

2

The disaggregation of qualitative data can provide a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within the Asian American student population.

Disaggregating Qualitative Data from Asian American College Students in Campus Racial Climate Research and Assessment

Samuel D. Museus, Kimberly A. Truong

Consider three scenarios:

- A higher education policymaker conducts an empirical analysis of Asian American college students' academic achievement, comparing that group to black, Latina/o, and white students, and concludes that Asian Americans are succeeding at higher rates than any other group in the nation.
- A researcher conducts a study of the experiences of Asian American college students. Her sample consists of fifty students, forty-five of whom are from middle-class East Asian backgrounds.
- An assessment specialist is hired to conduct a qualitative campus climate assessment at a prestigious predominantly white university. All of his interview participants are Asian American undergraduate volunteers who belong to an advocacy group focused on fostering cultural awareness.

All three of these scenarios constitute examples of how researchers can fail to take into account the diversity that exists within the Asian American student population. As a result, the researchers risk perpetuating common misperceptions of Asian Americans as a monolithic group, excluding the voices

of subgroups within the Asian American population, and overlooking critical challenges that a substantial number of Asian American students face.

This chapter highlights the utility of disaggregating qualitative research and assessment data on Asian American college students. Given the complexity of and diversity within the Asian American population, scholars have begun to underscore the importance of disaggregating data in the empirical examination of Asian Americans, but most of those discussions have been limited to considerations in analyzing quantitative data (see, for example, Museus, 2009; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi and others, 2004). In this chapter, using data from a qualitative study of campus climate, we explicate how the disaggregation and critical analysis of data can be an important consideration in qualitative examinations of the experiences of Asian American college students.

Asian American College Students' Experiences with Campus Racial Climates

The literature is clear and consistent in indicating that campus climates play a major role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of college students of color. Dissatisfaction with campus racial climates and experiences with racial prejudice and discrimination on college campuses have all been associated with a decreased sense of belonging, lower levels of institutional attachment, and a decreased likelihood of persistence among racial/ethnic minority students (Cabrera and others, 1999; Eimers and Pike, 1997; Feagin, Vera, and Imani, 1996; Harper and Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Museus, Nichols, and Lambert, 2008; Nora and Cabrera, 1996; Pasarella and Terenzini, 2005).

With regard to Asian American students, research indicates that campus environments might pose salient challenges, although results with regard to the magnitude of those challenges are somewhat mixed. For example, Harper and Hurtado (2007) concluded that Asian Americans were generally satisfied with their college experiences relative to other racial/ethnic minority groups; other studies have revealed that Asian American students face salient difficulties within the environments of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Johnson and others, 2007; Kotori and Malaney, 2003; Lewis, Chesler, and Forman, 2000; Museus, 2007, 2008; Rankin and Reason, 2005). More empirical research is needed to clarify these discrepancies; moreover, the urgency of understanding how Asian Americans experience campus environments is underscored by evidence that Asian American undergraduates' negative perceptions of campus climates are associated with problematic psychosocial conditions such as depression (Cress and Ikeda, 2003).

Indeed, although research that is specifically focused on the experiences of Asian American college students is sparse, the vast majority of it that does exist on this topic highlights the unwelcoming environments, prevalent racism, and pressure resulting from racial stereotypes that this population faces (Lewis, Chesler, and Forman, 2000; Museus, 2007, 2008).

Kotori and Malaney (2003), for example, concluded that Asian American students did not feel as safe and experienced more instances of racism than their white peers did. In addition, Museus (2008) has demonstrated that racial academic stereotypes can cause Asian Americans to disengage from learning processes and avoid interaction with key institutional agents both in and out of the classrooms. As we discuss in the next section, researchers have also begun to compare experiences with campus climates across race in higher education.

Variation in Perceptions of and Experiences Within Campus Racial Climates

Although it is clear that campus environments play an important role in shaping the college experiences of all racial populations, it is also apparent that students from different racial groups experience the same environments in disparate ways. A substantial body of evidence, for example, indicates that, in general, students of color perceive campus racial climates to be more hostile than their white counterparts do (Loo and Rolison, 1986; Hurtado, 1992; D'Augelli and Hershberger, 1993; Nora and Cabrera, 1996; Cabrera and others, 1999; Rankin and Reason, 2005). Moreover, researchers have found that campus climates exert different influences on the adjustment and persistence of various racial groups (Cabrera and others, 1999; Museus, Nichols, and Lambert, 2008; Nora and Cabrera, 1996). Whereas campus environments exhibit differential influences across various racial populations in college, scholarly research highlighting within-race differences in perceptions of and experiences within campus environments is hard to find.

