

## **Do You See Us?: Belongingness Experiences of Asian Americans in Senior Leadership**

### **Positions in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**

Kimberly A. Truong, Ph.D. (She/Hers)

Sumun L. Pendakur, Ed.D. (She/Hers)

Ria DasGupta, Ed.D. (She/Hers)

### **Abstract**

In this chapter we discuss our racialized and gendered experiences as Asian Americans navigating senior leadership positions in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in higher education. The statistics show that Asian Americans are the most underrepresented racial group in middle and upper management positions. We discuss how anti-Asian racism during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond has shed light on the realities that we know all too well – that we are minoritized. We highlight our personal narratives of the common experiences we have encountered in our roles as EDI officers, as well as the complexities associated with being in spaces where the very racism we experience is related to us not being seen as people of color. Essentially, we are sometimes seen as interlopers in a world where we have distinct knowledge of the nuances of how racism and other forms of oppression impact various communities. Although Asian Americans in the EDI space are sometimes seen as interlopers or imposters, the co-authors will demonstrate how our distinct knowledge of the nuances of how racism and other forms of oppression impact various communities shows up powerfully in our choices and in our work.

### **Introduction**

In April 2021, shortly after the heinous murder of Asian massage workers in Atlanta, following more than a year of heightened violence against people of Asian descent, the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) and the Association of College and University Housing Officers (ACUHO) hosted a joint webinar on “Recent Incidents of Racially-Motivated Bias, Violence, and Hate against Asian Americans.” During that webinar, a poll conducted of the nearly 300 attendees indicated that 84% of their institutions had issued a statement and 67% of their campuses had created community dialogue spaces. However, only 2% of institutions had allocated additional funding to Asian affinity spaces or invested in Asian American Studies Programs, and only 3% had increased their recruitment of hiring of Asian faculty

## Chapter 14

and staff, with 7% of participants reporting that their campus had taken no steps whatsoever. The *EdTrust West* (2021) poignantly names how Asian Americans, historically and contemporarily, are rendered invisible in the broader discourse and practice on race and racism. As co-authors of this chapter, we are writing it in the shadow of the mass killings in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay, California, during the auspicious time of Lunar New Year. We wonder: What will change and when?

### **Asian Americans and Leadership in Higher Education**

Within the higher education setting, research shows that Asian Americans are underrepresented in leadership positions. Turner (2007) found that only 0.5% (half of a percent) of all college presidents were Asian American women. Hartlep, Ball, Theodosopoulos, Wells, and Morgan (2016) examined endowed professorships in education and found that while Asian Americans were overrepresented in faculty (10% vs. 5.8% of the population), they were again severely underrepresented at the endowed professorship level. Only 2.2% of endowed professors were Asian American and 1.1% were Asian American women. To be clear, this overrepresentation in the Education faculty body is not spread across disciplines and is certainly not true when the genders and ethnicities of Asian American professors are disaggregated (Kim & Cooc, 2021).

Turner (2007) attributes the lack of representation of Asian American women in leadership to their racialized experiences as they are seen not to “fit” others’ expectations of what a leader embodies based on cultural differences. These individuals’ experiences with microaggressions are corroborated in more recent studies, such as Bain and Company’s (Venkataraman & Yee, 2022) survey of 10,000 employees worldwide. Out of all racial groups, Asians felt the lowest levels of inclusion and belonging in the workplace, experienced microaggressions, and encountered

institutionalized racism in the form of the “bamboo ceiling” which hinders their career advancement to leadership positions.

Data on the representation of Asian Americans in Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) roles in higher education is not readily available. Less than 3% of CDOs are Asian Americans (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 37). The three of us have had a number of conversations regarding our challenges and opportunities navigating academia and the profession as Asian American women leaders in the CDO space. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach (Chang, 2008), we made sense of our racialized and gendered experiences in higher education. While finding ways to thrive in our respective environments, all three of us have received implicit as well as explicit messages that we did not belong in these spaces.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Model Minority Myth and the Myth of the Forever Foreigner**

