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## Not a Monolith: Understanding of Racism and Racialization among Korean, Pacific Islander, South Asian, and Vietnamese Women

**Monica M. De La Cruz**<sup>1</sup>,

University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

**Shaniece Criss,**

Furman University, Greenville, SC, USA

**Melanie Kim,**

Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

**Nhung Thai**

University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

**Katrina Makres,**

**Junaid S. Merchant,**

**Thu T. Nguyen**

University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

### Abstract

The people within the Asian and Pacific Islander racial/ethnic category used in the United States are often misrepresented as a monolithic group when, in reality, the group includes people from over 48 different countries with diverse cultures, languages, and customs. Asian and Pacific Islander people experience racism and racialization in nuanced ways that are influenced by immigrant generations, histories of colonization, and origin countries' relationship with the US. This study examines the racialized experiences of Asian and Pacific Islander women in the United States. Focus groups were held with 21 Korean, Pacific Islander, South Asian, and Vietnamese women in the United States to explore their experiences of racism and racialization. Data were analyzed using an iterative coding and theme-generation process. Findings indicate that among these groups, there is a heightened awareness of racism both toward their own racial/ethnic group as well as toward other minoritized populations, a recognition of the importance of solidarity among people of color to combat racism and the difficulties in sustaining solidarity, and nuanced ways in which different Asian and Pacific Islander people navigate their own racialization.

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<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author: A Doctoral Candidate in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, USA. monicadelacruz@berkeley.edu.

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## Keywords

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Approximately 20.6 million people in the United States identify as Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, equaling about 6.2% of the nation's population (US Census Bureau, 2022). Additionally, Asians are the fastest-growing racial-ethnic group in the United States (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander people have historically been categorized together despite being a diverse group. The Asian Pacific Islander (API) category was created in 1977 for use in federal administration data, including in the US census (Humes & Hogan, 2009). Though there are people from over 48 different and diverse ethnic groups included in API, the category has worked to portray the diverse ethnicities within the category as a monolith, incorrectly assuming similar cultures and experiences.

One way in which groups within the API category differ is how they understand, experience, and respond to racialization and racism in the United States, both toward their own ethnic group as well as toward other ethnic groups. Given the diversity within the API category, it is not surprising that distinct Asian and Pacific Islander groups experience racialization and racism differently.

## Immigration and Racialization

Asian and Pacific Islander immigration to the United States has spanned centuries (Gregory, 2015). In 2021, 31% of immigrants in the United States were from Asian countries. There are differences in immigrant "generations," with "first-generation" immigrants being those who are foreign-born and have immigrated to the US and "second-generation" immigrants being those who are US-born with at least one foreign-born parent (Trevelyan et al., 2016). There are distinct differences between first- and second-generation immigrants in how they experience racialization and define their ethnic identity.

First-generation immigrants, especially from Asian-origin countries, often come from ethnically homogeneous environments (Alesina et al., 2002). Upon arriving in the United States, first-generation immigrants often go through a process of racialization in which they discover their racial and ethnic identity relative to the socially constructed racial/ethnic categorization schema in the United States (Fuligni et al., 2005; E. Kim et al., 2014; Weng & Choi, 2021). For example, the pan-ethnic term "Asian-American" is unique to the United States in that many first-generation immigrants from Asian origin countries do not identify as "Asian" but prefer to self-identify in terms of their national origin (Fuligni et al., 2005; Iwamoto & Liu, 2010; Weng & Choi, 2021). Second-generation immigrants, or children of first-generation immigrants who were born in the US, may experience racialization and identity formation differently, having been born and raised in the United States. Zhou and Lee (2007) interviewed both 1.5-generation Asian immigrants, or people who were born in another country but immigrated to the US when they were children, as well as second-generation Asian immigrants and found that they sometimes identified solely as "American" since they were raised in the United States and did not identify with any other country.

## Racialization of Asian Americans

Political scientist Claire Jean Kim developed the Theory of Racial Triangulation to explain how Asians are racialized in the United States and move the discourse of racism beyond Black and white. Kim contends that racialization not only has implications on how a group is viewed within the racial hierarchy but also impacts the privileges and opportunities afforded that group within dominant hegemony (C. J. Kim, 1999). Kim asserts that as viewed by the dominant group (white people), Asians have been racialized in America relative to the racialization of Black people and are therefore positioned between white and Black people (C. J. Kim, 1999). The racialization of Asian people is defined by their perceived relation and position as compared to white and Black people, and without which, their racialization would be different. Kim asserts that Asians are triangulated between Black and white on two linked dimensions: relative valorization (superior/inferior) and civic ostracism (insider/outsider). From the perspective of the dominant group, or white people, relative valorization refers to the valorization of Asian people as compared to Black people, and civic ostracism refers to the construction of Asians as foreign and unassimilable as compared to Black people (C. J. Kim, 1999). Using this model, white supremacy employs triangulation of Asian people and, in the process, inserts a wedge between people of color in “competition.” While this theory has merits in providing a general understanding of racial hierarchy in the United States driven by white supremacy, Claire Jean Kim herself has recently described the shortcomings of this theory. Racial triangulation is a simplistic view of an incredibly nuanced process of racialization that is reflective of the diversity within those who are labeled as “Asian” (C. J. Kim, 2022).