Higher education researchers have begun to underscore the importance of examining within-race heterogeneity (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper and Nichols, 2008; Torres, 2003). For example, Guiffrida (2003) reported that African American student organizations played a critical role in the experiences of African American students who came from predominantly black high schools, but actually created challenges for their same-race peers from predominantly white high schools because those students were forced to function in predominantly African American institutional subcultures for the first time. Thus, a few studies have begun to bring attention to examining within-race heterogeneity, but research exploring this phenomenon within the Asian American college student population is virtually nonexistent.

In the following sections, we offer an example of a qualitative investigation that is focused on campus climate. In this study, data were disaggregated by race and further disaggregated by high school racial composition in order to better understand how Asian American college students from the same race and different precollege communities can experience the same college environments in different ways. This example underscores the importance of analyzing within-race differences among Asian American students when conducting qualitative inquiries. Then we discuss the implications of

considering within-race heterogeneity in qualitative research and assessment on Asian American college students.

Purpose of the Campus Climate Study

We conducted this analysis using data from a larger campus climate study that was conducted at a PWI to understand how racial/ethnic minority undergraduates experienced the environments at that institution. We extracted twelve Asian American students from the research project participant sample and examined interviews with these students to understand the differences in perceptions of and experiences within the same campus environments between students who attended predominantly white high schools (WHSs) and predominantly minority high schools (MHSs). The following overarching question guided this inquiry: How do Asian American undergraduates experience the campus environments of a PWI? Three additional questions were explored in the investigation: (1) How do Asian American college students perceive institutional diversity at the PWI? (2) How do Asian American undergraduates perceive the campus racial climate at the institution? (3) How do those perceptions differ between Asian American students from WHSs and MHSs?

Executing the Campus Climate Study

The campus racial climate study explored here was aimed at understanding the experiences of students of color at a PWI. For the purposes of this chapter, we analyzed the experiences of the Asian American undergraduate participants in the climate investigation in order to discover and examine the ways in which those experiences varied across groups from different pre-college communities. In this section, we discuss aspects of the original climate study and the procedures that we employed to execute the analysis.

Participant Sample Selection. During the planning of the larger campus climate study, purposeful sampling was used to yield participants who could provide valuable insight into the environments of their campus and differed on a wide range of characteristics. Administrators were asked to refer undergraduates who had been at the university for at least one year, held positions of leadership or dedicated at least five hours each week to a registered student organization on campus, and varied on a wide range of attributes, including sex, year in college, student organization type, and communities of origin. From the final research project sample of thirty participants, we extracted the twelve interviews conducted with Asian American students to analyze their narratives.

Data Collection Techniques. The data collection consisted of conducting sixty- to ninety-minute individual, face-to-face interviews with each participant. A semi-structured approach was employed throughout the interview process to allow the emergence of unexpected themes (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Ten questions were asked during the interview pro-

cess, and the researcher probed for in-depth elaboration on the answers provided and emerging themes that the participants identified. The interviewer began by soliciting participants' descriptions of their precollege communities and then proceeded with a series of questions about those students' perceptions of the environments on their campus.

Data Analysis Procedures. The interviews were professionally transcribed and organized in the NVivo Qualitative Software Research Package. Because the purpose of this analysis was to understand how Asian American students' experiences were conditional on the precollege communities from which they came, the participants were divided into two categories: six WHS students and six MHS students. Then open and axial coding procedures were used to identify invariant constituents across the interview transcripts, which allowed the identification of three points of divergence between the two groups in the data and the development of an understanding regarding how participants' experiences varied across the two groups within those three themes.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance. Methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) were used to enhance trustworthiness of the findings. First, to ensure the convergence of multiple sources of data, the researchers triangulated data from interview transcripts, code reports, textural-structural descriptions, and researcher notes toward the end of cross-checking and verifying emergent themes. Second, member checks were conducted with four of the twelve participants to maximize congruence between researchers' interpretations of the data and students' perceptions of their own experiences. Third, discrepant data were sought and examined throughout data collection and analysis to question theoretical presuppositions and help identify and consider alternative hypotheses. Finally, the lead researcher engaged in discussions with two non-Asian American peer debriefers about the interpretation of the qualitative data. Because the two researchers are Asian American, debriefing with non-Asian American peers was intended to facilitate consideration of alternative interpretations of the interview data.

