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Asian American Identity and Drug Consumption: From Acculturation to Normalization

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Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between substance use and ethnic identity in the narratives of 206 young Asian Americans in a dance club/rave scene. We examine the meaning of drug use and found three types of narratives invoked to explain their drug use. The first noted difficulties arising from their Asian-American identities, the experience of culture clash and stresses associated with acculturation and Americanization. The second viewed their drug consumption as unusual among Asian Americans and saw their drug use as indicative of the degree to which they've grown apart from Asian culture and toward white/American culture. The final group saw neither their identities as Asian Americans, as drug users, nor as Asian American drug users as problematic. Drug use was a normal, accepted, and mundane part of their leisure time, not something they viewed as problematic or unusual.

Keywords

Drug Use; Asian American Youth; Ethnicity; Ethnic Identity; Normalization; Acculturation

Despite improvements in recent years, the depth and breadth of scholarship on substance use among Asian American youth is far less than that of white and African American (and to a lesser extent, Latino) youth. This is not a trend unique to the drug and alcohol fields; indeed, Asian American youth remain somewhat understudied throughout the social sciences, humanities, and medicine and the insights of Asian American studies are often not fully integrated into more general youth cultural studies (Zhou & Lee, 2004; Maira, 2002).¹ The result is that we know relatively little about Asian American drug use. Epidemiological studies of Asian American drug use have often lacked “sufficient numbers of cases to examine patterns of drug use among young people who were not members of the three largest racial and ethnic groups (whites, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans)” (Wallace et al., 2002, p. S74). Most national studies either omit mention of Asian Americans entirely, or lump Asian Americans into a broader (and generally unstudied) category of “other” (Ja & Aoki, 1993, p. 61). The two major national studies of drug use – Monitoring the Future (MTF) and the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) – still do not provide detailed information about Asian American drug use due to small sample sizes.

Beyond the question of sample sizes, one of the primary reasons for the neglect of Asian Americans in drug scholarship has been the belief that drug use among Asian Americans is not a problem. This belief has stemmed in part from the results of a few national surveys that found

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¹For a few key texts on Asian American youth, see Danico, 2004; Kibria, 2002; S. J. Lee, 1996; J. Lee and Zhou, 2004; Maira, 2002; Min, 2002.

for Asian Americans “much lower overall use prevalence rates than most other ethnic/racial groups” (Austin, 1999, p. 208). This portrayal seems to confirm the stereotype of Asian American youth as a model minority. Increasingly, however, this assumption is viewed as erroneous. More recent publications, especially those drawing from locally based studies, highlight the extent to which substance use is significant and increasing within Asian American communities (Harachi, Catalano, Kim, & Choi, 2001; Ja & Aoki, 1993; Jang, 1996; Nemoto et al., 1999; O'Hare & Tran, 1998; Zane & Huh-Kim, 1994). The available data on Asian American club drug use is even scantier and in need of development. According to MTF, between 1996 and 2000 Asian American 12th graders consistently had one of the lowest rates of drug use. However, for certain substances, including hallucinogens, LSD and some stimulants, Asian Americans reported annual use at a rate higher than African-Americans but lower than Latinos and whites (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2002) and another study found comparatively higher rates of lifetime ecstasy use among Asian American youth than other groups (SAMHSA, 2003). Other studies have suggested key differences among ethnonational-subgroups of Asian Americans in initiation and degree of substance use (Harachi et al., 2001; M. Y. Lee, Law, Eo, & Oliver, 2002). The NHSDA also indicates that although Asian Americans generally have one of the lowest rates of drug use, like other ethnic groups, Asian American youth and young adults have tried and are using drugs at higher rates than older Asian Americans, indicating that this is a group to be watched in the future.

Our previous research into the club drug use and the rave/dance/club scenes in the San Francisco area (see Hunt, Evans, Wu, and Reyes, 2005), combined with other local reports, indicated an increasing prominence of Asian Americans within club drug scenes, such as raves, warehouse parties, and dance clubs. We found numerous Asian American club promoters and event organizers and increasing numbers of Asian American youth attending clubs and dance events. While our previous research included Asian Americans within our broader sample, this newer project specifically targets Asian American youth. Using quantitative and qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 206 young Asian Americans in the club drug scenes, we queried the relationship between substance use and ethnic identity. Throughout our analysis, we were struck by the nuanced explanations of drug consumption and Asian American cultures provided by our respondents. We found that while the conventional theoretical perspectives of immigration and substance use, focused on issues of assimilation and acculturation, provide some leverage for understanding these experiences, they are not sufficient for understanding all of the stories told by these young, Asian American drug users.

Assimilation, Acculturation, Ethnicity, and Substance Use

To the degree that Asian American youth have been studied in the drug and alcohol literatures, issues of ethnicity and identity have tended to be subsumed under a focus on immigration² and assimilation. In this research tradition, researchers have examined the effects of assimilation on the drug- and alcohol-using behaviors of immigrant youth. In so doing they have utilized the concept of acculturation—a minority group's adoption of the “cultural patterns” of the host society. Growing initially out of the seminal work of Milton Gordon (1964), assimilation theory generally posited that acculturation was a large one-way process from less to more acculturated.³

In adopting this concept, drug and alcohol researchers have tended to focus on two themes. First, they have examined the extent to which immigrant youth alter their substance using

²The majority of Asian Americans (about 60%) today are foreign-born or “first-generation” immigrants. Over a quarter are the children of immigrants (the “second generation”). About 10% are third-generation or beyond (Zhou, 1997).