The racialization of Asians also varies not only by ethnicity but by skin tone. Colorism, or “skin color stratification,” is the use of skin color to distinguish between same-race individuals and is common in many Asian cultures, where darker-skinned Asians are discriminated against more than those with lighter skin (Hunter, 2007; Jones, 2013). For example, South Asians can be racially ambiguous given the wide variety in their skin tones, with lighter-skinned people racialized as closer to white and darker-skinned people racialized as closer to Black (Harpalani, 2015).

## The Model Minority

The “model minority” builds upon the theory of racial triangulation. Most of the literature on this topic references the “model-minority myth” as a powerful tool to reproduce racial hierarchies and create division between people of color (Huang, 2021; J. Y. Kim, 1999; Yellow Horse et al., 2021). The model minority myth plays a key role in the downplaying of racism against Asian people (Sue et al., 2016). The model minority myth and its portrayal of all Asians as a successful monolith provides reason to ignore Asian American protests about discrimination and racial inequalities and often renders them invisible in discussions of race (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Sue et al., 2016; Yu, 2006). To a greater extent, the model minority myth becomes a tool to support white supremacy and can be used to argue that anti-Asian racism and racism as a whole, can be remedied if one simply works hard (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Shah, 2019). Not only does the model minority myth homogenize Asian American experiences, but it downplays Asian American needs, invites resentment among

other minoritized groups, and allows for discriminatory practices (C. J. Kim & Lee, 2001). Research also demonstrates an interesting dichotomy: while Asian Americans are othered as the “model minority” in times of peace, they are othered as scapegoats in times of crisis (Gover et al., 2020). It becomes a spectrum wherein the positive traits of the model minority myth can shift easily into threats, again affirming that Asian Americans are considered foreigners in the US (Chen, 2000; Gover et al., 2020). Following this logic, the COVID pandemic let “real whites” push Asian Americans back from “honorary whites” to “racial inferiors,” as demonstrated through the forms of anti-Asian attacks and the emphasis on Asian individuals as uncivilized, physically inferior, and unhygienic (Ren & Feagin, 2021).

## Racialization of Pacific Islanders

The racialization of Pacific Islanders in the United States is less studied. “Pacific Islander” is a term that refers to people with genealogical ties to the indigenous people of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (Office of Minority Health, 2023). Within the Pacific Islander category, there are over 26 ethnicities, including but not limited to Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Chamorro, Fijian, Marshallese, Papua New Guinean, Palauan, and Tahitian (Office of Minority Health, 2023).

The limited literature on the racialization of Pacific Islanders within the United States describes how racialization is dependent on the sociopolitical histories of each origin country in relation to the United States. For example, the racialized experiences of people from American Samoa, who are considered US nationals, may be different from those of people from Tonga, a country with no historical US ties (Wright & Balutski, 2015). Pacific Islander scholars have employed Critical Race Theory, specifically Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), to provide a frame to understand how Pacific Islanders are “raced” in the United States. TribalCrit was developed as a framework to understand the relationship between the US and Native Americans and emphasizes the centrality of colonization, imperialism, and white supremacy to the building, maintenance, and wealth of US society (Brayboy, 2005). Using this framework, Pacific Islanders’ racialization is different from Asian Americans in that Pacific Islanders’ indigeneity, including the histories of colonization and imperialism from their origin countries, is central to their racialization. Diaz (2004) describes this well in stating:

Often couched as an opposition between the quest for equality or civil rights on the one hand, and equity and sovereignty on the other—and even these are not unproblematic or unproblematized—Native Pacific struggles, unlike those of U.S. Ethnic minorities, but much more similar to the struggles of Native Americans, are typically regarded as a quest for regaining lands and seas lost through colonialism and imperialism.

(p. 197)

## Gendered Racism and Intersectionality

Racism and discrimination are salient issues for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders currently. In 2020, while much of the country was under shelter-in-place orders, the murder

of unarmed Black people, specifically Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, drove national discourse and movement around racial justice (Chavez, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred anti-Asian sentiments and hate crimes across the country (T. T. Nguyen et al., 2020). Indeed, between 2019 and 2020, the Federal Bureau of Investigation cited a 77 percent increase in Asian-targeted hate crimes, and from March 2020 to June 2021, the advocacy group Stop AAPI Hate reported more than 9,000 hate crimes toward Asians (Findling et al., 2022). The Atlanta spa shooting in 2021 was a particularly heinous Asian-targeted hate crime and involved a white man shooting and killing eight people, six of whom were Asian women (Criss et al., 2023). As a result, Asians have expressed a heightened awareness of racism and fear of hate crimes (Findling et al., 2022; Ruiz et al., 2021). Despite increased awareness and discourse about anti-Asian racism, there are few studies that examine racism and racialization as described by different ethnic groups within the API category. The current study aims to add to this literature by exploring the understanding of racism and racialization of Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States as described by women from those racial/ethnic groups.