Before entering our autoethnographic space, it must be said that it is difficult to understand the experiences of Asian Americans without complex insight into two myths that serve as hegemonic frames, the “model minority” myth and the myth of the “forever foreigner” that shapes perceptions and treatment of Asian Americans. As Kim (1999) eloquently wrote, Asian Americans have been racially triangulated vis-à-vis Black and White people (and the constructs of Blackness and Whiteness). In the American racial project, “racialization processes are mutually constitutive of one another and...they unfold along more than one dimension or scale at a time” (Kim, 1999, p. 106). Meaning, Asian Americans are not simply NOT White or NOT Black; but rather, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Words matter and we were deliberate in our choice of Asian American, versus Asian or AAPI or APIDA. To be Asian in America, immigrant or 4th generation, is to be shaped by historical and political structures at play every day, that render us uniquely Asian American—a sociopolitical term meant to tie together experiences and build coalitions. While the term has its own limitations, the three of us resonate with it for many reasons and chose to use it. We specifically did not use aggregate terms like AAPI or APIDA because we are not referencing Pacific Islanders and did not want to contribute to their systematic erasure that is ever-present. We did not use APIDA because, as two of the co-authors are Desi/Indian American, we feel that Desi is inhered within being Asian American and we want to fully claim our space in that complex, yet meaningful, pan-ethnic identity.

## Chapter 14

construction of Asian Americans is in conversation and interplay with the construction and interpretation of other races. In addition, Asian American racial positionality has also been co-constructed with regards to Asian utility to the labor needs of American capitalism and the vagaries of American imperialism (Hua & Junn, 2021; Junn, 2007).

Simply defined, the model minority trope positions Asian Americans as homogeneously successful, without any nuanced understanding of disaggregated data, generational difference, selective immigration, war trauma and displacement, refugee experiences, or the politics of over-versus under-representation. Through deliberate erasure of history and Asian American heterogeneity, the image of the smart, capable, wealthy, unproblematic Asian has been cultivated. And that image is successfully deployed against other minoritized groups, particularly African Americans. The anti-Blackness inherent within the model minority trope is a key function, since it was first leveraged at the height of the Civil Rights Struggle (Petersen, 1966). This trope not only serves as a wedge tool, dividing people of color and pitting them against one another, it also serves to dehumanize Asian Americans by siloing them as quiescent, “White adjacent,” and robotic (Ng, Lee & Pak, 2007; Pendakur & Pendakur, 2012). In the particular cultural moment, the model minority myth also continues to render Asian Americans targets for hate, prejudice, and violence, all while simultaneously denying them the experience of race/racism by deeming them “honorary Whites.”

That violence, epistemic and physical, is also tied to the second key trope: the myth of the forever foreigner. From the moment of the first arrival of Chinese laborers to US shores, Asians have been cast as exotic, unassimilable, a threat to public health, and fundamentally un-American (Pendakur & Pendakur, 2012). The constant positioning of Asian Americans as outside of normative U.S. culture and as potentially disloyal and/or disease-ridden allows rhetorical, state-

## Chapter 14

sponsored, and individualized violence and exclusion (Hua & Junn, 2021). Some examples of the way the forever foreigner trope has played out in the public landscape include: the many exclusionary immigration acts [Page Act (1875), Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), Asian Exclusion Act (1924), etc.]; the rounding up of 120,000 innocent Japanese Americans and putting them into American concentration camps during World War II (WWII); the surveillance, detention, and deportation of South Asians after 9/11; and the massive uptick in violence in the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic era. Those examples do not include the daily indignities and microaggressions that Asian Americans face as an outcome of their racial triangulation.

On college and university campuses, the slights, erasures, and lack of inclusion of Asian American students are well-documented. Less well-documented is how these tropes and others play into the experiences and positioning of Asian American senior equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) leaders. We share some of those experiences in the following four vignettes.

### **Vignettes of Belonging Experiences in Higher Education**

#### **To be Myself: Calls for Assimilation**

**Supervisor:** *I want to give you some feedback related to your work ethic. Hmm...*

*the energy you give off. If you wanna make it, you're gonna have to have more executive presence.*

**Asian American woman:** *I'm not sure I'm following.*

**Supervisor:** *Well... you know, in your culture, you were probably raised to be... more quiet, a little passive, but that's something you'll need to overcome. I'm simply trying to help you.*

Recently, I participated in an interactive EDI online training in our workplace. The scenes that played out from this training were lived experiences that members of our community had

## Chapter 14

shared during focus groups. As I watched the actors play this scene out, I felt validated. This was *my* lived experience that I shared with the consultants who created the training. Other Asian American colleagues shared with me that they had similar experiences with their own supervisors and they too shared these with the consultants. When I facilitated a microaggressions workshop for the Asian American employee resource group at one of our partner organizations, the attendees said this case resonated with them as they had similar workplace experiences.

Having been in my role for a short amount of time, the message I received from my supervisor was that I needed to assimilate to White hegemonic norms of what leaders are. I saw that part of my role as a CDO was to help her and other leaders at our institution, my colleagues, to shift their thinking and recognize leadership in multiple forms.