³For analysis and critique of acculturation perspectives see Alba and Nee, 2003; Kivisto, 2005. Assimilation theorists have developed more sophisticated models over the years, for example Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation approach. Yet, even these more sophisticated models do not escape all of the problems identified by assimilation theory's critics, discussed in the next section.

behaviors and “converge with those of the host culture as they become integrated into their new social environment” (Johnson, VanGeest, & Cho, 2002, p. 944). While immigrant children may possess little prior knowledge or experience of alcohol or illicit drug use, as they become assimilated into the host society they may begin to adopt a different set of norms and values, which increases their likelihood of using alcohol and drugs. In adopting the culture of the host society they forego the protective nature of their parents' culture and are therefore more at risk of drug and alcohol use and problems. In other words, acculturation will lead to changes in substance use (Rodriguez, Adrados, & De La Rosa, 1993. See also Caetano, 1987; Caetano & Mora, 1988; Price, Risk, Wong, & Klinge, 2002).

“Acculturative stress” is the second research focus in the study of substance use and immigrant youth. Within this perspective, instead of examining the impact of the host culture on normative drug and alcohol use, researchers have investigated the extent to which the very process of acculturation and its related stress may increase substance use among immigrant youth. Caught between two competing and often conflicting cultures—their own or their parents' “traditional” culture and their newly adopted culture—young immigrants may turn to drugs and alcohol as “coping mechanisms” to reconcile potentially conflicting pressures (see, e.g., Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Bhattacharya, 2002; Bhattacharya & Schoppelrey, 2004). In the former research focus, the emphasis is on the potential risk for increased drug and alcohol use because of adopting the norms of the host culture; in the latter focus, the emphasis is placed squarely on the effects of acculturation itself.

In recent years, the underlying perspective that provides the foundation for either side of this debate—assimilation theory—has come under great scrutiny among sociologists and cultural theorists. Indeed, by 1993 Nathan Glazer had published an essay titled “Is Assimilation Dead?” (1993) and Alba and Nee argued that the theory of assimilation had: “fallen into disrepute ... in recent decades assimilation has come to be viewed by social scientists as a worn-out theory which imposes ethnocentric and patronizing demands on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity” (1997, p. 827). Critics charge acculturation research with over-simplifying cultural complexities and with conceptualizing immigrants as passive actors. Researchers adopting acculturation theory have also been criticized for assuming that “identification with the country of origin uniformly decreases with time spent in the United States and that it rarely intensifies” (Gutmann, 1999, p. 173) and that changes in the behavior of young immigrants can be attributed solely to changes in place as opposed to temporal changes. Contemporary sociological research on youth cultures, ethnicity, and immigration have significantly questioned the static and essentialist notions of ethnic identity underlying assimilation and acculturation and in so doing have provided us with new conceptual tools for analyzing the relationship between ethnic identity and substance use.

In the case of Asian American identity, researchers have demonstrated how different Asian ethnic groups negotiate identity through interaction both within and outside their communities. Asian Americans can choose from “an array of pan-ethnic and nationality-based identities” (Nagel, 1994, p. 155; see also Espiritu, 1992; Kibria, 2000; Maira, 2002), though these choices are constrained by continuing structural inequalities. The notions of “core” and unchanging Asian values, of cultural continuity, and of the gradual linear change in the ethnic group's adaptation to their new home (Thai, 1999; Wu, 2003; Zia, 2000) that underlie much discussion of Asian American acculturation, have been increasingly challenged. Instead, social constructionists argue that “ethnicity is emergent” and situational—neither constant nor guaranteed—and can fluctuate over time (Song, 2003). While this social constructionist model may be ascendant in contemporary sociological research on racial and ethnic formations, it is not yet fully integrated into the drug and alcohol literatures' inquiries into immigration, which retain a focus on assimilation via their use of the concept of acculturation, nor into the drug field's treatment of ethnicity which can sometimes be somewhat static and monolithic.

Thus we argue for bringing into the drug and alcohol scholarship on immigration and ethnicity these social constructionist models. First, this would mean treating Asian American youth not as passive actors but instead as active players in shaping their (ethnic) identities and (drug) consumption choices. Second, it requires questioning the static and essentialist notions of ethnic identity contained in much of the literature on immigrant youth. Instead we emphasize “the fluid, situational, volitional, and dynamic character of ethnic identification, organization, and action—a model that emphasizes the socially ‘constructed’ aspects of ethnicity, i.e. the ways in which ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities” (Nagel, 1994, p. 152). Such developments, we will argue, are more useful in helping to understand the ways in which young Asian Americans discuss their ethnic identities, their sense of who they are, and their drug use. Finally, we wish to move our discussion of Asian American drug use beyond the traditional debates of acculturation and assimilation and additionally situate it more within the recent research on youth cultures, identities, and the consumption of commodities.

While the acculturation perspectives are not without utility—especially if they are deployed in a manner that does not assume that youth passively succumb to either acculturation or substance use, but actively manage and negotiate both—the acculturation paradigm cannot tell the whole story. Recent youth cultural research has emphasized the importance of examining the role of consumption—of music, cars, clothes, or drugs—in constructing an identity and a lifestyle, particularly within youth cultures (Miles, 2000); drug consumption needs to be situated within this broader context of consumption (Hunt & Barker, 2001). Though such work has tended to focus on white, and to a lesser extent African American, youth (see Maira, 2000 for an important exception), we argue for the utilization of these concepts for examining and understanding the construction of identity for our young Asian American respondents.

