

Racial and Cultural Otherness: The Lived Experience of Americans of Korean Descent

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my mother. I love you, Mom.

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ABSTRACT

In the sociological literature Otherness is conceptualized as a condition of difference that is imposed upon a group of people by another, more powerful group. In this qualitative, phenomenological study, it was determined that Americans of Korean descent do, in fact, experience Otherness and it is an integral part of their identities. However, the experience of Otherness can be divided into two separate but interrelated components: racial Otherness and cultural Otherness. It was also determined that the severity of Otherness experiences was shaped by the contexts of phenotype, socio-geographic location, and childhood.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of Otherness is foreign to most individuals, although many individuals experience its effects within their lifetimes. Otherness is a relatively new concept to sociology. However, it has been discussed widely in the arenas of philosophy (e.g., de Beauvoir, Sartre, Levinas)¹ and, to a lesser extent, psychology (e.g., Lacan).² The initial conception of the Other was a utilitarian one that deemed it necessary for the establishment of one's subjective self by delineating what a person is through establishing what he or she is not. In America, immigrants, racial minorities, ethnic groups, homosexuals, women, and the disabled are Others. In fact, most people are. Arguably, the only group that is not designated Other in America are white, middle class, educated, heterosexual males (Canales 2000). Of course, the severity of one's experience with Otherness depends on how far the individual deviates from this standard.

Perhaps more important than the concept of Other as a noun is Mackey's (1992) conception of Other as a verb. To Other is to designate certain individuals as being different or not belonging to one's group. Canales (2000) goes further and attributes a motivation to Othering: to dominate and subordinate those designated as Other. According to Jamieson and McEvoy (2005), Othering involves defining certain persons or groups as being outside the moral community protected by law. Othering is problematic because it can potentially create conditions favorable for acts of violence

¹ See Simone de Beauvoir's work in "The Second Sex" (1949); Jean Paul Sartre's work in "Critique of Dialectical Reason" (1960) and "Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology" (1943); Emmanuel Levinas' work in "Humanism of the Other" (1972), and "Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence" (1974).

² See Jacques Lacan's work in "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis" (1964).

(e.g., the murder of Vincent Chin)³ and human rights violations (e.g., the persecution of Wen Ho Lee).⁴

The purpose of this study was to determine whether Americans of Korean descent experience Otherness and, if so, how that experience is manifested and shapes self-concept. I chose to research this topic because of my own experiences with Otherness. As a biracial woman of Korean descent, my difference has been a source of pain and confusion for me, particularly during my youth. I wanted to know if this experience was common among other Americans of Korean descent and how a sociological framework might inform this phenomenon.

In this research I found that Americans of Korean descent do experience Otherness, although many are not consciously aware of its presence in their lives. There were two types of Otherness identified in this research: racial and cultural. All of my respondents experienced Otherness to some extent. However, some experienced only one type, while others experienced both simultaneously.

LITERATURE

There is little research on Americans of Korean descent. Most studies focus on either Asian Americans in general or biracial Asians (and in particular, individuals who are white and Asian). Even among the studies of Korean Americans, I was unable to find any that combined all individuals of Korean descent. Furthermore, when specific ethnic groups are examined, researchers tend to examine the experiences of Chinese or Japanese

³ Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was beaten to death by two white men who thought he was Japanese. For more information on the Vincent Chin case, see the documentary: "Vincent Who?" directed by Curtis Chin and Tony Lam of Asian Pacific Americans for Progress 2009.

⁴ Wen Ho Lee, a Chinese American scientist, was falsely accused by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of spying for China. He was imprisoned for nine months although there was no evidence to suggest he had committed a crime (Aoki and Nakanishi 2001; Kawai 2005).

Americans. The results of these studies may not be generalizable to Americans of Korean descent because of the cultural differences between these groups.

Korean Americans are an ethnic subgroup of the larger racial/socio-political category of Asian Americans. When considered against the Chinese and Japanese populations in America, the Korean American community is most heavily composed of relatively recent immigrants (Ishii-Kuntz 1997). As a whole, the Asian American population is much smaller than other population groups due to a series of immigration laws that prohibited Asian immigrants from entering the country (Tamura 2001). While there were Koreans in Hawaii as early as 1903 (Kim 1992), most came after the exclusion acts were abolished in 1965 (Tamura 2001).