Experiences of racism are nuanced and impacted by other forms of oppression, including sexism. Because this study centered on Asian and Pacific Islander women, intersectionality provides a valuable lens to understand and interpret this study's findings, as the experiences described by the women in this study lie at the intersection of two systems of oppression: racism and sexism (among other systems of oppression). Intersectionality is the way in which multiple forms of oppression interact to create unique experiences for those at the intersections (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with coining the term in 1989 in her paper arguing that the discrimination Black women experience is not experienced solely because of their gender nor solely because of their race, but the interaction of being both woman and Black (Crenshaw, 1989). She further identified the problematic nature of a "single-axis" framework used by many anti-oppressive approaches in that these approaches fail to identify the interaction of multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectionality does not necessarily mean multiple systems of oppression add or multiply to create a larger oppressive burden; on the contrary, experiences at the intersections can be at the same time privileging and oppressive, and therefore it is the relationship and interaction between multiple oppressive systems that are important to consider (Weldon, 2008).

## Methods

This was part of a larger qualitative study of focus groups of women of different racial/ethnic groups that explored the experiences of racism in general and in relation to birthing experiences. A purposive sample of 21 participants was recruited for four focus groups by posting flyers on social media (Twitter and Facebook) and by contacting student and community organizations (e.g., Korean American Community Foundation NY). Eligibility criteria included women who were at least 18 years old, have had children or are open to having children in the future, use social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.), and were available to participate in a 90-min focus group via Zoom. Potential participants completed a brief online survey to collect basic demographic information, including region of residence, race, contact information, and availability to participate at the scheduled times. The four

focus groups were ethnically homogenous as we specifically recruited participants who self-identified as Korean, Vietnamese, Pacific Islander, and South Asian. Participants received a \$50 gift card as compensation for their time.

## Data Collection and Analysis

We developed a semi-structured focus group guide based on a literature review and our research aims. Topics covered in the guide included experiences of racism and racist attacks of the individual and family/friends, vicarious racism, microaggressions, and intersectionality.

The 90-minute focus groups were conducted in English, except for the Vietnamese focus group. The sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed by [Rev.com](#), and the Vietnamese focus group was translated into English. The Vietnamese focus group transcript maintained the original language along with the English translation to compare and clarify meaning when needed. All the focus group transcripts were de-identified. Two study team members attended each focus group to provide support. The topics covered in the focus group guide were used to develop the initial codebook. We evaluated the codebook through consensus-building discussions among our research team to ensure the clarity and accuracy of code definitions (MacQueen et al., 1998). NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to code the data based on the codebook. The team discussed coding disagreements and came to a consensus for all coding to prepare the data for theme development.

We analyzed the NVivo coding reports through a series of team meetings to establish themes and connections within and across API groups (Maxwell, 2012). Our study team included researchers from various racial/ethnic backgrounds, including Korean, Vietnamese, and Pacific Islander.

## Author Positionality

Various racial and ethnic identities are represented within the authors in this paper, including African American, Filipino, Korean, Pakistani, and Vietnamese identities. All the authors have worked extensively in research examining race and ethnicity, as well as discrimination and stigma. Six of the authors identify as women, which is in congruence with the gender identity of our study participants. All authors worked as a team, having regular discussions to ensure the study was guided by their collective cultural knowledge and expertise. It is likely, however, that our backgrounds influenced our interpretations of the data. To avoid speaking for the data, all authors made efforts to acknowledge existing biases or assumptions. Furthermore, to avoid bias, group discussions were taken on all preconceptions that arose about the study population to be cognizant of these existing assumptions during data collection and the analysis process.

## Results

### Participant Demographics

There were 21 focus group participants, and their average age was 35.5 years old (Table 1). The number of participants varied between focus groups, with the Korean focus group having the most participants (9), followed by Vietnamese (7), South Asian (3), and Pacific Islander (2) focus groups. Participants were highly educated, with the majority (67%) holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Region of residence varied among participants, with most participants from the Northeast (47%) and West (43%). The majority of participants (62%) had at least one child.

### Awareness of Racism toward Own and Other Racial/Ethnic Groups

All participants discussed either personally experiencing or knowing people who had experienced racism or discrimination directly. All participants were also aware of current instances of racism or discrimination that had occurred to people of their ethnic group or to other people of color through word-of-mouth and through social media. Examples participants described included Asian hate crimes in New York and San Francisco, the Atlanta spa shooting, and police brutality against Black people. Many focus group participants also described having a newfound heightened awareness about racism in America because of current events, specifically the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. Some participants discussed these events as catalysts for new conversations with family or friends about racism in America, particularly anti-Black racism. Describing talking to her first-generation immigrant parents about the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter Movement, one Korean focus group participant said:

Just trying to talk to my own parents about the death of George Floyd and kind of everything that was going on with Black Lives Matter... when George Floyd first happened and the subsequent protests and all of it, it was interesting to have those conversations because I wasn't trying to persuade them of any sort of viewpoint, but yeah... I think people should want to learn and kind of change their mind if something that they believe is different or wrong and they're open to seeing the other side. But from my perspective, I was also trying to understand where [my parents] came from, and why they have this mindset.