In this paper, we examine the narratives of these young Asian Americans to see how they explain, how they make sense of, their own drug consumption and their own ethnic identities. We find three distinct narratives utilized by respondents in the interviews. While two of these are resonant with the issues of acculturation or acculturative stress, the third narrative indicates a different phenomenon: a normalization of club drug use within some Asian American youth cultures.

Methods and Sample

As part of our study of the San Francisco Bay Area dance scenes, we collected qualitative and quantitative data through in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Drug use and demographic data for this paper come from 206 interviews with Asian American youth, conducted by the project manager and four interviewers between 2005 and 2007. Data for the qualitative analysis portion of this paper come from a sample of 100 of the 206 interviews. A quantitative survey instrument was used to collect drug use data and sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. For the remainder of the interview, a semi-structured guide was used to collect open-ended qualitative data on the respondents' family lives, their experiences with Asian culture and traditions, their sense of identity and culture, their histories of substance use, and their involvement in the dance scenes.

Respondents were recruited via advertisements, referrals, and through contacts of the project staff and were each given a \$50 honorarium. Respondents were screened and included if they had used at least one of the 6 NIDA-defined club drugs (ecstasy, LSD, methamphetamine, GHB, ketamine, Rohypnol) or mushrooms, and were involved in the electronic music dance scene (raves, clubs, warehouse parties) in the San Francisco Bay Area. We recruited respondents with a wide range of experience with club drugs—heavy and light users, current and past users.

Description of the Sample

The sample of 206 respondents was 52% male (n=108) and 48% female (n=98). The median age was 23, with ages ranging between 14 and 35. The respondents were of twelve different ethnic groups/national origins, with the greatest number being Chinese American (25%), followed by Filipino (18%) and Vietnamese (10%), in addition to Cambodian (9%), Korean (8%), Indian (7%), Taiwanese (3%), Laotian (2%), and Indonesian, Pakistani, and Mien (1% each). Another 27 respondents described themselves as having mixed ethnic or racial backgrounds, with the majority indicating their Asian ethnic group as their primary ethnic identity. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents were born in the U.S. (108 in California) and all but 3 of the foreign-born respondents were born in Asia, the Philippines or Indonesia. 81% of all respondents indicated that both parents were born in Asia.

The respondents had a wide-range of educational experience, with high school diploma/GED accounting for 38% of the sample and 35% of the sample having a Bachelor's degree or higher. Over half of the respondents (51%) were attending some form of educational institution at the time of the interview. Close to two-thirds of respondents were employed at the time of the interview. Those who were employed held a range of white-collar business jobs, several worked in education-related fields, and others worked in clerical and/or retail jobs. Only 20% of our sample were not employed; many of those were in school and others were actively seeking work. Median income for the respondents was \$1,500 per month.

Drug Use in the Sample

The overall prominence of drug experimentation in our sample can be seen in Table 1. Given the way that our respondents were chosen for the study—a history of club drug use was a required for inclusion—we cannot offer evidence of the overall rates of substance use among Asian Americans. Instead, we can look at patterns of drug consumption within this population of Asian American drug consumers. All of our respondents had tried some form of alcohol in their lifetimes, and 80% had consumed beer in the last month. Lifetime prevalence of marijuana (97%) neared that of alcohol, with close to two-thirds having used in the past month. As in the general population, alcohol and marijuana were the most widely used substances, but lifetime ecstasy-use rates were almost as high (94%); in the past month, though, only 28% had used ecstasy. Mushrooms was the only other drug tried by over half of the sample (67%). The majority of the sample (55%) had tried at least five drugs in their lifetime. Marijuana was the only drug currently used by the majority of respondents in the past month, 62% of the sample were not current regular users of club drugs. The data indicate a wide degree of experience and experimentation among our respondents, but only moderate, leisure-time use in the present.

We looked for differences in drug consumption between foreign- and American-born respondents and between different ethnonational groups, but found few significant differences (see tables 2 and 3). Even after we collapsed national-groups into broader categories (Chinese, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Filipino, Japanese/Korean, and Mixed Asian) the small cell sizes for the most part precluded finding statistically significant results. Methamphetamine use was one of the few areas of significant differences: 68% of Filipinos had tried methamphetamines, compared with 40% of the sample overall (and as few as 18% of South Asians) ($p < .01$) and foreign-born respondents were more likely to be current methamphetamine users (10.8%) than American-born respondents (2.8%) ($p < .05$). We also noted small differences between particular groups and individual drugs (e.g., Southeast Asians were more frequently current club drug users; no South Asians reported pill opiate use compared by 12% of the sample overall, but 63% of South Asians had tried cocaine vs. only 30% of Southeast Asians), but few of these differences were statistically significant.

While the data suggest some possible differences in drug consumption between first and second generation Asian Americans and between different ethno-national subgroups, and certainly this is an area perennially in need of further investigation and large-scale studies, in examining our respondents qualitative interviews, we were often struck more by the commonalities among these groups in narratives about their drug consumption and their ethnic identities. This is not to suggest that the Asian American youth we interviewed were homogenous or unitary. Far from it; this was an eclectic and diverse group of young people and we will discuss a variety of different narratives offered by them. But the key differences between and among them were often much more salient around issues of lifestyle, taste, and consumption, and not always the more typically looked-for dimensions of immigration-generation or national background.

Simply looking at the drug-use histories and prevalence rates of our respondents can only get us so far, though. For, these numbers alone tell us very little about the meaning or context of drug consumption in the lives of these young Asian Americans. To get a sense of the meaning and significance of drug consumption within their lives, we turn to their own words, their own narratives of explanation.