The literature does support the idea that Asian Americans, in general, experience Otherness, particularly through the perpetuation of stereotypes. According to Abreu et al. (2003: 694) stereotypes “reflect and perpetuate the notion that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners who forever associate with their countries of origin or descent and can never be completely assimilated into U.S. society.” Korean Americans, as well as other Asian Americans, have been excluded from the definition of what it is to be American. The experience of exclusion is largely a product of the perpetual foreigner stereotype, which is pervasive in the American psyche.

Historically, Asian Americans have been denied the basic rights provided to most Americans. In the post-Civil War period Congress passed the Naturalization Act of 1875 which expanded naturalization and citizenship rights to “non-whites” for the first time in American history (Sohoni 2007). According to Sohoni (2007), in order to deny Asian Americans the right to naturalization, the courts were forced to make the awkward

argument that members of Asian ethnic groups were not "whites" and not "non-whites." In 1922 the Supreme Court definitively ruled in *Ozawa v. United States* that Asian immigrants were neither, and therefore ineligible for citizenship (Aoki and Nakanishi 2001). This ruling denied Asian immigrants the right to become American until the McCarran-Walter Act passed in 1952 (U.S. Department of State 2009).

The question of how to classify Asians in the existing American racial stratification system persists. Many people continue to conceive of race relations in America as a bipolar spectrum where whites are on one end and blacks are on the other. In this conceptual framework, Asian Americans are thought to be located somewhere in the middle. Alcoff (2003) notes that "[t]he hegemony of the black/white paradigm has stymied the development of an adequate account of the diverse racial realities in the U.S. and weakened the general theories of racism which attempt to be truly inclusive" (p. 14).

According to Kim (1999) the geometry of racial hierarchy is not linear but triangular. She argues that whites, through a process of racial triangulation, pit Asian Americans and African Americans against one another to further white interests. Kim conceptualizes racial triangulation as a set of two simultaneous processes: (1) processes of "relative valorization," whereby whites valorize one subordinate group (Asian Americans) relative to another subordinate group (blacks) on cultural/and or racial grounds in order to dominate both groups and (2) processes of "civic ostracism," whereby whites construct Asian Americans as immutably foreign and unable to assimilate with whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership. She uses the case of affirmative action as an example of how this process works. According to Kim, Asian American student and community groups raised

the possibility that schools employed tacit racial quotas to keep Asian American admission rates low and preserve the white demographics of their student bodies when they noticed that increased application rates at several prestigious universities failed to yield comparable increases in admissions rates. White conservatives reframed the issue as a problem stemming from affirmative action programs, thereby transforming the issue of white discrimination into one of black perpetuated “reverse discrimination.”

In addition to struggling against questions of civil rights, Asian Americans also struggled against the segregated institutions of education and marriage. The Asian American battle for desegregation started in 1885, long before the success of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (National Education Association 2008). Asian Americans also had to struggle against laws that criminalized marriage between them and whites. It was not until 1967, that the Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia* declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional (Sohoni 2007). According to Sohoni (2007), the legacy of anti-miscegenation laws was to categorize Asians as racially distinct and unable to assimilate. He notes that, despite being citizens, U.S.-born Asians are grouped together with foreign-born Asians and defined as foreign and fundamentally “un-American.”

According to Canales (2000), individuals or groups are labeled according to perceived differences from the societal norm and are stigmatized for these differences. Through stigmatization, their identity is constructed as Other. Accordingly, Otherness is signified by relational differences when compared to the ‘ordinary’ and ‘natural’ attributes of persons perceived as socially acceptable. In the case of Korean Americans, the group of comparison is white Americans. In an ethnographic study of Asian American high school students, Stacey Lee (1996) reports that Korean immigrant parents

often instructed their children to socialize only with Koreans and "Americans." When asked to define the term American, the Korean students responded in unison with "white!"