The Korean focus group participant further described how her first-generation immigrant parents' point of view was different from her own because she grew up in the United States whereas her parents did not. In terms of different understandings of racism in America, participants echoed this sentiment and described how generation or recency in immigration to the United States impacted perspectives on race. Participants who were "second generation" or who were born and/or grew up in the United States highlighted having different perspectives about race from their immigrant family members. A Korean focus group participant described having to educate family members who were first-generation immigrants specifically about anti-Black racism in America, saying:

And even honestly, my husband, to a certain extent, because I am an American and he is from China. So again, it's the first generation versus kind of being born and raised in America kind of thinking, but I think that for my parents and also for my husband, they have had negative experiences with, unfortunately, Black people who, whether it was crime related or kind of a violation of their own feeling of safety, so I think that that has definitely influenced how they see Black people, for sure.

Participants who had recently immigrated to the United States described not realizing the extent of racism in America until a few years after arriving. One South Asian focus group participant described this realization by saying:

I'm currently a grad student here, and I came down in 2018. Before that, I was working back in India, and I've had experience with working with global teams and working internationally... But only when I came here did it clearly hit me that race is so pertinent. While it was not as evident before the 2016 elections, it kind of started growing in day-to-day life; from interactions with the cashier at the grocery stores, or even at a farmer's market where you suddenly realize you're the only colored person in a completely white environment, and you get treated differently. Very, very mildly, but differently. Those things started growing and impacting my mental health.

Additionally, the increase in Asian hate crimes personally impacted the awareness of racism for many participants. News of attacks on Asian people made many participants more conscious of the possibility of being attacked because of their racial and ethnic background, and this awareness was accompanied by changes in behavior. A Vietnamese focus group participant said:

I was really worried since the news talked about the Asian community being attacked all the time, and it could be that I listened to the news all the time that I became very worried. In my family, I have elders, so when we go outside, we make sure to always go together and never go alone. I need to be more careful since I do not want any accidents to happen. I want to make sure that my family and I are safe.

### **Importance of Solidarity to Combat Racism but Difficulties in Sustaining**

Given the increased awareness about racism in America, participants across all focus groups described the need for and importance of solidarity among all people of color. One Korean focus group participant said:

Thanks to the media or advocate activity, public education, we are learning a lot about racism, white supremacy and Black Lives Matter, and even white fragility. So, I think we realized we have to stand in solidarity, shoulder to shoulder. It is very important.

In addition, some participants also discussed instances when they witnessed unity among groups recently. Describing an example of Asian solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, one Vietnamese participant said:



I think Vietnamese people really love African American people. A Vietnamese YouTuber shared videos about Vietnamese people doing good deeds for the African American community, I think that is something that we can all be proud of.

In describing living in close proximity with Black folk, another Vietnamese focus group participant said: “I think that in the community, it is due to their mindset because, in my neighborhood, there are many African American families. They are sociable with everyone around them.”

Though many participants described the importance of unity and solidarity among people of color, they did describe that the current unity between groups may be short-lived. In relation to this “temporary” unity between racial groups, one Korean focus group participant said:

I don't want to be pessimistic about it, or cynical, but I think we have to really see what the future brings in terms of how far we can take this unity, because unity is really the only way we're going to ever get past it, but I'm not yet convinced that we're at that point yet.

Even though participants discussed the importance of solidarity among all people of color, many recognized that building unity that is long-lasting would be difficult to achieve for several reasons. Some participants described understanding how the racial triangulation of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, as a group “between” Black and white people, upholds white supremacy. This positioning of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders against other people of color is a way to “pit” each group against the others and promote intergroup competition. This phenomenon was described well by one Pacific Islander focus group participant saying:

Yes, because we've all been colonized into white supremacy and made to believe that if we're doing better than somebody else, then we're doing good. Just the way that we're set up economically, situationally, forced to live, the schools we're supposed to go to, the job opportunities that we're given. We set up in these positions where people are basically scrapping over the really small amount of resources and distracted by looking at each other instead of really looking at why do we not have access to resources.

Furthermore, participants across all focus groups were aware that tensions between racial/ethnic groups inhibited solidarity across people of color. For example, a Vietnamese focus group participant described racial tensions at work. She said:

I think that there is because when I go to work, my company divides us into two groups: Vietnamese and Filipinos. When we are outside of work, we are happy around each other, but inside of work, we do not like each other and want to eliminate one another.

This pitting against each other is seen as a form of competition in the workplace, though it does not continue outside of work. Some participants described that fear was driving groups to “look out for themselves” instead of standing together. In the South Asian group, there was recognition that solidarity would take a lot of trust-building between communities,

which would be hard to accomplish because communities often are concerned only for themselves. One South Asian participant said:

How different communities tend to keep within themselves. It's hard for BLM to view the Indian community as an ally just because we haven't established that trust or that bridge. Or the hate crimes against Asians that happened recently, right after COVID. This is what my parents, when they read about it, they are worried about it, but they said it's the Chinese community, right? It's not the Indian community... I guess everyone is looking out for themselves. Unless they get out of that mentality and think for the common good, because our children are going into a very global world, and soon it's not going to be the race divide. We have to dissolve that.

