff's schools. Other interviewees recalled similar scenes from their high schools as well. In fact, it is a distinctive feature of American high schools, but many continue to find it puzzling. Beverly Daniel Tatum (Tatum 2003) explains in her book, *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*, that what is often dubbed as "self-segregation" can actually be an act of self-care. Black students turn to each other for the support they need as they encounter racism at school. Together, they help to validate the complicated feelings they are going through. Coming from a developmental psychology approach, she urges the "need to understand that in racially mixed settings, the racial grouping is a developmental process to an environmental stressor, racism" (Tatum 2003). Racial groupings are not only helpful during adolescence. They can benefit from them throughout different stages of life, at different institutions.

And their benefits are not limited to Black students. Asian students, who experience racialization, can also benefit from socializing with other Asian/co-ethnic peers. Numerous studies show that Asian adolescents are faced with difficult questions of group membership and racial/ethnic identities (Kasinitz et al. 2009; Kibria 2003; Min and Kim 1999; Tuan 1998). They have to navigate between two different, often competing cultures (immigrant versus native),

pursuing academic success, etc. Being an Asian teenager has its unique challenges that only similarly-situated peers could understand.

Despite the well-documented benefits of having co-ethnic/Asian peers, my interviewees did not sit at the Asian table. Instead, they sat at the White table. Some East Asian interviewees sat with the Filipino (non-White, non-East Asian) kids. Yuri, a Chinese investment banker who grew up in Long Island, initially gravitated toward other East Asian girls in her class. But, her parents discouraged her from hanging out with them. “Why did we come all the way to America if you're just going to hang out with Chinese?” is something that she would hear over and over from her parents. She describes how her parents emphasized assimilation:

To my parents, it's very important to assimilate into the American culture by removing themselves from the Asian community, the Asian American community. So growing up in Long Island, and then when I went to college, a lot of that was still underlying where I felt like I need to assimilate with the real part of America who are not the Asian American community because when people see me, they already see an Asian American. So why would I give them more fuel to feel more that way by living in a way that I was very firmly part of the Asian American society or something like that.

To Yuri's parents, assimilation meant becoming a member of the “real part of America,” which, from their point of view, primarily consists of White elites. Similar to the way Jinny's parents viewed assimilation, it was not just about reaching a certain socioeconomic status (as they were already financially successful). It was about prestige, and they knew that in the U.S., it is synonymous with Whiteness. They knew that even before arriving in the U.S. and factored it into their choice of neighborhood. Though they may be too late in the game, they thought Yuri has a shot; she can learn how to carry herself in a way that signals to White people that, although she does not look like them, she is not so different from them when you get to know her. They wanted Yuri to adopt the White habitus—”racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions

and creates whites' racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their view on racial matters" (Bonilla-Silva 2006). To them, assimilation had a meritocratic appeal; you can achieve it as long as you try hard.

Peer groups in high school get as cliquy as they can get, so it is not an easy task to join a group that is not originally prescribed to you based on where you are on the high school social totem pole. As Jeff mentioned in the quote above, "only the popular ones" get to move around. Then, who gets to be popular? Is there a formula for becoming popular? Yuri's strategy was to be active in sports. She played all seasons—fall, winter, and spring—all the while earning top grades (which is not helpful when you want to be "cool"). She made it into the varsity teams, and for basketball, she became the team captain. Her endeavors in sports paid off handsomely. In her final game, the school threw a special ceremony for her and gave her flowers and a custom-made t-shirt.

Several interviewees mainly pointed to their parents as to where the pressure to assimilate came from. But after a while, they came to internalize what Jinny called the "assimilation mindset." And in so doing, they became critical of the so-called Asian cliques. They used racist stereotypes against Asians to justify their distancing (Chou and Feagin 2008; Tuan 1998)

Tiffany, a Chinese scientist, is one of the few interviewees who attended a racially-mixed high school. Despite the school's diversity, she remembered that the peer groups were usually divided by race. But, she mainly hung out with White kids and avoided Asian kids. From her point of view, the Asian cliques were "unhealthy": they were pulling frequent all-nighters and "competing against each other." She was extremely high-achieving herself but felt like being a part of that hyper-competitive environment would do her more harm than good. There was the right and good way to get into elite schools versus the bad and unhealthy way. Her critique of

Asian students reflects the ways that Whites pathologize the high academic achievement of Asian Americans (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013).

Another view expressed by the interviewees was that Asian kids drew their own rigid social boundaries—they would hang out only with those who are “Asian enough.” Rebecca, a Korean American woman, described Asians who mainly hung out with other Asians in her high school as “hardcore Asians” who are “very obsessed with like the bloodlines and [...] very into things like clans.” Her comment made me wonder how she views the directionality: is developing a predominantly Asian group response to racism (as Tatum explains), or is it Asians being racist against other groups? When I asked Rebecca what could have led Asian kids to stay together, she said it was not necessarily by choice. Still, the term “hardcore Asian” stung. She sounded sympathetic and critical at the same time.

Jeremy, a Chinese artist who grew up in New Jersey, said he was like a “chameleon” who skillfully navigated across different groups in high school. He was dedicated to expanding his friendship circles—he got rebuffed many times, especially by the girls, but he kept going at it until he mastered the art of being a “chameleon.” He said that he came out of adolescence relatively unscathed because he was taller and more athletic than an average kid of his age. His comment suggests that for a kid to navigate across different social groups at school, it takes more than a mindset and courage; it takes a certain quality that allows one to escape the typical Asian teenager stereotype. But at the end of the day, he thinks it is more about one’s willingness to step out of the comfort zone. He explained why some Asians tend to stick together:

Because this is a weird thing where you take an Asian person, you pluck them down in all-white places. It's a phenomenon that happened to so many people [...] and all these people have like this trauma. They look different and their parents don't know how to deal with it, because it's the first generation to go through this. So, all the media

that they see growing up, it's all white people. All the superheroes, all the romantic figures on TV and all the culture that they get, all the books, you see all the advertisements they see it's completely different than it is now. So, you take all those kids and I think you get a lot of people with a lot of baggage, who were made fun of, being called Ching Chong. You know, stuff like that is very offensive. [...] When that child goes to middle school, high school, they've already internalized a lot of feelings of othering. And then when they get older, they want to kind of reclaim their Asianness when they're more aware. So they form this strong tribe that I feel like goes too far sometimes, where they are so exclusive—their friends are all Asian, they only date Asians. And I feel that was too reactionary. But what I think all those people share is an upbringing where they were really othered as little kids.

Like Rebecca, Jeremy has mixed feelings: on the one hand, he sympathizes with the Asian kids. He recognizes the trauma that is associated with growing up Asian in a predominantly White environment. He acknowledges the difficulty of not having a role model that looks like them in the media. Although he did not have it as hard, he saw his older brother struggling with his sense of identity and belonging, so he can relate to the challenges.

On the other hand, he feels that these Asian “tribes” tend to go “too far.” Experiencing othering is almost an inevitable part of growing up Asian American, but he still thinks staying within the racial group is “too reactionary.” There is more to lose by focusing on the wound. “If you carry around your ethnicity as a part of your identity so hard, you’re putting your own barriers in front of you,” he says. “Moving out of one’s comfort zone” is just a part of “getting on with life” in the U.S. Does accepting unfairness also a part of it?

How the interviewees made sense of friendship choices suggest that interracial relationships are more complicated than they look at the surface level. First, many equated having White friends with assimilation: making White friends is something to be pursued as it solidified your membership into the “real part of America.” Second, they viewed engaging in interracial

friendship as a matter of choice. Initially, it may require some effort and courage to move out of the Asian clique you are automatically assigned to. But at the end of the day, it comes down to your willingness to make yourself vulnerable. Perhaps, such an emphasis on the agency is inevitable, considering that they have been “successful” in navigating white social worlds.

Third, it takes two to tango, but the work that goes into developing interracial friendships fell disproportionately onto Asian kids. None of the interviewees mentioned White kids “not getting out of their comfort zone” or “clinging onto each other”—the claims that were repeatedly used to describe Asian kids. This contrasting view suggests that racial homophily among Whites is the default: it is normal and expected. On the contrary, Asian homophily is perceived as problematic. Hearing these repeatedly, I could not help myself but wonder why they seem content (or do not problematize enough) racial status quo. Are things really not that bad for Asian Americans? Or are we socialized to value everything White, and therefore it just does not occur to us to ask why the burden disproportionately falls onto us? Maybe it was just better off not to ask that question. Maybe it is just a waste of time. It certainly does not help with climbing the social ladder. As strange as it may sound, adopting racial color blindness may have been a coping mechanism in navigating White social worlds as teenagers.

“Stupid Box of Model Minority”

While some of the Asian participants viewed joining White peer groups as something that takes work but is eventually attainable, others found it as an unviable option. So instead, they hung out with other minority students from their schools. Hyun, a Korean professor who grew up in Northern California, described that his high school's racial composition was mostly Whites and Asians. And the Asian population was actually quite diverse: it had not only East Asians but also

Southeast Asians and Filipinos. And among them, he became close friends with the Filipino guys.

I asked him how he came to befriend the Filipino kids, and he said:

I don't remember exactly how. I think racially I felt kind of confused. I definitely could feel at that point that I'm not White and I'm not going to be really fully accepted in that White culture. I'm not accepted into a friend group, you know, not at least on close terms. But there was also a part of me that was also rebelling a little bit against the whole model minority thing with East Asians in particular, where I just felt like, 'Wow, this is so corny—to be like that studious Asian.' Of course, I think my life in so many ways fits that stupid box of model minority stereotype. Um, but there were definitely parts of me that were resisting that and felt very uncomfortable with it, because I didn't ever feel accepted. It was definitely a subconscious thing where I knew I wasn't White. Everything that I had been socialized in the United States to love was White and that meant I couldn't really feel comfortable with myself. I was uncomfortable with the box that was kind of presented before me, like the conforming, studious Asian even though I was that.

Growing up, Hyun felt like a foreigner. One visible marker of his foreignness was his name, which his classmates frequently made fun of. When someone mispronounced or commented on his name, he was reminded that he is different from the White kids and does not “inherently belong” in this country as they do. Sure, kids can make fun of anything—teasing seems trivial when treated as isolated incidents. But enough was happening, and they piled up to make him realize that the White kids will not accept him as their peers. Hyun was experiencing microaggressions—“brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al. 2007). These little and not-so-little incidents made Hyun color-conscious. I wonder what it would have been like if he had adopted color-blind discourse. Would that have been an option?

He felt the intense societal pressure that tried to fit him neatly into what he referred to as the “stupid box.” He admits that he was studious, but he was much more than that. When it comes to academics, the stereotype can be beneficial because teachers have high expectations for Asian students and give them the benefit of the doubt that is not extended to other minority students (Lee and Zhou 2015). But as a teenager, Hyun found the stereotype to be limiting when navigating peer networks. Hanging out with Filipino kids and adopting their youth culture were his way of asserting his identity. He further explained what drew him:

So I think it was partially me trying to express some of the conflicts. I hung out with the Filipino students cause they were like—it was weird—but they were like the cool Asians. At that time, even then, in the Bay area, there was quite a bit of East Asians, but I didn't have really models of cool East Asians. At most you had Bruce Lee, but he's dead already. And it had become its own cliché, right? The martial artists. But the Filipinos were cool. They loved hip-hop. I loved hip hop. They wear baggy clothes and have different kinds of hair and just have their kind of a little cultural insider things. It just felt a little bit like, ‘it's Asian, but it's like different from the Asian that my parents expect or what society expects me to be.’ [...] And my parents weren't too happy when I got my hair cut like the Filipino kids, but I was co-opting. It was a way for me to assert some sort of independence from those boxes that were presented before me.

Hyun describes that the pressure to mold him into the box came from more than one direction, and it also collided with the pressure to assimilate. He was taught to “love everything White,” but he could never be White. He was taught to assimilate, but simultaneously, he was reminded of his otherness and was told to remain that way. Juggling between the competing and often incompatible societal demands, who was he supposed to be? How much freedom of choice did he have?

Casey, a Korean teacher who grew up in New York, also had close Filipino friends. Up until high school, she mostly hung out with White friends. Once she got to high school, however,

she became racially conscious upon being othered by her White peers. During that time, her Filipino friends validated her feelings and provided language to make sense of what she was going through. She also felt like the Filipino kids were less judgmental than the Korean kids she met through the Korean church. Being a Korean Christian girl came with very specific expectations—in the way you dress, talk, and behave—and she found all of that to be too limiting. She knew that she was being looked down on for not conforming to what is expected of her as a member of the Korean immigrant church community.

Whether they hung out with White kids or Filipino/non-White kids, one thing the participants had in common was that they resisted being stereotyped. Everyone, particularly those of East Asian descent, was keenly aware of the negative stereotypes and their debilitating effect. Where they diverge, I think, is in the way they went on about making sense of the stereotype. Those who hung out with Whites tended to shrug off or minimize the racial incidents. One would say, “who does not get teased as a kid?” But others became more aware of race and came to understand not just the interpersonal but the structural aspects of racism. What accounts for the bifurcation in the responses? Could it be that the former group had it “easier” because, for some reason, they were able to avoid being stereotyped? Or is it a matter of “grit”—how hard you are willing to fight the stereotype? At this point, I can only speculate.

But what I can say with some certainty is that learning to make White friends in adolescence entailed distancing oneself from the Asian community, which they viewed in a negative light—they are too cliquy, too competitive, too traditional, etc. It also included internalizing a color-blind approach, even when they felt ambivalent about its adequacy in explaining their social world. Asian individuals who have close White friends or partners are more likely to minimize racism (Gonlin and Campbell 2017).

The literature often views interracial relationships as a measure of how well racial minorities are socially accepted by Whites. And I think there is a grain of truth to that perspective. But at the same time, it is important to examine the underlying assumptions and take a close look at the process of being “socially accepted” rather than treating it as a natural phenomenon. For some of the interviewees, it entailed learning to cater to White people while actively distancing from Asianness. And doing so came with a cost. By downplaying the salience of race in everyday lives, they validated the White racial frame (Clerge 2020).

Continuing on the “Path of Least Resistance”

No matter how grueling, the high school years eventually came to an end, and many Asian participants managed to reap what they have sowed. They got into prestigious colleges, including the Ivy Plus schools. This meant that they were leaving their childhood homes and moving to college campuses, which were more diverse than their high schools. It also meant that the time has arrived for them to enjoy their newfound freedom away from their parents. I expected that once they got to college, there would be less pressure to assimilate, and they would meet new people, which would lead them to some sort of a rediscovery of their racial/ethnic identities. After all, it was the college students and activists who came up with the term “Asian American” back in the 70s. They also fought to have their histories represented in classrooms during the Third World Movement. Thanks to their activism, there are courses that reflect the diverse histories and languages of the student body in college classrooms. I thought that if high school years were like a downward slope where you slip away from Asianness, college years would be an inflection point where the reconnect takes place. But, for the majority of the participants, it was more like the road that leads to Whiteness was paved during high school and then cemented over the years in college.

The racial composition of their social networks remained mostly unchanged, especially for those who hung out with Whites in high school. As one interviewee described, “how you grow up, it just kind of stays with you.”

Virtually all Asian interviewees went to colleges that were more racially diverse than their high school (one exception was a person who went to a private international school). There were various formal and informal opportunities to engage with other Asian students. Some recalled a plethora of student organizations catering toward Asian Americans—a pan-Asian one, a Chinese one, an Asian Christian one, an international one, you name it. Previous studies have found that participation in these organizations helps identity development among Asians. Depending on the scope of the organization, they may develop ethnic, pan-ethnic, or ethnoreligious identities (R. Kim 2006, S. Kim 2010). Involvement in Asian campus communities can have a lasting impact. They help students to develop awareness and pride as Asian Americans, which translates into their preference for Asian Americans as intimate partners (Chong 2017).

For my interviewees, however, these student organizations did not become a part of their campus life. They generally appreciated the greater diversity of the college student body but did not find ethnic/racial organizations as attractive options. Katherine, a Taiwanese American marketing director who grew up in Virginia said, “I didn’t have it within me to seek out where the Chinese community is, because I was already used to not having one, so I didn’t have to or have the desire to segment myself to relearn my Chinese roots.” Like Katherine, several other participants explained that seeking ethnic communities was not necessary because they were already comfortable being in predominantly White environments, even in situations where they were the only Asian person. Also, Katherine’s comment suggests that there is something unnatural

about joining these groups. She thinks it is “segment[ing]” where one is purposefully deviating from the so-called mainstream. Jinny put it more bluntly:

I never saw a reason to kind of segregate yourself? I mean, having sort of navigated the world without it, I didn't really think there was a reason for it? I wasn't someone who felt as if, ‘Oh, no one understands me. Like, no one understands what I'm going through.’ Or maybe I wasn't thinking about it very deeply. I don't know. But I never felt the need to kind of seek out other similarly situated people.

Jinny viewed participating in ethnic organizations as a form of “self-segregation.” Her description suggests that the organizations cater to those who struggle with their identities and who feel the need to pull themselves out of the White social world. As described earlier, when she was in high school, she minimized how her race shapes her experience in personal and institutional settings by adopting a racial color-blind narrative. Adopting racial color-blindness made sense, given that she had her eyes set on assimilation: she was culturally different from her peers because of her immigrant background, and she could successfully close that gap through acculturation. In a way, participation in ethnic organizations would undo what she has worked toward since childhood. It would pull her away from the White social world. From her racial frame that centers on color-blindness, ethnic organizations are problematic as they were for those who did not fit in.

When Yuri got to college, she found herself once again gravitating toward Asian students. And this time, she was several hundred miles away from her parents. She got to know about the Chinese student organization from the student activities fair during her freshman year. It seemed like a very active group, so out of curiosity, she decided to check it out. However, she was taken aback when she did not automatically click with the members of the group. She felt “ostracized” from the encounter:

Because I didn't have an Asian community growing up, I felt a little bit ostracized by the Asian community because there are certain cultures like traditions or interests that you cultivate as part of a community. If I had hung out with Asian kids growing up, we would have had like similar interests in stories or family dynamics that would have fostered a different type of affiliation. [...] The Chinese Americans at my school were into things like karaoke or certain singers that I wasn't really into. There were a lot of Chinese from California, and I didn't really know how to break into that conversation either. In my high school, I predominantly talked about sports, like soccer, basketball or lacrosse. But sports wasn't a big part of their life. I remember hip hop was really popular amongst that group, and I just wasn't into dancing. So little by little, because of lack of trying because of a lack of peripheral interests that I just didn't end up getting involved as much.

Having had mostly White friends growing up, Yuri found a cultural gap between her and the “Californian Chinese” students in college. She realized that to be a member of an ethnic community meant that you have to show that you belong to that group through shared interests and knowledge. But after spending several years working her way toward Whiteness, she found herself sharing very little with the Chinese American students. There was some homework to do in order to be fully admitted into the group. Still holding onto the “assimilation mindset,” she did not have the bandwidth to do a deep dive into Chinese-American culture. So instead, she continued on her “path of least resistance,” which is supposed to lead her closer to White America.

Joining ethnic organizations was perceived as regressive, but instead, some participants were open to taking language courses and Asian studies courses. And this was quite a departure from how they initially felt about ethnic languages. Growing up, many participants spoke an ethnic language only with their parents, and keeping up with the language usually took a back seat due to their busy schedules. Weekend language schools were notoriously unpopular. I mean, who likes taking classes on a Saturday? Stephanie recalls: “My mom told me we were going to Korean school,

and I was hyperventilating because I was going to miss my morning cartoons. I think that was my very first anxiety attack.” But college gave her a more flexible class schedule. So she enrolled in Korean classes—partly to fulfill the graduation requirement and to brush up on her Korean.

Through these language classes, the interviewees got to know other co-ethnic/Asian students. In the classroom, there was less pressure to prove your “Koreanness” or “Chineseness.” After all, you are here to learn the language, not because you are fluent in it. So language classes helped Stephanie to meet similarly-situated Asians, who then became good friends. This meant that their social networks became less White. However, it did not necessarily become more integrated. The friend groups remained separate. Joonhyung, a Korean doctor who grew up in Virginia, straddled between the two groups of friends he made in college. On one night, he would hang out with his White friends, and on a different night, he would go out with his Korean friends. Not only did he engage in different activities, but he also found himself behaving differently depending on the group he was with. He said:

I think the things that I liked to do were more attended by White people, Caucasians. And so I think by virtue of that I ended up more with White friends than Koreans. But I did have some Korean friends, and we would go out. And I noticed the shift would happen. It was an interesting duality. My white friends, it was one way and then with my Korean friends, all of sudden it was completely different. Even coming down to pay for the check, with my [White] friends it’s completely Dutch. With my Korean friends, somebody pays or somebody fights to pay or the older person pays. With Asians or Koreans, there’s been an awareness of politeness and there’s a certain decorum. And especially if there’s an older person. Korean community is so small where everybody knows each other, so I have to be a certain way. But at the same time, there’s a real rawness where I can be more blunt and have hard conversations about race, and also understanding where I’m coming from. Where with my white friends, which is still predominant, there’s a lot of things they don’t understand, and I have to

explain. And as much as they try to understand, they'll never really fully embrace because they don't experience the same things.

Joonhyung developed a new cultural toolkit by interacting with Asian friends. Some of them he already knew through his parents, but he had some catching up to do. Also, straddling the two groups took coordinating and code-switching. It meant more work, but Joonhyung took up the task, and he found it rewarding. He found himself connecting with his Asian friends in a way that seemed impossible with his White friends. He was able to talk about race and how racial power structures society, which some of his White friends had a hard time wrapping the idea around their heads.

Going to college is considered a pivotal stage in racial/ethnic identity development. Many informants described that they “went wild” when they first arrived at college. But there was nothing really too “wild” about the ways they forged friendships: the racial composition of close friends remained mostly the same, and when they made co-ethnic friends, they were remained mostly separate. For most, their college years were like a continuation of the high school cafeteria scene, but with less peer pressure. The yearning to be at the White table lingered on.