In several different studies (Kim 1992; Lee and Vaught 2003; Pyke 2000) Asian-American respondents unilaterally attributed Americanness to being white. Lee and Vaught (2003) implicate the media in the racialization of Americanness. The racialization of Americanness refers to the perceived connection between being white and being American.

Asian Americans, like many other Americans, desire to meet American cultural ideals. When those ideals fall outside of their reach, serious self-definition problems can occur. For instance, white, middle class, nuclear families are the purported norm in America. The media unrealistically portrays these images of family as being the standard. In comparison to what is portrayed, most other families fall short. Pyke (2000) illustrates how damaging the concept of the "normal American family" is to Asian American families. Serious intergenerational conflict occurs in response to the children's perception that their families are dysfunctional. She compared native-born Korean children with American-born ethnic Koreans and found that Korean-born children interpreted parental strictness as evidence of warmth and concern, whereas Korean-American children evaluated their parent's behavior negatively.

Lee and Vaught (2003) used data from two separate studies to illustrate how the media shapes the perceptions of "Americanness" among Asian American females. The first study involved adolescent Hmong girls and the second involved Korean American college students. The teenage girls indicated that they felt that not being white caused

others to view them as not being authentically American. To counteract this perception, they aggressively engaged in Americanizing themselves through the consumption of name-brand clothing and American popular music. They also distanced themselves from recent immigrants, which the author saw as a sign of their internalization of racist discourse. The teenage girls, who were ethnically Hmong, adopted black culture rather than mainstream white culture. The Korean American college students, on the other hand, strived for inclusion in the perceived white mainstream by altering their appearance to seem more westernized. These women differentiated between looking exotic and foreign, the former being the more desirable option.

According to Kim (1992), because of their non-European origin, Asian Americans' differences have been constructed as if they were objectively real. Stanfield (1994) calls this "racialized ethnicity," which he characterizes as the categorization of culturally specific populations by linking phenotypical attributes to traits such as intellectual abilities, moral fiber, and personality. For Asian Americans, racialized ethnicity manifests itself in the "model minority" stereotype, a term popularized in the mid-1960s. The term implies that Asian Americans are not problematic like other minorities and represent a standard which other minorities should strive for (Abreu 2003).

Although the common perception of Asian Americans is that they personify such traits as intelligence, capability, ambition and self-discipline, Asian Americans are also viewed as cunning, sly, selfish, nerdy, and lacking interpersonal warmth and kindness (Maddux et al. 2008). Abreu et al. (2003) notes that, historically, people have used both negative (yellow peril) and positive (model minority) stereotypes to describe Asian

Americans. The "yellow peril" stereotype preceded the model minority stereotype. It involves the perception of Asian Americans as a threat with collective goals to take over the world and/or evil intent toward those outside their groups. Abreu et al. (2003) studied whether old stereotypes associated with the yellow peril view of Asians still affected the formation of social impressions among college undergraduates and found that they did. Maddux et al. (2008: 75) note that "most groups who are stereotyped as competent and cold are socioeconomically or professionally successful minority groups (e.g., Asians, Jewish individuals, and career women in the United States)".

Kawai (2005) also notes that while Asian Americans are supposedly positioned as superior to African Americans through the model minority stereotype, they are still ostracized as immutably foreign in comparison to whites. He illustrates how "people of Asian descent have been treated as 'less American' or 'forever foreigners' who have been subjugated to racially motivated exclusion and discrimination such as the exclusion of Asian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the recent racial profiling case of Wen Ho Lee" (p. 117).

Kim (1992) suggests that Korean Americans are all too aware that they are not fully accepted as Americans. Questions of nativity and loyalty are commonly experienced by individuals of Asian descent. Accordingly, "Korean Americans are not only lumped together with other minorities, but there is also a tendency to treat them as foreigners whose belonging is somewhere other than in America. Korean-Americans are often asked questions like "when are you going 'back' to your country?"(p. 127).