Analysis: Asian American Youth Interpreting and Explaining their Own Drug Consumption⁴

Clashing Cultures?: Acculturative Stress and Asian Culture as Explanations for Drug Use

Some of the descriptions and explanations of drug use provided by our respondents sound almost perfectly like they could be coming from a drug researcher within the acculturative-stress paradigm. These respondents describe their drug consumption as growing directly out of their experiences of being Asian American, and in particular out of the experiences of feeling “in-between” or torn between Asian and American cultures.

For some respondents, such explanations are salient only for their supposition about why other Asian Americans may use drugs. A young Chinese American (086) woman, for example, speculates that “if they're newly immigrant, their parents are working all the time, they don't have enough time to, you know, understand their kids, and they're not doing well in school... they turn to drugs.” She does not think, though, that experiences with immigration or with Chinese identity have anything to do with her own drug consumption. Other respondents, though, speak in great detail about how they think their own drug-use histories have grown out of their experiences with immigration, with culture-clash, or with difficulties feeling at home in American and/or Asian cultures. A young Filipina woman, for example, specifically describes her illicit drug use as a form of “self-medication” and as a response to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression that she connects to her ethnic identity and to feelings of disconnect with Filipino culture (in part due to being a lesbian, and in part due to the (physical and metaphorical) distance that she says all American-born Filipinos experience): “Oh, let's just smoke weed, or let's just take acid, let's just snort some coke. You know, it's like everything was to sort of disguise the fact that I had real emotions about stuff that I couldn't understand.” She speculates that she wouldn't have turned to drugs if she had been able to find “support or a community...that I can relate to or relates to me” (010).

Other respondents specifically attribute their drug use to a response to the “culture clash” that they experience as Asian Americans—as both Asian and American. A young Indian woman, who immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager, describes herself as an “in-betweenner”—neither fitting in fully with other Indian-born immigrants or with American-born Indians. At times she felt intense pressure to choose between these two groups and two cultures, though more recently

⁴The qualitative analysis for this article is taken from analysis of a smaller number (100) of the 206 respondents discussed above.

she realized “we don't have to choose. We are happy being a bit of everything ...stuck in between, and we don't have to pick sides” (073). Her first club drug experiences were with another “in-between” in the same position that she was in, and while since then her drug-using networks have greatly expanded, she still finds a particular resonance with that identity.

An even more common version of “culture clash” described by our respondents occurs with second-generation immigrants in conflict with their first-generation parents. A young Chinese American woman, for example, discusses parental pressure to excel academically and the desire to appear as an honorable daughter—a theme that emerged in many of our interviews. She specifically invokes the term “culture clash,” echoing a recurrent trope in our interviews. These expectations, which grew out of her parents' experiences of being raised in China, she argues, may be difficult to meet for young Americans like herself. She describes Chinese culture as “repressed,” as shut-down emotionally, as precluding free expression of thoughts and problems. Within her narrative, all of these combine to explain her drug use:

If I was raised in a different atmosphere, I probably wouldn't have been so exposed to... if I wasn't so repressed maybe... if I was able to talk to my parents or have conversations with them about concerns I was having... I wouldn't have to turn to other people... And I think it did contribute to, you know, drug usage. (025)

Finally, a Filipino young man (041) describes his own drug use as a response to depression: “drugs are just mechanisms to deal with, you know, whatever pain ...you go through.” He further elaborates that this may be particularly true within Asian American communities due to stigmas associated with mental health problems and treatment “mental health is a private matter ...no one must find out ...in the Asian community, you know, we don't really talk about too many things like that.”

These respondents' self-explanations for drug consumption echo some discourses within treatment and etiology literatures regarding drug use as a coping mechanism for other underlying problems. The respondents go beyond merely psychological explanations in connecting these states to their negotiation of ethnic identity, conflicting expectations of Asian and U.S. culture. Yet, to do justice to their explanations, it should be pointed out that, contrary to many of the drug literatures, this is not always seen as a negative or problematic response to these issues. The young Filipina (010), for example, specifically denies any regret for her extensive drug use, even though she has successfully gone through drug treatment: “I don't regret having had my experiences with all those drugs and heroin, I really don't, because it really forced me to go inside myself to understand ...I would not have had those experiences to ...grow on or ruminate.”

Maira and Soep (2005) have criticized an overreliance on what they call the “simplistic trope of the ‘culture clash’” (p. 259) in studies of Asian (and other immigrant) youth cultures. Such work, they charge, “has tended to neglect the engagement of youth with popular culture and their more nuanced understandings of race, especially, and also of gender and sexuality” (ibid). They call for moving beyond the limited narratives of acculturation and culture clashes, which have overwhelmingly dominated studies of Asian American youth. As we will argue below, we agree with them about the importance of engagements with popular culture and that acculturation explanations are far from sufficient—much cannot be reduced to issues of culture clash. However, our respondents' narratives indicate that it would not be prudent to drop these models altogether. For, despite any skepticism about the concept that we may have brought into our analysis initially, the trope of “culture clash” continues to have a great deal of salience and resonance for many (but not all) of the young Asian Americans we interviewed, who independently raised these explanations on their own, as they attempted to make sense of and interpret their own experiences with drug consumption.