Findings from the Campus Climate Study

The experiences of Asian American students originating from WHSs and MHSs varied in three ways: differences in overall satisfaction with the institutional climate, the salience of prejudice and discrimination in the college experience, and students' reactions to prevalent racial stereotyping.

Varying Levels of Satisfaction with the Campus Racial Climate. Participants in both the WHS and MHS groups differed in their overall levels of satisfaction with the racial climate of their campus. In particular, when asked about how satisfied they were with the racial climates at their institution, the students from WHSs provided more satisfactory appraisals than their MHS peers did. Indeed, students from MHSs generally described the campus racial

climates of the PWI as more unwelcoming and less safe than their WHS peers did. One MHS student, for example, said:

In terms of race relations, it really sucks here. Every year, we have to have at least one or two racial incidents. I'm sure there are hate crimes. I know there is property damage and racial slurs. If you're a student of color, you may not adjust very well here. . . . I really wouldn't recommend coming here.

MHS students were also more likely to report that the negative climate was associated with their experiencing adjustment difficulties.

Participants from the WHS group reported more positive appraisals of the campus climate of the university. One student from this group explained that she generally felt the climate at the university was warm and welcoming:

I like how everyone's really friendly to each other, because I know that was one of the factors that made me choose the university. When I came here for the campus tours, everyone was just really nice, and they're all very open in general. I can't say that for everyone, but a lot of people are very open and very friendly. That's one of the reasons why I came here . . . because I like the environment.

Differences in the Salience of Racial Prejudice and Discrimination. Although participants from both groups acknowledged that racial prejudice and discrimination exist on their campus to some extent, participants from MHSs were more likely to stress the salience of prejudice and discrimination on campus than their WHS peers did. A participant from the WHS group, for example, said that she encountered racism on campus but that it did not affect her much because she had learned to deal with it:

The university is still majority white. So, here or there, you might face racism. I've come across different instances where, you know, racist remarks have been made, but you kind of just deal with it.

Although racism appeared to play a minimal role, at least consciously, in that student's life, a student from the MHS group provides a stark contrast in the prevalent racial prejudice and discrimination found at the PWI:

Institutionally, this university is racist. . . . Do you really want to be called nigger or chink or something like that in the middle of the night and have no one do anything about it? Would you feel safe walking home? And, when there is a murder, and it's hardly reported on by the university. There's like one official statement in one article published online. The university has to do more than that if it's really committed to diversity.

Differential Reactions to Racial Stereotypes. Students from the MHS and WHS groups acknowledged the existence of racial stereotyping on cam-

pus. They described many pervasive stereotypes of Asian Americans, such as assumptions that they are math and science majors, computer nerds, all Chinese, unable to speak English, and exotic. The most common stereotype was the model minority myth: the assumption that all Asians and Asian Americans achieve universal and unparalleled academic success. The WHS students were less conscious of the stereotypes and tended to rationalize or downplay their significance. One WHS participant, for instance, explained that she knew the model minority stereotype existed on campus but did not believe it affected her experience: “The typical stereotypes exist on campus, like ‘she probably does well in school and is good in math,’ but I think that those are the assumptions of every Asian. I don’t feel that they affect me personally.” This response does not mean that racial stereotypes did not influence her experiences. Indeed, internalized stereotypes can subconsciously shape an individual’s behavior. Nevertheless, she did not notice any impact of stereotypes on her experiences.

While participants from WHSs were more likely to believe that racial stereotyping did not affect them, students from MHSs were more likely to indicate that stereotypes had a greater impact on their experiences. Specifically, they reported feeling substantial pressure from stereotypes. One MHS participant, for example, said that the pressure to conform to the model minority myth inhibited her willingness to seek help from her professors:

I know that when I’m not doing well in a class, I don’t want go talk to my professor. They encourage us and they’re like, “Come talk to us, and we’ll help you through this and that.” I’m just thinking that they’re just going to think I’m stupid. Especially since I’m Asian, they’re going to be like, “Okay, well, Asian students are supposed to do well.” And I’m not doing well, so I don’t fit that majority.

Lessons Learned

The analysis of disaggregated qualitative data yields insights into experiences that would have gone uncovered if the students had been analyzed as one monolithic group. These lessons are associated with considerations that are important in conducting future research and assessment with Asian American students, including research and assessment specific to campus climate, as well as the systematic examination of other phenomena related to Asian Americans. The overarching message conveyed in this section is that scholars and administrators conducting research and assessment must consider within-race diversity in order to develop a more intricate and accurate understanding of their Asian American students’ experiences. It is within this context that we offer the following recommendations:

- *Be critical of aggregated educational research and assessment data.* First and foremost, researchers and evaluators should use caution when analyzing

and presenting aggregated data. Although the aggregation of data is common practice in qualitative and quantitative research and assessment, it is clear that the failure to critically analyze and consider the nuances within those data can lead to the formation and perpetuation of overgeneralizations, such as in the case of frequently cited oversimplified data that help perpetuate common misconceptions about Asian Americans' academic achievement (see, for example, Chapter One, this volume). Researchers and evaluators therefore should always inquire whether their findings are conditional on particular characteristics, such as precollege communities, as in this case. Critical inquiry and analysis is important in developing a complex, comprehensive understanding of the phenomena and the participants under investigation.

- *Consider the many facets of diversity within race.* The analysis in this chapter is aimed at understanding variation in perceptions of and experiences within the campus climates of a PWI across students from high schools of varying racial composition. In addition, many other differences exist within this population, including substantial variation in ethnic, socio-economic, generational, and racial/ethnic identity. If higher education scholars, administrators, and institutional researchers hope to maximize their knowledge of which populations experience specific institutional environments in particular ways, they must acknowledge, understand, and consider these forms of diversity within the Asian American population, as well as other racial and ethnic groups.
- *Examine within-race variation using quantitative and qualitative methods.* Although researchers have begun to use quantitative data to analyze the differences across Asian American subgroups, qualitative studies using the same disaggregating approach are difficult to find. Indeed, several scholars have begun to disaggregate large-scale quantitative data sets to analyze the diversity within the Asian American population and demystify common stereotypes (for example, Chang and others, 2007; Hune, 2002; Museus, 2009; Teranishi, 2007; Teranishi and others, 2004). Although these studies have made a critical contribution, they have only scratched the surface in terms of helping to develop a comprehensive understanding of Asian Americans in higher education. The utility of disaggregated quantitative data is limited, and disaggregated qualitative data are necessary to identify variation in the experiences of Asian American subpopulations. Both quantitative and qualitative research highlighting diverse experiences and outcomes among Asian Americans is critical to developing a nuanced understanding of this population.
- *Simultaneously consider differences within and commonalities across race.* The differences that emerged across students from MHSs and WHSs might exist within other racial and ethnic groups as well. Indeed, evidence confirms considerable cultural diversity within other racial populations (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper and Nichols, 2008; Torres, 2003), but understandings of those differences are limited. Thus, it is critical that

future research and assessment include explorations of within-race diversity among other racial populations as well.

Although we often think of students from disparate racial backgrounds as being different in their perceptions and experiences, and evidence generally supports this conceptualization, the reality is that individuals from two different races can sometimes be more similar to one another than students from the same racial group. Much like the Latina/o students studied by Torres (2003), the Asian American participants in this analysis were more likely to encounter noticeable difficulties in the environments of a PWI if they had previously attended predominantly minority high schools. It is possible, therefore, that Asian American, black, and Latina/o students who grow up attending predominantly white high schools and predominantly white K–12 schools have much in common with one another and less in common with same-race peers from predominantly minority neighborhoods and K–12 schools. Thus, it is important for higher education researchers and evaluators to keep in mind that in addition to race, these other factors, such as socioeconomic status and communities of origin, are deeply embedded in the identities of Asian American college students.