It is against this backdrop that Otherness can be understood. Canales (2000) theorizes that Othering is a dialectical process that can be both inclusionary and

exclusionary. Her conception of inclusionary Othering involves the utilization of power for transformation and coalition building. Canales (2000) conceptualizes this process as a role-taking exercise, wherein one steps into the perspective of the Other to understand the perspective of the marginalized group. It also involves a reconceptualization of difference, in which difference “becomes a ‘tool of creativity’ for exploration, critique, and empowerment” (p. 26). While this aspect of her theory is attractive, the other component of her theory is more in line with my research. In contrast to inclusionary Othering, exclusionary Othering is the use of power to dominate and subordinate Others. The experience of exclusionary Othering can manifest itself in various ways:

- persons from subordinate groups may experience primarily exclusionary Othering without engaging in inclusionary practices (e.g. Asian Americans experience racism and isolate themselves from other groups);
- members of subordinate groups may experience both processes concurrently (e.g., Korean Americans join forces with a minority group, such as Hispanic Americans, to tackle problems they collectively share such as English-only initiatives);
- members of one subordinate group may perpetuate exclusionary Othering, participating in exclusionary acts toward persons from a different subordinate group (e.g., black-Korean tension);
- persons from subordinate groups may experience self-Othering by internalizing the exclusionary Othering perpetuated against them (e.g., Asian Americans attempting to change their looks in order to appear more Americanized);

- members of dominant groups may use both exclusionary and inclusionary Othering (e.g., white Americans befriending members of a minority group, while other dominant group members do not move beyond an awareness of difference); and
- some members of subordinate groups may not perceive themselves as Other and may not be aware of the influence Othering has on their lives (e.g., Asian Americans denying the experience of discrimination or Othering).

Several strategies have been identified as typically used among Asian Americans to deal with Othering. One strategy was to associate exclusively with other Asians (Oyserman and Sakamoto 1997). Sears et al. (2003) found that ethnic groups show substantial in-group preference in their closest friends. In an effort to understand in-group preferences, Riley (2003), a high school principal, examined the reasons behind the self-imposed segregation of Chinese-American students at her school and found that Chinese American students grouped together because they craved “sameness.” Apparently associating with individuals outside of their race heightened a feeling of difference and did not make them feel as comfortable as when they were with individuals of their own race. The second strategy identified by Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997) was the exact opposite strategy—to befriend non-Asians. The third strategy was to distance oneself from other Asians and perceived Asian activities. Both strategies suggest that the minority group attempts to conform and to assimilate with the dominant group. In Chen’s (1999) model, it is known as *denial*. Denial involves the rejection of either the existence of stereotypes or their applicability to oneself. Kim (1992) indicates that many Asian Americans go through a denial stage, in which they identify with whites and internalize

white societal values and standards. This causes Korean Americans to see themselves through the eyes of white society and, in many cases, make negative appraisals of themselves or Korean Americans as a group (Kim 1992). According to Kim (1992), some Korean Americans are even unaware that they are Korean due to their upbringing in an exclusively white environment. A related strategy observed by Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997) was to avoid the use of Asian language or the observance of Asian customs in the presence of whites. This emerges from a sense of shame and a desire to avoid calling attention to one's differences. A final strategy that Chen (1999) discovered was called *compensation*. This strategy involved meeting hegemonic ideals head on. It is a defiant stance where the individual refuses to become the stereotype. Chen provided the example of a man who overcame the stereotype of academic overachiever by excelling in athletics.

Although most people view race as a real natural category, the prevailing theories about race emphasize racial identities as both fluid and socially constructed. Race identity is viewed as being determined through a process of negotiation between the observer and the observed. Harris and Sim (2002), citing Nagel (1994), observed that expressed ethnic identity involves negotiation between internal and external opinions and processes. Accordingly “in different settings, traits such as phenotype, ancestry, and culture are differently and differentially privileged as criteria for identifying one's race. Thus, as social composition, racial ideology, and knowledge about an individual can vary across contexts, there is the potential for variation in internal, external, and expressed identities, and their relationships to one another” (Harris and Sim 2002: 615).