Participants also described the importance of leadership in addressing racism, specifically the role politicians could play in promoting unity and anti-racism. Another South Asian participant said:

There has to be some leadership which shows us that everybody has to be united to fight against this big giant called racism... Once you represent unity at the political level at all, governance level, that's when the realization and inclusion will come in. It's difficult to have such things built bottom-up; it's more top-down, and you need directional leadership... It's not easy for society to accept changes drastically. So, if things need to move faster, as fast as they can be, it has to be top-down, and political representation does help. Just amplifies the message multiple times than any individual, community, or organization impact can do.

### **Navigating Racialization**

Participants across all focus groups described different methods they or their families have employed to navigate the ways their groups have been racialized in the United States. Within the Korean group, participants discussed the intersection of ethnicity and gender in that being a Korean woman often meant navigating marginalization on both axes. Speaking about how she was socialized as an Asian girl growing up, one Korean participant described how she was essentially taught *not* to communicate to ensure she was not going to cause conflict:

I think that just my own experience as a second-generation child and a child of immigrants in America, but I think that I was never really taught to communicate in a way that was not conflict. So, I never learned the speaking skills of just telling people no or kind of not fighting back, but just being willing to disagree with people without thinking that, 'Oh, I'm fighting with them' or, 'Oh, I'm going to make somebody mad.'

Additionally, in the Korean group, participants further described the intersection of ethnicity and gender when it came to their children, specifically daughters. There was a recognition that Asian girls have multiple disadvantages, and as a parent, the Korean participants wanted to ensure their daughters were set up for success. One participant described the process of choosing whether to give her Asian-American daughter a "girly" name by saying:

When we chose her name, my husband and I both initially wanted her to have a gender-neutral name because we were... There's, I don't know if this is true, but

there are studies that say that for people who have kind of more masculine names, they kind of can get more opportunities or things like that. Again, I don't know if this is true or not, but ...I don't want her to have a super girly name because she's going to be an Asian-American woman. And I want her to have more opportunities than what I have.

This participant went on to describe how the recent Asian hate crimes have raised her own awareness of how she has had to navigate both the racialization and gendering of her own daughter from birth. She continued:

And then actually we decided, we made a conscious decision to not put her Asian name, not put her Chinese name into her birth certificate, her legal name. And again, it's interesting now, too, because I think that my view on that is a little bit different now, after all of the conversations about Asian-American discrimination and kind of what [the other participant] was saying about being confident. But at that time, I was like, oh, I don't want people to be biased against her because she has a very clear Asian name and her name or whatever. And that's really sad because, again, it's a part of her heritage, and looking back on that now, I don't know if I would change anything, but I would definitely not want to think that, oh, she needs to be ashamed of anything but yeah, I definitely was considering that in terms of she's already got the cards stacked against her, she's a minority in America, she's a female I wanted to just, even before she was born, I wanted to set her up for success.

Within the South Asian group, participants described a "dual identity" that they employed depending on the situation and who they were with. One participant, in particular, described that when she was with others of South Asian ethnicity, she would go to specific events and dress differently as compared to when she was with people from other ethnicities. She recognized this "code-switching" by saying:

In my case, I'm from India, but my husband is not. My husband is from Poland. Our friends invariably end up being mixed. I have a separate world with them, where we get together, we have a really great time, our children get together. There is also this other world where I'm connected to the Indian community. For some reason, I cannot find a way to bridge those worlds; I'm two different people. If there is an Indian festival, I'm doing something that weekend with the Indian community, dressing a certain way.

The same participant described wanting to keep her two "worlds" separate even when asked about it by friends. She discussed being more at ease when she only had to play one "role" at a time. She said:

Once, my friends were like, 'Why don't you take us to these events? How come you've never invited us to the Temple, where you're having this event?' I think about it, and I don't know. In my mind, I have this dual identity, and I'm happy with the way it works. I probably play a part in this role that seeks some comfort in one group, and don't necessarily take the effort to mix it, so that's on me.

The Pacific Islander participants described how their family had used assimilation to navigate the racialization they experienced after immigrating to the United States. One Pacific Islander participant discussed assimilation as a form of moving up the “economic ladder” and modeling white people’s behavior to gain acceptance and privilege. She describes this by saying:

For myself, my Samoan family is hella into being around, just being around white people and being around the colonizers and assimilating certain tactics that they... Assimilating as a tactic to move up socially, and just being very aware of the degree of privilege I have had in being exposed to different things, being exposed to different ways of being... Even being around people that live better off than we did, to normalize that that’s a possibility, I really see how that has a big impact.