Normalizing Racialized Attractions

During high school, dating was just out of the question for most participants. They shared the all-too-familiar stories: strict parents who viewed boyfriends/girlfriends during school years as a hindrance. Dating diverts your attention from schoolwork. It can wait. Several Korean participants who went to Korean immigrant churches growing up, they had to endure similar, often more damning messages from the pulpit. Their experiences reflected the findings from previous studies that such sexually prohibitive messages from the parents combined with high educational

aspirations contribute to delays in romantic and sexual relationships among Asian American young adults (Cheng and Landale 2011).

But in college, there is neither parental supervision nor curfew. So they pursued their romantic interests: some went on casual dates. Some hooked up at parties. Some went steady with their boyfriends and girlfriends. But overall, the nature of the relationships tended to be more casual than committed (Stephanie was the only person who married her college boyfriend). They were deferring serious relationships until after college, as they had to check off education and career from their list. Also, casual sex and dating were becoming more common when the participants were in college.

For those who had mostly White friends, the racial preferences for friendship and romantic relationships went hand in hand. Immersed in a White social world, the chance that they would be romantically involved with a White person was high. They met potential partners through mutual friends, frat parties, and other social gatherings. But it was not just a matter of availability. By the time they reached early adulthood, interracial relationships had become the norm. For some, dating an Asian person did not even cross their minds. Katherine “just knew that she would never get along with Asian men” and thus crossed off Asian men from her list of potential partners. Instead, she found herself drawn to “very smart, delicate, metro White men.” Having been so close to Whiteness, attraction toward White men felt natural.

For Jinny, what would have been categorized as interracial was just another “normal” relationship. Interracial relationship connotes differences in racial power between two individuals, but that was not how Jinny viewed her relationships. Rather, she assumed equal status. So she was stunned when a group of Chinese women who she became friends with well into her adulthood told her about “yellow fever:”

I, never in my wildest imagination, and this may be my own naivete, thought that someone wouldn't date me because I'm Asian. And then it was only when I met this group of women, which is probably in my late twenties, early thirties where this notion of white men who like to solely date Asian women. Until then, I had never heard of that. And so for me, it was like this funny statement about a circumstance that I had never thought about. [...] I had never even thought that you could never date that person because you're Asian and he would never date an Asian person. Maybe it was true, but that conversation kind of never was had when I was in school. I mean maybe because I wasn't really friends with other Asian women, but it just wasn't a thing, and nor did I ever feel like it was like a problem. Like from the time I was in elementary school through college and thereafter. I mean I think that's just a virtue of like my feeling, I don't know, whether it makes me think that I was fully assimilated or, or what, but I just never thought of that as a way of achieving a particular status.

In reviewing the quote, I was struck by how many times she used the word “never.” Never once she felt or thought of the possibility that her race would be a factor in intimate relationships. I could not help myself but wonder, “how is that possible? Do we live in different Americas?” I think she also wonders why her experience is so vastly different from those of her Chinese friends. She thinks it is either her naivete speaking or a testament to her “full assimilation.” I have only known Jinny for a little over two hours, but I know that she is not naïve. Far from it.

She thinks it could be her being “fully assimilate[ed].” But perhaps, it could be more accurate to say her being fully colorblind. As Ibram X. Kendi puts it, living in the U.S. entails being continuously rained on with racist ideas and get drenched in them without ever realizing that they are pouring on you. Having embraced colorblindness, marrying a White person was more of a homogamy than marrying an Asian person.

Assimilation and colorblindness are not necessarily a prerequisite to developing racialized preferences. Among the interviewees, those who had non-White friends found Whites desirable as

romantic partners as well. Whites were not deemed as good friend materials, but for some reason, they were ranked high on the potential partner list. Casey knew that she would “never be close friends with Whites” because of the barriers and hostilities she felt from White peers growing up. Her experiences with interpersonal racism morphed into what she calls the “dislike of the White race.” But that dislike did not come into play as much when she was on the dating market. She sought out relationships with White men while specifically avoiding Asian men.

Emily grew up in a predominantly Asian neighborhood, and from elementary school to graduate school, she had mostly Asian friends. Despite her closeness to the Asian community, she knew that she would not marry an Asian person. Her long-term relationships have always been with White men. Casey and Emily gave reasons that were widely echoed in the literature: they avoided Asian men because they seemed too traditional, patriarchal, and nerdy. Also, it was not just Asian women who had negative opinions about Asian men. It went both ways. Hyun felt that there was always something “off” about being with Korean-American women: they seemed to embrace patriarchy too willingly. He clicked better with White women whom he thought were more egalitarian.

Ruling out coethnics as potential partners stemmed from their personal experiences. Casey and Emily have shared with me the pain and trauma that were inflicted upon them by men from Korean immigrant communities. Without them going into much detail, I knew what they meant, and I felt for them. I have my own wounds to tend to, and I feel like they tell me to stay away from certain types of people. It is easy to treat that feeling as self-preservation instincts. But as much as I know that the wounds are real, I know that the feeling is more complicated to treat as self-preservation instincts. The sociologist in me reminds me to see the perils of generalizing individual negative experiences and get to the core of the social problem as closely as possible. What we have

suffered, I believe, stems from patriarchy. And patriarchy exists everywhere, not just in Korean communities. But living in a racist society, we are taught to overgeneralize bad experiences that involve racial minorities and thereby believe that there is something more toxic and sinister about their communities and the members. So at the end of the day, we do not grant Asian Americans the same benefit of the doubt that is given to Whites over and over again.

When you have different racial preferences for friendship and romantic relationships, compartmentalization happens. A mainly non-White friends network is not very useful for finding a White romantic partner. But my participants still managed to date and eventually married White partners. How did such compartmentalization work? It turned out that they met their partners through dating apps. Emily had mostly Korean and Chinese American friends, but when she went on OkCupid, the algorithm frequently matched her with White guys. The matchmaker had a good sense of who she was looking for from asking her a lot of questions. It also gave options to exclude specific groups, which in Emily's case were Asian guys. There was no way to filter out "creepy White guys" who reached out to her because she is Asian. But after some time, Emily encountered enough of them to learn how to avoid them. "You just know," Emily said.

So by virtue of advanced technology or the persistence of Asian female sexual stereotypes (probably a combination of both), Emily and other female participants were able to compartmentalize their relationships. Their experiences suggest that it may take a higher level of assimilation into Whiteness to make White friends than to date/marry one. This may be more relevant to Asian American women, given the pervasiveness of racialized sexual stereotypes (Chou). The racialized preferences in intimate relationships and how they were developed among my participants do not neatly fit into the assimilation approach to understanding interracial relationships. They illustrate that while for some it is the feeling of equality that draws them to

prefer Whites over co-ethnics, but for others, it is the “racial status inequality” that shapes and normalizes their preference (Chow 2000). From personal experience, they came to view that Asianness falls short when compared to Whiteness and thus choosing a White partner is all-around a “better” choice for them.

Conclusion

Intermarriage rates have been understood as an indicator of social distance between distinct groups. Thus, studies tend to focus on identifying predictors. They look at individual-level factors such as education and employment characteristics and contextual factors such as relative group size and marriage market constraints. These studies mainly examine the characteristics/conditions that precede their marriages.

When we focus on these predictors, intermarriage seems almost natural for Asian Americans. They are highly educated, work in predominantly White sectors, and live in White neighborhoods. These indicators collectively suggest that Asian Americans are highly assimilated. What they also imply is that the partners are bridging the distance between the two different social worlds that they come from (Shiao 2018).

My Asian participants, however, mostly grew up in predominantly White environments. Thus, just by virtue of the racial composition, their odds of interracial contact were high. But it was not a smooth benign process that is predetermined by school racial composition. In search of their own little corner in a White social world, they experienced assimilation and racialization, which translated into their racial preferences for friendship and romantic relationships. They learned that embracing Asian identities was too costly. They knew that once they were put into this box, they only get to be Asian and nothing else. So they actively distanced themselves from

Asianness to get closer to Whiteness. And part of that process entailed internalizing racist messages against their own racial/ethnic communities. For some, it meant adopting colorblindness. While some interviewees felt certain that their race had little to do with whom they drew near, incoherency and value judgments in their life stories hint that some of their views are learned. These early understandings of race and ethnicity had a lasting impact. They were intricately connected to the ways in which they approached friendship and romantic relationships in early adulthood.

Of course, how one makes sense of race can change over the life course. Today, one of Jinny's closest friends is Latino, and she thinks that he "has given [her] a kind of the language and the kind of recognition of differences and being able to sort of express those differences versus, kind of shying away from it and not acknowledging it." And it would be more accurate to say that she has become selectively colorblind—she sees institutional racism but not interpersonal racism. But this shift suggests that it is all the more necessary to place intermarriage within a longitudinal framework and examine the contexts that precede and follows this lifecycle event. In doing so, we will have a more nuanced understanding of what intermarriage is indicative of and how race works for Asian Americans.

Chapter Three: Marriage and the Asian Success Frame

Family and sacrifice have been running themes of the U.S. contemporary immigration narrative. For generations, immigrants have come to this country, and with them, brought their versions of the American Dream. Among contemporary immigrants, Asian immigrants and their success stories are frequently showcased as living examples of the American Dream coming true. Asian Americans indeed have come a long way: once considered “unassimilable,” Asian Americans today are often depicted as “exceptional” (Lee 2015) due to their educational and occupational attainment. Examples of their educational success, particularly those of the second generation, are easy to find in mass media and are backed by numerous research. The mechanisms behind such high achievement remain a popular yet contentious topic in immigration research.

In particular, there has been a lot of attention on the ways in which Asian immigrant parents craft and operationalize the American Dream. What stands out is the ubiquity of the specific dream scenario among Asian immigrant parents. Lee and Zhou (2015) find that Asian immigrant parents have adopted a “success frame” that heavily emphasizes education as a vehicle of upward mobility. Success is narrowly defined as getting top grades, going to prestigious colleges, and pursuing professional careers—not just any jobs, but specific ones such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and accountants. Putting together these concrete steps, they pass down a “playbook” that serves as a “how-to” guide for the economic success of Asian American youth (Chin 2020). The playbook suggests that there is a narrow path to success given the challenges one faces as an Asian American. But it also promises that as long as they manage to hit those milestones, they will be “able to be in control of situations, choose what they want to do with their life, and find rewards for themselves and their families” (Chin 2020:51).

The Asian Americans whom I spoke to, in many ways, are the poster child of this success frame/playbook. They went to highly-selective colleges, obtained professional degrees, and landed stable, well-paying jobs. In fact, many of them did far more than just check off these milestones; I would say that they passed with flying colors. Their success should make their parents happy, and they now should have the freedom to move on to other businesses of life, as promised. However, for many, that was not where the story ended. There was another milestone waiting for them—marriage. And again, like the previous ones, parents often had specific expectations when it came to choosing a marital partner. Navigating romantic markets is complicated at best, but they had to do it with their parents in the backseat.

This chapter examines what was it like for Asian and White participants to introduce their partners to their parents. How parents and family members respond to their children's mixed relationships is a theoretically important question because their responses reflect the porousness of racial boundaries (Childs 2005). In fact, previous studies have documented how families can impose "third-party constraints" and prevent one from intermarriage (Kalmijn 1998). In this chapter, I aim to extend this literature by showing how marriage carries different meanings to Asian families compared to White families. Marriage today is often perceived as a highly individualized affair. But, as will be shown in this chapter, marriage was perceived as a social contract for the whole family from the Asian parents' perspective. Just as they strived for success at school, the Asian participants were expected to marry "well" to set the seal on their family's future. To have a clearer picture of what mixed relationships signals about race, I argue that we first have to consider how the meanings of marriage are framed within the larger context of the family for different groups of people. Overall, this chapter aims to present a close-up view of how

Asian families' understanding of marriage is jointly constructed by the success frame and the current racial hierarchy, and how it then goes on to shape the experiences of Asian-White couples.

Third Parties to Mixed Marriages

Today, mixed marriage is commonly viewed as a matter of personal preference and their level of openness to other racial groups. According to Kalmijn (1998), however, personal preference is just one of the three factors that predict one's likelihood of intermarriage. The other two are marriage market constraints and third-party interference. The marriage market shapes one's opportunities to interact with members of different racial groups. It is perhaps not too surprising that the Asian participants in the study married Whites, given that most of them attended predominantly White schools and continue to interact with them at their current workplaces and neighborhoods. The structural opportunities and personal preferences seem to go hand in hand since their social locations during adolescence and young adulthood profoundly impacted their racial preferences in romantic relationships, as illustrated in Chapter 2.

Along with these individual and structural level factors, there are "third parties" that can interfere with one's likelihood of intermarriage. These social institutions, namely, families, church, and state, can discourage one from marrying out and reinforce homogamy. Among these three institutions, the state historically has played a much more substantial role in preventing intermarriage through anti-miscegenation laws and segregation laws. The landmark decision of *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, however, ruled that prohibiting interracial marriage is unconstitutional. The state no longer has legal means to prevent people from marrying across racial boundaries.

Families have also experienced a decline in significance as a third party as the cultural norms about parent-child relationships and marriage have changed significantly in the past few

decades (Cherlin 2004). Parents do not have as much control over their children's romantic relationships. Still, they can play an important role in shaping their children's understanding of race by the ways they structure the social environments (Hagerman 2018). Also, they can have a say in their adult children's romantic relationships by introducing potential partners and voicing concerns or approvals.

Dalmage (2000) introduced the term "border-patrolling" which refers to the ways in which the family members "perpetuate the myth of group homogeneity, punish boundary crossers, and internalize to limit transgressions." Previous studies have documented the mechanisms of border-patrolling by Black, White, and Latina/o families. White families use various explicit disciplinary methods such as violence, threats, and exclusionary tactics to discourage interracial relationships (Vasquez 2015). Some families adopt a color-blind approach by "expressing concerns" about the couples' compatibility (Osuji 2019). They also use the "problem of the child," discouraging mixed unions because they "worry" about the challenges that the mixed children will face growing up (Childs 2006).

Non-White families also engage in border patrolling. Latino parents tell their children to "stick to their own" and "not marry down," which reflects their views on racial hierarchies (Vasquez 2015). They stigmatize women who date Whites by imposing sexual stereotypes against them. At the same time, they uphold Latino men who marry Latina women as family men. The salience of family influence in intermarriage warrants an investigation of how Asian-White intermarriage is perceived by the couples' parents. Do they object to the relationship? If so, how? And in what ways the parental influences affect how adult children navigate relationships?

Disciplined Racial Preferences

There is nothing strange about parents wanting to see their children happily married. For a long time, though, marriage has been a means of social reproduction, which means that marriage has always meant something more than just love and happiness. An “ideal marriage” entailed several conditions. In a racially stratified society, race has been an important factor in the definition of the ideal marriage. It was no exception for Asian immigrants parents, who have carefully planned out their children’s life course for success, to discipline their children’s racial preferences for marital partners early on.

The Asian participants recalled their parents either directly expressing or indirectly hinting at what they expect from future children-in-law in terms of race. Ethan, a Chinese man, remembered, “my mother was always like, ‘you have to marry someone Chinese. You can’t marry anyone else.’” Some parents, like Jae-young’s, were even more specific. She said, “I was made aware that I was not to marry outside the Korean race, but to marry specifically a well-to-do Korean male.”

Co-ethnics were hands down the parents’ first choice. However, there are only so many co-ethnics in marriage markets, which meant that the parents needed to adjust their expectations. The parental preferences often came in the form of a hierarchy. With the co-ethnics at the top, the next preferred group was other Asians. For example, Jeremy’s parents have told him that they would like her to marry a Taiwanese woman, and if he could not find a suitable Taiwanese woman, they would be open to him marrying other East Asians. Before Jeremy met his wife, he went on blind dates with a Korean woman and a Chinese woman that his parents have arranged for him. Parents often emphasized the importance of group homogeneity, and how it is key to family harmony. Having a shared language and cultural background would make things easier not just for the couple but also for the entire family. Why not avoid visible roadblocks when you can?

The next group deemed acceptable to most parents was Whites, and the list pretty much ended there. It was as if other racial groups were simply “unthinkable” as potential children-in-law. Jeremy felt that the parents’ preferences were not just a result of convenience. Instead, he felt they reflected their racist attitudes. He witnessed how his parents “bought into a lot of the racism in the United States,” and marital preference was one of many ways their racism manifested.

Eric, a Chinese man, once tried to probe her mother’s view on race and marriage. He recalled:

There is a hierarchy of what good marriage material is and what’s not. When I was in high school, I asked my mom, ‘would you be okay if I married a White woman?’ And my mom’s like, ‘yeah, sure, why not?’ Then, I said, ‘Would you be okay if I married an African-American woman?’ And I knew that she would not be okay with it, because they both have said so many racist things. My mom said, ‘well, marriage is already so difficult, you know. If there’s a way to prevent difficulties between the two, why would you not minimize adding more difficulties?’ And I was like, ‘yeah, that means you’d be against it.’ She was trying to say what she thought was the correct thing to say, but I knew that. I think that they would not have been okay with me marrying an African-American woman.

Eric’s mom tried to dissuade Eric from considering Blacks as potential partners by “expressing concerns,” a color-blind strategy that is often adopted by family members to discourage their close family from marrying out (Osuji 2019). Yuri, a Chinese woman, echoed that her mom’s preferences were shaped by racism:

I would call my mom a racist. She is. Not in a malicious way. She would never vote for taking someone’s rights away in any shape or form. But I think like culturally she was pretty racist in terms of having a lot of stereotypes in her mind about different people. Basically, in her mind, she thought I should marry either an Asian person, like

a Chinese person specifically, or a White person. Those are the two races, I think, she would have accepted.

The Asian participants received explicit and implicit messages from their parents that they would only approve of Asians and Whites as their children-in-law. Only these two racial groups were deemed acceptable because, according to their understanding of the American racial hierarchy, marrying anyone other than the two would mean “marrying down.” The Asian participants found their parents’ racism problematic and sometimes challenged their views. Yet at the same time, their preferences were shaped by racism as well. They found themselves mostly attracted to Whites while categorically excluding co-ethnics as potential partners. It is hard to parse out how much effect Asian parents’ border-patrolling had on the participants’ marital choices. What is more evident, though, is that Asian Americans’ marital choices are often a reflection and reproduction of the American racial hierarchy.

“They Just Want Me to be Happy”

On the contrary, the White participants said their parents did not express specific racial preferences when it came to their marital partners. The contrast between Asian and White participants was striking. No White participant recalled talking about how their parents thought about intermarriage. What they do remember is that their parents have always wanted what is best for them, and that did not come in a specific shape or form. Whereas many Asian parents had clear expectations as to which schools their children should get into, what kind of jobs they should get, and whom they should marry, the White parents expressed their expectations in rather abstract terms. They wanted them to be “happy” and “explore the world.” When asked about what expectations his parents had regarding marriage and family, Nolan, a White man, said:

I don't think my parents ever explicitly stated what they wanted for me. I mean, I think they just wanted me to be happy. And they probably knew that I would want to have kids—because I was the oldest one and I was always very natural with taking care of kids.

When asked about how did his parents respond to his intermarriage, he replied:

I think my parents are very progressive—my mom's an artist but she also works in hospice care for homebound low-income seniors. So we've grown up always volunteering in urban areas, and interacting with pretty diverse people—racially and economically. So I don't, in any instance, I mean my parents had no judgment about it. It's really just about the person and who they were. There was no stigma.

Nolan never felt that he has to marry a certain type of person to make his parents happy. His happiness came first, and he was confident that his parents would accept anyone whom he decides to marry—they were open-minded people.

Lauren, a White woman, grew up in a “strict Catholic” family. Her parents would lecture her about chastity and warn her not to “date around.” But the strict rules about dating did not entail specific racial preferences. She thinks her parents would have been open to dating a non-White person. She recalled, “my family was totally cool with any sort of racial background. They just wanted me to marry a good, hard-working guy.” She recalls that the only time racism came up in family dialogues was from her grandfather, a World War II veteran who would use racial slurs against Japanese people. Of all the White participants I spoke with, no one had mentioned that their parents told them that they should marry a person of specific racial background. At most, White parents would say that they wish their children-in-law would share the same religious faith.

The stark contrast between the Asian and White parents' marital expectations me wonder whether there is some sort of interviewer effect. On one hand, Asian participants were open about

how their parents projected their racist preferences on them. On the other hand, virtually no White participants recalled such incidents. Would the White participants have responded differently if they were speaking to a White interviewee? Personally, I would not feel comfortable talking about race to a White person that I just met. But then, during other parts of the interviews, the White interviewees were quite open about sharing their views on race and racism (A few times, I got mini-lessons about how race works). In addition, the Asian participants confirmed that they did not feel like their in-laws were opposed to their relationships on the basis of their race (although they have experienced racial microaggressions, which will be discussed in Chapter 4). Since I was the only interviewer for this study, I cannot rule out the possibility of the interviewer effect, but the consistent responses from both spouses helped me conclude that the White parents overall were much more accepting of the marital choices of their children compared to the Asian parents.

How could we make sense of such discrepancies in parents' attitudes? The Asian parents were much more active in border patrolling compared to the White parents. Could we conclude that Asian immigrant parents are much more racist than White parents? Several of my participants—both Asian and White—seemed to think so. The Asian parents' racial preferences for their children-in-law do reveal how racism is operationalized. But what they also reveal is how seriously they take their children's marriage as a social institution. Marriage as a social institution has gone through significant deinstitutionalization in the U.S., and the White parents' view certainly reflects that trend (Cherlin 2004). The changes in the norm, however, have been uneven at best. The Asian parents felt that they had a significant say in their children's marriage. But for White participants, marriage was more of an individual choice, not one that was made at the family level. This does not mean that marriage no longer functions as a mechanism of social reproduction for Whites; assortative mating continues to be the primary characteristic of American marriages

(Qian 2017). Instead, the main difference seems to stem from who had a say in marital choices and what marriage meant for different family members. As will be discussed in the following paragraphs, the differences in the ways Asian and White participants introduced their partners to the parents further illustrate how marriage fits into the Asian success frame.