Sears and his colleagues (2003) examined Asian and Hispanic immigrant use of pan-ethnic or ethnic labels to identify themselves. While blacks and whites uniformly use

pan-ethnic labels and Hispanic students increasingly label themselves this way, Asian Americans are reluctant to use a pan-ethnic label. Even after four years of exposure to “an ethnically conscious” and “politicized campus,” Asian Americans still failed to spontaneously use the pan-ethnic label to self-identify. The researchers attribute this to incomplete assimilation, such as not speaking English at home and reinforcement by the presence of fellow ethnics in their schools.

Harris and Sim (2002) used data from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health* to examine how biracial youths identify themselves. They note that, unlike white/black and white/Native American youths, white/Asian youth are equally likely to identify with their white and nonwhite heritages when asked to choose a single race, which, they say, “supports the hypothesis that the relatively small social distance between whites and Asians provides white/Asian youth with the freedom to choose between mono-racial identities in contexts where a multiracial identity is unacceptable” (p. 622). They also noted that, for white/Asian youth, living in a predominately white neighborhood significantly increased the probability that they identify as white. They warn other researchers that their study was limited to youth and therefore cannot be used to make inferences about the fluidity of race for other age groups.

Khanna (2004) provides information about how adults self-identify. She utilizes the theoretical framework of reflected appraisals to examine how individuals of Asian and European descent identify themselves. She found that phenotype and cultural exposure were the major determinants in this process of identification. Respondents based their identity on how they thought others viewed them racially and culturally.

There is a dearth of research on Korean American identity. The only substantive work that I could find was a doctoral thesis by Myoung-Hye Kim, which I rely on heavily for comparisons in my analysis. According to Kim (1992), one's ethnicity is continuously being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in response to different situations. She says that, Korean-Americans have a "pasted" identity, which she describes as a hybridized form of identity that (1) appropriates from more than one culture, (2) questions authenticity, and (3) brings the past culture of origin to the present American context. She says that "pasted identity resists the logic of binary exclusion of 'either/or.' Instead, it enables us to think about ethnic identity holistically as both Korean and American at the same time to recognize its 'new' form because it is neither Korean nor American" (p. 177). Korean-Americans, according to Kim, have both Korean and American elements in their identity, which are influenced by their unique positions in terms of class, gender, length of stay in America, age, family upbringing, and educational background.

Kim (1992) argues Korean-Americans are aware that they are not fully accepted as American and are often viewed together with other Asian-Americans. However, she notes that most Korean Americans do not even realize they are minorities. Kim's (1992) interviewees associated the term "minority" with blacks and Hispanics who they see as less privileged and systematically oppressed. She notes that, although Asians are minorities, they are excluded from the benefits of minority membership because society does not believe Asian Americans need institutionalized support. This is a danger, because, as Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997:449) point out, those who are "insensitive to the possibility that being Asian may be a barrier for success may be less likely to see

structural disadvantage when it exists and may unnecessarily blame themselves for failures and setbacks, increasing the risk of negative mental health outcomes”. Kim (1992) suggests that most Korean Americans attributed society’s rejection to a weak connection to American history given Koreans’ short immigration history. She says that this “missing link to American history makes Korean-Americans feel that they do not have preemptive rights as Americans like whites, especially Anglo-Saxons” (p.138).

Kim cites Jean Kim (1981), who asserts that Asian American identity emerges as a reaction to white racism. She outlines five stages of Asian American identity development.

- 1) *Ethnic Awareness* - when a child is approximately 3 to 4 years old and becomes aware that she or he is different from whites.
- 2) *White Identification* - when a child enters elementary school. At this stage, the individual internalizes white societal values and sees him or herself through the eyes of white society. The child realizes difference carries a negative valuation.
- 3) *Awakening to Social Political Consciousness* - when the individual realizes she or he is a minority and is not personally responsible for the minority status. At this stage, the child questions and reassesses white values and standards.
- 4) *Redirection to Asian American Consciousness* - when individuals actively develop Asian-American identity and recognize the bicultural nature of his or her identity. At this stage, he or she tends to relate more to other Asian Americans.
- 5) *Incorporation* - when the individual is finally able to relate to many groups without losing her or his own identity as Asian-Americans.