References

- Cabrera, A., and others. "Campus Racial Climate and the Adjustment of Students to College: A Comparison Between White Students and African-American Students." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1999, 70(2), 134–160.
- Chang, M., and others. *Beyond Myths: The Growth and Diversity of Asian American College Freshmen, 1971–2005*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 2007.
- Cress, C., and Ikeda, E. "Distress Under Duress: The Relationship Between Campus Climate and Depression in Asian American College Students." *NASPA Journal*, 2003, 40(2), 74–97.
- D'Augelli, A., and Hershberger, S. "African American Undergraduates on a Predominantly White Campus: Academic Factors, Social Networks, and Campus Climate." *Journal of Negro Education*, 1993, 62(1), 67–81.
- Eimers, M., and Pike, G. "Minority and Nonminority Adjustment to College: Differences or Similarities?" *Research in Higher Education*, 1997, 38(1), 77–97.
- Feagin, J., Vera, H., and Imani, N. *The Agony of Education: Black Students at White Colleges and Universities*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Guiffrida, D. "African American Student Organizations as Agents of Social Integration." *Journal of College Student Development*, 2003, 44(3), 304–319.
- Harper, S., and Hurtado, S. "Nine Themes in Campus Racial Climates and Implications for Institutional Transformation." In S. Harper and L. Patton (eds.), *Responding to the Realities of Race on College Campuses*. New Directions for Student Services, no. 120. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Harper, S., and Nichols, A. "Are They Not All the Same? Racial Heterogeneity Among Black Male Undergraduates." *Journal of College Student Development*, 2008, 49(3), 247–269.
- Holstein, J., and Gubrium, J. *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1995.
- Hune, S. "Demographics and Diversity of Asian American College Students." In M. K. McEwen and others (eds.), *Working with Asian American College Students*. New Directions for Student Services, no. 97. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

- Hurtado, S. "The Campus Racial Climate: Contexts of Conflict." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1992, 63(5), 539–569.
- Hurtado, S., and Carter, D. "Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latina/o College Students' Sense of Belonging." *Sociology of Education*, 1997, 70, 324–345.
- Johnson, D., and others. "Examining a Sense of Belonging Among First-Year Undergraduates from Different Racial/Ethnic Groups." *Journal of College Student Development*, 2007, 48(5), 525–542.
- Kotori, C., and Malaney, G. "Asian American Students' Perceptions of Racism, Reporting Behaviors, and Awareness of Legal Rights and Procedures." *NASPA Journal*, 2003, 40(3), 56–76.
- Lewis, A., Chesler, M., and Forman, T. "The Impact of 'Colorblind' Ideologies on Students of Color: Intergroup Relations at a Predominantly White University." *Journal of Negro Education*, 2000, 69(1/2), 74–91.
- Lincoln, Y., and Guba, E. "But Is It Rigorous? Trustworthiness and Authenticity in Naturalistic Evaluation." In D. Williams (ed.), *Naturalistic Evaluation*. New Directions for Program Evaluation, no. 30. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986.
- Loo, C., and Rolison, G. "Alienation of Ethnic Minority Students at a Predominantly White University." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1986, 57(1), 58–77.
- Museus, S. D. "Using Qualitative Methods to Assess Diverse Institutional Cultures." In S. Harper and S. Museus (eds.), *Using Qualitative Methods in Institutional Assessment*. New Directions for Institutional Research, no. 136. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Museus, S. D. "The Model Minority and Inferior Minority Myths: Stereotypes and Their Implications for Student Learning." *About Campus*, 2008, 13(3), 2–8.
- Museus, S. D. "A Critical Analysis of the Exclusion of Asian American from Higher Education Research and Discourse." In L. Zhan (ed.), *Asian American Voices: Engaging, Empowering, Enabling* (pp. 59–76). New York: NLN Press, 2009.
- Museus, S. D., Nichols, A., and Lambert, A. "Racial Differences in the Effects of Campus Racial Climate on Degree Completion: A Structural Model." *Review of Higher Education*, 2008, 32(1), 107–134.
- Nora, A., and Cabrera, A. "The Role of Perceptions of Prejudice and Discrimination on the Adjustment of Minority Students to College." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1996, 67, 119–148.
- Pascarella, E., and Terenzini, P. *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- Rankin, S., and Reason, R. "Differing Perceptions: How Students of Color and White Students Perceive Campus Climate for Underrepresented Groups." *Journal of College Student Development*, 2005, 46(1), 43–61.
- Teranishi, R. "Race, Ethnicity, and Higher Education Policy: The Use of Critical Quantitative Research." In F. Stage (ed.), *Using Quantitative Data to Answer Critical Questions*. New Directions for Institutional Research, no. 133. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Teranishi, R., and others. "The College-Choice Process for Asian Pacific Americans: Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Class in Context." *Review of Higher Education*, 2004, 27(4), 527–551.
- Torres, V. "Mi Casa Is Not Exactly Like Your House." *About Campus*, 2003, 8(2), 2–7.

SAMUEL D. MUSEUS is assistant professor of higher education and Asian American studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

KIMBERLY A. TRUONG is a doctoral candidate in higher education at the University of Pennsylvania.