I take pride in my authentic leadership style, which has shown to be effective in transformational change here at our institution. I am intentional in leading others through collaboration and support. Hearing my supervisor give me this feedback—this message that I have heard throughout my life that I needed to assimilate to move further in my career—gave me this isolating, sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I wasn't good enough. Just like I wasn't good enough to be promoted to a CDO role in a previous job even though I had been performing the role. Just like I wasn't good enough to be promoted at another organization, but once I left that position, they hired three people to perform my work responsibilities, some with better titles and more pay. I lead on my own terms through developing genuine, collaborative relationships with colleagues and students to create change and by being transparent. No matter what my accomplishments were, I felt the pressure to drown a part of myself to help others feel comfortable. I refused. I still refuse, as I am proud of my leadership style and choose to be authentic to who I am. I recognize that there are real financial and emotional

## Chapter 14

costs associated with this as I have shared them with you. It really hurts, while also allowing me to sleep at night and be at peace that I don't have to be someone I am not.

Fast forward three years from that initial conversation about executive presence, and my supervisor asks to check in with me about the training. My supervisor acknowledges the microaggression she committed and that she is learning from the training and other opportunities to engage in learning about EDI and to apply that learning to her practices. She recognizes that my leadership style is different from others and has acknowledged my contributions in making the organization a better place to learn and work. We have a conversation about the options that people have: to assimilate or change the system and others' thinking. We recognize it is challenging to shift the paradigm. She thinks the system change is the harder option, and I feel like it is my only viable option. I cannot advocate for creating conditions in which we can bring our authentic selves to work if I cannot take this risk myself and model it. This conversation is progress.

### **Do You See Me?: Invisibility and Lack of Discernment**

Over the years, as part of my work, I have led educational programs that supported the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement; raised awareness about anti-Muslim discrimination and racism; shared tools for undocu-allies; advocated for bills in the state house that support Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Plus (LGBTQ+) populations; opened up dialogue about Whiteness; and supported data equity among Asian American populations. I used an intersectional, social justice lens as I engaged in this work and saw all of this as relating to my job in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

Thus, I was perplexed when I spoke with my supervisor at the time who suggested that I not use institutional funds to support Asian American issues. She shared that my support of data equity was an issue of personal interest and not related to the mission of our office. I disagreed

## Chapter 14

with her that data equity was central to the mission of the office. Why would we not help our students, faculty, and staff to understand how Asian Americans experience racism through the masking of our experiences in data and us thereby being treated as a monolithic group? Why would we not help them to understand how this treatment results in a model minority myth stereotype that is then weaponized as a tool of anti-Blackness?

It seems like my questions confused her, as perhaps she did not see Asian Americans as people of color and she placed us in close proximity to Whites. Or perhaps she was confused that there were some Asians who were against data equity, and she felt uncomfortable not being able to discern what was just or central to our mission. Instead of opening up dialogue and learning, she wanted to stifle the conversation and silence education about anti-Asian racism. Now in the present day, anti-Asian racism and violence are acknowledged after the pandemic and the Atlanta shootings, but what sticks in my mind are these memories of everyday anti-Asian racism experiences in the Academy.

### **A Litmus Test: Asian American Experiences as Transformative to EDI Work**

Last week, I spent three days at an EDI conference. This conference is the largest annual EDI gathering in its particular field. Despite its stature and popularity, this conference was like all the EDI-focused conferences I have been to, most of which have been dedicated to EDI in higher education. For starters, a majority of the people in attendance were Black and Latine. Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Middle Eastern or North Africans were few and far between as attendees, and even less represented as panelists. Over the three days, I attended only one session with an Asian American presenter. I later found that there were only three Asian American presenters in total. Only on the panel that I attended with the Asian American speaker did anyone voice any specific stories related to Asian American experience. It was my suspicion going in; and



## Chapter 14

as the conference wore on, it was clear to me that I and other Asian Americans were not considered to be legitimate contributors to the EDI conversation at this conference, and I certainly did not feel that any of the ideas, advice, or networking opportunities were meant for us.

Since this has been my experience at every EDI conference I have attended, I was not surprised by what I found at this one. Yet, it never disappoints or hurts less to encounter this limited and limiting dynamic by which entire swaths of stories and their implications for EDI progress are rendered invisible. When EDI conferences, programs, and policies leave Asian Americans out, they implicitly suggest that Asian Americans do not require the support. I see the “model minority” myth so clearly still playing out in this way, and I constantly question whether or not “people like me” are meant for this work. Why should anyone care what I think? What do I even have to offer? Maybe I am not the best person for this job. I lose faith in myself and my expertise, and when I see the same dynamics repeated in multiple arenas, my hope and faith in EDI work itself becomes progressively more damaged too. This is an intimate, internal struggle. There are also few spaces to which I can turn to process my frustration without the risk of appearing anti-Black, anti-Latinx, or concerned only with Asian American progress at the expense of all other races. I end up turning to other Asian Americans who are EDI professionals, and we process and understand one another, but we find few open spaces to comfortably launch our observations and offerings into the EDI landscape.