While Jean Kim’s (1981) work is thought-provoking and has valid elements, her

sample was composed of third generation Japanese American women. Therefore, her work may not be generalizable to Korean Americans or Asian American men.

Kim (1992) advocates for the invention of a collective voice in American cultural politics and the sharing of stories to establish a 'community of memory' for future generations. She cites Takaki's (1990: 226) assertion that, "In America, whites' meta-narratives of progress, civilization and American democracy, which have justified their oppression of non-whites with their sovereign status, have been the dominant and ruling narratives ever since they landed their foot on this soil". She cites Kim and Huhr (1983), who state that mainstream meta-narratives paint pictures of Korean Americans succeeding at achieving the American dream but fail to mention how many Korean Americans are only able to do so through self-employment and self-sacrifice. Kim (1992) says that Others' susceptibility to mainstream meta-narratives derives from their oppressed status, illiteracy in English language, and lack of access to representation. In this way, "they became objects of the whites' narratives rather than becoming subject in their own story telling" (p. 227).

The review of the literature that exists on Americans of Korean descent, while limited, nonetheless suggests that many pervasive stereotypes exist and shape the experiences of this group of Americans. It is my hope that through my research I am able to paint a more accurate picture of my participants' experiences and perhaps break down some of the misconceptions mainstream society may hold about Americans of Korean descent. My primary research questions include: 1) how do Americans of Korean descent experience Otherness? 2) what contexts shape the experience of Otherness? and 3) are the identities of Americans of Korean descent built on a sense of Otherness? In the

following section I describe the design of the study I used to answer these guiding research questions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Cresswell (2007) states that a researcher should use a qualitative design for topics where theories are not readily available to explain the behavior of participants or the population of study, and theories need to be developed. Due to the complexity of the concept of Otherness and the dearth of research on the actual, lived experience of Otherness, I found a qualitative design most appropriate for my research. I chose a phenomenological design because I wanted to describe the lived experiences of individuals who had undergone feelings of Otherness. Because individuals can only observe phenomenon through their own subjective perspective, there is no way for an individual to objectively perceive reality. The aim of phenomenology is to use multiple perspectives to come to a consensus on the reality of a given phenomenon.

To come to a consensus on the meaning and experience of a phenomenon, one must engage others in conversation. According to Somers (1994), it is through the use of narratives that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and constitute our social identities. As such “ontological narratives process events into episodes. People act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives - however fragmented, contradictory, or partial” (p. 618). Narratives essentially provide points of reference to compare one’s own experience against. As a woman of Korean descent, I personally found the stories of the individual participants in my research to be comforting because they reinforced my own reality. I

hope that, should other Americans of Korean descent read this work, they too will feel a sense of empowerment and validation. Like those theorists that counter the dominant white, male perspective in social science theory, my goal with this work was to transform the devalued traits of Otherness into a newly esteemed ideal of selfhood and normalized social action (Somers 1994).

In order to perform a phenomenological analysis, the researcher has to suspend all of his or her preconceived notions about the topic at hand. Although I have lived the experience of being “Other,” I cannot use my own experiences to color the experiences of my respondents or see their reality through my own point of view. Prior to the data collection stage, I “bracketed” my experiences with otherness to make myself aware of the potential biases or assumptions I had as a researcher that could have impacted my interpretation of the data. This is a traditional practice in phenomenology. Husserl, the man who created the phenomenological approach, called it “epoche.”

Data Collection

I elicited narratives, primarily, in the form of open-ended surveys, but I also used three in-depth interviews in my analysis. In the case of the surveys, I emailed them to my respondents as an attachment. The completed questionnaires were then submitted to me through e-mail as well. I conducted five interviews in total, but ended up discarding two because the individuals did not qualify for the study. With the interviews, I never directly engaged the participants in a discussion of Otherness until after the interviews were concluded because I did not wish to influence conceptions of Otherness. One of the interviews I used was conducted over the phone and the other two were conducted at local eateries because I wanted to interview my participants in a neutral setting.