Meeting the Parents

The White and Asian participants felt quite differently about introducing their partners to the parents. For most of the White participants, introductions were no big deal. They have done it before and did not expect that things would go differently because the partner this time is Asian. Jacob, a White man remembered what it was like to introduce his wife, Hannah, a Korean woman, to the parents for the first time:

I think I was just nervous that they would like her or not. I wanted them to like her. I mean, if you want to ask did I think that her being Asian would be a factor, I never really thought of it. Because for me, she's beautiful and I thought, 'well if I think she's beautiful, I would think my parents would too.' Me and my parents, we probably have very similar kinds of—I don't know—what we think is pretty or whatever. I know that for my parents sharing the same faith is important. Just being a kind person was important, which I know Hannah is. So I guess I didn't have too big a nerve.

For Jacob, it was important that his parents like Hannah, but he did not see why they would not: Hannah was kind, beautiful, and of the same Catholic faith. His parents were politically conservative and lived in rural America. They voted for Trump in both presidential elections. Still, he did not think Hannah being an Asian would be an issue for them. He just gave them a little heads-up that Hannah is Asian and that was pretty much the extent of the preparation he had to do.

Similarly, James remembered calling his older sister before he brought his then-girlfriend to a large family gathering:

I remember calling up my older sister and asking: we're having a family get-together next week, and I'm going to bring my girlfriend over. And by the way, she's Japanese American. Do you think that's going to be a problem? And my sister was like, I don't think so. This was over the phone so I couldn't see her reaction, but she said I don't think so. Anyway, I still remember asking her so I must have been nervous about it or a little concerned. But again, I thought it went fine, and I mean, I was more concerned about overwhelming her with my big family because she's an only child. I was the first person to bring someone who was not White but I don't think my parents ever had a problem.

Foreseeing little or no objection to their relationships, James and several other respondents used family gatherings as an opportunity to introduce their partners. They put their Asian partners through "crash courses" where they flew out and met as many extended family members as possible during their visits. The White respondents recalled that they were not too concerned about how their family would respond to their Asian partners. Instead, some were rather worried about how their significant others would feel being in predominantly White environments. Being in mixed relationships has made them more mindful of racial distributions of the places they went together. They have learned that being the only Asian in the room (or sometimes in the whole town) entails a significant amount of emotion work.

The White women were more cognizant about the emotional toll of "being the only Asian" than the White men. For example, Sarah, a White woman, introduced her husband to her family for the first time at Thanksgiving. She was less worried about whether the family members would have difficulty accepting him but more about how things would go for her husband. Her grandfather, who fought in World War II, has expressed "inappropriate opinions," and she did not

want any of that to spill out when they were together. She recalled: “my mom told me that my grandparents had already made some comments about him being Korean to her, and I was nervous that they would say those things in front of him.” She loved his grandparents very much and respected them. But their opinions about her marriage carried little weight to her decision-making process. Rather, she wanted to prevent her husband from feeling othered.

At the end of the day, meeting the White-side of the family went quite smoothly for most participants. No blatant objections to the relationships. No refusals to meet the partners. The Asian partners generally told me that “it went better than [they] expected.” Some of them expected that there would be some level of border-patrolling coming from the White parents, especially for those who have been living in rural America. But overall, the White families were hospitable. Some of them already expected that their children (especially White men) would marry Asians.

Introducing White partners to Asian parents did not go as casually as it did the White participants. Many Asian participants delayed introductions until the relationships became more serious. When they made up their minds, they carefully planned the introduction. A part of the planning included emotional preparations, in case there would be any harsh responses from the parents. Stephanie, a Korean woman, waited two years before she introduced her partner to her mom: “I delayed telling her because she wouldn’t have a great reaction to it.” Stephanie’s mom had always wanted Stephanie to marry a Korean man, so she expected that her mom would not take the news well. And her hunch was right. “When I told her that he is American, Caucasian, she started crying and had to go for a drive. She stormed out of the house and disappeared because she had to calm herself down.”

The Asian participants knew their parents’ expectations of the potential spouses and how much they meant to them. Marrying “well” was one of many things they had to do to make their

parents' sacrifice worthwhile. Whether they agree with their parent's view of what constitutes a good marriage or not, it inevitably shaped the ways they navigated their romantic relationships. Casey told me that she sought relationships with men who are far from her parents' ideal type. But then, her doubts about the relationships would creep in sooner or later. She described:

I never brought home anyone, let alone the guys that I dated were the greatest either. It's funny because before I met my husband, I had dated another White guy, and he felt like somebody that I could bring home. So I did, and my parents didn't like him. So I stopped dating him. I actually listened to them.

Casey's comment suggests that when deciding where her relationship is headed, she, of course, thought about what her heart desires, but simultaneously, she considered whether it would be something that her family would approve of. And it was a bit of a guessing game—she knew who the parents would categorically approve: Asian, White, Christian, male. But checking those boxes did not guarantee their approval. Still, she looked for people who fell into those categories (except for Asians) since she felt like she had little choice but to follow her parents' opinions.

Olivia, a Vietnamese woman, adopted a different strategy for managing parental expectations. She described her parents as “extremely status-conscious” people who believed that she should not marry (nor befriend) anyone who is “beneath her.” Her view of marriage could not have been more different from her parents. Not wanting to compromise, she thought the best way is to outright “rebel against them” by introducing “all sorts of guys” to her mom. And her mom “basically rejected every single one of them,” except for the one she married. In retrospect, she thinks her strategy helped her mom to mellow out a little. But being faced with her mom's rejection did put a strain on her past relationships. She said: “I don't like to think of myself as someone who does things because of their parents. But it did cause a lot of tension. So eventually I would break up with my boyfriends—not because of my mom, but she didn't make it easier, I guess.” Perhaps

it is not a coincidence that she married the first person who her mom did not disapprove of. Olivia recalled introducing her husband to her mom: “she was like, ‘well you’re getting older, and he’s fine. I don’t see any red flags. He is not my first choice, but I do want you to get married, so I’m not going to put any fights.’” After having spent a long time in the dating market, Olivia and her mom finally found a middle ground.

David, a Chinese man, also played the waiting game. He and Terry started going out during college. When they introduced each other to their families, Terry’s family welcomed him right away. David’s parents, however, were not thrilled to meet Terry. They said that they hoped to see David marry a fellow Chinese or someone East Asian. Upon facing the rejection, David retreated. He continued the relationship but never spoke about Terry for the next eight years. Terry was hurt that David’s parents disapproved of the relationship. She was also perplexed as to why he would have to hide their relationship.

As they reached their late twenties, David’s parents began wondering when he would get married. He finally told his parents that he has been dating Terry all along, and his mom responded, “oh, you’re still together? Are you going to get married?” Between those years, Terry went on to earn a Ph.D. and started working as a postdoc for a renowned mathematician who David’s parents happen to know. Both David and Terry think that her academic pedigree is what has led his parents to have a change of heart. Terry said that she finally “fit into the family vision” that David’s parents had been holding on to over those years. Although she is not Asian, she thinks she makes up for it with her credentials.

The Asian participants had much more homework to do before they formally introduced their White partners to the parents. They somehow had to convince the parents that their partners would be suitable for the family. Being White was, in most cases, acceptable, but it did not

guarantee acceptance. The class background was just as important. And most of the Asian participants married highly-educated professionals. In that regard, many respondents had married “well” and thereby checked off another milestone in the success frame. But not everyone chose a partner from similar class backgrounds and had to face severe blowback for their choices.

Broken Bargain, Fractured Relationships

Stephanie’s mom complains from time to time about how her son-in-law, Charles, does not quite live up to her standard. She thinks he does not take his responsibilities as head of the household seriously enough and that he could do a better job at being a son-in-law. Regardless of her opinion of Charles, she plays an integral role in the everyday lives of Stephanie’s family. Stephanie has a busy work schedule, so her mom spends a lot of time taking care of the grandchildren. Gradually, many Asian parents warmed up to their children-in-law and provided support to the newly-formed family.

In some cases, the Asian parents offered financial support that could go into paying a down payment for a home or private school tuition. Stephanie sometimes gets exhausted from tending to her mom’s feelings, but she is nonetheless appreciative of her financial and physical support. Many couples did not have the smoothest first interactions with Asian parents, but gradually, they found the family ties strengthening over the years.

For Alice, however, her marriage deeply fractured her relationship with her parents. They were vehemently opposed to Alice and Taylor’s relationship. They got married four years ago without the blessings of Alice’s parents, and time has yet to mend the severed relationship. She continued to reel from the wound of rejection, which to this day felt quite raw. When I met Alice for an interview, I would have never guessed that she would be someone who was struggling from

the fallout with her parents. Alice, a scientist-turned-business-executive, seemed like a person who cares little about what other people said. Behind her façade of confidence, however, she had deep wounds. As we got on with the interview, it began to seep through her voice.

Ever since she was little, Alice was made aware by her parents that they have set up a very high bar for her. She believed that meeting that bar is her contribution to the family, and she did her best to be the “model child.” But as she grew older, she realized that meeting that bar is impossible. Alice described:

My mother used to introduce me as Alice, the girl who goes to Columbia, which was the school I went to, and not me, her youngest daughter. That was the level of how pedigree was far more important to her than who their daughter was. So apparently you see that there’s no pleasing my parents. At the same time, I didn’t want to be constrained by my parents. I would hear my mom say you can only marry Asians. I was like, ‘no, that’s not for me. I’m going to get my Ph.D. I will do this route. But when it comes to my part, I can, I can only give so much.’

She was the most academically successful child among the siblings, which made her the favorite child of her parents. She felt like her filial duty should end there. So when it came to dating, she followed her heart’s desires. She dated White men exclusively; she feared that an Asian man would hold a similar mindset to those of her parents and put his interests before hers. Then she met Tyler through a mutual friend. They could not be more different, but, as the saying goes, opposites attract, and they hit it off quickly. Alice found Tyler to be incredibly smart and funny. Six months into the relationship, she knew that Tyler is the person she wants to spend the rest of her life with.

She also knew that her marriage to Tyler would come at a high cost. She knew that her parents would be disappointed in her for not holding up her side of the bargain. Tyler being White

would make her parents not very happy, but they would eventually get over it, she thought to herself. Her older sister is also married to a White man, so they have already gone through the process once. The second time would be easier, right? But, to Alice's parents, Tyler was not the "right kind" of White guy. He is not highly educated nor makes as much money as Alice does. If they were to get married, Alice would be the primary breadwinner. She knew that the parents would find Tyler bad news, no matter how important he was in her life.

Regardless, she shared the news of her engagement with her family. She knew what to expect, but no amount of mental preparation was enough:

The minute I said this is the person that I want to be with, it was traumatizing, to say the least. It was one of the most difficult decisions I had to make in terms of balancing between maintaining my identity and keeping things with my parents [...] To this day, my mother can barely look at him and barely interacts with him. It is so heartbreaking.

She managed to have her parents come to her wedding. That did not mean that they approved of the marriage. She recalled:

After three months of engagement, we got married. We got married in a civil ceremony. And my family could barely spend time with me. They left immediately after the ceremony. In the courthouse, I just started breaking down. It broke my heart so much that they couldn't open their eyes to just be there for me. We've been married for four years, but I still harbor this resentment. I couldn't express my disappointment in my family's rejection of my husband. I don't know if I have the courage to bring it up with my family how much pain I felt about what was supposed to be the happiest day in my life.

As she was recalling what should have been the happiest day of her life, tears were free-flowing down her face. We were at a café on a weekend afternoon. Surrounded by tables of people enjoying their brunch, Alice started sobbing. Some time has passed since the wedding, but Alice

still had unprocessed emotions. And I was saddened to witness her pain and by the fact that she should not get herself to tell her family how much she has been hurting inside. It seemed as if every member of her family had specific roles they had to play, but providing emotional support to each other was not one of them. Deviating from what was expected of her cost her significantly, and made her wonder whether she has made the wrong choice. She described:

They raise these children who are supposed to be successful. And the children are supposed to take care of their parents. But instead, they see me with my husband who doesn't have the same motivation or desire to provide for them. That's not what he signed up for. He signed up for being with me as opposed to being with my family. So it's challenging. He's slowly understanding. But you know, I sometimes wonder if I punished myself by creating challenges for myself for no reason whatsoever in choosing this life.

To Alice, marriage is a social institution that brings her and Tyler together. It is her way of committing that she will be with him through thick and thin. She did not care that she made more money than him. That they were living in a condo that she pays the mortgage for and is under her name. She did not marry for financial security. But marriage carried a very different meaning to her parents. Marriage is supposed to be the culmination of success—you work hard to reach a certain status, and you marry a “like-minded person” who will help you secure what you have gained. Someone who respects the parents and thus is willing to take care of them as they get older. Someone who you can trust that the family wealth will be securely transferred to the next generation.

In that regard, most participants' selection of spouses did not threaten what the parents have worked hard for. The White spouses may not be as familiar with Chinese or Korean family culture, but their class background would help uphold family status. Whether the participants

intended it or not, their choices satisfied the parents' needs a good deal. They managed to keep their side of the bargain. And for someone like Alice, upholding that bargain meant betraying herself, and when she broke the bargain, she had to pay a steep emotional price.

For most of her twenties, Jae-young also faced a similar dilemma—trying to find a middle ground between what she wants and what her parents want in a marriage. As mentioned earlier, Her parents urged her to marry a “well-to-do Korean man,” which was a group that categorically did not appeal to her. So she has always known that the conflict between her and her parents would be unavoidable. At first, she waited, thinking that if she waits out long enough, perhaps the parents would loosen their grip and just be happy that she is getting married. But the parents' stance remained firm. She explained:

We—my husband and I—had a long period of dating and engagement. I think it was about 5 or 6 years in total. I was in my mid-30s, and time was kind of ticking by. It was really tough, and I don't know if anybody can understand unless they've been in that position. That's why I broke up, actually with my first boyfriend. We were together for 10 years. He wasn't the one that I would risk losing my family for. But I was sure enough with Richard that I would want to marry him, even if that means potentially losing my dad.

Jae-young knew that her parents would disapprove of Richard as their son-in-law, not even begrudgingly. First of all, he is not Korean. Second, Richard was far from her parents' definition of “well-to-do.” It took her an immense amount of courage to decide to marry Richard and break the news to her parents, especially to her dad. At the time, her dad was in Korea, and she felt the need to talk to him in person.

I went to Korea to tell my dad because I thought this is going to be the last time I talk to him, and this is a conversation that I don't want to have through email or over the phone because of the language barrier. It was a two-week trip, and I remember I finally

told him on the last day because I thought, ‘This is it. This is the only time I can do this.’ And I told him the day before I left for the airport. I probably was physically shaking at that point.

As the wedding day approached, it was just Jae-young’s mother who agreed to meet Richard. They were civil with each other. Richard practiced some Korean through Rosetta Stone and tried to familiarize himself with Korean culture, but it was not enough. There were many things that Jae-young’s mom did not approve of, and she almost did not come to the wedding, but she attended eventually. Jae-young’s dad refused to attend. To this day, Jae-young’s dad and Richard are not on speaking terms.

Needless to say, the parents’ rejection caused a lot of sadness and pain to Jae-young. It complicated her relationship with Richard, as he too, reeled from the pain of being rejected for who he was. In their own ways, both Jae-young and Richard tried extremely hard to understand where Jae-young’s dad was coming from. She explained:

So the toughest part of it all is that I’m able to fully understand where he’s coming from, so I never had anger towards my dad, which I think my husband couldn’t understand. He would say: how could you say that you love him after what he has done to you? And I said because I understand his life and I understand Korean culture enough, where I can see what a huge disappointment and shock this is to him. And I felt sad at that moment that I couldn’t be the daughter that he wanted, that he wished for. Because to honor my life and what I wanted – and I didn’t want to have any regrets and anger towards him if I chose to marry a Korean that was acceptable to him. And so I felt this fracture that I had to live my life and choose what I thought was best for me knowing the pain that it would cost my dad. It’s almost like I could hold that space for him, for Richard, and then for myself – but nobody was understanding me. So I think that was the toughest part about it. But yes, even after marriage, I understood the pain that I have probably caused him.

The duality of Jae-young's emotions—feeling hurt and sorry at the same time—suggests that she understood that marriage was part of the immigrant bargain. She was remorseful for not holding her side of the bargain. To begin with, the bargain was not a fair one—it was purely on her parents' terms. Still, because she loved her parents and wanted them to be happy, it pained her to see them disappointed. She found herself caught in the middle of the tension between Richard and her dad, unable to take either one's side.

Richard struggled to make sense of the rejection. He explained:

That guy [Jae-young's dad] changed my worldview. So I went through my entire life thinking that there are two kinds of people in the world. People who like me and people who love me. The difference between the two is that the people who like me, haven't met me yet, but once they do, they'll love me. I mean, let's be honest. You have to get to know me and then you'll love me. Everybody likes me, loves me, and then Jae-young's dad comes into the picture and that guy didn't like me. Like, what have I ever done to you? But I understand it. From a purely transactional point of view. I'm a bad business decision. So I'm just from the Midwest. I'm not educated, not highly educated. I mean, I got my bachelor's. I was in the military. I don't come from a good family. I'm not a doctor or lawyer or an engineer, like those coveted occupations. Yeah, my parents are divorced and all that stuff. I don't do much. I don't bring a lot of value to the family, and I understand. You know, objectively, after some years and some therapy now, I get that I was a bad business decision [...] I came to realize that everything he didn't like about me, really didn't have anything to do with me. It's like he had a notion of what the future of his children was going to be like and he just had a lot of baggage tied up to Jae-young's future. I think maybe he had tunnel vision and thought that I represented the death of his family's dream.

It took him several years of individual and couples therapy to reconcile with the rejection. Richard referred to himself as a “bad business decision,” suggesting that his socioeconomic background is the main reason why Jae-young's dad was not welcoming toward him. He sees how

he could have been viewed as the “death of the family’s dream” from his father-in-law’s perspective. Race matters, but being White was not good enough. He joked that his “being White was kind of the icing on the cake, which is funny, because icing, most of the time, is white.” Alice and Jae-young’s experiences suggest that the Asian success frame can be a powerful vehicle of intergenerational mobility, but it can also leave people severely underprepared to cope when life throws a curveball.

Situating Intermarriage within the Asian Success Frame

This chapter found differences in how Asian and White participants navigated interracial relationships within the broader contexts of their families. The Asian participants received racial messages from their parents about whom they should marry, whereas the White participants felt much less parental pressure. There were notable differences in the ways they introduced their loved ones to the families. For Asians, the introductions were like a job interview—they were formal occasions in which the participants sought the parents’ approval. For Whites, the meetings were casual and less anxiety-provoking.

I expected that interracial relationships would elicit stronger responses from White parents, given the historical legacy of intermarriage in the U.S. I thought that White families would have a greater incentive to border patrol because maintaining group homogeneity helps sustain the racial status quo. But instead, I found that it was the Asian parents who border-patrolled more actively. They wanted their children to marry Asians and were open albeit begrudgingly to Whites. The Asian parents’ justification for border-patrolling revealed their racial bias against other communities of color. The interviewees’ comments about their parents confirm the high level of anti-Blackness among Asian immigrants (Kim 2018). While they regarded their parents’ racism

as more-or-less benign, it is deeply troubling how casually racist views are exchanged within families. These findings point out that racism is alive and well among the Asian American community.

Comparing the expectations and reactions of Asian and White parents is particularly helpful in understanding the meaning adult children's marriage carried for their parents. Stricter border-patrolling and open rejections of White partners among Asian parents not only tell us that they hold racial bias but also that they treat their children's marriage as a serious family affair. Whom to marry is a decision that is not made at the individual level. Rather, it is a collective one that is negotiated between parents and children. There is no question that parents of all races want their children to marry the right person. But to Asian immigrant parents, their children's marriage seemed particularly more important because, to them, it symbolically and practically helps them sustain the hard-earned social status of the family.

I find it useful to situate marriage within Lee and Zhou's (2015) Asian success frame to better understand the source of emotional turmoil that so many Asian participants have had to go through. It seems to me that marriage consummates the family's project of social mobility: get good grades in school, secure a high-paying job, and seal it all in by marrying someone of equal if not higher social status. Confucianist culture indeed places a lot of emphasis on marriage. Yes, partly cultural but I find it more accurate to say that these strategies are developed as a response to the structural constraints faced by Asian families. They grew out from the tried-and-true strategies adopted by middle and upper-middle-class families in East Asian countries, where most of my participants' families have come from (Chang 2010). How families make sense of marriage is closely shaped by their social locations.

Changes in family roles are inevitable as immigrant families adapt to a new economy. Women work outside the home. Couples work together in small businesses. Numerous studies document these shifts within virtually all immigrant communities. Continuities are also part of immigrant family lives. A heavy emphasis on children's education is a family strategy that carries over national borders because it remains applicable in the U.S. context. The changes as well as continuities in the immigrant family as an institutional arena reveal that the family roles are far from static. They are profoundly affected by the structural constraints that the families face.

Moreover, the rigidity of the success frame further supports that their engagement in intensive parenting, which spans decades, is developed and "perfected" over the years to ensure the economic security of the families. Given the deeply entrenched racial inequality in the U.S., it perhaps made sense for the parents to hold onto and instill racial preference in marriage partners to their children. The successful marriage in many parents' views reflects the capitalistic and racist realities of American society.

Since marriage was a part of the success frame, many Asian participants felt pressured to excel. They were keenly aware that it was part of the family project, a part of their bargain. They were no longer living under their parents' roof and were financially independent, but still, they felt the burden of it. As they were navigating the romantic relationships, they had to ask: is this person the right one for my family? It is hard to tell how much weight this question carried in their decision-making process, but in the end, most of the Asian participants held their side of the bargain by marrying well-educated White men and women.

For a few of the participants, breaking the bargain was inevitable, and the fallout was incredibly painful. When they married partners who were far from the parent's definition of "successful," the relationships sustained permanent damage. I found it difficult to make sense of

the severity of the fallout. I wondered if the parents felt betrayed, and felt that their children had broken the covenant that, once upheld, would have promised them security as they grow older. Also, the sheer amount of remorse and pain felt by Alice and Jae-young indicates that the bargain was the core element that held the family together over the years.