### **Importance of Recognizing Diversity within the API Category**

The Pacific Islander participants described the importance of not treating the API category as a monolithic group given the several ethnicities that category encompasses. They also described the erasure of Pacific Islanders within this category because of the overrepresentation of the Asian experience within the category. Additionally, the Pacific Islander participants discussed the erasure of disparities in health issues within the Pacific Islander population because of categorization with Asians. Describing this phenomenon, one Pacific Islander participant said:

There’s rarely, if ever, Pacific Islander representation in an API event and really that category was just created pretty arbitrarily, because essentially white people thought that you should let Pacific Islanders work close enough that we could belong together. And it completely erases the distinctive categories, and cultures, and life experiences of the people under those umbrellas. And, because of the relatively small population size of Pacific Islanders as compared to Asian people in the United States, when you do a category that is Asian Pacific Islander, you’re not going to get accurate data of Pacific Islanders.

## **Discussion**

The results from the focus groups demonstrated both similarities and differences between Asian and Pacific Islander sub-groups in the recognition and understanding of racism in the United States and show that the API group, indeed, is not a monolith in experiences and viewpoints. The findings also provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which Asian and Pacific Islander people understand and navigate their “otherness” in a society centered on white supremacy.

### **Navigating Race and Racism in the United States**

Participants described a different understanding of American racism in relation to generation; first-generation Asian immigrants seemed to be less aware of anti-Black racial issues in America until they had been in the United States for a longer period of time. Participants described their immigrant family members as not understanding anti-Black racism the same way as Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders who had been born and/or

raised in the United States. Though the literature about the differences in understanding of race and racism in the United States by generation is limited, the available studies do suggest that there are some generational differences. For example, a qualitative study done by Young et al. (2021) found that young adult Asian Americans who grew up in the United States often taught or informed their first-generation immigrant parents about the concepts of anti-Blackness specific to the United States, supporting our study findings. The majority of participants in that study discussed not having conversations about race and having a different understanding of social and political issues as compared to their first-generation immigrant parents, similar to our findings. The differences between immigrant generations in the understanding of racialization, as well as the navigation of that racialization among different Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups, may be influenced by several factors. Prior research suggests that attitudes of the host country toward immigrants, age at immigration, gender, length of time spent in the host country, English fluency, and level of social support impact the acculturation strategy that Asian immigrants choose (Berry, 2003; Bhugra, 2003; J. B. Choi & Thomas, 2009; Oh et al., 2002; Yeh, 2003).

Participants also described how they have navigated racialization as an Asian American or Pacific Islander in the United States and how that has influenced how they act. Acculturation refers to the ways a group of people changes their culture and behavior in response to encountering a new culture (Sam & Berry, 2010). Research has identified four primary acculturation strategies used by immigrants: (1) *assimilation* into the mainstream culture; (2) *separation* from mainstream culture and maintenance of cultural heritage; (3) *integration* of both mainstream and cultural heritage practices; and (4) *marginalization* when an immigrant neither adopts the mainstream culture nor maintains their cultural heritage (Berry, 2005). Studies have shown that different Asian American populations tend to utilize different acculturation strategies (Y. Choi et al., 2018). Our study participants described themselves or their family members using a combination of these acculturation strategies in response to being racialized. For example, a Pacific Islander participant discussed her immigrant family members using assimilation to be “accepted” into American culture, and a Korean participant described choosing not to name her daughter an “Asian” name to “help set her up for success,” one form of assimilation. Studies have found that employers discriminate against job applicants based on names on resumes, with “Black” names receiving fewer callbacks for interviews (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Indeed, an older qualitative study by Pyke and Dang (2003) in which the authors analyzed interview data from 184 Korean and Vietnamese grown adult children of first-generation immigrants found that participants described not wanting to be viewed as a “FOB,” or a recent immigrant who was “Fresh off the Boat,” and assimilated to “white culture” as a way to gain acceptance from the dominant group. Another form of acculturation some of our focus group participants employed was that of separation. For instance, one South Asian participant described the use of separation of their culture from mainstream culture to compartmentalize their “two different worlds.” This separation of cultural heritage from mainstream culture can also be thought of as “code-switching” or cultural “frame-switching” in which individuals change their behavior, language, and cognition depending on the situation to better “fit in” (No et al., 2008). Code-switching has been studied most among Black people in professional settings as a way to subvert racist stereotypes against them in the workplace and move up the professional ladder

(Britt & Weldon, 2015; Cross et al., 2002; Lacy, 2007; McCluney et al., 2021; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Scott, 2013). In our focus groups, a South Asian participant described acting and dressing differently when she was participating in South Asian community events as opposed to when she was with people who were not South Asian and kept both groups separate in her life. Findings from our study confirm that Asian and Pacific Islander people use a variety of strategies to respond to experiences of racialization in the United States. However, given the number of sub-ethnicities within the API category, more research is needed to understand the factors that contribute to acculturation among understudied groups, including Pacific Islanders.