Yet, also key are the ways our respondents describe actively managing, shaping, creating, or negotiating their drug-using experiences and their identities as Asian Americans. If the acculturative-stress model is to truly help explain the meaning of drug use among young Asian Americans, it must be deployed in such a manner that understands the meaning of drug consumption for them and takes seriously their role as agents, rather than presenting them as pawns, torn between two cultures or passively turning to or “succumbing” to drugs.

While this first group of respondents explain the relationship between their ethnic identity and their substance use in terms familiar from the acculturative stress research, others offer explanations of their own drug use in terms of increasing acculturation and/or Americanization (compared to less acculturated Asians). It is to this second group that we now turn.

Model Minorities?: Acculturation Leading to Substance Use

One of the most dominant stereotypes of Asian Americans today is that they comprise a “model minority”; in contrast to other racial/ethnic minorities, Asian Americans are depicted as hard-working, successful, less likely to be impoverished or involved in crime or substance use. Critiques of this perspective abound within Asian American studies. Kibria (1998, pp. 951-955), for example, provides a helpful summary of the problems engendered by the model-minority myth. She notes that while this image of Asian Americans contrasts from earlier images of Asians as unassimilable, inscrutable, tricky, or immoral heathens and seems to situate Asians in a privileged position in US racial hierarchy, the “model minority” construction raises difficulties of its own. Within media discourses of Asians as a model minority, for example, the idea of a “threatening yellow peril” remains and can help sustain the racial marginality of Asians in U.S. society. This is because it is often used to pit Asians against other minorities. In addition, empirical evidence utilized to demonstrate Asian American success tends to be based on pooled Asian American statistics, obscuring socioeconomic diversity (and even polarization) among subpopulations of Asian Americans.

Interestingly, one set of our Asian American respondents often themselves invoked images of Asian Americans as a model minority. They described Asian Americans, as a group, as unlikely to use drugs or to participate in the dance/rave/club scenes and their discussions of why this is so often dovetailed with the dominant model-minority discourse. Or, more precisely, they described most Asian Americans in this way. They, themselves, were exempt from this categorization. They described themselves as unique, atypical, unlike most Asian Americans—and they argued that a major factor separating them from other Asians is their attendance at clubs/raves and their substance use.

These respondents argue that Asian American drug use is relatively unusual. A young Chinese American woman, for example, speculates that “there would be a lower amount of drug use among Asian Americans ...I think it's not in our culture” (080). In contrast to others in our sample, many of these young Asian Americans tend to be in social networks that are of mixed-ethnicities or are not predominantly Asian American. Or, in other cases, they maintain multiple, distinct social networks, including Asian American peer groups (who do not use drugs) and non-Asian drug-using groups, keeping the two separate.

These respondents need to reconcile their belief in the infrequency of drug use among Asian Americans with their own, often rather extensive, drug use. For some young Asian Americans, this distinction is a source of pride, proving that they are different or breaking the mold. A young Indian man, for example, asserts that he may be “unique” among other South Asians because he's used more drugs and alcohol than them. He argues that most Indians aren't using drugs, “and even if they are ...because Indian people are generally conservative, they wouldn't talk about it, they wouldn't expose the fact that they were on a certain drug” (081). He feels “somewhat isolated” from other young South Asians, arguing that he has more in common

with “just normal American kids.” Similarly, a young Chinese American man (020), who is heavily involved in the rave scene, explicitly distinguishes himself from other Chinese Americans due to (among other things) his drug consumption.

I can't just call myself Chinese. Cuz when I think of just a Chinese kid, I don't think of a person like me [who]...does like psychedelic drugs (laughs), or does like drug education volunteering that's not like anti-drug...these things that...I don't know, that I associate with like...I don't know... white kids or white people.

In both of these examples, the respondents associate white culture or American culture (and the two are often used interchangeably) with drug consumption, and Asian, Indian, or Chinese cultures are seen as in opposition to this.

While these two young men wear their “uniqueness” like badges of pride, others who experience drug consumption as a feature that distinguishes them from other Asian Americans express feelings of anxiety, shame, or worries that they're losing or “selling out” their (Asian) culture and their family's traditions. A young Filipina, for example, avoided the Filipino community on her college campus due to her drug use, which she feared would stigmatize her.

And I remember thinking, ‘God, I wonder if they=re using, too.’ ... >I wonder if this is something that=s acceptable... Do other Filipino kids do this?= I remember thinking that, like, ‘Am I being less Filipino because I=m hanging out with some white people and Vietnamese people and doing drugs with them or...?’ I kinda had a hard time with that, didn=t know if I was being true to my people. (076)

She equated using drugs with losing her culture or undermining her authenticity as a Filipina, which threw her into what she called an “identity crisis.” While she eventually discovered other drug-using Filipino- and Asian-Americans at clubs and raves (a “mind-boggling” experience for her), she still carefully manages her drug use vis-à-vis Asian identity, being careful not to inappropriately use (or exhibit signs of) drugs within what she deems unsuitable cultural contexts: “Asians, when we do drugs, it=s at a very specific place, like raves, and a very specific context, like the privacy of your own home.”

In the narratives of these respondents, acculturation and Americanization (though not precisely in those terms) are very much tied up with substance use and assumed to be causal—the more American one is, the more likely to use drugs; the more Asian one is, the less likely, according to these respondents' explanations. These respondents appear to experience Asian and American identities as bifurcated and feel pressure to choose one or the other—unlike some of our other respondents, they do not experience their “in-betweenness” as a strength to be cherished.

In some ways they are the opposite of the first group. Whereas the first group saw their drug use as a natural outgrowth of their experiences as Asian Americans (and the culture clashes that can result from this), this second group experiences drug consumption as something oppositional to Asian American identity. One thing that both narratives hold in common, though, is the sense that drug-using identities and ethnic identities are carefully and actively managed and negotiated by each of these young people; their narratives very much belie the notion of ethnic identity (or drug-using identity) as a category one passively occupies, or something that can simply be used as an independent variable in our analyses. While in many ways their explanations of their own drug use are reminiscent of the sorts of etiologies dominant in much of the drug literatures' explanations of immigration and ethnicity, our respondents remind us of the important role of agency in these processes, an agency that is too often missing within drug scholarship.

Yet not all of our respondents found their identities as Asian Americans, as both Asian and American, as the source of culture clash or alienation. And not all of our respondents found anything unusual about Asian Americans as drug consumers. For a third group of respondents, their experiences of drug consumption, and the relationships they posit between substance use and ethnic identity are not particularly resonant with the issues raised within acculturation perspectives in the drug and alcohol scholarship. For these respondents, in our final group, issues of style, consumption, taste and differences within Asian American communities have much greater salience in how they understand the context of their drug use. And the narratives of drug use presented by these young Asian Americans indicate a normalization of Asian American drug use in these youth cultures.

Normalized Asian American Drug Consumption?

The drug-normalization thesis argues that illicit drug consumption, which has traditionally been seen as extraordinary, unusual, or deviant, is becoming normative, accepted, and part of the everyday in many youth cultures. Parker, Aldridge and Measham (1998) found that in the UK, drug use was no longer confined to the subcultural margins, but has become an undeniable aspect of mainstream youth cultures (see also Parker, 2005). Indicators of this normalization include: the degree to which drug use is widespread and drugs easily accessible, the approaches to “sensible” drug use and cost-benefit analyses constructed by young drug users, a growing social and cultural accommodation to drug use (particularly marijuana use), and the prominence of drugs and drug symbols in popular and consumer culture. This perspective has been less developed in the United States than in the U.K. (for exceptions see Lankenau & Sanders, 2007; MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2005). However, with drug use rates in the two countries being comparable (Shiner & Newburn, 1999), and with drugs having a similarly prominent place in much of youth culture, this is an area in need of further development in understanding drug consumption—and youth culture much more generally—in the United States.⁵ However, in a country as diverse and heterogeneous as the U.S., one might expect uneven levels of drug normalization within various youth cultures (for, youth cultures in the U.S. are far too variegated to speak of “youth culture” in the singular). With the stereotypes of Asian Americans as a model minority unlikely to use drugs, one might expect a lesser degree of drug normalization within Asian American youth cultures. While our study is not a comparative one, and we cannot assess relative degrees of normalization in different ethnic youth cultures, our research certainly indicates the presence of at least some Asian American youth cultures in which club drug use is expected, everyday, mundane; in a word: normalized.

This third group of narratives actually represents the majority of respondents we interviewed. These respondents spoke to us for hours about their ethnic identity, culture and family traditions, and about their long histories of drug use and their involvement in the dance scenes. Yet, after hours of these interviews, they often made no explicit connections between their ethnic identities and their substance use. They tended not to remark at all on this. Within these narratives, Asian American drug use was seen as unremarkable; it was completely taken for granted.

Some of these young Asian Americans describe certain dance scenes (Asian dance clubs, but also the rave scene more generally) as increasingly dominated by Asians and by the drug ecstasy (MDMA). For these respondents, the two (Asians and ecstasy) go hand-in-hand. One Chinese

⁵Shiner and Newburn (1999) use this data to argue against the normalization thesis, demonstrating that in neither the U.S. nor in Great Britain, has illicit drug use become a majority activity. We agree with them about the dangers of exaggerating these claims. However, they do point out that drug use is on the rise among youth in both countries and additionally point to the importance of not focusing just on prevalence statistics but also on the attitudes of the youth themselves. It is to the latter type of analysis that we are confining our comments about normalization. Our sampling frame explicitly excluded non-drug users, so we are making no claims about overall trends in drug use among Asian Americans. Instead, we will examine attitudes about and perceptions of normalization among this sample of drug-experienced Asian Americans (most of whom do not think they differ much from Asian American youth at large).

American woman describes her first impressions of a rave, in a way we saw repeated in numerous interviews: “there were a lot of Asians ...Everywhere, on the dance floor... it felt like everybody was on E. I know of a couple people that were sober, but... pretty much everyone was on E” (027). Many describe ecstasy as being on par with alcohol, in terms of prevalence and acceptability. A young Chinese American man describes:

E is the biggest thing they do, we do ...at the Asian clubs that's the most prevalent. More than any other drug. More than marijuana ...I would say it's equal to alcohol ...E it almost seems... accepted... like smoking or drinking alcohol it's... Oh, it's not that bad. (054)

When pondering why the club scene is increasingly popular and the reasons for the growth of the Asian club scene, one Chinese American simply speculates, “perhaps it's the drugs, perhaps it's the alcohol” (040). An affinity between Asian Americans and substance use, or rather, use of particular substances, including ecstasy and alcohol, is simply taken as a given.

Indeed, so normalized has this become that one Chinese American (054) describes a popular Asian dance event “almost like a social networking place, where it's not really a rave, it's people getting to know each other ...professionals going to talk to each other ...you build contacts and stuff.” He compares it to dinner parties or cocktail parties of the past, although rather than wine and cocktails the substances of choice may be club drugs, particularly ecstasy. But, in this description, the drugs are an almost incidental, mundane part of the broader social context.

This group is not easily categorized in terms of experiences with acculturation. It includes highly acculturated third-generation Asian Americans and recent immigrants who socialize in predominantly Asian/Asian American social networks. Some of these respondents prefer Asian clubs, while others frequent mixed-clubs (though often in ethnically homogenous and/or pan-Asian social groups). Their drug use is not necessarily tied up with being more or less acculturated or Americanized (and some discuss drug-using experiences in Asia), nor do these particular respondents tend to describe experiences that indicate “acculturative stress.” Any “culture clashes” that they may describe are between finely distinguished subcultures, between different “types” and styles of Asian Americans, often distinguished through music preferences and clothing styles. Neither Asian American identity, nor that of being a drug-consumer, are problematic for these youth; they are accepted, normalized aspects of their existence. The sorts of differentiations they make are not so much about whether or not they would try drugs (that is taken as a given by these respondents), or to what degree this is influenced by being Asian/Asian American. Instead, they focus on much finer levels of distinctions—distinctions based on different ways of being Asian within club drug settings and communities: how to display and perform one's subcultural affiliations; how to dress like a gangster, or a “Hong Kong girl,” or a hipster; how to avoid being perceived as a “square Asian.” Within these narratives, drug consumption can only be understood if placed in the context of a whole other range of consumption choices—of clothes, cars, drinks, and music.

This is not a universal, across-the-board phenomenon for young Asian Americans. Certainly for the young Asian Americans discussed in the previous section (who represent a significant, but minority, group, within our sample) Asian American–drug use is far from perceived as the norm. And there do appear to be significant ethno-national differences with respect to drug normalization. Drug use is described as normalized particularly within Chinese American and other East Asian youth cultures (both by insiders and outsiders to these cultures). To a lesser degree this appears to be true for many Southeast Asian and Filipino respondents (although drug use patterns here are a bit different, with ecstasy playing a less central role). However, there was near unanimity among our South Asian respondents that drug use continues to be stigmatized in South Asian-American communities, including in youth cultures. “Typically Indian people get wrapped up in drinking but not in drugs” (062).⁶ “Within the South Asian

scene ...the only drugs I ever saw being done was ...booze. And some weed. ...Never heard of anything else” (065). Though many South Asian youth may use drugs (including, of course, all of our South Asian respondents), this is something that tends to be done discreetly, hidden from view. Further exploration of cultural differences between and among Asian American subgroups will be important in the future to discern the reasons for the differential acceptability of drug consumption in various youth cultures in the U.S. and beyond.

Conclusion: Asian American Youth and Drug Consumption in the Context of Globalization

In our diverse group of young Asian American club drug users, we found three distinct types of narratives invoked to explain their own drug use. One group noted difficulties arising from their Asian-American identities, the experience of culture clash and stresses associated with acculturation and Americanization, and saw their own substance use as an outgrowth of this. A second group viewed their drug consumption as unusual among Asian Americans and saw their drug use as indicative of the degree to which they've grown apart from Asian culture and toward white/American culture. A third group saw neither their identities as Asian Americans, as drug users, nor as Asian American drug users as problematic. Drug use was a normal, accepted, mundane part of their leisure time, not something they viewed as problematic, shameful, or unusual.

In discussing these narratives, one can sometimes fall into the trap of making sharp contrasts between Asian and American cultures, between host culture and immigrant culture. Our respondents themselves often paint these distinctions as either/or. Yet in this increasingly globalized world, such distinctions are increasingly problematic to make. While our current research project does not explicitly situate our respondents or their drug/club scenes within a broader global context, future research, if it is truly to understand the meaning and contexts of drug use, will need to.

Given increased globalization and the import and export of cultural products and cultural notions, we can no longer assume that even a new immigrant youth does not have some preconceptions of the culture or cultures he or she is coming into, particularly those notions that are transmitted through the media and popular culture. Furthermore, drug and alcohol use and abuse are not limited to any particular country, although accessibility may vary, and it is a mistake to assume that immigrant youth have had no previous exposure to such behaviors. Nor are Asian American immigrants, even second and third generation immigrants, cut-off from Asian culture after migrating to the United States—communication and travel back and forth between Asia and the U.S. is increasingly common, and participants in Asian American club drug scenes sometimes also participate in such scenes within Asia.

In choosing and creating their lifestyle and consequently their identity, immigrant youth today, like other youth groups, are consumers within both a local and global market and are able to connect with developments in youth cultures far beyond the communities in which they live. Through the use of Internet web sites and chat rooms they can remain informed of new developments in youth cultures whether that be in the field of music, of dance, of dress or of drugs. As Osgerby has noted:

Groups of young people far removed from one another in terms of time and space became audiences for the same sets of messages and images and, in many respects,

⁶This idea of alcohol being particularly dominant in the Indian community was commonly mentioned in the interviews, and in our quantitative analysis we found that 100% of our South Asian respondents were current users of hard alcohol (whereas for all other ethnic groups the range was from 70% to 79%).

come to share the same cultural vocabulary. By the early nineties, therefore, it was possible for the first time to speak of a “global” dimension to many youth styles and cultures (1998, p. 199).