Just as the changes in the roles of Jae-young's family members have been inevitable, today, the roles in her family are evolving yet again. The newest members of her family, her two beautiful children, are now playing the roles of the "little ambassadors." They have become pivotal in bridging the chasm between Jae-young/Richard and her parents. For the very first time, they brought the family into one room and made them laugh together. No amount of "success" can trump those precious moments.

Chapter Four: Familiar and Foreign

“Compatibility” is the word Steven used to describe his relationship with his wife Emily. Steven is White, and Emily is Korean. Four years ago, they met each other through a dating app called OkCupid. According to the app, Steven and Emily’s compatibility score was in the high eighties. The app seemed to know what it was doing; the two hit it right off. Casual dating quickly turned into a serious relationship, and they got engaged in a few months. Everything went so smoothly, Steven felt. “What’s so special about interracial relationships?” he wondered.

However, when Emily’s parents came to stay with the couple for a while, Steven felt a distance between the two for the first time. He felt like a stranger in his place. It was as if a wall existed between him and the rest of the family. He mainly blamed the language barrier; his in-laws are not fluent in English, and Steven barely spoke any Korean. So they relied on Emily for translations. He would say something to Emily in English, and then she would translate it into Korean for her parents. Unfortunately, this arrangement soon fell apart. Emily and her parents ended up chatting among themselves in Korean while Steven sat next to them, feeling clueless. He understood that they had a lot of catching up to do. Still, he felt isolated. He explained that “it got to the point where I would get home, and I would only hear Korean for the rest of the night, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s just that I couldn’t be involved at all. I felt like an outsider.” So for the next few days, he decided to stay later at the office than usual.

I asked Steven whether he considered learning Korean so that he could communicate better with his in-laws. He answered:

No. Learning a new language is generally hard, and Korean, especially, is completely different from English so even if I tried, it would take forever for me to become fluent enough to carry out a conversation with my in-laws. And it’s not like they don’t speak

English at all. They can do basic conversations, and Emily can help us out most of the time.

Although Steven felt isolated, he was not compelled to take an initiative to improve the relationship with his in-laws. It was Emily's job to do cultural brokering. And if he cannot recruit her help, he could spend less time with the in-laws.

Asian-White couples in this study felt a cultural gap between each other. But navigating in-law relationships was very much new to them. Particularly for White partners, it was their first time cultivating a close relationship with older Asian immigrants. These new relationships evoked various emotions ranging from curiosity to frustration. Like all interpersonal relationships, managing in-law relationships took work.

However, not everyone was expected to put in the same amount of work. In this chapter, I examine how the Asian and White partners in my study managed their relationships with their in-laws. Using the emotion work framework in the family context, I find an uneven distribution of emotion work by race and gender of the partners. Compared to White men, White women put much more effort into finding out how to be a "good" child-in-law to their Asian in-laws. In the process, they realized that patriarchal gender norms largely shaped the Asian in-laws' expectations. On the other hand, Asian men and women were ambushed by the stereotypes against Asians when spending time with their in-laws. They had to manage feelings stemming from their hypervisibility as well as invisibility. The Asian women additionally experienced exoticization and received less spousal support than the Asian men. While both White and Asian women faced challenges in navigating the relationship with their in-laws, they carefully strategized against the imposed racial and gender norms to create a more inclusive family life.

Emotion Work in In-Law Relationships

Family is a social institution that requires time and effort to sustain. The three components of “family work” are housework, childcare, and emotion work (Erickson 2005). Emotion work has several definitions, and in the family literature, it refers to “people’s attempts to effectively manage the emotional climate within a relationship” (338). In recent decades, the demand for emotion work has significantly increased due to demographic changes. Family members today spend “long years of shared lives,” which makes family relationships, particularly intergenerational ones, more important to people’s well-being (Bengtson 2001). The aging population complicates families’ roles of providing emotional support and managing harmonious relationships, but more often than not, this behind-the-scenes work goes unrecognized.

Gender largely dictates how family members allocate emotion work (Devault 1999; Hochschild and Machung 2012). Indeed, women perform the lion’s share of work to emotionally support the family, often at their own emotional expense. Existing studies, however, are based on racially homogeneous families. Thus, we know little about the racial dynamics of emotion work within mixed-race families and how it intersects with gender to inform the division of emotion work. This is an oversight in the literature since families in the U.S. are becoming more racially diverse. In 2015, one out of six marriages was between individuals of different racial backgrounds (Bialik 2017). Such a demographic change warrants a better understanding of how race complicates the ways individuals perform emotion work within families.

Moreover, as intergenerational family relationships become more salient to individuals, we need to pay attention to the emotion work that goes into managing relationships with extended family, particularly the in-laws. In-law relationships can reveal how Asian partners are integrated into the White side of the family and vice versa. Studies that focus on Black-White couples find

that extended family relationships can take a toll on partners, particularly Black partners who often become targets of microaggressions (Osuji 2019, Steinbugler 2012). These findings suggest that Asian partners are likely to perform more emotion work than their White partners.

How White Partners Navigate In-Law Relationships

Most White men and women did not know what typical in-law relationships looked like in their partners' ethnic culture. Interacting with Asian in-laws was a new experience that often accompanied surprises, such as the language barriers Steven experienced. But not all surprises were necessarily unpleasant. For example, Steven realized that the dynamic between Emily and her parents is different from the one he has with his parents; Emily and her mom have a much more intimate relationship with each other. Their lives remain tightly linked despite the physical distance, and he has come to appreciate this close family dynamic. His in-laws have offered to pay for the wedding and helped them furnish the apartment. The in-laws make sure that Steven and Emily are fed well whenever they are spending time together. So, these upsides made the occasional language barrier feel somewhat more tolerable. "There are definitely more upsides than downsides, for me, for sure," said Steven. Like Steven, most White men overall rated their relationship with the in-laws as overall positive. They felt gradually and eventually accepted into their Asian side of the family without having to jump through many hoops.

Kimberly, a White mother with two kids, is also impressed with the generosity of her Chinese parents-in-law. The in-laws live about an hour's drive away, and ever since she had children, they have been coming over almost every weekend. Kimberly described that her in-laws take care of her entire family—not just the kids but she and her husband, who are often exhausted from work and childcare:

They have put in a lot of sweat equity since we are a young family. They come on Saturday with a cooler full of food and six grocery bags. So, there's an entire little Costco. There could be things from the Asian supermarket to put in a freezer, and the mother-in-law makes really great sticky rice, fried rice, fish, and vegetables, and we'll have lunch together. Then they take the kids, and Eric and I take a little break. It's not a long visit, but it's like this oasis in the sea of work and parenting. They really are incredibly generous.

These days, Kimberly spends more time with her in-laws than her own parents, who live further away in the Midwest. Her parents miss the grandkids dearly, but they are grateful that the in-laws are close by and so eager to help. Kimberly's father is moved by the in-law's care work that he once told her that marrying a Chinese guy was "one of the best decisions she has ever made."

While both White men and women in this study were new to Asian family dynamics, White women put greater effort into finding out about their in-laws' expectations than White men. Kimberly asked her husband Eric what would make someone a "good" daughter-in-law, but Eric brushed off her question and told her she should just "be herself." Kimberly, however, had a nagging sense that there is an unspoken rule about how she should interact with the in-laws.

Kimberly's father-in-law is a fascinating storyteller. He tells stories in a way that instantly catches people's attention. Kimberly enjoys listening to his stories during their weekend lunches. She likes to engage in conversation, and she is not shy about voicing her opinion. Then, she noticed that her father-in-law would get taken aback whenever she disagreed with him. At first, she thought it was her tone; perhaps she said it the wrong way. But then, she saw how Eric openly disagrees with him, and that does not seem to upset the father-in-law. So she found herself wondering whether he expects her to be a passive listener, the one who just listens and nods in agreement. As much as she would like to have a good relationship with the in-laws, she does not want to

compromise her belief that every family member is entitled to their voice. She realized that being a “good” daughter-in-law is one who conforms to patriarchal norms and struggled to balance between keeping her voice and respecting her in-laws.

Christine also felt conflicted about being a “good” daughter-in-law. When she married her Korean husband five years ago, she was looking forward to building cross-cultural connections as a mixed family. She loves meeting people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds; she finds it rewarding when people come to understand each other despite their initial differences. But today, she feels ambivalent about managing relationships with her in-laws. Over the years, she has realized that Korean families are much more hierarchical, and daughters-in-law occupy the lower rung of that family hierarchy. She elaborated:

At times, I feel like we’re on the same page. And at times, I feel like the chasm between us is so vast that we could never understand each other. I’ve thought recently actually about -- I had this moment this past summer where I was like, Jeff, I think I messed up with your parents. I think that I had -- we’ve started watching more Korean movies and Korean dramas. And you know, I watch Korean T.V. when I’m at their house. And I had this moment of realization that I am not what Korean parents expect their daughter-in-law to be. I am strong-willed, and I’m outspoken. And you know, when my father-in-law comes in, I don’t immediately sit him down and get him a drink. And of course, those are like stereotypes, but I know that they’re also kind of like that.

Christine watched Korean movies and dramas to better understand Korean family dynamics. They are probably not the best reference points since television shows tend to overdramatize family relationships. Still, they are one of the few resources that were easily accessible to her. Comparing herself to the daughters-in-law on the shows, Christine realized that she is an “antithesis” of a traditional Korean daughter-in-law. She is too “outspoken” and “strong-willed.” She said:

You know, I don't make kids play during meals. I make them sit down and finish their meals first. And I just would never think to do those things because that's not the cultural context that I come from. And I wonder if they think that I'm so brash and offensive. And I'm just being me, but I don't know the expectations of what a Korean daughter-in-law is. And Jeff and his sisters are no help with that because they also grew up in the U.S. So they understand a little bit more than I do, but they don't fully understand what the expectations are. And they're also really belligerent about it. They'll be like, 'No, you just be you. You don't have to conform to any expectations.' But I also want to have a good relationship with my in-laws and want to conform to some of their expectations.

The idea of conforming to the in-laws' expectations made her feel uncomfortable. She felt like giving in to patriarchy. So instead, she made sense of the in-laws' expectations through the framework of "Korean culture." She told herself that there is an American way to raise a family, and then there is a Korean way to do it. Both are valid, and she should respect the differences between the two.

So when Christine visits the in-laws, she respects their "Korean" way of living. It helps her manage the uneasiness—she tells herself that she is respecting the culture, not endorsing patriarchy. She elaborates: "my father in law will say like, 'Christine, will you get me a beer?' and that to me is his way of saying like, 'this is something that you should do without me having to ask.' And of course when he asks, sometimes I'm like, 'Ahh.' But I tell myself that I'll do it because I'd like to do it." She actively tries to manage her uneasiness when balancing feminist ideologies and family harmony.

The balancing acts were more challenging when they involved children. White women wanted to cultivate good relationships with their in-laws because the in-laws are an important point of contact for ethnic culture. They felt they needed the in-laws for their children to learn ethnic

language and culture. As will be discussed in a later chapter, the White mothers viewed familiarity with ethnic culture as crucial for their children's identity development. The White fathers also acknowledged the importance of the grandparents' role in the transmission of ethnicity, but it was the mothers who were more intentional and active about facilitating the relationships and filtering what gets passed on to the children from the Asian grandparents.

Megan, a White mother, wants her daughter to have strong ties with the Chinese side of the family. She thinks her mother-in-law is a great role model for her daughter. Megan's in-laws come from a family of elite scholars from pre-communist China. Everyone in the family has advanced degrees in STEM and had successful careers as scientists. She is deeply impressed by their closeness with each other, the respect they show to the elderly, and their dedication to learning—the traits she thinks are rare in American families. That said, she does not wholesale accept the in-law's version of Chinese culture. Sometimes she feels like the in-laws put too much pressure on her daughter and that she has to “push back” against their expectations. Megan explained:

I find that Chinese culture has this deep respect for education that just goes way deeper than it does here for learning and for being a scholar. I see how my in-laws and husband try to cultivate this powerful desire for learning and knowledge and for a kind of expanding yourself. Whenever we visit the in-laws, they're constantly discussing ideas and concepts and speaking to her in very advanced terms and stuff. [...] But they can be too much pressure. They want her to go to Princeton or Yale as their children did. It's a problem. So I push back a little and say that she should do things she's passionate about and get the education that's right for her. I just try to mitigate their expectations for her.

Megan valued the Chinese culture of education, but she did not necessarily think it was the best way to raise her daughter. So when her in-laws imposed their narrow version of education and success onto her daughter, she pushed back against it.

Compared to White men, White women in this study put more time and energy into cultivating relationships with their in-laws, but they were also more likely to feel guilty that they were not doing enough. For example, Lauren, a White woman with three children, has been eager to teach Chinese culture and language. She sent her children to a Mandarin-speaking daycare and took them to playgrounds in predominantly Chinese neighborhoods. Despite her efforts, her mother-in-law told her that her grandchildren are “not really Chinese, so why bother teaching Chinese?” “Of course, they’re not just Chinese; they’re mixed kids,” thought Lauren. Nevertheless, she was hurt that her efforts to teach the language and culture to her children went unrecognized.

Kimberly also felt like it was her fault that her children lost the opportunity to be bilingual. She consulted her in-laws on the best practices for raising her children to be bilingual. But they responded that because Kimberly cannot speak Mandarin, there is very little chance that the children would grow up bilingual. And perhaps the in-laws are right. It is hard to be fluent in Mandarin even when both parents stick to speaking only Mandarin at home. Sometimes, kids just want to speak English. So perhaps the in-laws were not blaming their White daughters-in-law. But the fact that only the White mothers felt responsible whereas no White fathers expressed similar feelings suggests that the expectations of ethnic transmission largely fell on the mothers’ shoulders even when they are new to the ethnic culture.

Most of the White men, on the other hand, were largely unaware of their in-laws’ expectations. They did not feel pressured to perform emotion work to foster a relationship with the

in-laws. In Daniel's case, such a thought seemed to have never crossed his mind. Daniel, married to an Indian woman, thinks he has an amicable relationship with his in-laws. Not particularly a close one since they live on opposite sides of the country, but close enough that he never felt unwelcomed or isolated. When I asked him about what it is like to be a son-in-law to Indian immigrant parents, he responded: "Is there something I'm like completely oblivious to my entire life that there is some expectation of a son-in-law to have? My wife certainly wants me to be friends with them and build relationships with everyone in her family, but I'm unaware of her family having some sort of expectations to that end." For a minute, I thought I had asked something that I should not have asked.

More often than not, White men in the sample benefitted from other family members' kin work. Kyle, a White man married to a Vietnamese woman, said that he is always "pampered" by his in-laws whenever he visits them: "whenever I visit, they sit me over at the table, bring me food and wine, and just really take care of me. They make sure I don't do anything, not even cleaning up after me." Diane, Kyle's wife, jokingly described how her parents "basically treat him like a prince." In the beginning, it made sense that they were so nice to him—he was a guest. But now, he is a member of the family. It has been more than ten years since they got married, so Diane thinks it is about time her parents treat Kyle the same way they do with the other family members. However, she suspects that her parents are more careful around Kyle because he is White and comes from a higher-class background. Diane's Vietnamese brothers-in-law do not get the same special treatment. Kyle's race, gender, and class status spare him from having to work to please his in-laws.

Some White men had a closer, more reciprocal relationship with their in-laws. For example, Cody spends time with his Korean in-laws every week, and often it is just him and the in-laws. His

in-laws come into the city frequently to help take care of his four-year-old boy. Cody appreciates their help, and he overall enjoys spending time with his in-laws. Deeply interested in Korean culture, Cody practices Korean with his in-laws. They would also talk about the latest Korean dramas and shows. A shared interest in Korean pop culture and his eagerness to learn how to speak Korean helped them build a close relationship. On weekends, he would learn how to cook Korean dishes from his mother-in-law. During the interview, he cheerily boasted how he had mastered the ggakdugi recipe, radish kimchi, and that his version is better than his wife's but not quite as good as his mother-in-law's. To Cody, having Korean-in-law meant that he gets a gateway into exploring Korean culture. He was not picking up on the culture to please anybody specifically, but mainly because he finds it genuinely interesting. He had hoped to have more "culture" growing up, and he was finally getting it through his chosen family. Cody described, "I think you'll find for me that I get the best of both worlds. I feel good about both families."

The differences in White women's and men's experiences highlight that gender essentially informs who does what work in managing relationships with the Asian in-laws. Overall, White men had greater freedom to "just be who they are" without worrying much about what their in-laws would think of them. Meanwhile, the White women did not have such freedom—the in-laws would quickly remind them in one way or another that they were out of line. The white men were largely spared from the obligations of emotion work because that was not what they were expected to do. Then, what is their role within the family? As described in Chapter 3, the White partners who did not meet their Asian in-laws' class expectations had severely fractured relationships with the in-laws. This suggests that the Asian in-laws mainly expected their sons-in-law to help the family maintain, if not improve, their class status. And most of the White men in this study who are highly educated and financially stable have managed to meet the expectations or were clearly

en route to meeting the expectation. Whether they have realized it or not, they have fulfilled their roles envisioned by their in-laws.

Several White men described their in-law relationships as “easy” and “smooth.” When asked about what makes their relationships relatively “easy,” as they say, they seemed unsure, when in fact, their wives were often doing the emotion work for them. For example, James, who is married to a Japanese woman, thought it was just a matter of luck. He explained:

I always consider myself lucky. They made it easy. They just accepted me. I mean were they putting on an act? I don't think so. Like maybe secretly they were disappointed that she didn't marry a Japanese guy. I don't know. But they never gave me any indication. I don't think that was the issue. I thought that was the case. So it was very easy for me.

Hana, James's wife, painted a different picture. Over their fifteen years of marriage, Hana worked behind the scenes brokering language and culture between her parents and James. James did not know much about Japanese customs and culture when they first got married. Hana gave him mini-lessons so that when they are spending time together with the in-laws, he would not come off as rude (although the parents would have given him the benefit of the doubt since he is not Japanese). When Hana's parents wanted to invite them over for dinner, she would coordinate the dinner menu with her mom to not include any ingredients that James has yet to try—like no seaweed in miso soup and no raw seafood. But like many other “women's work,” these efforts to sustain family harmony went unnoticed.

White men in this study had a privileged position in their in-law relationships afforded by their racial, gender, and class status. They did not have to think much about relationship management. Zack was one of the few who were more eager to learn about the cultural expectations and credit his wife for helping him navigate the relationship. He explained:

Gina helps me kind of navigate the cultural differences. Or expectations, I guess, is a better word. Cultural expectations of a son-in-law with Korean parents-in-law. I'm trying to think of an example—like, I'm the one who should offer to pay for the meal even though they invited us out. I know that's a Korean thing. Like my in-laws, they have to do that. If they say that they're going to pay, I have to still offer to pay. And then, they'll be like, 'no, no, no.' But I have to offer again to pay. It's like this back and forth, but it just needs to be done. For me, if they offer to pay, that's fine. They offered, so we're not going to fight about it. But I know that they have to do these little things.

These cultural expectations make little sense to him, but he is willing to play by the script. Zach recognizes that there are more difficult expectations that he is spared from because he is a White man. He said:

I also think that the expectations are greater with my sister-in-law, my wife's brother's wife. I just call my in-laws "mom" and "dad," but my sister-in-law calls them "ummoni" and "ahbeoji" (in honorifics). I think the bar for her is a little bit higher because she is Korean, and she's a woman. I think it seems there's a little more leeway when it comes to men. And more so the fact that I'm not Korean—I think that is in my favor. So the fact that I'm a guy, is in my favor. The fact that I'm White is probably also in my favor. So I get along fine with them. But why is that? Maybe there's a part of that is due to me being a White male.

Zach realized that if he gets more leeway due to his White male status, it means that the required work goes to his Korean wife, Casey. He also realized that the only way to lighten her workload is for him to step up and take the initiative to get to know his in-laws better. Unfortunately, he was one of the few White men in the sample who took such initiatives, further attesting to the powerful ways gender shapes how family members care for each other.

How Asian Partners Navigate In-Law Relationships

Hana, a Japanese woman, thought she knew her way around White people. Then she married James and realized that the White family space is quite new to her. Her family members were people who look like her and share the same customs and culture. She felt like she had a lot to learn about her White side of the family. “It was like assimilation 2.0,” she recalled. Some parts were pleasant—she felt her in-laws are so much more “chill.” Sometimes they are more like her peers than her parents. Some aspects were not so pleasant: the interactions with the in-laws reminded her that White people tend to draw on Asian American stereotypes to make sense of who she is. At times, microaggressions were not so micro, and she had to suppress her anger and frustration.

Although most participants in the study lived in large, racially diverse metropolitan areas on the East Coast, their in-laws often lived in predominantly White parts of the country. When Donald Trump became President in 2016, visiting these places made Asian partners feel anxious and insecure. For example, Yuri, a Chinese woman who grew up in predominantly White suburbs, felt uneasy about going to Nebraska to see her in-laws. She said:

I feel incredibly insecure when I’m in Nebraska, which is where my husband is from because there’s not a lot of diversity. When people see you, they first see you as Asian and then they start questioning what kind of Asian are you. Like when did you come and all those questions. So I feel almost less American. I feel more insecure there.

Jeannie, a Korean woman, also had vivid recollections of her first visit to Kansas: “I don’t say this lightly, but I felt like I was stranded in the middle of the country. I couldn’t believe this was the U.S.” Similarly, Casey described the small town in Indiana where her in-laws live gets “as White as it can get,” which made her “extremely conscious that [she’s] Asian.” Kevin feels “strange” visiting the in-laws in Maine as well. He often finds himself being the only “person of

color” and feels “a little alerted, just because I don’t know what’s going to be said or what’s going to happen or if I’m going to have to defend something.”

How Asian partners respond to visiting rural parts of the country suggests that they are more used to a specific type of Whiteness—one that is associated with higher social class and progressive political attitudes. They were unfamiliar with White people who put Trump decals on their bumpers and show off their guns. Casey said, “they would stare at you as if you are a spectacle but also pretend like you do not exist.” To her, visits to Indiana felt like a “wake-up call” that reminded her that New York is a bubble, not representative of the rest of the country.

It was not just the surroundings that made Asian participants feel uncomfortable. They also endured their in-laws’ microaggressions. These microaggressions reminded them that the in-laws viewed their Asian children-in-law as foreigners and model minorities simultaneously. For example, Jeannie’s mother-in-law would say things to her that would suggest that Jeannie and her family are not “American enough.” She recalled one FaceTime call she had with her mother- and sister-in-law:

My mother-in-law is racist, and it does come out, and it will be vocal. My father-in-law does a good job of containing her. But there are some comments that they have made that are just so off the wall that I’m glad I don’t see her often. [...] One that’s always inside of my mind is what my mother-in-law and sister-in-law said. So when I’m at work, my mom comes to take care of the kids. And they had made a comment: “are the kids around any American people? Are they going to learn English?” Which was so beyond ludicrous.

Jeannie’s mom has been living in the U.S. as a naturalized citizen for close to forty years. But Jeannie’s mother-in-law views her as a foreigner, not “American.” Moreover, the mother-in-law’s comment suggests that Jeannie’s mom is somehow holding back the kids from becoming “full Americans.” These insensitive comments packaged as a concern for the children deeply

offended Jeannie. To Jeannie, her mom is her “lifeline.” She does not know how she could work long odd hours as a doctor and raise two kids if it were not for her mother’s help. These days, Jeannie mostly delegates FaceTiming with the in-laws to her husband and the kids and tries not to pay attention to those calls.

Microaggressions can be very stealthy, and they tend to catch people off guard. For example, Woo described:

This last Christmas holiday, we were with the in-laws and playing with my daughter. At that point, she verbalizes a lot, but she doesn’t have a lot of words yet. So my mother-in-law made this offhand comment: She doesn’t have enough English words yet because her dad sings to her in Korean. And I was like, are you fucking kidding me? I sing her two songs in Korean, and that’s special to me because I can’t speak Korean that well. I was so fucking mad.

This comment suggests that Woo is hampering his daughter’s language development. The mother-in-law hints that her granddaughter might be linguistically confused because of the Korean nursery rhymes. Recalling that incident still upset Woo. When asked how he responded to her comments, he said:

I very passive-aggressively left the room shortly after that and just was mad about it. I would’ve, should’ve, wanted to say something very kind of more upfront. But it was the holidays. And I was exhausted, kind of run-down, and a little sick. I didn’t have the emotional bandwidth to fight with my mother-in-law. I remember going back to our room and kind of hiding away for the rest of the evening. [...] Generally, I like her. She’s nice. She lives in an extremely White town. She doesn’t get it, you know. At this point in my life, I just feel like it’s way too much energy to educate especially older White people about race. I don’t feel like it’s my responsibility. It’s not my job. It takes too much damn effort to get anything.

The in-laws' offhanded comments stung. They reminded Asian participants that no matter how successful they are, their in-laws will perceive them as less of an American and question their ability to raise their children as "fully American." To the White parents-in-law, the Asian participants' educational credentials and professional careers held less weight than the pervasive immigrant stereotypes.

At the same time, White in-laws viewed their Asian children-in-law through the model minority stereotype. They often assumed that their children-in-law would share the same racial attitudes because they are "basically White" or "different from other minorities." This was particularly problematic when the White in-laws were politically conservative. Stephanie, a Korean woman, gets along fine with her White in-laws. During the Thanksgiving holiday, however, their xenophobic comments made her feel very uncomfortable. She recalled:

One time, they were saying all the nasty stuff about DACA and immigrants, and I was so offended I had to remind them that my mom is an immigrant. And they say, 'oh, no, no no, we're just joking. Your mom is great.' And then they continued saying weird stuff about immigrants. They're such welcoming, loving people but when they say those things, I feel extremely uncomfortable.

The in-laws downplayed the severity of their comments by calling them a joke. But to Stephanie, they were not just some harmless jokes. She knew that they translated into the ways they vote. The father-in-law's Facebook page was full of pro-Trump posts. She was hurt and confused that the in-laws supported an openly racist, nationalist, xenophobic, and sexist president. Why were they rooting for someone who vows to jeopardize her family's safety? The in-laws knew that most of her family members are immigrants. "It's just politics," the father-in-law said, dismissively. "Is it because they think Asians are quiet and don't cause any trouble?" Frustrated, Stephanie blocked her in-laws on Facebook.

Jeff also recalled an incident where the in-laws treated him as if his Asian identity was invisible to them. One time, Jeff's in-laws came from Vermont to visit his racially diverse neighborhood. His in-laws seemed surprised to see many Blacks and Latinos in his neighborhood.

Jeffrey said:

My father-in-law and I were talking about ethnic businesses, and he mentioned the African Americans in our neighborhood, and for some reason, he said "us White people." And I told him like, "well, I'm not White." And he was like, "you're basically White." Which was not cool. I guess he thinks that Asians are closer to Whites compared to African Americans probably because Asians are the model minority who do what they're told to do or something, and have had success from "hard work." I'm pretty Americanized, in that, I have American interests. But that does not make me White.

Jeff's father-in-law drew White versus non-White racial boundaries and co-opted Jeff as "us White people". Rather than asking Jeff about his identity, he assumed that Asians like Jeffrey would side with Whites rather than non-Whites,

Several Asian men and women in my sample felt hypervisible and invisible during their interactions with their White in-laws. However, there were two distinct ways their experiences differed by gender. First, Asian women were subjected to yet another prevailing stereotype—the trope of an exotic and docile Asian wife. Second, gender largely dictated how much help the Asian participants managed to solicit from their White partners to navigate these relationships. White women were more aware of the difficulties faced by their Asian husbands and made proactive steps so that their husbands would have a more smooth experience when visiting/interacting with their in-laws. Meanwhile, Asian women were mostly on their own.

Some White in-laws had preconceived notions that their Asian daughters-in-law are exotic and domestic. Alice, a Chinese woman, feels that her in-laws have a "weird soft spot" for Chinese

women. Her mother-in-law, especially, thinks Alice is “so sweet.” Once, during the end-of-year holiday season, a large number of people from her husband’s side of the family got together at her in-laws’ place. As they were hanging out waiting for the big dinner to be ready, she overheard her mother-in-law talking to Alice’s sister-in-law (her husband’s sister), “isn’t Alice just so beautiful?” Alice cringed at the mother-in-law’s fetishizing comment about her physical appearance. Such an objectifying comment made her hypervisible at family gatherings when she just wanted to blend in.

Katherine, a Taiwanese woman, also feels uncomfortable whenever her in-laws project her as a domestic, dedicated wife when she has a robust career as a lawyer and makes more money than her husband.

I think my in-laws love me because, for the most part, they think of me as this Asian woman who is very genteel and domestic. It is true that I have a lot of piety toward my elders. I’ve been raised in that culture where I understand how to treat elders. It’s just an automatic reflex for me, and it helps me get along with the in-laws for sure. But they think I am this model child who somehow managed to settle him (my husband) down. They think I managed to do that because something about me being Asian can calmed him down. I don’t know—it’s just really weird.

Both the Asian men and women talked to their White spouses about the struggles of managing the relationship with the in-laws. They expressed their anxiety about being “the only Asian” when spending time with the White side of the family. But the amount of support they were able to solicit from their White partners was not uniform. It was largely gendered: the White women took more proactive measures to help their Asian partners feel less foreign and alienated when visiting their in-laws.

Erin and Kevin, a White female-Chinese male couple, visit Maine a few times a year to see Erin’s parents. Erin always feels nostalgic when she arrives in her rural hometown. She enjoys

getting away from the hustle and bustle of the city. At the same time, she notices that Kevin, who is a “people person,” tenses up when they arrive at her childhood home. He seems more tired and quiet than he usually is in the city. During one of their visits, Kevin asked Erin if she would ever want to live here again. “If there are jobs that I can take, I’d be open to it,” Erin responded. Kevin then said that he does not think he could ever live there, knowing that he would be the only Asian person besides people who run the Chinese restaurant. His response stuck with Erin. It helped her realize that she, as an “insider-outsider,” has to be more attuned to Kevin’s needs and help him feel more comfortable when they visit Maine. She described:

That was an aha moment for me where I was like, wow, that’s true. And if we raised kids here, they would be the only multi-ethnic kids or one of the multi-ethnic kids in the school. And so that was kind of a moment where we were like, okay if we’re going to stay together, that means I’m probably not going to live in something that I still think of as home, which is fine. I’ve come to feel good about that. And we also agree that we can’t live in New York because we’ll never be able to afford it. Philadelphia is a good middle ground.

She recognized that her hometown is not a welcoming place for her husband. To help Kevin feel a little more at ease, Erin has told her parents in advance what are appropriate and inappropriate things to say to him and has urged them to educate her neighbors and friends so that Kevin would not have to face a deluge of questions. She explained:

When I took him to my parent’s church, or when he meets old friends or family friends, they ask so many questions and are so curious. And I think they would be with any person I brought home that I was dating or married to, but I think there’s like an extra layer of curiosity. And there, of course, are always like -- I haven’t seen this too frequently. But I always am waiting for ignorant questions like: but where are you really from? Or where are your parents from? But I think my parents are also probably prime people for that, you know. I think they’re probably like my son-in-law is Korean.

He was born here, and his parents are from Korea. So I think people hopefully don't have to ask those questions to my husband.

Vicky, a White woman whose parents live in Wyoming, found herself visiting there less frequently ever since she got married to a Taiwanese man and had kids. Mainly, it was because life got busy. But she also realized that perhaps Wyoming is not the most welcoming place for her husband and her kids. To this day, her husband and kids draw the locals' attention. She feels like she has to protect them somehow, especially her kids. So on rare occasions when they do visit, she takes them around to places that she knows would be "safe." Vicky said:

When we go visit, we go to visit family. So we're not out socializing in big public areas like that. It's not that we keep ourselves hidden, it's just that we're not necessarily out all the time. We visit people that we know. And as a result, their visit may not be an accurate representation of how Asian people would be welcomed or not welcomed. I know that one of my coworkers who has mixed race kids, she is Caucasian, their dad was Black and she took them to Wyoming, they are so not used to seeing black kids that, uh, much like a scene out of the 1950s where her daughter went to get in a swimming pool and a bunch of kids got out and were like, "we're not swimming in the same place you do." Oh yeah. And that's in the 2000s. And, she was done. Uh, I was done. Um, I wasn't there, but she talked to me about it, because she knew that I was from Wyoming too, and she said "I couldn't believe it. I told my daughters to just keep swimming." Um, but we've never had a situation like that. We've never had, you know, when we've visited there, and sitting at a restaurant and somebody saying, you can't be here or anything like that. But at the same time, I could see it happening. So I will go visit there. I will not live there. Okay. I think that it is getting better, but it's getting better too slowly for me. And I would rather be in a place where I didn't have to struggle with that.

White women in this study were more emotionally supportive and racially conscious than White men. This meant that the Asian women were doubly burdened: they were often left to their

own devices to navigate the relationship with their in-laws, but then, they had to help manage the relationship between their husbands and the Asian parents. Despite the disproportionate burden, the women did not give up on making their families more equal.

How Asian and White Women Speak Up Against Family Inequality

Being in a mixed family posed challenges to the women unique to their race and gender. On one hand, the challenges they experienced indicate that the family is a site where interpersonal relationships are shaped by the existing racial and patriarchal hierarchies. On the other hand, how the women managed the relationships suggest that the family is also a site where these hierarchies are actively challenged.

Some of the White women resisted the gender norms imposed by their Asian in-laws by emphasizing their White racial identity and framing themselves as a foreigner unfamiliar with Asian culture. For example, Christine, a White woman married to a Korean guy, noticed that her mother-in-law would frequently comment about the physical appearances of the female family members. She said:

There are some things that I push against—like the weight thing. I don't want my kids to grow up overly body-conscious and worry about their weight. So that's why when my mother-in-law says, "oh, you're looking chubby" or "oh, so and so has gained weight," I don't want us to talk about things like that around the kids. That is important to me that they don't hear that.

If the comments about physical appearance were directed only at Christine, she would have tried to brush them off. But she does not want her daughter to become body-conscious. To protect her daughter, she strategized on how to tell her mother-in-law to stop making the "weight comments" without sounding "offensive and brash." She used her outsider status as a White

woman to her advantage and kindly asked her mother-in-law not to make the “weight comments” because “in her family culture, we don’t talk about our bodies.” Since then, Christine can tell that the mother-in-law suppresses her urge to comment on people’s appearances in front of her.

Christine also noticed that the in-laws are beginning to treat their grandchildren differently as they are growing older. One time, during a family dinner, the mother-in-law said to Christine’s son (who is her only grandson): “I’m the most important grandma because I’m your dad’s mom.” And then she said that he is her “favorite grandchild” in front of his cousins. Christine’s sisters-in-law rolled their eyes in annoyance but did not say anything. So Christine interjected and said, “no mom, that’s not the way our family works. You’re important to him, but so is his maternal grandma.” Then she added, “Grandma loves all grandchildren equally.” Whenever she sees gender favoritism creeping up during family gatherings, she tries to counteract it by promoting gender-egalitarian ideals.

Meanwhile, Some of the Asian women confronted their White in-laws’ racist and nativist views by facilitating “hard conversations.” They viewed that their in-laws, at their core, are “good people.” If they were really “bad people,” they would not have accepted them as their daughters-in-law. They made sense of this discrepancy by concluding that the in-laws are not “bad people” but perhaps “ignorant.” The in-laws fell prey to the right-wing media and fake news, they told themselves. So they thought that they could help them “unlearn” their racist views.

Casey knew that helping someone confront their prejudices is a challenging job, to say the least. But she was willing to take up the challenge for the sake of her children. Casey wanted her children to have close relationships with both their maternal and paternal grandparents and know that they are warm and caring people. She assumed that having these hard conversations is a part

of the kin keeper's job. Talking to the mother-in-law, however, felt like "walking on eggshells."

She described:

My mother-in-law is a huge Trump supporter. She openly talks about what she likes about Trump as if she expects me to like him too, but I don't. But I don't say that I don't like him. It's important for me that I'm honest with her, but I also want to carry on a relationship. So I say to her, you know, I liked Trump in the beginning, but I question him now. And I said the only thing that hit home for me is the way he treats the refugees and the people who are seeking asylum in the United States. I am so hurt to see children being pulled away from their parents at the border because I have a close friend who is a Dreamer.

Casey tried to talk to her mother-in-law as gently as she could, trying her best not to hint that she thinks of them as racist. And these conversations have begun to pay off. The in-laws stopped inviting a family friend who cannot stop talking about politics at family gatherings; they are trying to understand that to Casey and her children, it is not "just politics." These views affect their everyday life.

It also took up a lot of courage and preparation for Ruth, a Korean woman, to have these hard conversations:

Whenever we meet, I try to have some hard conversations, and I've been told politely that we can't talk about politics. We're on opposite ends of the spectrum, but I do it anyway. Last time, I brought up White privilege. I tried to get them to understand the concept in a very gentle way without dividing the family. These are really good teachable moments but also can cause a lot of feelings. [...] They're the only ones that I know that are Trump supporters. So I want to know what their thoughts were and how they landed where they did. I feel like our conversations don't go anywhere and they can be frustrating. But the last time they were visiting, a topic of gentrification for some reason came up. So I felt like, okay, this is my opening to talk about White privilege.

As hard as they may be, Ruth viewed having these conversations as her job as a mother of mixed-race children.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that both race and gender are salient factors in the ways the Asian and White partners managed relationships with their in-laws. For most White men, their racial and gender privileges made relationship management smoother. They were mainly expected to be a breadwinner and had their Asian wives take care of emotion work. Lacking clear communication about the expectations, the White women did a lot of guesswork and found out that being a good daughter-in-law meant embracing patriarchal gender norms. The Asian partners, although they did not experience direct hostility or rejection from the White in-laws, were nevertheless reminded of the pervasiveness of the Asian stereotypes from the microaggressions. And the Asian women, many of whom performed emotion work to help their White husbands' relationship with the Asian parents, did not get a similar type of support from their husbands when navigating relationships with the White in-laws. Despite these difficulties, many of the White and Asian women continued to focus on their roles as a mother to tackle the in-laws' patriarchal norms and racist attitudes for the sake of their children and thereby played critical roles in making families more equal. These findings challenge the public imaginaries of mixed-race families as a symbol of a picture-perfect family in a post-racial society. Instead, they indicate that mixed families and their extended family relationships are a particularly apt site to observe how intersectional inequalities are reproduced and challenged at the micro-level.

Chapter Five: What's in a Name?

During the interview phase of this study, I had my phone with me at all times. At every ping, I immediately checked my inbox to see if it was from a potential interview participant. There always was a bit of suspense because my old phone was slow at loading the email. The symptoms of smartphone addiction made me worry, so I decided to do a little digital detox by turning off the ringer during the end-of-year holiday season. People would not have time for an interview during the holiday season anyway, I told myself. Unfortunately, I failed, and I resumed checking the inbox impulsively, most of the time finding nothing. A few days before Christmas, there was an inquiry e-mail sitting in my inbox from a woman named Rebecca Johnson. She was like a secret Santa as there was no mention of where she had heard about my project nor much about herself. I pictured her as a White woman married to an Asian man. We quickly scheduled two interviews back to back—one for her and the other for her husband. Although the detox failed, it was not all bad.

On the day of our interview, I looked for a couple, a White woman and an Asian man, specifically, but could not find one. I wondered if they were running late. Then, a White guy approached me and asked if I am Hayden. At that moment, I realized that Rebecca Johnson is an Asian woman married to a White man. She probably changed her surname when she married her husband, Doug Johnson. As Doug and I were exchanging pleasantries, Rebecca walked over to the table. Indeed, she was Asian.

Marital surname change for women is a long-standing cultural tradition in the United States. The first known American woman to break this tradition was Lucy Stone (McMillen 2015). She kept her surname when she got married in 1855. Stone, a prominent women's rights activist argued that "a wife should no more take her husband's name than he should hers. My name is my identity."

Although there was no law mandating women to change their surnames upon marriage, she was unable to own property or vote under her birth surname (Million 2003).

The movement to keep birth surnames took on in the 1970s, led by college-educated, professional women who had “made a name” for themselves (Goldin and Shim 2004). Data on marital surname changes are very limited, and therefore it is hard to estimate what percentage of married women have kept their names. According to a Google Consumer Survey conducted by the New York Times, 17 percent of the women married in the 1970s have kept their surnames, and that percentage increased to 22 percent among those who got married in the 2010s (Miller and Willis 2015). The Times also analyzed the data from the Social Security Administration between 2010 and 2013 and found that the percentage of recently-married women who changed their surnames during this period decreased from 74 percent to 71 percent. This suggests that keeping one’s name as well as other options such as hyphenation were on the rise in the 2010s. Still, the majority of American women follow the tradition of adopting their husbands’ surnames.

Women’s marital surname decisions are closely related to their socioeconomic status and attitudes toward gender. Women who have college degrees, professional occupations, and are older at the time they were married are more likely to retain their surnames (Goldin and Shim 2004; Gooding and Kreider 2010; Scheuble and Johnson 2016). How people feel about surname changes is also connected to socioeconomic class. According to Shafer (2017), less educated men are more biased against women who keep their surnames compared to college-educated men. These studies illustrate how marital surname decisions can reveal important sociological insights about gender.

As I casually assumed Rebecca Johnson was a White woman rather than an Asian woman, names can signal not only people’s gender but also their racial background. When Rebecca Hwang became Rebecca Johnson upon marriage, it became much less obvious that she is Asian. When

Megan Ferguson, a White woman, became Megan Hsieh upon marrying a Taiwanese man, she noticed that people tend to assume her to be an Asian woman up until they meet her. Marital surname decisions among mixed families have an added layer of complexity. Yet we know little about how race affects one's surname decisions. Exploring how intermarried women arrive at their decisions can help unpack how race comes into play and interacts with gender during the decision-making process.

The issue of surnames also arises when couples choose names for their children. Almost always, heterosexual parents give children their father's surname. This tradition of patrilineal surnaming suggests that "only men are legitimate carriers and creators of family identity and heritage" (Nugent 2010). Such practices, however, may be less appealing to mixed families because they essentially erase ties to the mothers' ethnicities (Waters 1989). Additionally, mixed families may take into consideration which surname option could maximize the life chances of their children given how people with ethnic surnames are presumed less competent by prospective employers than those with Anglo-sounding names (Banerjee, Reitz, and Oreopoulos 2018; Goldstein and Stecklov 2016). Thus, how mixed couples name their children can reveal their understandings of race, and how they perceive their children will be incorporated into the racial fabric of our society.

This chapter examines how Asian-White couples make decisions about women's marital name changes and their children's names. Particularly, I paid attention to the differences between Asian female-White male couples versus Asian male-White female couples. The first section explores how women decided to retain or change their surnames and made sense of their decisions. The second section analyzes how couples decided on different parts of their children's names—

given/first names, middle names, and surnames/last names, focusing on the salience of Asian ethnicity in names.

Women’s Surname Decisions

Table 2 shows the surname decisions of the female participants. Changing surnames was not as common as it is across the country. In fact, the proportion of the women who kept their names was greater than that of those who changed theirs. This trend can be attributed to their socioeconomic background—most had advanced degrees, had professional careers, and were living in metropolitan areas—which are known to increase women’s likelihood of keeping their surnames (Gooding and Kreider 2010; Hamilton, Geist, and Powell 2011).

Table 2. Surname Decisions of Female Interviewees

	Asian		White	
	n	%	n	%
Changed Surname	9	45.0	4	28.6
Retained Surname	11	55.0	10	71.4
Total	20	100	14	100

Table 2 also shows racial differences in surname decisions. A greater percentage of White women have retained their surnames than Asian women (71% versus 55%, respectively). This finding does not align with Gooding and Kreider’s analysis of the 2004 American Community Survey, where they found that Asian women are more likely to keep their surnames than White women. They found that White women had the highest percentage of retaining their surnames across different racial groups. One potential explanation for this discrepancy is that there may be a difference in the ways women make surname decisions to the racial background of their husbands.

The interview sample of this study is in no way representative of the Asian-White mixed couples in the United States. The patterns of their surname decisions (and child naming decisions discussed in a later section) cannot be extrapolated to the actual population. That said, there was a clear difference in the ways White and Asian women came to and made sense of their decisions. Women often mentioned race as the main reason why they kept and changed their surnames. In addition, their husbands' race mattered: White men held on to the surname tradition more strongly than Asian men. How women arrived at their surname decisions was shaped by the racial hierarchy within our society as well as racial power differentials between couples.

The Name Keepers

There was a short period in Rui's life when she went by Rachel. Rui, a Chinese American woman, was tired of teaching people how to pronounce her name. So, in elementary school, she tried an "American" name. It did not last too long because she realized having a preferred name that is completely different from your legal name can cause logistical hassles.

When Rui married a White guy with the surname Howell, she knew better than to not go through a name change. She explained why she kept her surname:

Well, one, I think Rui Howell sounds dumb. I wouldn't want that. And two, I didn't see a reason why I would take his last name. See, it sounded like a lot of paperwork. Also, I guess the underlying current is that I'm an only child. In a very strange, traditional way, I don't want my parents' lineage to end here if I take his last name. Then, what do I have to hang on to?

I probed what she meant by "dumb." After a pause, Rui responded:

Several years ago, before I got married, I was looking for a Korean recipe on YouTube. Maangchi used to be my go-to YouTuber then. But one of the suggested videos had a

video posted by a woman named Seonkyoung Longest. I don't know why, but I had this kind of visceral response when I saw the name. You would usually expect that a Korean name would be followed by something like Kim or Park. I clicked on the video and found out that she had an accent, and at that point, I figured out that she probably married a White guy and changed her surname. Which is what most women do, you know. But to me, it felt like her name was just screaming, 'I'm an Asian woman who married a White guy.' And yeah, so did I. But I guess I didn't want that to be the first thing that comes across people's minds when they see my name. And changing her last name isn't even part of her culture, right?

Name is an important marker of identity to Rui. Her response suggests that she expects people's names, particularly their surnames signal their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Her name, "Rachel Zheng," suggests that she is of Chinese origin and her Americanized given name suggests that she is likely to be a native-born or someone who came to the States at a young age. On the other hand, the name Rui Howell (or Seonkyoung Longest) does not tell a straightforward story of ethnoracial background. Rui was flustered when she could not immediately register the name Seonkyung Longest into a specific category. The given name sounds Korean, but the surname did not. She eventually connected the dots: the name is a result of a mixed marriage.

Stereotypes entered into her chain of thought. She thought about yellow fever among White men who view Asian women as sexual objects. She also thought about Asian marriage migrants who get trapped in toxic relationships. She wondered if she took on her husband's surname, she would be pulled into that stereotype. Marital surname change is a widespread tradition. But to Rui, it evoked a swath of feelings.

Most Asian women in this study had Anglo-sounding given names. Only a few women had ethnic names, and they chose to keep their surnames. They explained that their names would sound "weird" when White-sounding surnames are tacked on. An Asian ethnic name combined with a

non-Asian surname would “cause confusion,” said Jinny. Similarly, some Asian women with Anglo-sounding given names kept their surnames to avoid racial confusion. Stephanie, a Korean woman, explained that she kept her surname, Lee because she did not want to be mistaken as White based on her name. She explained:

In Korea, women usually don’t change their names. That too, but I did it mainly out of convenience. There is a thing where it’s like I don’t want people to be surprised when they meet me. If I had changed my last name to Clark, I knew it would be like, “Oh, *you’re* Stephanie Clark?” Not that everyone knows that Lee is necessarily an Asian name, but if people know it, then they know.

Changing her surname from Lee to Clark would have been “inconvenient” to Stephanie. The meaning of inconvenience was two-fold. First is the extra logistical work that is involved with changing one’s surname. You would have to update every formal document that had your old surname—id, social security card, bank accounts, etc. These take up a lot of time but there are only so many documents to update. Secondly, the surname change would have meant additional emotional work for Stephanie for the foreseeable future. She would have to deal with people who are confused by her name. Sure, having an Asian ethnic surname has its disadvantages, but she did not think changing her surname would improve her situation, if not cause more headaches. Moreover, she felt that changing her surname would seem like she is taking advantage of her husband’s Whiteness.

White female participants decided to keep their birth surnames because they did not want to be mistaken as Asian based on their surnames. Some have tinkered with the idea of hyphenating their surnames, but no one got through with it. Teresa uses her birth surname professionally, but on social media, she uses a hyphenated surname, which she found herself using more now that her daughter has the hyphenated surname, too. Potential racial confusions, as well as resistance to the

antiquated gendered practice, were the main reasons why the White women decided not to change their surnames.

The Name Changers

Race was also the main factor for women to change their surnames. Megan Ferguson changed her name to Megan Liu when she married a Chinese man. She has one daughter who just turned ten. She explained:

I changed my last name, and to be honest, it was one of the decisions I made specifically because of our different ethnic backgrounds. I thought that had I kept my name, we wouldn't have seemed as much like a family. I thought that it might seem awkward to my husband or something like that, you know. If I married some guy named Smith, I probably would've kept my name cause I like my name. There's a lot of history to it. My family is Scottish and has a long tradition and stuff. But I just thought that given our unique situation, being a mixed couple, it was better that way.

Her response suggests that there are unspoken assumptions about families—that family members usually come from the same racial background. She describes being in a mixed family as a “unique situation,” where people might not immediately think that they would be a family. She thought that she could rectify that situation by adopting her husband's surname. Also, she thought changing her surname would make it less “awkward” for her husband.

The surname change somewhat simplified her life. Having the same surname helps when she is out with her daughter. Megan describes that since her daughter looks more Asian, people tend to stare at them. But when they realize that Megan and her daughter have the same surname, people, sooner or later, get that they are family. She mainly changed her surname so that she and

her husband can be the “Liu Family,” but she’s glad that she did it since it sends a strong signal that she and her daughter are related. She elaborated:

It’s weird that I have this Asian name, but, that said, it’s better for my daughter to have the same last name because, um, she’s a really, really beautiful, lovely child, but she doesn’t look a lot like me. She looks like the other side of the family. And so I think it gives us a tie to each other and stuff. It’s important to have that continuity with her.

But the surname change also complicated Megan’s life. She works mostly from home using email as her primary channel of communication with co-workers and clients. Occasionally, she jumps on a video conference call, and she sees people’s confused looks as they put a White face on a Chinese-sounding name. In those moments, she feels like Donna Chang, a White woman with a Chinese-sounding surname, in a Seinfeld episode “The Chinese Woman.”

There’s one episode in which they have this lady, and she’s Caucasian, but her last name is Asian. And one of the moms, George’s mom, who is kind of a stereotypical New Jersey mom keeps calling her (Donna Chang) to ask her for fortunes, thinking that she is Chinese. When finally the mom finds out that she’s a Caucasian lady, she gets really mad. So I feel a little bit like that.

In the beginning, she would explain to people how she has a Chinese surname. Lately, though, she has stopped explaining it to people. I asked if she has ever felt that she felt treated differently when people realize that she is White, and she said that she could not recall a specific incident that made her feel that way. That said, once her daughter is all grown up, she thinks about changing her surname back to Ferguson so that she does not have to deal with confusion. “Do you think mixed families would become more of a norm by then?” I asked. “Maybe just in some pockets of the country?” She replied. “You know, it’s annoying, but I don’t blame them either

because that's what I'd think too. I wonder what assumptions people make when they find out my daughter's name. Obviously, they'll think that she's Asian. But what else is going through their mind?"

When Jeannie Kim, a Korean woman, changed her surname to Hill, she immediately felt the difference in the way people treated her. The surname change, to her, was like a "breath of fresh air." Jeannie elaborated on what the name change meant for her and her sense of racial identity:

I think it was just, you know, naturally, you get married, and your name changes. And to be honest, I liked that I was shedding—it is horrible—but I was happy to be shedding my last name. I always felt—I don't know if this is stuff I make up for myself or it is because I am Asian: because I am Asian, we don't get the same treatment. When I get customer service on the phone and say I'm Jeannie Kim, I feel like being judged already. Like, oh, she's Asian. I don't know why that is, or maybe I do. But I feel different—I don't know the right word, maybe respected is the right word, because now I don't have an Asian last name. So a part of me, although it was natural just to drop my last name, I almost was very happy to do it.

To Jeannie, the marital name change was perceived as an opportunity to "shed" her surname, a distinct racial marker that has troubled her for a long time. Born and raised in New York, Jeannie sounds like a typical New Yorker. Even over the phone, however, people try to pick up racial clues about her, and her surname, Kim, gives away that she is Asian. She has experienced how the tone changes when she tells people that she is Jeannie Kim, but what is so cruel about these microaggressions is that they make you second guess yourself and think that there is something wrong with you for feeling paranoid ("I don't know if I'm making stuff up," said Christine). Changing the surname was Jeannie's way of setting up a natural experiment as well as protecting herself from racial microaggressions.

Erika Sagan, a Japanese woman who changed her surname to Suzuki, also saw a marital name change as an opportunity to remake her identity. It enabled her to rebrand herself in the art world and set herself from other Japanese artists who share the same surname. She elaborated:

So my maiden name is Suzuki, which is basically the Smith of Japan. It's such a common name, and in the art world, there are a lot of Suzukis. So when the time came to make that decision, I suppose I liked the sound of Erika Sagan. But it's funny because some of my hardcore feminist friends refused to call me by that name. It was a pain to change my name because I had already built a career. So I almost had to do this whole almost like an art project where I was coming out with a new name. I made cards and did this whole thing. It's very difficult to change your name when you're older, but I changed it because Suzuki itself was not that special. The other thing also is, I hate it when the mother is the only one presenting her name in a family like you become an outcast. Like why should the mother be the only one with your name? You're like this outcast?

To Erika, changing her surname helped establish herself in two different arenas. One, within the family, it helped her avoid feeling like an "outcast." Second, she thought, despite the hassle, it would help her with her career in the art world as well. It could help her with dealing with the problem of being an "interchangeable Asian" (Chen 2021). She would not have to worry as much about being mistaken or confused as another Suzuki or her work automatically categorized as that of a Japanese artist. With her creativity and artistic talent, she created an art project out of the name change process.

The women's understanding of race and ethnicity shaped their decisions to keep or change their surnames. Some Asian women kept their surnames as they saw the change as an erasure of their ethnic identities. Some viewed that the ramifications of the name change would entail racial confusion and the perpetuation of racialized stereotypes against Asian women. On the other hand,

some Asian women understood the name change as an opportunity to avoid (or delay) racial stereotyping that stems from their ethnoracially distinct surnames.

Most White women kept their surnames as well to avoid being mistaken as Asians. And their predictions were right. White women who changed their surnames to their Asian husbands' were routinely assumed as Asian. It was their first time falling out of the White normativity. However, they viewed that it was a worthwhile decision as it helped them to understand what it means to be a non-White person at least on paper. Moreover, it served as proof of family to the world that does not view mixedness as a norm.

Race was an overarching factor that guided both Asian and White women's decisions. That said, I was intrigued by the fact that a greater proportion of Asian women changed their surname than White women. This may have been a result of sampling bias. But as I was analyzing the data, it stood out that a few Asian women specifically mentioned that it was their White husbands who had "insisted," "encouraged," or "forced" them to change their surnames while no White women mentioned such incidents. Again, it is entirely possible that I ended up with a skewed sample. Still, it was an interesting contradiction to what the Asian women have told me. They have purposely avoided dating Asian men and did not view them as a potential marital partner because they were seen as generally more patriarchal than White men. Some White men, however, were not very progressive when it came to surnames.

Rebecca, whom I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, described that her husband, Doug, "forced" her to change her name. Initially, she did not intend to change her surname. However, Doug was "pretty insistent." He wanted his family to be the "Johnsons." She eventually gave in but remained upset at how it went down. When I spoke to Doug later, he told me his side of the story. He just wanted everyone in the family to have the same surname so that they can have

a unified sense of the family. “It didn’t matter whose last name we went with. I told her (Rebecca) that I could change my last name to Hwang, but she didn’t want that. I just wanted us to have the same last name, that’s all.” There was a clear difference in the ways they remember the decision-making process. Regardless of how things went down, what seemed clear was that Rebecca is bitter to this day by the nature of her name change.

Indeed, some White women changed their surnames because that is a patriarchal cultural norm. As quoted above, Megan changed her name partly because it would be “weird for her husband” if she did not. No White women had attributed their decision to their husbands though. In China and Korea, where most of the Asian participants’ families are from, marital surname change is not a custom, so there is a possibility that Asian men are not as attached to this tradition as some White men were. But observing how Asian men-White women couples and Asian women-White men couples organized their everyday lives, I found that the Asian men seem more egalitarian than the White men. They were not only “chill” about the surname change. They were also doing a greater share of housework and care work. In the case of my participants, the patriarchal Asian male stereotype was a stereotype.

Perhaps that is what it takes for Asian men to intermarry. The most notable feature of Asian-White marriages is their severe gender imbalance. In a way, Asian men who marry White women are a selective group. I am wildly speculating here, but I wonder whether these Asian men have beat the odds by deviating from the “typical Asian man” stereotype. Whether that is true or not, the women’s surname decisions illustrate that they are not solely determined by women’s understanding of race and gender but also shaped by the racial and gender dynamics that exist within couples.

Children's Names

When a child came into the picture, couples in this study were faced with questions of who they are as a family, how they build their identity as a family, and what implications their choices would have on their child's life chances. Coming up with a name was one of the first decisions they had to make as parents. How they choose and negotiate names for their children reflected the couples' understanding of the racial hierarchy in the U.S. and how their mixed children would be positioned in that hierarchy. Similar to the women's surname decisions, couples' racial and gender configurations affected how ethnic the children's names were.

Given Names

All but one child had "American" given names. Only one couple—a Japanese woman and a White man—named their son Haru, a Japanese name. It seemed as if, across all couples, an "American" given name is the default choice for their children. Several Asian men and women had ethnic given names themselves, but even to them, "American" names were considered "normal." For example, Thuy, a Vietnamese woman, said that "it had never crossed my mind to have a Vietnamese name for the children." Of course, a name is a strong signal of family identity, so you want to come up with a name that represents both parents' backgrounds. But it seemed like there was an active avoidance of ethnic names, at least when it came to given names. Thuy recalled that her name was a source of "trauma." "I always hated my name." She had her name mispronounced and misspelled her whole life. "What is so annoying is that some people don't think it is their job to learn to get the name right. They think I should change the name or 'anglicize' it so that it sounds less foreign. My children don't need to go through that." She knew too well the

emotional cost of living with a name that deviates from the “norm,” and wanted to spare her children from that experience.

Hyun, a Korean man, had hoped that he had an “American” name growing up. He has seen several immigrant kids at his school and church who suddenly changed their names to ones that people can pronounce and would not be made fun of. He recalled:

I deeply remember the day in the middle of high school, this guy changed his name to Michael. And there was just something so sad about this. You know, your parents named you something. They gave you this, and you can't hold on to it because of how much harm it does to you. It's the only day-to-day life, and I think maybe that was a part of me that maybe didn't decide to change my name. But there are also parts of me that wonder what people think about me before they meet me.

His Korean name was a constant reminder that he is seen as a foreigner by other people. He could have given in to the pressure and changed his name. However, he could not bear to tell his parents that the name they have given to him is causing him pain. So when the time came for Hyun and his wife to name their daughter, they chose one that everyone could pronounce, including his parents and other Korean relatives. After a months-long search, they decided on Leanne, a name that encapsulates his love and care for both his daughter and parents.

The predominance of “American” names as children's given names suggests that Anglicization remains very much a part of becoming and being an American today. Almost everyone assumed it to be the case regardless of their race and gender.

Surnames

Giving paternal surnames is an enduring American tradition. This would mean that children with Asian fathers would have Asian ethnic surnames. Meanwhile, children with White fathers

and Asian mothers would have White American surnames. Also, there are other options such as dual surnames with or without a hyphen. Dual surnames/hyphenated surnames would represent both parents' surname and their racial backgrounds. For example, if couples were to hyphenate their surnames, like Johnson-Hwang, the surname would suggest that the person is likely to be biracial. In a way, these alternative options like hyphenation make one's race more ambiguous.

As shown in Table 3 below, the paternal surname was the dominant choice for the mixed children. When broken down by the fathers' race, however, hyphenation was a more popular option among the Asian fathers-White mothers than the White fathers-Asian mothers (36% versus 17%). Perhaps hyphenation is more common with the former because most White women have kept their surnames upon marriage. Does hyphenation reflect egalitarianism between spouses?

Table 3. Children's Surnames by Fathers' Race

	Asian Father		White Father	
	n	%	n	%
Paternal	9	64.3	15	83.3
Hyphenated	5	35.7	3	16.7
Total	14	100	18	100

Some Asian women whose children have paternal surnames felt that they had less bargaining power during the naming process. When Rebecca changed her surname from Hwang to Johnson, she knew that there would be no debate about her children's surnames. They would be Johnsons, and she felt helpless about it. Rebecca regretted "not putting up hard enough of a fight." But she rationalized her situation by telling herself that "things are just easier when everyone has the same last name."

Asian women's internalized sense of inequality also played a role in naming their children. They kept her birth surname when she got married, not wanting to give up her surname for some patriarchal tradition. Her children, however, were given their father's surname. It was a "no-

brainer.” Her husband never asked her opinion about the surname, and she did not bring it up. She just assumed that her husband would prefer their children to have a paternal surname as is the norm and decided to go along with it. She explained:

It’s interesting because strangely enough, I did not insist on them [my children] having my name too. I insisted on a lot of things, but on that one, I felt, subconsciously, I have to prove more to his family. Like, you know, he comes to my family, he’s like a god. He comes from this White, traditional upper-class family with lots of money, but my family, we are not like that. So subconsciously, I think, ‘okay, I’m going to give that one to his family. I’m not gonna fuss about having both our names for their grandchildren.’ I didn’t fight for it.

Thuy’s comments suggest although surnames are not exactly an indicator of a person’s class in the U.S., names can carry different levels of privilege and status. Moreover, given the unequal socioeconomic status between her and her husband’s families, she felt like it was not within her rights to suggest a hyphenated surname. Although she is the one who is doing the bulk of childrearing, her perceived social location relative to her husband’s had prevented her from voicing her thoughts about the children’s heritage.

As a result, “their names all sound ‘super White,’” said Thuy. There is no hint in their names that they have Vietnamese heritage. Today, she has mixed feelings about her children’s names. On the one hand, she feels a sense of loss— “the Vietnamese side is completely erased,” she said. On the other hand, she is somewhat relieved about that. Their names do not sound Vietnamese but “American.” People know how to pronounce them correctly, and they will not pigeonhole them based on their names. She tells me that name is just one aspect, and there are other ways you can pass down your ethnic heritage. Recently, out of the blue, her son, a 9-year-old boy, asked her, “Mom, why don’t we have your last name? Can we have two last names?” She

replied that they absolutely could if they wish to when they are older. There was something weirdly comforting about what her son said. Perhaps things are changing. Maybe the classrooms and playgrounds are not as cruel as they used to be. But more open and accepting toward diversity.

To Tiffany, a Chinese woman, the surname decision was less about bargaining power. Her husband had asked her how she would like their child's surname to be. Tiffany has kept her surname, and her husband was open to hyphenating the two surnames. She tinkered with the idea of hyphenation, but in the end, she decided to take the traditional route. She explained her decision:

To be perfectly honest, I felt it would make it easier for Alex if he wanted to assimilate. So in the area where we are, it's not a big deal [to have a hyphenated name]. There are a lot of mixed Asian-White couples. It's more diverse. But wherever he ends up going, sometimes it just makes things easier, I think, to have an Americanized name.

It was somewhat of a surprise to hear her comment because, in the earlier part of the interview, she did not seem to think of race (or being Asian) as an important factor shaping her life chances. She quickly rose through the ranks as an engineering researcher and has always had mostly White friends. She said that she felt more constrained by her gender than her racial background. But still, she thought that having a non-ethnic surname would make things "easier" for her child. It would make his assimilation smoother, and he will experience less prejudice from others. Reviewing the transcript, I sorely regretted not following up on what she meant by assimilating. Does assimilation mean different things for her and her racially mixed child? To him, does it mean passing as White? And if that is the case, does being a Myers make assimilation easier than being a Li-Myers?

Asian mothers in this study often viewed paternal surnames are in the best interest of their children. But sometimes, it had an emotional consequence. Hannah, a Korean woman, kept her name upon marriage but decided not to hyphenate her children's surnames. It would make the

surname too long. She has heard how many headaches a hyphen in a surname can cause. So instead, she put her surname, Chung, as their middle name. As her children grew older and started school, she suddenly was stung by the thought that she “gave away her last name too easily.”

In the last year, I’ve been a bit upset, because now as I’m filling out all the paperwork for the doctors and the schools, I’m always writing Daniels [her husband’s surname]. And Chung is never on there. I’m feeling a little slighted because I do most of the childrearing. So I wonder, are they going to think that I’m their adopted mom? Stepmom? Remarried? There’s no identity that they’re my kids. I started talking about changing our last names, hyphenating, or blending. We jokingly call ourselves the Chaniels. And so that’s on our Christmas cards. We sign them that way. So either we’re going to change everyone’s name to Chaniels or change the kids to Chung-Daniels, which is a lot of bubbles on a scantron. I feel a little sad; I feel like people don’t know them as a part of me, especially since my kids don’t look a lot like me. I feel like, ‘who am I to the outside world?’ I wish it didn’t matter, but it started to.

In the previous chapter, I showed how Asian women on average shouldered a greater share of the emotion work of managing relationships with their parents and in-laws than their White husbands. In this chapter, we again find Asian women putting their partners and family’s emotional well-being over their own when it came to naming decisions. Family inequality shaped everyday decisions.

White mothers whose children had paternal surnames also had some woes about these decisions. They worried that their children would be presumed to be Asian and would experience disadvantages in higher education and the job market. Terry and David, a White female-Chinese male couple, chose a paternal surname for their children because that was and still is the norm. Terry, however, started to feel that there are disadvantages to having a distinctly Chinese surname. She found herself wondering whether her children, some of whom are now in college, would be

discriminated against in the job market because of their surnames. In a similar vein, Megan, a White woman married to a Chinese man, had paid close attention to the college admissions lawsuit against Harvard. She felt that the lawsuit's outcome would affect her daughter (although she is only ten at the moment) because of her Chinese surname. Given how Asians are treated in higher education, she realized that her daughter has to excel in everything. She said, "these elite schools are not letting the Asian kids as much as the Caucasian kids and stuff." Visibly frustrated, she added:

They say that they're seeking more diversity, but then, why aren't they seeking my child's diversity? I know that lawsuit [Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard] ran into trouble. I understand that it is being advocated by conservative groups that are just fighting for Caucasian people. So I understand that there is a double edge to what they're doing. But then, at the same time, I feel angry that one group of people is showing considerable merit, and therefore, being excluded based on their merit, as opposed to other people.

Terry and Megan are both concerned that people would assume their children as Asian only due to their surnames, although they are mixed and thereby not fully Asian. Their Chinese husbands, however, were not as worried as their wives. David, Terry's husband, thought that in this country, all people whose names do not sound White experience some sort of a disadvantage. It is not something unique to Asian people or mixed people. David seemed rather hurt that Tara would view the surname, which has a long family history that he is proud of, as a stumbling block as the children prepare to launch their careers. He managed to navigate fine with his ethnic surname, so why cannot his children, who have much more advantages than he had, do the same, if not better? He wondered.

Talking to mothers whose children have paternal surnames, I learned that race matters before and after their naming decisions. Within mixed families, naming can reflect not only gender power imbalance but also racial power imbalance that exists outside the family. So does race have anything to do with why hyphenated surnames are overrepresented among the children of Asian father-White mothers? According to the couples, it did not. White women explained to me that they did not want to change their surname because they did not want to get mistaken as Asian. But they did not say anything about racial signals of surnames when it comes to their children.

Anne and Joonhyung decided on a hyphenated surname for their daughter so that both sides of the family are reflected in her name. Anne described that hyphenation (deciding on the surname Jones-Choi) was a “natural” choice for them. “So that both sides are represented,” she said. They struck me as very gender-egalitarian couples who were intentional about deviating from the patriarchal norms.

But at the same time, I could not help but think that if we were to view naming as one way of social reproduction, there is an additional incentive for hyphenation for Asian men White women couples, just as Asian women-White men couples are disincentivized to hyphenate. As mentioned earlier, Tiffany and her husband decided on Myers rather than Myers-Li because Myers-Li sounds more ethnic than Myers. She viewed that Myers sounds more assimilated, more American. For Asian men-White women couples, hyphenation works the other way. It can make the name sound less ethnic. For example, people might register Choi as an Asian ethnic name, but when they hear Jones-Choi, they may think of a biracial/mixed person. I have no data to back this up, but Jones-Choi would be viewed as more “American” and closer to Whiteness than Choi. Although no couple has specifically mentioned it, it could be in the couple’s interest to hyphenate their children’s surname because by doing so they are not only upholding their egalitarian values

but also they can signal Whiteness through the name. It is like catching two birds with a stone. Hyphenation can be a hassle, but it probably will not cost you a job or other opportunities like it does when you have an ethnic name.

Middle Names

Assimilation seemed to be the main undercurrent in choosing children's given names and surnames. However, there was one part of the name where there was some resistance against that trend: middle names. Many couples treated middle names as a safe place where they do not have to worry much about how their children would be racially perceived. Several couples chose ethnic names as their children's middle names. It is not as visible, but it is there should the kids want to emphasize their Asian heritage when they get older. Since most couples were unfamiliar with the ethnic naming conventions, they recruited their Asian parents and in-laws for help.

Ruth, a Korean woman, took on her husband's surname when she got married. So did her children, but she got her husband to agree on giving the children Korean middle names. Their given names and surnames make them sound completely White, so she thought giving them Korean middle names would give her parents something they could relate to. She explained:

My first one is Jinwoo, so we wanted to stick with woo at the end for the middle one. So my parents came up with the Ki, and I added the woo, so he is Kiwoo. And then the last one, my mom came up with Woohee. She took hee from my Korean name and put it together with woo to make Woohee. That's how that came up. For Jinwoo and Kiwoo, they gave us a reason; some Chinese characters with nice meanings. I don't remember what the meaning was, but it was something good. So we went with it.

For most Asian women-White men couples whose children have "super White sounding" first and last names, middle names allowed the Asian side of the family to claim their ethnic

heritage. For Ruth's children, it quickly became a family affair. All of their names end with the syllable "woo," which is a Korean naming tradition to have a common syllable in the names of siblings and cousins. The naming process brought Ruth closer to her parents. Having a Korean middle name was less about its meaning. Ruth long ago forgot what the names meant. But instead, it symbolized family heritage and generational ties that have been and will be channeled through those names. In fact, Ruth's parents call their grandchildren by their Korean middle names and they seem comfortable that they have both ethnic and non-ethnic names like Ruth did growing up.

Joonhyung and Anne also gave a Korean middle name to their daughter, Leanne Jinah Jones-Choi. Joonhyung's dad gifted them the Korean name, Jinah, which they happily accepted. Joonhyung observed that whenever they spend time with his side of the family, people prefer to call her Jinah. On Anne's side of the family, she is just Leanne, which is fine too. Joonhyung described why it was important for him for his daughter to have a Korean middle name:

I have this feeling like there's something about the experience of being non-White that I want my daughter to understand because that's a part of her. No matter what, even if she does identify as White later, I wanted to leave something with her, um, that would be part of understanding what it means to be non-White in her name. I think we wouldn't have minded Jinah being the first name either. To be honest, I have a nickname for her, LJ, which Sarah doesn't really like, but I like it because it captures both parts of her name.

In a way, mixed children's names reflected the American society that privileges Whiteness. All but one child had "Americanized" given names. As for surnames, White spouses' names prevailed whether through paternal naming practices or hyphenation. Parents chose (or in some cases were pushed) to suppress ethnicity in given names and surnames. But they imparted ethnic heritage through middle names.

Chapter Six: Preserving Ethnicity to Protect Class

In Michelle Zauner's "Crying in H Mart," I came across my long-forgotten Korean childhood. Zauner's description of the flavor, smell, and texture of Korean snacks transported me back to Seoul, my hometown. Walking down the snack aisle at H Mart, she reminisces: "I think about the time Mom showed me how to fold the little plastic card that comes inside bags of Jolly Pong, how to use it as a spoon to shovel caramel puff rice into my mouth, and how it inevitably fell down my shirt and spread all over the car." Never have I thought that someone would describe such distinctly Korean memories in English. Even more surprising was that Zauner is a Korean-White American who grew up in Oregon.

Immigration research tends to have a laser focus on how and how much immigrants and their children are changing. It asks, how successfully are they becoming mainstream Americans? This question also has been at the center of my research agenda. But it is also important to flip the question and ask, what gets carried forward? And under what conditions? Assimilation theory assumes that ethnic distinctiveness will eventually disappear as the generation progresses. Only time will tell us about the fate of Asian ethnic culture in the U.S. In the meantime, we can examine how second-generation Asian Americans transmit ethnic culture to their children, and how the cultural transmission is complicated by interracial relationships. How and why they emphasize or deemphasize ethnic culture to their children can help us better understand what it means for Asian Americans to assimilate and what place ethnic culture inhabits in that process.

This chapter examines the relevance of ethnic culture among mixed families. I focus on parenting practices because they can show us the specific ways in which parents spend their time and resources to shape their children's cultural environment. Moreover, we can observe how Asian and White parents negotiate with each other and develop an identity as a family unit during that

process. This chapter is broken into two sections. First, I focus on Asian parents. I found that their familiarity with ethnic culture was an often-cited reason for how much they are transmitting their culture. But I also found that, at the end of the day, it was their class interest that dictated how much time and resources they spent on ethnic and cultural transmission. To elaborate on this point, I categorized the parents into three parenting types: ethnic-oriented parenting, mainstream-oriented parenting, and diversity-oriented parenting. Parents who viewed that learning ethnic language and culture would give their children a leg up in navigating a globalized economy adopted ethnic-oriented parenting styles while mainstream-oriented parents deemphasized cultural education as they did not find that ethnic culture would serve their class interests. Meanwhile, diversity-oriented parents, who were in the minority, did not evaluate ethnic culture in relation to its role in reproducing class status. Rather, they found ethnic cultural transmission as an important part of racial socialization by which come to see themselves as allies for marginalized communities.

In the second section, I shift the focus to White parents and show how White parents, particularly mothers, not just become affiliative ethnics but take on primary responsibilities of arranging ethnic and cultural activities and resources, sometimes at their emotional cost.

Overall, this chapter finds that class background is an important factor for ethnic cultural transmission. In that sense, one may say that ethnicity is becoming less salient to their sense of identity. But for many, it was part of the essential tools for reproducing socioeconomic success.

How Asian Parents Transmit Ethnicity

Ethan: Ethnic-Oriented Parenting

When Ethan, a Taiwanese American man, moved to New York a year ago, his priority was to find a church. He soon found a church that has a fair share of second-generation Asian Americans that

is a few subway stops away from his place. He was surprised to learn that they have a support group catered to mixed families. Given the church members' demographics, most mixed families were Asian-White, and to be more specific, Asian female-White male. He felt weird about the race-gender imbalance, but he relished the connections with other mixed families and all the information he was getting from Asian moms. Through them, he learned about the best Mandarin classes, Chinese grocery stores, and gifted and talented programs in town. They had all the intel he needed to navigate this new maze of a city.

It took Ethan some time to get used to the sheer crowdedness of the city, but he started to feel that New York is an excellent place for him to practice "Taiwanese parenting." New York felt like a strategic place to expose Adrian to the strengths of two cultures: the "Taiwanese culture" and "American culture." Inculcating Adrian with both would be vital to setting him up for success.

What is "Taiwanese culture?" To Ethan, it was first and foremost about persistence. Taiwanese people work hard. They persist in times of hardship. He explained:

Parenting is a very personal and philosophical subject. You put together things that you believe are the right recipe for your kid so that they could replicate success. Being Taiwanese American, you get to see different ways people raise their kids. Taiwanese families focus a lot on practice and making efforts. No matter how hard, you keep working, keep pounding the same spot, and one day you will get it. To achieve anything, you first have to demonstrate your diligence and responsibility. American families, I mean, every family is different, but in general, they encourage kids to pursue their interests. They often spend too much time searching for their passion. And there's nothing wrong with that. Sure, everything could be okay after all. But not everyone gets that kind of extra cushion. I feel like my job is to help Adrian grow that muscle. Muscle of diligence.

As mentioned above, Ethan's primary motivation for transmitting ethnic culture is to "replicate [his] success." He wanted to give his son the cultural tools he grew up with so that he could also stay in the upper-middle class, if not higher. Letting children pursue their interests, which, in his view, was often what White American parents do, was not necessarily conducive to success. Emphasizing the Taiwanese work ethic, on the other hand, would ensure success.

Routine is the best word that captures Adrian's day. Ethan and Adrian make weekly trips to a public library to pick out new books. Every morning, before heading out for school, Adrian spends at least half an hour reading those books. Then, they eat breakfast together. Their early morning routines mean that they rarely stayed up late. Adrian's bedtime was nine sharp. After school, he worked on math worksheets, and he got special treats of his choosing for completing each workbook. Consistency was key: read every day, math problem sets every day. Small habits, accrued over time, will pay huge dividends.

Language was also at the core of Adrian's exposure to Taiwanese culture. Ethan prided himself in the fact that he speaks Mandarin rather fluently. Moreover, it brought him and his wife together; they met in a Mandarin class back in college. So when Ethan suggested that they teach Mandarin to Adrian, she was immediately on board. As a team, they ensured that Adrian's first language was Mandarin. Adrian spoke more Mandarin than English until he went to preschool. Once Adrian started school, it was just a matter of time before he prefers speaking English over Mandarin. Ethan had fully anticipated this transition, but he was still startled by the sudden shift. It was time to sign Adrian up for Mandarin lessons.

Ethan prioritized language because he "wants Adrian to be comfortable around Taiwanese and Chinese people." Mandarin is his parents' preferred language, so he wants Adrian to be able to communicate with them comfortably. However, he wants Adrian to be able to do more than

communicate with his grandparents. He invests in Mandarin classes because “knowing the language and culture is a huge asset. It opens up so many opportunities. You are not just limited to the States. You can live in Taiwan. You can live in China or Singapore. I feel like my role as a parent is to give him as many opportunities as possible.” Given how Chinese-speaking countries’ economies and political powers have grown in recent decades, familiarity with the language would give Adrian a leg up in navigating the globalized economy.

In their extensive study on children of immigrants in New York City, Kasinitz and his colleagues (2009) found that young adults develop a cultural hybrid by picking and choosing from mainstream culture and ethnic culture. Their skillfulness in developing multicultural toolkits was helpful as they came of age in a turbulent economy where previous rules seemingly no longer apply. Similarly, Ethan mixed and matched Taiwanese and mainstream parenting cultures. In his view, “American parents encourage kids to be inquisitive.” They emphasize critical thinking. So he is mindful of the way he communicates with Adrian. He tries to avoid being too didactic. Instead, he wants to have discussions with Adrian, where they share their opinions and learn how to listen.

Another distinctly American culture was team sports. Ethan wanted Adrian not to be another Asian kid who plays violin, so he signed Adrian up for soccer. The merits of team sports drew Ethan’s interest; they increase your physical strength and teach you how to work as a team. Through soccer, he hopes that Adrian will learn how to communicate and build relationships with his teammates.

Ethan coordinated when and how much he exposed Adrian to two cultures. As mentioned earlier, Ethan mainly spoke Mandarin to Adrian until he reached school age, so he would pick up the language naturally. Then, in the weeks leading up to an admissions exam for a specialized high school, Adrian stopped attending Mandarin classes to fully immerse himself in the English

language. He returned to classes immediately after the exam was out of the way. Ethan hopes his careful coordination efforts will help Adrian get top marks on AP or SAT Subject Tests in Mandarin.

Asian parents like Ethan practiced ethnic-oriented parenting, actively incorporating ethnic cultural norms and philosophies in their children's extracurricular activities. They have attributed their successes to ethnic culture's emphasis on education, and they hoped it would help maintain their family's class status for the next generation. Moreover, particularly for those of East Asian origin, changes in the stature of East Asian countries gave them additional motivation to transmit ethnic culture. Familiarity with ethnic culture and language would expand their children's horizons as they navigate the global economy. They were an investment for their children's success and the family's future.

Lisa: Mainstream-Oriented Parenting

"How do they look?" Lisa, a Vietnamese American woman, pulled out an iPhone from her pocket to show me pictures of her kids. The first picture has two kids, a fifteen-year-old boy, and a twelve-year-old girl, smiling at a ski resort with pale red cheeks from the wind. "I think my little one looks more Asian than White. See? Her eyes look super Asian. A flat nose, too. Actually, neither of them has high noses." In the following picture, the two are at a beach in California. "My son, his skin gets pretty tanned during summer months. People usually think that he is Hispanic."

Although her children look more Asian than White, she thinks they are "not very conscious of their Asianness." She added that she "hasn't done a good job imbuing them with Vietnamese culture." They do not speak Vietnamese. They do not observe Vietnamese holidays except for

New Year's Day when they visit Lisa's mom. The kids get red envelopes with money in them, and that is about it.

At the outset of the interview, she explained that she is just not familiar enough with Vietnamese culture to transmit them to her children. However, as the interview went on, it became more evident that she chose not to expose their children to ethnic culture because she viewed it to have little benefit to their success.

Lisa had the means to expose her children to Vietnamese cultural heritage. Nevertheless, she did not make an intentional effort to help children connect with it. Instead, she packed her children's schedules with academic and extracurricular activities such as debates, robotics, and swimming. She was a firm believer in what Lareau (2002) calls "concerted cultivation," wherein parents "attempt to foster children's talents through organized leisure activities and extensive reasoning."

Her understanding of Vietnamese culture is similar to Ethan's idea of Taiwanese culture: hard work and discipline. She grew up with "very much your stereotypical Asian immigrant parents" who were very strict: no sleepovers, no makeup, and of course, no dating. Every day, they reminded her of the importance of education, with its sole purpose being getting a well-paying job. Being the good daughter that she is, she chose a career in accounting. She explained:

When I think about a career, I think about making money to support myself. My parents never asked me what I love to do. I don't think I ever gave that a particular thought, either. There was just this kind of idea in my head that I just had to make money to support myself, whatever that ended up being.

Then, she met Jake, her White husband, who had a vastly different view on education and career. Education was a means to an end for Lisa, while it was an end in itself for Jake. Jake was exposed to numerous educational opportunities at a young age. His parents encouraged him to

“explore” and “dream big.” In a way, Jake is an embodiment of Laureau’s concerted cultivation.

It took a while for Lisa to wrap her head around their difference. She elaborated:

He is always very encouraging to the kids. He’d be like, why couldn’t you go to the moon? Why couldn’t you be the person to solve climate change? It’s as if he has no sense of limit. Whereas for me, those realms just never came into my head. There was never this idea that you could achieve whatever, anything. He is saying to the kids, ‘look what so and so has done. If they could do it, why can’t you?’ For me, education and a job are related to something very functional. But to him, it’s like: so how will I leave my mark on the earth? Where’s my place in history?

When asked where she thinks their difference stems from, Lisa responded:

Jake’s family has been in the States for generations. He comes from a different echelon than first-generation immigrant families like my parents. Sure, they came from a prominent family back in Vietnam, but here, they had no influence, no wherewithal. You’ve got nothing. You’ve got no support system. And they did whatever they could to make up for that. They tried to push me into a society they couldn’t enter.

Looking back at her childhood, Lisa agrees that she benefited from the Vietnamese culture’s emphasis on strict disciplining. Looking forward, however, she chose to move away from these cultural practices she grew up with. Her upper-middle-class status affords her that luxury. Her kids do not have to be “yet another Asian kid who gets drilled with school and spits out great test scores.”

In fact, she thinks imbuing her children with Vietnamese culture may hurt them in the long run. Yes, it might help kids go to a good college, but it may hold them back once they enter the corporate world. She explained:

I’m not particularly shy or not very verbal, but at the same time, I feel certain aspects of how I was raised limits my level of assertion in the workplace. I got this kind of natural deference to people older than me, whereas my colleagues can be very assertive.

Notwithstanding that I don't necessarily have what one might see as a kind of traditional quiet personality, I find myself not pushing myself outside the traditional Asian boundaries given to me as a kid. And seeing where my colleagues who started their careers around the same time as I did [are now], I think there is a steep cost for not coming out of those bounds.

The ability to hold your tongue can be rewarded in some places, but not in the corporate world that Lisa has been in for the past two decades. It is the Jakes who exude ambition and speak up that go long and far in that world. The "natural deference" that Lisa described is not unique to those of Vietnamese origin. It is a challenge common among Asian Americans in the professional world (Chin 2020). She has seen enough cases during her career to conclude that absorbing ethnic culture does not help Asians blend into the upper echelons of society. Mainstream-oriented parenting was the way to go.

What became evident was that for both ethnic-oriented and mainstream-oriented parents, it was the transmission of class privilege, not an ethnic culture that dictated how they allocated time and resources to their children. Ethan was interested in ethnic culture because he viewed that it aligns with the maintenance of class status while Lisa did not. Both devoted much of their time and money to children's education, similar to aspirational class parents described by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett (2018). Their emphasis on education sometimes became a source of conflict with their White spouses. "I think that my husband sometimes forgets that Adrian is just a kid," Vicky, Ethan's wife would tell me.

Despite their successes, the parents were anxious about the prospects of their children. They memorized their children's calendars, which were scheduled at a microscopic level. They had little time to make ethnic cultural connections. Perhaps that is just modern-day parenting. But it also tells us that gaining success and maintaining it are two different things.

Hannah: diversity-oriented parenting

The immigration literature frequently asks whether maintaining ethnic culture is conducive to upward mobility among immigrants and their children. Most Asian parents in my study also asked that question to their children. However, a small group of parents viewed ethnic culture in a different light. They rejected the idea that the primary value of ethnic culture is its ability to promote socioeconomic success. Instead, they viewed that transmission of ethnicity is critical to help their child value diversity and seek inclusion of ethnic minorities in mainstream society.

Casey, a Korean American woman, found it important to transmit Korean culture to her children so that they will “root for the underdogs.” Of course, she wanted her children to do well in school, just like any other parent would. However, that was not what motivated Casey to transmit Korean culture. Actually, she was critical of how Korean parents overemphasize their children’s education.

She was not interested in utilizing Korean culture to get ahead of others. Rather, it has informed how she builds a relationship with other people, particularly those who have been traditionally underserved in the U.S. “I really appreciate the way we (Koreans) respect our elders,” said Casey. It is the minute details in their interactions that set Koreans apart from others. For example, “when somebody walks through the door, you stand and say hello. You don’t say hi from the couch. You go to the door and greet the person. When the guest is leaving, you walk the person out to their car.” She hopes that her children internalize these little gestures of respect in their daily interactions with people, particularly with non-White people, because “people of color are not seen as full human in this country.” The dignities that are automatically granted to White people are not extended to non-White people. For much of her life, she has fought to be seen. Her parents, on the contrary, do not put up a fight. “They get mistreated all the time, and they can’t even complain

about it. They just accept it because they are foreigners.” She wants her children to know that everyone should be treated with respect, so she gives mini-lessons on Korean etiquette to her children. They give a deep bow to their grandparents and use both hands when giving or receiving things from others.

Hannah’s oldest daughter, Leah, has developed a particularly deep bond with her grandmother. At the dinner table, she always makes sure that her grandma is served first and waits for her to take the first bite. When the family goes out for a walk, she reminds people to go slower so that grandma who has bad knees could keep pace. Her respect for her grandmother has become second nature. Leah has what Lisa introduced earlier referred to as “natural deference” to her elders. Lisa stepped away from Vietnamese culture because she thought this natural deference would become a hindrance for her children as they grow older. Casey, on the other hand, wanted to instill in her children a sense of care for other people as she viewed ethnic culture, not as an individual resource but as something that benefits her community.

Her community was not limited to other Koreans. Instead, it entailed other underserved groups. She made a conscious effort for her children to have a diverse group of friends whom she could develop a sense of solidarity with. That was tough when they were in a mostly White Long Island neighborhood. So, they moved to Queens, which is known as the world’s borough. The children are in the public school system, and she is active in the PTA, hoping that her participation benefits not just her children but other students many of whom are low-income immigrants. Leah’s school has a lot of children of Muslim immigrants, and whenever they have playdates, she dishes out vegetarian Korean food. Sharing food is another essential Korean culture that she wants her children to absorb. Korean people take “sharing is caring” very seriously.

Diversity-oriented parents distanced themselves from the Asian success frame and the role of ethnic culture in its maintenance. That did not mean that they did not care about education. Hannah's children have busy schedules, filled with extracurricular activities. She and her husband's dual income allows them to send the kids to various afterschool classes. What sets diversity-oriented parents apart from other Asian parents is that they were less interested in maximizing their class privilege. They invested in schools and communities that would not give them the highest return but could impact the lives of many other, often less privileged families. They were proud of their ethnic culture's communitarian ideology.

Hannah appreciates how the tools from Korean culture have helped make her community more diverse. However, she had not always had a positive view of Korean culture. She rather had a tortuous journey of reconciliation with her Koreanness. For most of her adolescence and early adulthood, she had wanted to get out of the Korean community. She felt that the community had a clear expectation of what she should become. But her truer self was far from what was expected of a "good Korean girl." Her parents thought she should follow her dad's path and become a doctor. She "rebelled" and instead immersed herself in English literature. Feeling the futility of seeking acceptance from other Korean immigrants, she avoided interacting with Korean people as much as possible. The distance gave her the breathing room that she has craved for so long. She also finally felt accepted by a group of Filipino and Latino friends. Sometimes, it felt good not to have to think about Koreanness.

Something in her changed when she became a parent. "I was forced to reckon with the fact that me and my kids will always be Korean." Much to her surprise, she found a part of her wanting her children to know and feel that they are Korean. It stung to think that they might solely identify as White and feel distant about their Korean heritage. "I want them to be rooted in both races so

that they know that they are Korean and White. I want them to identify with both and to feel confident in both because they have the best of both cultures,” said Casey.

Hannah went on a mission to identify the best aspects of Korean culture. Initially, she felt like there was not much goodness there. “Oh god, I have so much work to do,” she realized.

“Ever since I had my kids, I have become more reflective about who I am and confronted my prejudices against certain groups. Especially with Koreans and Whites. I have worked on my prejudices and continue to try to not let them overflow. I’m afraid because the biases have become such a natural part of me, it’s going to overflow, and my kids will pick up on it. So, my husband and I, talk a lot about how to raise them to love all races, and at the same time, be proud of their heritages.”

Reconnecting with Korean culture was painful at times. It brought out difficult memories: the ways her parents hit her to “discipline” her and how they justified it as “sarang ae mae,” a rod of love. The dirty looks on people’s faces when they saw how she was dressed. How she became a disappointment for not being euisa (doctor), byunhosa (lawyer), or hwegyesa (accountant)—the only seemingly respectable occupations by Korean standards. These recollections reminded her that as much as she wants to transmit Korean culture to her children, she needs to protect them from certain aspects of the culture. So she made a hard pass when her parents offered to take the kids to a Korean Sunday school run by an immigrant church. Her White husband was puzzled why they were forgoing such a great low-cost opportunity for the kids to learn Korean and culture. There is no doubt about learning another language, but she was worried that the kids might pick up other things—hyper-competitiveness, overt racism, and sexism. She carefully curated Korean culture for her children without directly engaging with the Korean immigrant community, which has a robust presence in Queens. She wanted as much control in curating what goes into the Korean culture toolkit.

White Parents: Becoming an Affiliative Ethnic

Asian participants in this study served as a gateway to ethnic culture for their White spouses. Some White participants have studied Mandarin or watched Korean dramas before they met their spouses, but most had little prior exposure to Asian ethnic culture. Introductions to ethnic culture often began with food. James said, “believe it or not, I had my first sushi on a date with my wife. I definitely made a fool out of myself with my miserable chopstick skills, but sushi is one of my favorite foods now. I love all sorts of Japanese food.” Lauren, a White woman, knows where to get the best regional Chinese cuisines—Shanghainese, Sichuan, Hunan, and many more—in Flushing. White spouses enjoyed the “uniqueness” of ethnic culture. “White culture, if such a thing exists, is boring. To be honest, we don’t really have culture,” Cody, a White man, said humorously.

When it came to exposing their children to ethnic culture, White parents typically followed the lead of their Asian spouses. Vicky, who was married to Ethan, the Taiwanese man introduced earlier, shared the ethnic-oriented view on parenting. She tried to keep up with her Mandarin so that she could continue to speak Mandarin with her son, Adrian. Like Ethan, she befriended Asian American women from church to get information about various Chinese educational resources. She has Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival on her calendar so that she could prepare for family celebrations in advance. In preparation for this past Mid-Autumn festival, she bought mooncake molds from Amazon and found a recipe video on YouTube. Vicky’s familiarity with Taiwanese culture and language helped create a bicultural environment for Adrian.

Cultural fluency, however, was not a prerequisite for White parents to engage in ethnic-oriented parenting. Lauren, a White woman married to a Chinese man, barely spoke any Mandarin, but she nonetheless was determined to raise her children as bilinguals. To that end, she took advantage of the robust Chinese community in New York. When her children were little, she took

them to playgrounds in predominantly Chinese neighborhoods of Queens. It was at these playgrounds that she learned about Mandarin-speaking daycare centers. The children naturally picked up Mandarin from daycares although at home they spoke mainly English. During summer breaks, she took them to China so that they could be fully immersed in the Chinese language and culture. She often coordinated trips on her own, since her husband was unable to take extended time off. Her home was decorated with stunning Chinese paintings and artifacts she brought back from these trips.

Lauren and Vicky highlight how White parents can be actively involved in introducing Asian ethnic culture to their children. White parents developed ethnic affiliations by consuming, participating in, and teaching ethnic cultural practices. For some couples, White parents seemed to be more at ease with navigating ethnic immigrant communities than their Asian partners who have had negative experiences with immigrant gatekeepers (“how come you don’t speak Chinese?”) Megan took the lead in finding the right tutor for her daughter: “Chinese tutoring is not cheap, you know. Especially when you’re looking for someone with the right credentials and the right accent. It took us a while to find the right tutor for her, but it was worth going through the trouble. She’s much more comfortable practicing Chinese with her tutor and a lot more interested in really learning the language.”

Why did White parents care about teaching Asian culture and language to their children? Like most Asian parents, they were hoping that fluency in an Asian language and culture would translate into better educational and career opportunities. Those who had Chinese or Korean partners were particularly more enthusiastic about cultural transmission than those who were married to other ethnic partners. Vicky was quite impressed by how Ethan, her husband, and other Asian moms dedicated themselves to education. “They seem to have their kids’ educational plans

fully mapped out in the most detailed way,” she marveled. They agreed with their Asian spouses that ethnic culture is a worthy investment for children’s education.

A smaller group of White parents had a diversity-oriented approach wherein they viewed transmitting ethnic culture as “doing the right thing.” They viewed that valuing and celebrating ethnic culture is essential to rectify the historical exclusion of Asian Americans in the American imaginary. Kimberly, a White woman, explained:

I’m descended from American slave owners on my father’s side, so I think a lot about the damage that was done and how that affected people for generations. There’s the generational wealth that comes from it. There’s generational poverty. And there’s generational trauma. So, I think a lot about what it means to be honest, what it means to be responsible as a White person. I ask about how I live as a person in a way that is restoring some degree of that damage. [...] I realized in our education system, we spend a lot of time studying American history, but we gloss over the histories of the indigenous and immigrant people. It perpetuates the idea that people of color didn’t contribute anything. So as a parent, I decided that I need to read more widely and make sure that my children know the contributions of Asian Americans.

Kimberly believed that some of the privileges that she had inherited had been unjustly accumulated. She did not stop at acknowledging the past and educating her children. “I think a lot about what am I doing to transfer, share those resources,” she explained. “I don’t want to spend all of our time and energy making sure that our kids get into elite colleges. Sure, I want them to do well in school and all of that. But my husband and I, are committed to public school. We are quite involved to make sure that public education provides opportunities for all children to do well.” Ethnic culture mattered not because of its economic potential, but because it reminds her family where they came from and where they are headed.

As one may have noticed, White mothers spent much more time incorporating ethnic culture into their parenting practices. Most White fathers were glad that their children were growing up in a bicultural environment, but they largely left it up to their Asian spouses to construct that environment. Still, White mothers often expressed feeling a “sense of guilt.” They felt like they were not doing enough work to ensure their children become fluent bilinguals. They wanted their spouses and parents-in-law to know that they respect Asian ethnic culture and are making efforts to learn and teach them to their children. As elaborated in Chapter 4, they felt greater pressure to absorb ethnic culture to be accepted as a part of their new families than their male counterparts.

At times, White mothers felt overwhelmed navigating these uncharted territories. Anne, who is married to a Korean man, wholeheartedly agreed with her husband that it would be best if their daughter is exposed to as much Korean as possible. Still, when Joonhyung suggested that they take Korean lessons as a family, she “got really scared.” She knew she had a lot of catching up to do with learning Korean culture. Thinking of all the things that she should be doing, she felt lost. At the same time, there were family traditions and culture that she wanted to pass down to her daughter, too. So, she sought out a meet-up group for mixed families to learn how others raise their children in racially conscious and culturally respectful ways.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how mixed families made sense of and transmitted ethnic culture to their children. For most parents, the key factor was not necessarily their familiarity with ethnic culture, but rather their view on the role of ethnic culture on socioeconomic success. Parents like Ethan portrayed above placed significant emphasis on ethnic language and culture for their

children and mixed and matched both ethnic and mainstream middle-class parenting strategies to maximize their children's potential for success. On the other hand, parents like Lisa primarily adopted an American middle-class parenting style and minimized ethnic elements as they viewed being ethnically distinct could be a deterrent to their children's success in a predominantly-White environment.

The last group of parents, as exemplified in Hannah's case, was distinct from the two aforementioned groups as they dissociated the value of ethnicity from socioeconomic attainment. They were critical of their ethnic group's overemphasis on "success at all costs." Instead, they focused on the communitarian aspect of various ethnic cultures and re-envisioned them to identify and build solidarity with other marginalized communities.

Parenting requires teamwork, and White parents, particularly mothers, played active roles in incorporating ethnic culture into their children's social environment. They navigated ethnic playgrounds, daycares, after-school programs, and churches in search of opportunities for their children. In doing so, they not only developed affiliative ethnic identities but also helped replenish ethnic culture within families.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

“So many mixed kids.”

This was one of the catchphrases that I heard numerous times during data collection. Many parents were surprised to find out about other mixed-race classmates in their children’s schools. They would go on to describe the mixedness of each kid, with a sense of marvel as well as relief. Seeing all these children of different mixed backgrounds assuaged their worries about how their children would adjust to school. Richard, a White father with two children in elementary school described:

Where we live now, there are so many mixed-race kids. It seems like everyone’s half-White and half-something else. Ok, I’m exaggerating a little, but I think we’re moving in that direction. Everybody’s doing it. Everybody’s making mixed-race babies instead of war.

Jinny, a Korean woman who also has children said:

I feel like the world will become where everyone’s gonna end up looking like Latinos. Like once you start mixing all the races, everyone ends up looking kind of Latinos.

Richard and Jinny were not the only people who viewed mixed families as a sign that race is becoming less and less salient in America. Popular media definitely thinks so: putting mixed families on ad campaigns has become one of the go-to strategies for companies to virtue signal that they care about racial diversity. And they have a point. Anti-miscegenation laws that criminalize intimate relationships between people of different racial backgrounds have a long history in the U.S. People were imprisoned, denied citizenship, and even killed for being in mixed relationships. But could we conclude that mixed-race relationships as the panacea for racism?

Not quite, sociologists would say. Research suggests that what mixed marriages signal about race is quite complicated. Numerous studies show that social distance between racial groups has decreased over the years. But racial stereotypes continue to persist, and these stereotypes are sometimes what drive people to seek out mixed relationships. Plus, even when we assume that people are thinking less about race when deciding whom to marry, we know very little about how race works in these relationships. Family is often the most intimate and important social relationship to people, and therefore, it is critical to understand how race shapes the ways individuals form and sustain these relationships.

This study builds on the existing body of research on mixed families by studying how White and second-generation Asian American couples negotiate race, ethnicity, and gender as they become a family. Broadly speaking, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion of “what it means to be in Asian-White mixed families, and what do these experiences tell us about race and assimilation?” in the following ways. First, it uncovers socioemotional costs of assimilation by examining the early social relationships of Asian Americans and how they led to racial color blindness. Second, by focusing on the ways mixed couples navigate family relationships, this study finds that intersectionality is a central framework for understanding mixed family experiences. Lastly, this study extends the discussion on Asian American ethnicity and assimilation by showing how mixed families make sense of ethnic culture in relation to their class interests.

Socioemotional Costs of Assimilation

This study examined Asian Americans’ decision to marry White Americans through a life course perspective. It confirms previous findings that earlier social relationships matter. Who we

come into contact with, and who we become friends with during adolescence affect how we form close romantic relationships later in life.

Contrary to the stereotype that “they only hang out with Asians,” Asians are much more likely to have friends outside their racial groups than Whites (Kao et al. 2019). This is partly due to their social environment. They tend to attend schools that have large non-Asian populations whereas Whites tend to go to predominantly White schools. Past studies found that social relationships during adolescence matter. People who had interracial relationships when they were younger are more likely to have mixed-race relationships as adults (King and Bratter 2007; Shiao 2018).

These studies highlight the importance of studying mixed relationships through a life course approach. Who we come into contact with, and who we become friends with in the early stages of our lives affect the ways we form close relationships later in life. Asian participants in this study shared these patterns. Most went to predominantly White schools and had White friends. For many of them, it was “normal” to have mostly White friends and date White men and women.

This study extends the literature by revealing the inner workings of making White friends. Making White friends was a part of the assimilation experience. Participants in this study understood assimilation in two regards: one was to excel in school, and two was to adopt Whiteness as much as they could—making white friends, acting, and sounding like their White friends.

The closer they got to Whiteness, the further they distanced themselves from Asianness. They strived not to be “another stereotypical Asian.” To justify their distancing, they became critical of their Asian peers. They were “hypercompetitive, clannish, and one-dimensional.” These views later evolved into racial colorblindness. Meanwhile, those who could/did not make White

friends became more racially conscious. They paid attention to not just interpersonal racism but also structural racism.

Whether they have managed to get into White cliques or not, their assimilation experiences had a long-lasting impact on how they think about who is romantically desirable. They have internalized that Whites are the most desirable group to the point that in many cases, Asians were categorically excluded as potential partners. These findings show that Asian Americans' racialized romantic desires found in numerous studies are closely connected to the ways they understood assimilation.

Intersecting Inequalities

One of the most distinct characteristics of Asian-White mixed relationships is its race-gender imbalance: Asian female-White male couples largely outnumber Asian male-White female couples. Thus, existing studies have focused on explaining why Asian women are much more likely to marry Whites than Asian men. Meanwhile, we know relatively little about what this race-gender imbalance means to the everyday experiences of mixed families. This study, by focusing on the lived experiences of Asian-White families, shows that race and gender simultaneously shape the ways families make everyday decisions.

Specifically, this study examined two areas: in-law relationships and naming. Both areas highlight the need for an intersectional feminist approach to identify nuanced ways family dynamics play out. Prioritizing race over gender or vice versa would lend a partial picture of how mixed family experiences are influenced by greater social forces.

For example, this study found that the allocation of emotional work was dependent on one's race and gender. Asian partners bared greater emotional stress such as microaggressions in

their interactions with White in-laws. However, the emotion work they put into managing relationships with the in-laws also differed by gender. Asian women, who assumed the primary role as family kin keepers performed significantly more emotion work to improve their relationships with their in-laws. Meanwhile, Asian men were able to solicit help from their White female spouses. Disproportionate allocation of emotion work by race and gender among mixed families debunks the view that mixed-race couples share equal power in their relationships.

While gender is often the primary lens to understanding how women decide to change their surnames upon marriage, this study shows that it is insufficient within mixed family contexts. In this study, Asian women were more likely to adopt their White husbands' surnames than White women. Does this mean that White women are in more egalitarian relationships than Asian women? Yes, perhaps. Some Asian women said their White husbands pressed it upon them. However, for some, race was also a primary factor. Spousal name change allowed them to rid of a name that felt like a racial stigma. White women's decision to keep their surnames was also racially motivated: they did not want to be mistaken as Asians.

This study also found that, again, race and gender jointly affect the ways mixed couples named their children. Most children with White fathers were given paternal surnames whereas a good number of children with Asian fathers had hyphenated surnames. Hyphenation allowed children with Asian fathers to indicate that they are not solely Asian, but mixed. In other words, it made their names sound less Asian. Asian mothers, whose children had White-sounding surnames, regretted the erasure of their ethnic heritage, but at the same time, they understood that surnames that are not ethnically distinct are in the best interest of their children.

These findings collectively suggest that as families become more racially diverse, scholars need to pay careful attention to the ways intersecting identities inform the relationship dynamics within mixed families.

Beyond Ethnic Identity

What would happen to Asian ethnicity as more and more Asian Americans intermarry? Assimilation theory suggests that intermarriage would result in the loss of non-White spouses' ethnic distinctiveness. However, increased transnational ties and a continued flow of Asian immigrants to the U.S. may provide greater cultural opportunities that mixed families can take advantage of (Min 1998). This was certainly the case for this study's participants: for most families, ethnic culture was very much woven into the fabric of everyday lives. There were numerous virtual and in-person cultural opportunities, and White parents who did not speak Asian languages still managed to find the right activities for their children. The resources were there if they wanted to make use of them. But some families did not seek them out.

Why did some parents actively incorporate ethnic culture in their parenting while others did not? While they had different attitudes toward ethnic transmission, I found that for both groups, their number one priority was making sure that their children were on the right path to socioeconomic success. How they allocated their time and resources was closely tied to the protection of their class interests. Thus, the ethnic cultural transmission was scrutinized similarly. Parents asked how Mandarin tutoring and Japanese weekend schools would aid their children to succeed in this hypercompetitive educational context. Parents invested in Mandarin lessons as they viewed fluency in Mandarin as an important asset in today's globalized economy. On the other

hand, ethnic culture had a minimal role for parents who viewed Anglo conformity as the key to success.

These findings point out that ethnic identity is just one of many identities of Asian Americans. Also, this study suggests that to better understand how and why ethnicities matter across one's lifetime, it is necessary to locate them in greater social contexts. Although participants in this study were highly educated and economically successful, they expressed class anxiety. They acknowledged that their children are privileged and were worried sometimes that they would be spoiled. Still, they felt that they had to do whatever they can to ensure their children's success. Therefore, their relationship with ethnic culture became mainly utilitarian.

However, there was a small group of parents who sought to reject such a view. These parents approached ethnic culture from a diversity-oriented, communitarian perspective. They made room in their children's schedule to learn ethnic culture and history not because it would serve as a plus for college admissions but because they hope their children would grow up to become someone who engages in community actions. They believed in teaching how to identify structural inequalities and provide tools for changing them rather than teaching them how to survive on an unequal playing field.

Limitations and Next Steps

This study offered a close look into a small segment of the lived experiences of Asian-White mixed families and found several additional questions that future research should address.

First, most of the Asian participants in this study were of East Asian origin—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese. While this study did not find notable ethnic differences between these groups, it is yet to be explored in what ways the mixed family experiences would be similar

or different for South Asian and Southeast Asians. We need more research that accounts for the diversity of Asian Americans and how that may lead to different meanings of mixed families.

Second, the study participants had a homogeneous class background and most of them resided in large metropolitan areas that they described as “bubbles.” They noted that their experiences would have been significantly different if they had lived outside these urban areas. Therefore, it would be useful for future studies to look into mixed family experiences in various social environments. Comparative studies may reveal new racial fault lines.

Third, this study showed that the race and gender combinations of the couples affect their power dynamics. While this study identified possible mechanisms of how race and gender intersect in family relationships, to what extent such dynamics are representative of Asian-White mixed families remains unanswered. Quantitative analyses of mixed couples’ division of labor and relationship satisfaction can help us confirm whether such patterns are common among mixed families.

Lastly, this study primarily focused on Asian and White partners in mixed families. While the parents played a primary role in shaping their children’s understanding of race and ethnicity, it was also clear that they were learning from their children. In this moment of heightened anti-Asian sentiment, the role of the family in racial sense-making is particularly more important for the well-being of mixed families. Future studies should utilize ethnographic methods to understand the processes in which parents and children collaboratively construct and make sense of race.

Concluding Remarks

So what did you find in your research?

For a while, this question filled me with dread. Sure, I learned quite a lot about mixed families. But I did not know how to boil them down into just a few sentences. It felt like I would essentialize mixed family experiences. Participants in this study shared similar backgrounds. They were all either Asian or White, highly educated, and economically stable city people. Still, there were diverse views and experiences that I could not fully capture. I met participants that were very racially conscious and engaged in racial justice activism. I also spoke to participants who told me that they do not see race at all. At times, I was thoroughly puzzled by the interviewees. During one interview, a White man told me how he is a victim of racism from his “super racist” Chinese mother-in-law. In that same interview, he also shared with me how he has begun to see the ways White people gloss over his Chinese spouse as if they never notice her. He sees how she has to speak up more to get her voice heard. Oftentimes, couples would tell me two versions of the same story.

But amidst these complexities and contradictions, there was a clear throughline: mixed family experiences reflect broader society and all of its inequalities. Race has reached even the smallest nooks and crannies of mixed-family lives. Whether couples acknowledge it or not, race informed how couples made small and big decisions. It intersected with other social forces such as gender and class. Just because two people are together, that does not mean that they share equal power.

I found that mixed families are important sites to observe intersectional inequalities in action at a micro level. But they also show us how people can develop racial consciousness, confront racial prejudice, and pass down ethnic heritage. For a full picture of how race is reproduced and challenged, we need to focus on the family.

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