I know that if I could just have the EDI mic, if my Asian American colleagues could just have the EDI mic, we could talk about how EDI still operates in a Black/White binary; and that for this reason including our stories, bringing in histories from the margins, mixing in the gray, the yellow, the brown; necessarily complicates EDI work. When EDI work and workers refuse to move beyond the binary, they reveal their flawed and limited thinking—weaknesses that

## Chapter 14

demonstrate that these initiatives are, ultimately, not adequately complex enough to even support the limited range of the “oppressed” for whom they are designed. There is a direct correlation between our belongingness in the EDI world and that world’s progress. The more I see our absence, and the more I see the stubborn nature of the Black/White binary in EDI work (and the depths of American exceptionalism), the more I can say that the Asian American experience is a litmus test for EDI work.

### **Our Gifts: Knowing and Naming our Assets**

I was so excited about my new role. I was thrilled at the chance to shape the college’s culture, to draw on everything I had learned and studied, and to build relationships with the key drivers of sustainable cultural change. I was eager to harness the opportunity to partner with students, faculty, staff, and fellow administrators to move the EDI needle in significant ways. Day one arrived, and in one of my very first meetings, the White person sitting across the table from me said, “They really needed to hire a Black man into this role.”

I swallowed my surprise and irritation, and calmly asked, “Why do you say that?”

“Well,” my new colleague responded, “the optics, of course!”

Not only did that strike me as a deeply cynical statement to make; it also struck me as utterly thoughtless and ahistorical. Because underlying his “optics” comment is the idea that I didn’t have racial legitimacy or expertise in this terrain. That, as an Asian American, I wasn’t the right kind of “optics.” That my degree, years of work experience in social justice, scholarly writing, evidence of shifting practices and serving students at my prior institution, and my very own lived experience as a woman of color, an Asian American woman, didn’t matter. My colleague uttered five words, but those five words erased me from the landscape of possibility, in his mind (and possibly in the minds of others).

But here's what my colleague missed. My colleague missed all of the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) I was bringing to this new campus. My colleague didn't understand that as the daughter of immigrants, I had learned how to navigate multiple worlds, languages, cultures. I had a transnational upbringing that exploded the borders and boundaries of American exceptionalism. I had a critical consciousness that came from the sense-making I had undergone about my own experiences with being Othered on the playground, on the streets, in the workplace, and every time the United States invaded another Brown nation and I was told, "Go back to your own country!" Because of my many years as an EDI practitioner, rooted in social justice and racial equity, I had a fluency with Black liberation history, Latinx freedom movements, Native sovereignty, LGBTQ+ truth tellers, disability warriors, and more. No, those were not my lived experiences, but my work had been built in solidarity with those communities—which meant I had spent years reading, studying, and being on the ground with fellow minoritized communities. My colleague missed that, as an Asian American in the EDI space, I was *expected* to know deeply about the issues of need and desire in multiple, intersectional communities—even if that same expectation didn't translate back to others knowing deeply about my community(ies).

I am grateful for the gifts I have gained as an Asian American EDI leader. And to those out there who don't see us for who we are or what we know, you miss out on the assets we bring, the hard-won assets that come from traversing the lacunae that give us insights and skills that others may not have.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

These vignettes; To Be Myself: Calls for Assimilation, Do You See Me?: Invisibility and Lack of Discernment, A Litmus Test: Asian American Experiences as Transformative to EDI Work, and Our Gifts: Knowing and Naming Our Assets; highlight some of the negative

## Chapter 14

experiences Asian Americans have in the workplace that contribute to their low levels of inclusion and sense of belonging (Venkataraman & Yee, 2022). These narratives highlight how even as CDOs who lead EDI work at their institutions and within their fields, our experiences are rendered invisible (EdTrust West, 2021). Our lived experiences demonstrate the assets we bring navigating these spaces that were not created for us and position us to share insights and transform the landscape of EDI as a profession (Yosso, 2005).

The following are several recommendations we can offer based on the troubling issues we shared regarding the explicit and implicit messages that Asian Americans do not belong in conversations related to EDI or as leaders in higher education.

**Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs):** IHEs can better educate all senior leaders about the ways in which Whiteness and White supremacy show up at your respective organization, in your leadership cabinet, in your policies and practices. Examine your data and disaggregate it to better understand how racial and ethnic groups experience your campus in different ways, whether it be compensation, retention, promotion rates, or student loan burdens. Support the professional development of EDI professionals on your campus, so they can better inform and coach on good practices.