## Understanding the Importance of Solidarity

The findings from the focus groups reveal that there is a recognition of the importance of solidarity among Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other people of color. Given the recent racial reckoning and Black Lives Matter movement, there is newfound attention to how people of color “show up” for each other (Moon, 2021; Perez, 2020; Tseng & Chen, 2021). Mainstream and social media have documented the support for the BLM movement from the Asian American community, specifically in addressing anti-Blackness among the larger Asian community through informing and asking for support from older, first-generation immigrant generations. For example, the “Letters for Black Lives” is a campaign and tool started in 2016 that provides younger generations a way of both educating about anti-Blackness and advocating for empathy and support for Black lives from the older generations (Letters For Black Lives, 2016). This letter has been translated into more than 30 languages since its development (Letters For Black Lives, 2016). Indeed, this movement to “educate” immigrant family members about anti-Blackness was discussed by our focus group participants. In addition, Merseeth (2018) analyzed data from the 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey, which included a nationally representative sample of Asian American respondents, and found that Asian American respondents supported the Black Lives Matter movement, especially those who held race-based linked fate beliefs, or beliefs that individual and group interests for Asian Americans are linked to what occurs to other Asian Americans as well as other groups of color. Lastly, there are increasing numbers of Asian American youth willing to discuss anti-Blackness being seen in their community, especially following the murder of George Floyd. Through an ethnographic study of a community-based educational space called Solidarity Holds Our Unity Together, Lee et al. (2020) explored how this type of community organization can cultivate cross-racial solidarity between Southeast Asian American and Black youth. They found that by addressing and educating youth about anti-Blackness in Asian American communities, empathy and relationships between both groups could be strengthened (Lee et al., 2020). Similarly, our study’s findings also confirm that, at least among our Asian American and Pacific Islander focus group participants, there is support for cross-racial solidarity. Despite this support for cross-racial solidarity among our study participants, it is unclear if this is a perspective other Asian and Pacific Islander people share.

## Barriers to Solidarity

Despite historical coalition building between Asians and other groups of color, solidarity between racial and ethnic groups may be difficult to sustain, as raised by our study participants. The logic of white supremacy works to pit Asian people against other people of color, specifically Black people, in a competition for resources (Yellow Horse et al., 2021), introducing questions of merit and favor and who “belongs” more in the US (Tawa et al., 2015). Terms such as “model minority” and “honorary white” act to separate Asian Americans from other racial groups and provide justification for the perpetuation of the racial hierarchy (Ren & Feagin, 2021). Participants of this study described ethnic groups “looking out for their own” and feeling “pitted against” other groups of color as barriers to solidarity, which provides evidence suggesting that white supremacist logic is working as designed.

Previous research has emphasized the importance of proximity, geographical and experiential, as a tool to build intergroup understanding and empathy (Hope, 2019; Morris, 2000); an absence of such contact or shared lived experience prevents successful coalition building between Asian Americans and Black people (C. J. Kim & Lee, 2001). A recent case study of South Sacramento demonstrated how Black people and Southeast Asians used a shared experience of state-sanctioned violence to build solidarity through vocal individual activists, community organizations, social media, and youth development (Hope, 2019). In sum, research has identified key characteristics to achieve multiracial solidarity, including the ability to focus on larger issues as opposed to narrow race-based politics, having the understanding that what impacts one group of color impacts all groups of color, creation of strong relationships between individuals and organizations, and the ability to mobilize resources of ethnic-specific organizations (Merseth, 2018; Park & Saito, 2000). While our study participants described barriers, they did not suggest strategies to build solidarity which would be important to explore in future research.

## Importance of Disaggregating Data

Lastly, our findings exemplify the multiple and diverse perspectives within the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, and therefore the categorization and representation of these numerous groups as a singular, monolithic group is problematic. The Pacific Islander focus group participants described concrete consequences of being grouped into the larger API category, including the masking of health disparities. While this finding was unsolicited, it is understandable that this issue was raised by the Pacific Islander focus group participants, given that Pacific Islander issues are often marginalized and overlooked when lumped into the API category. Research has found that, compared to Asians, there are higher rates of chronic diseases among NHPIs, and funding to support health issues faced by NHPIs is disproportionate because of their relatively small population size (Blaisdell, 1993; Braun et al., 1997; Chen & Hawks, 1995; Panapasa et al., 2011). There are also disparities in education and income between NHPIs and Asian Americans. 60% of nonelderly Asian American people have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to only 19% of nonelderly NHPIs (Pillai et al., 2022). Additionally, 29% of NHPI nonelderly people have a household income below 200% of the federal poverty level, as compared to only 18%

of Asian nonelderly people (Pillai et al., 2022). The disparities in a number of outcomes between Asian Americans and NHPIs affirm the diverse needs of groups within these categories. Indeed, other groups within the API category who are not Pacific Islander would benefit from disaggregation, specifically Asian sub-groups that experience greater disparities in financial well-being and health as compared to other Asian ethnicities (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021; Pillai et al., 2022).

Indeed, others have recognized that aggregation of the numerous Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicities within one category often silences the voices and experiences of smaller groups (Aina, 2012; Bacong et al., 2020; Bhakta, 2022; B.-M. D. Nguyen et al., 2013; K. H. Nguyen, 2022). Because of this, there have been calls to disaggregate the API category since the 1980s. In 1990, the federal Office of Management and Budget created the NHPI category, separating Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders from Asians, but further disaggregation of these broad categories is still needed.

## Implications

Results from this study generate new questions for future research. Our findings suggest that perspectives on and the navigation of racism and racialization are diverse among people within the Asian and Pacific Islander categories as well as between immigrant generations, highlighting the importance of data disaggregation among API people. Future studies should explore how immigration generation and length of time since immigration impacts and shapes views on one's racialization. Additionally, among participants of this study, there was a shared understanding of the importance of interracial solidarity in combating white supremacy. However, these views may not be reflective of Asian and Pacific Islander people more broadly. Future research should explore the concept of interracial solidarity with other Asian and Pacific Islander sub-ethnic groups. Lastly, participants of this study highlighted the difficulty in sustaining authentic interracial solidarity but did not suggest ways to build those relationships. Follow-up studies should explore strategies that Asian and Pacific Islander people believe can build and sustain interracial solidarity.

## Limitations

The current study has some limitations. One limitation was that the Pacific Islander focus group had a small sample size,  $n=2$ . Despite this small sample size for the Pacific Islander focus group, one of this study's strengths is the inclusion of Pacific Islander perspectives (albeit from two participants), which is sorely needed in academic research. Researchers looking to engage the Pacific Islander community should be aware of the hesitancy of many Pacific Islanders to participate in research given the history of exploitation and extraction by academics on Pacific Islander people and be prepared to build authentic relationships with Pacific Islander communities prior to requesting their participation. The current study included Korean, Vietnamese, and South Asian participants but did not include other Asian ethnic groups and, therefore, may not capture the experiences and perspectives of those who are of a different Asian ethnicity. Future studies should explore other Asian and Pacific Islander groups and their views on racism and discrimination. Lastly, given that this study is qualitative, findings cannot be generalized to the overall population.



## Conclusion

Though often portrayed as a singular group, Asian and Pacific Islander people are incredibly diverse and hold varied perspectives on race in the United States. Racialization of Asian and Pacific Islander people often triangulates them between white and Black, but this process is nuanced. This study demonstrates the diverse understanding of racialization in the United States among Asian American and Pacific Islander women. Participants described numerous ways in which they or their families coped with racialization, which varied between ethnic groups and immigrant generations, recognized both the importance of and difficulty in maintaining solidarity among people of color in combating white supremacy, and highlighted the need for disaggregation of the API category. These perspectives add to the literature that examines the understanding of racialization among these ethnic groups and encourage future exploration of experiences of racism and perspectives of racialization among other Asian American and Pacific Islander sub-ethnic groups. Together with this study, future studies can deepen the knowledge base of racialized experiences among people of color in the United States and can elucidate ways in which to build and sustain interethnic group solidarity.

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## Biographies

**Monica De La Cruz** is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests focus on ways to ameliorate economic inequality in communities of color. She has extensive experience studying economic and racial equity through qualitative, community-based and community-driven participatory research. She has published in *Journal of Community Health*, *Public Health Nutrition*, *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* and the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*.

**Shaniece Criss** (ScD, MPH, MPA) is an associate professor in the Health Sciences Department and director of the Master of Arts in Advocacy and Equity Studies at Furman University in Greenville, SC. As a founding member of the Big Data for Health Equity Research Collaborative, she investigates how societal issues impact health.

**Melanie Kim** serves as an outreach specialist at HomeFirst, a housing nonprofit. She is a recent graduate from Brown University with honors in medical anthropology. As a member of the Big Data for Health Equity Research Collaborative, she investigates the impact of social factors on health inequities.

**Nhung Thai** (BS) graduated from the University of California Berkeley and is currently focused on researching the impact of racial inequities on women and maternal health.

**Katrina Makres** (MPH) is a recent graduate from the University of Maryland School of Public Health. She is a researcher who focuses on health disparities.

**Junaid S Merchant** is a data analyst in the Epidemiology and Biostatistics department in the School of Public Health at UMD College Park. He has a PhD in Neuroscience and Cognitive Science.

**Thu T. Nguyen** (ScD MSPH) is an associate professor in the Epidemiology and Biostatistics Department at University of Maryland School of Public Health. She is a social epidemiologist whose research focuses on the impact of social factors on racial and social economic health inequities.

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**Table 1**

## Demographic Information for Focus Group Participants

	<i>n</i>	%
Ethnicity		
Korean	9	43
Vietnamese	7	33
South Asian (from Indian diaspora)	3	14
Pacific Islander	2	10
Education		
Less than high school degree	0	0
High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)	3	14
Some college	4	19
Bachelor's degree	6	29
Graduate degree (e.g., J.D, M.D., or Ph.D.)	8	38
Region of Residence		
Northeast	10	47
West	9	43
Midwest	1	5
South	1	5
Have children		
Yes	13	62
No	8	38

*Note.* N = 21. Participants were, on average, 35.3 years old.