Young people utilize and adapt features of these global cultures and fuse them with elements from their own more localized cultures in order to create a distinctive identity. Their ability to create an identity and an associated lifestyle based on a more global perspective raises important questions for assimilation theorists who have focused solely on the impact of American culture on more traditional immigrant cultures. While assimilation theorists have focused on immigrants adopting the host culture in favor of their own or their parents' culture, they have failed to consider the extent to which immigrant youth today are able to draw on many different cultures and create a more distinctive, a more idiosyncratic and hybrid identity. In so doing they no longer follow a linear progression of assimilating, but as Modood (1997) has noted they are assimilating on their own terms. The fact that most of the respondents in our sample are negotiating those varying and sometimes conflictual identities points to the complexity and pressures of those often competing cultural attractions and strains. Even when attempting to understand the role of the party scene and club drugs in the lives of Asian Americans, the variations and diversity of experiences that cannot be fully rationalized or explained by ethnic groupings, point to the complexity inherent in an analysis of Asian American identity.

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Table 1

Lifetime and Current Substance Use

Drug	Lifetime Prevalence		Current (30-Day) Prevalence	
	Total <i>N</i> = 206	%	Total <i>N</i> = 206	%
<i>Beer</i>	205	99.5	165	80.1
<i>Wine</i>	189	91.7	112	54.4
<i>Liquor</i>	205	99.5	175	85.0
<i>Marijuana</i>	201	97.6	132	64.1
<i>Ecstasy</i>	193	93.7	56	27.2
Mushrooms	128	62.8	16	7.8
<i>Cocaine</i>	93	45.1	24	11.7
<i>LSD</i>	70	34.0	7	3.4
<i>Methamphetamine</i>	82	39.8	11	5.3
<i>GHB</i>	32	15.5	4	1.9
<i>Ketamine</i>	29	14.1	4	1.9
<i>Nitrous Oxide</i>	62	30.1	6	2.9
<i>Prescription Opiates</i>	105	51.0	25	12.1

Table 2 Lifetime Prevalence of Drug Use by Ethnonational Group and Immigration Status

Ethnonational Subgroup % (N)	Drug (Percentage who have used drug in lifetime)												
	Beer	Wine	Liquor	Marijuana	Ecstasy	Methamphetamine	Cocaine	LSD	Mushrooms	GHB	Ketamine	Nitrous	Prescription Opiates
Chinese/American 28.2% (58)	100.0	94.8*	98.3	98.3	100.0	32.8*	39.7	34.5	63.8	17.2	15.5	39.7*	55.2
Japanese/Korean 13.3% (17)	100.0	82.4*	100.0	100.0	88.2	47.1*	52.9	35.3	70.6	11.8	5.9	35.3*	52.9
Southeast Asian 4.3% (50)	100.0	84.0*	100.0	98.0	94.0	32.0*	30.0	20.0	44.0	10.0	8.0	12.0*	40.0
South Asian 18.8% (16)	100.0	87.5*	100.0	93.8	87.5	18.8*	62.5	25.0	68.8	6.3	6.3	18.8*	43.8
Philipino 8.4% (38)	100.0	97.4*	100.0	100.0	92.1	68.4*	57.9	50.0	71.1	23.7	23.7	36.8*	57.9
Mixed/Asian 13.1% (26)	96.3	100.0*	100.0	92.6	88.9	37.0*	51.9	40.7	70.4	18.5	18.5	37.0*	55.6
Immigration Status (N)													
American Born 8.4% (141)	99.3	92.9	99.3	97.2	92.9	37.6	46.1	34.8	63.8	13.5	17.0	31.9	53.9
Foreign Born 1.6% (65)	100.0	89.2	100.0	98.5	95.4	44.6	43.1	32.3	58.5	20.0	7.7	26.2	44.6
Total % (N)	99.5 (205)	91.7 (189)	99.5 (205)	97.6 (201)	93.7 (193)	39.8 (82)	45.1 (93)	34.0 (70)	62.1 (128)	15.5 (32)	14.1 (29)	30.1 (62)	51.0 (105)

<.05

Table 3

Current (30 day) Prevalence of Drug Use by Ethnonational Group and Immigration Status

		Drug (Percentage who have used drugs in last 30 days)												
	% (N)	Beer	Wine	Liquor	Marijuana	Ecstasy	Methamphetamine	Cocaine	LSD	Mushrooms	GHB	Ketamine	Nitrous	Prescription Opiates
Hispanic	86.2	53.4*	79.3	53.4	20.7	3.4%	12.1	5.2	6.9*	1.7%	3.4	1.7	13.8	
Non-Hispanic	76.5	52.9*	82.4	64.7	23.5	0.0%	17.6	0.0	17.6*	0.0%	0.0	5.9	11.8	
Asian	74.0	30.0*	86.0	62.0	42.0	14.0%	4.0	0.0	0.0*	0.0%	2.0	0.0	12.0	
Black	93.8	75.0*	100.0	75.0	18.8	0.0%	6.3	6.3	0.0*	0.0%	0.0	0.0	0.0	
White	76.3	76.3*	89.5	73.7	23.7	2.6%	15.8	5.3	15.8*	2.6%	0.0	5.3	7.9	
Unemployed	77.8	59.3*	81.5	70.4	25.9	3.7%	18.5	3.7	11.1*	7.4%	3.7	7.4	22.2	
Immigrant	79.4	54.6	85.1	63.1	29.8	2.8%*	13.5	3.5	9.2	2.1%	1.4	2.8	14.9	
Non-immigrant	81.5	53.8	84.6	66.2	21.5	10.8%*	7.7	3.1	4.6	1.5%	3.1	3.1	6.2	
Total	80.1 (165)	54.4 (112)	85.0 (175)	64.1 (132)	27.2 (56)	5.3% (11)	11.7 (24)	3.4 (7)	7.8 (16)	1.9% (4)	1.9 (4)	2.9 (6)	12.1 (25)	