**National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE):** Serve as a space to educate CDOs and other EDI professionals about Asian American issues and offer a venue for Asian Americans to connect, learn, and seek support from one another. NADOHE is the professional home for many EDI professionals, so it should be where they learn about the complexities of racism and how it operates for Asian Americans. It should be a place where tools are developed and shared, such as an equity-based barometer check for organizing programs and initiatives that recognize these nuances. It should also be a space that brings in a global perspective

## Chapter 14

rooted in historical understanding that pushes and changes the whole EDI paradigm. We, as EDI officers, should engage in solidarity work as it relates to anti-racism strategy, and it just is not possible yet because we have not had the necessary conversations and learning. Given the paucity of Asian American CDOs, NADOHE should support the development of a formal mentorship and sponsorship program to increase the representation of Asian Americans in the field.

**Non-Asian American Leaders:** Develop your own critical understanding of the ways that you have imbibed the model minority myth and other harmful stereotypes of Asian Americans. Reflect on implicit and explicit messages of marginalization to Asian American colleagues and students. How does it show up in your own practice? What will you do to mitigate harmful actions? Seek greater knowledge about Asian Americans and the racism (and all corollary -isms) they experience historically and in the present day.

**Asian American Leaders:** Critically challenge “model minority” framing of you and your work. Push back on others’ racialized expectations of you to assimilate and draw on the assets that you bring. Know your unique worth and don’t be afraid to name your knowledge. Continue to advance the breadth and depth of EDI work.

### References

- Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Pub. L. 47-126, 22 Stat. 58, Chap. 126.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- EdTrust West (2021). *Anti-Asian racism and exclusion in higher education*. Retrieved from [https://west.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/EducationTrust\\_2021\\_ANTI-ASIAN-RACISM-AND-EXCLUSION-IN-HIGHER-EDUCATION-\\_v5.pdf](https://west.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/EducationTrust_2021_ANTI-ASIAN-RACISM-AND-EXCLUSION-IN-HIGHER-EDUCATION-_v5.pdf).
- Hartlep, N. D., Ball, D., Theodosopoulos, K., Wells, K., & Morgan, G. B. (2016). A national analysis of endowed chairs and distinguished professors in the field of education. *Educational Studies, 52*(2), 119–138. doi: 10.1080/00131946.2016.1142994
- Hua, W., & Junn, J. (2021). Amidst pandemic and racial upheaval: Where do Asian Americans fit. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics, 6*, 16–32. doi:10.1017/rep.2020.46
- The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act), Pub. L. 68-139, 43 Stat. 153 (1924).
- Junn, J. (2007). From coolie to model minority: U.S. immigration policy and the construction of racial identity. *Du Bois Review, 4*(2), 355–373.
- Kim, C. (1999). The racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics and Society, 27*(1),

105–138.

- Kim, G.M. & Cooc, N. (2021) Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in academe: race and gender through the tenure pipeline from 1993-2017. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24(3), 338-356, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2020.1753675
- Ng, J. C., Lee, S. S., & Pak, Y. K. (2007). Contesting the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes: A critical review of literature on Asian Americans in education. *Review of research in education*, 31, 95–130.
- Pendakur, S. L. & Pendakur, V. (2012). Let's get radical: Being a practitioner-ally for Asian Pacific Islander American college students. In D. M. Ching & A. Agbayani (Eds.), *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in higher education: Research and perspectives on identity, leadership, and success* (pp. 31–55). Washington, DC: NASPA.
- Page Act of 1875, Pub L. 43-141, 18 Stat 477, Chap. 141 (1875).
- Petersen, W. (1966, January 9). Success story, Japanese-American style. *The New York Times*.
- Turner, C. S. V. (2007). Pathways to the presidency: Biographical sketches of women of color firsts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 77(1), 1–38.
- Venkataraman, K., & Yee, P. (2022). Greater inclusion can help Asian Americans crack the bamboo ceiling. Retrieved from <https://www.bain.com/insights/greater-inclusion-can-help-asian-americans-crack-the-bamboo-ceiling/>
- Williams, D. A., & Wade-Golden, K. (2007). The chief diversity officer: A primer for college and university presidents. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Yi, V., Mac, J., Na, V. S., Venturanza, R. J., Museus, S. D., Buenavista, T. L., & Pendakur, S. L. (2020). Toward an anti-imperialistic critical race analysis of the model minority myth. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(4), 542–579. doi: 10.3102/0034654320933532
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. doi: