

**PERCEPTIONS OF INEQUALITY AS RACIAL PROJECTS:
UNCOVERING ETHNORACIAL AND GENDERED PATTERNS AMONG FIRST-
GENERATION COLLEGE-GOING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS**

Gilberto Q. Conchas¹
The Pennsylvania State University

Socorro Cambero
UC Irvine

Vanessa Delgado
UC Irvine

Jess Lee
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Leticia Oseguera
The Pennsylvania State University

AUTHOR NOTE

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gilberto Q. Conchas, College of Education, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802-3201. E-mail: gqc5330@psu.edu.

ABSTRACT

Through a Racial Formation Framework, this article explores how Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese American first-generation college students at a large research university perceive inequality in the United States. Drawing on 129 interviews, our findings suggest that students operate under a *Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum* in which they conceptualize contemporary racial projects through distinct structural-to-cultural explanations. Korean American students in this sample deploy a cultural understanding of inequality embedded within structural frames, while Chinese and Vietnamese American students employ more structural perspectives integrating critiques of cultural explanations. We also find that gender shapes these factors, as most women respondents are more likely than men to view inequality from a structural lens and utilize more sophisticated conceptualizations where they critique purely cultural explanations. Ultimately, we argue that the discourse about perceptions of inequality can serve as a form of racial projects. The results of this research shed light on how social locations such as ethnorace and gender contribute to divergent understandings of inequality in the United States as described by Asian American college students. The findings have direct implications for student sense of belonging and success in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Asian American college students, higher education, first-generation, gender, social inequality, racial formation, racial projects

Introduction

“I actually think America is a very equal country. As a capitalist country, we get what we deserve. Our success is a reflection of our hard work. We are living in the land of opportunity.” – John, Korean American

“Inequality in America means that certain people do not have the same rights or opportunities as other people. This inequality derives from our social economic class, our race, our physical abilities, our age, our gender, and our attitude. Most factors, unfortunately, are not in our hands to determine.” – Emily, Vietnamese American

Inequality in the United States (U.S.) has been widely explored by scholars. Numerous studies highlight how historical processes and social locations influence one’s position in the U.S. social hierarchy (Almaguer, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Because inequality plays a pervasive role in U.S. society, scholars have also turned their attention to exploring Americans’ consciousness of social inequality. In this work, scholars note that Americans tend to underestimate the actual level of inequality and treat Americans as a homogenous and, often, generalizable group (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Limited work explores how different members of U.S. society experience and perceive inequality and the nuanced ways they manifest in their understandings of the sources of this inequality. For instance, John and Emily, both members of the Asian American pan-ethnic group, expressed distinct conceptualizations about U.S. inequality in the two quotes above. Further unpacking groups’ understandings of inequality based on their social locations in society and placing attention on these differences can help scholars theoretically understand how people explain inequality and how higher education institutions can respond accordingly.

Drawing on 129 interviews with Asian American first-generation college students at a large research university, this paper examines how Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Americans conceptualize contemporary inequality in the U.S. In so doing, this article makes two key theoretical contributions to Omi and Winant's (2014) Racial Formation Theory. First, we argue that the discourse of the perceptions of inequality can serve as racial projects. Our case of Asian American college students demonstrates that respondents operate through distinct structural-to-cultural explanations as the basis to conceptualize contemporary racial projects. We find ethnoracial and gendered variation in Asian Americans' conceptualization of inequality. Whereas Korean Americans in this sample often deploy a cultural understanding of inequality embedded within structural frames, Chinese and Vietnamese American students employ more structural perspectives critical of narrow cultural explanations. Gender further complicates these perspectives, as women are more likely to view inequality from a structural lens and push back against purely cultural experiences of inequality compared to men. These findings highlight how ethnorace and gender contribute to variant conceptualizations of contemporary racial projects in the United States.

Second, we conceptualize the *Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum (RFIS)* to elucidate how inequality is defined along a discourse of racial projects as an axis of structural-to-cultural dimensions. We define structural explanations of inequality as a matter of political economy—e.g., how social, political, and economic capital are organized and stratified within the United States (Conchas, 2006; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014; Yano & Akatsuka, 2018). Cultural explanations refer to ideologies, values, norms, and beliefs of ethnoracial communities (Conchas, 2006; Louie, 2012). Each ethnoracial group's unique sociohistorical process of marginalization shapes their development of racial projects where social locations (i.e., race, class, and gender) often play a major role in shaping one's life outcomes and one's position in the social strata (Almaguer, 2008; Tran, 2016). The differential conceptualizations of racial projects shape where Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese American students fall on the spectrum.

This article, fundamentally, sets out to understand how Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese American college students' discourse of their perspectives of inequality function along an RFIS that employs both structural and cultural explanations of stratification. We call for educators and educational leaders to consider that, through the RFIS, intersecting identities allow Asian American students to see various structural inequities and critique institutional processes that reproduce marginalization. Ultimately, if the aim is to foster the sense of belonging and academic success of Students of Color, then institutional leaders must be attentive to students' experiences in society as racialized people in order to provide them with quality, equitable, and relevant resources at the college level.

The Racialization of Asian Americans in the United States

Omi and Winant's (2014) Racial Formation Theory (RFT) addressed the limitations of racialization paradigms such as ethnicity, class, and nation. While these concepts have been useful in describing specific racial formations in the United States, none of these concepts were equipped to singularly account for the complex racialization processes experienced by racially othered peoples. RFT attempts to address these limitations by highlighting how racialization processes, racial categories, and racial politics are constructed, destroyed, and reproduced within the entanglements of structure and signification. For purposes of this work, racial formation is applied to understand perceptions of inequality and opportunity in contemporary society among Asian American pan-ethnic groups. To be clear, this work is not focused on racial identity or racial

ideology (see the works of Bonilla-Silva, Goar, & Embrick, 2006 and Trieu & Lee, 2018), but rather we are focused on these students' understandings of inequality writ large through a racial formation frame.

For Omi and Winant (2014), racial formations are animated through racial projects, which are described as the "...interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines" (pg. 125). The idea of the Asian American model minority can be understood, for instance, as a racial project that emerged during the Cold War (Cheng, 2013; Hsu, 2015) and was cemented during specific historical moments in the United States after 1965. As one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the U.S., Asian Americans are often deemed the "model minority." In popular discourse, Asian Americans are praised for their high achievement and their ability to integrate into mainstream America. Asian immigrants and their descendants are often regarded as an ethnic group that possesses the appropriate cultural values to assimilate and to be successful. To this end, the "model minority" stereotype of Asian Americans "may be most succinctly characterized by its passive conformism, which is keeping quiet, playing safe, and thus being 'good'" (Yano & Akatsuka, 2018, p. 11).

In fact, Claire Jean Kim's (1999) seminal work on racial triangulation illustrates how the racialization of Asian Americans has resembled a dialectical process of ostracization and valorization relative to whites and Blacks. Kim (1999) elaborates on how Asian Americans have been civically ostracized as foreigners in relation to whites. Simultaneously, Asian Americans have also experienced relative valorization as meritocratic subjects in relation to Black communities. Furthermore, in the wake of decades of social movements, the model minority myth has been useful for white conservatives in curtailing and thwarting racial justice policies and demands (Omi & Winant, 2014). For example, traces of this racial project have been integral to long-standing debates about affirmative action practices in higher education institutions (Allred, 2007) and have emerged during recent efforts to desegregate highly selective public high schools (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014).

In other words, the "model minority" myth as a racial project has been predicated upon maintaining racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000), white supremacy, and anti-Black racism (Poon et al., 2016). Whichever political ideologies are at play, these projects embody an interpretation that links certain meanings to race. The circulation of model minority tropes continues to inform the contemporary racialization of many Asian American groups as a hegemonic obfuscation (Lee, 2015). Whether or not an individual accepts these stereotypes as true is immaterial since it will always shape their everyday experience and society at large.

Inequality among Asian Americans and Racial Formation

Racial projects not only confer qualitative traits onto groups of racialized people, but they also have consequences for their material conditions—including their relationships to the state. Thus, racial formation is captured by the synthesis of these racial projects, large and small, as they interact on a societal level. Since racial formation is always understood in its historical context, this allows for a dynamic and changing perspective of race in modern times. With regards to Asian Americans, the model minority typology has become a powerful force behind their racial project and the consequent racial formation. Yet, it often masks the great heterogeneity of this population.

In fact, the term "Asian American" is pan-ethnic and encompasses over 17 million members of nearly 50 different national-origin groups with different ethnicities and historical experiences, such as Cambodians, Hmong, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Koreans. Yet, the

great diversity among these groups is often overlooked due to such singular categorization. Intra-Asian heterogeneity has important implications for the ways in which Asian Americans understand inequality, especially in relation to their educational experiences and opportunities. At the aggregate level, Asian Americans have been racialized as the model minority, partly due to the hypervisibility of certain groups who are deemed as high achieving, such as the Chinese and Koreans (Tran et al., 2018). Nonetheless, this monolithic understanding of Asian Americans and their structural and cultural positioning in the larger U.S. society masks important areas of inequality and dissensions among Asian Americans (Conchas, 2006; Felicinao, 2005; Kibria, 1996; Lee & Zhou, 2015).

Although categorized and racialized similarly as pan-ethnic Asian Americans, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese groups have emigrated and settled in the U.S. under different circumstances. As one of the oldest Asian ethnic groups to settle in the United States as migrant laborers, Chinese Americans have been direct victims of racist policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. They were also crucial facilitators in forging pan-ethnic alliances and solidarity with other Asian ethnic groups (Le Espiritu, 1992). Once the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act was passed, a large influx of highly skilled and educated Korean and Chinese immigrants began and their fast integration into the larger society through upward social mobility is well documented (Le Espiritu, 1992; Lee & Zhou, 2015).

On the contrary, most of Vietnamese immigrants immigrated to the U.S. as refugees with limited social and cultural capital (Conchas, 2006; Okamoto, 2014; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou & Xiong, 2005). As refugees, Vietnamese immigrants are predominantly under-educated and low-skilled, and their resettlement in the United States was facilitated by the federal government. As a result, large groups of Vietnamese refugees are concentrated in areas that were not previously populated by Asian ethnic groups. Despite such hardships, Vietnamese youth who are well integrated into their ethnic communities have achieved remarkable academic success (Conchas, 2006; Zhou & Bankston, 1998; Zhou & Xiong, 2005). Some scholars argue that the immigrant culture of Vietnamese families and ethnic communities that emphasize the importance of education, strong work ethic, and achievement facilitates Vietnamese socioeconomic and educational mobility (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

However, downward mobility of many Vietnamese refugees and their children settled in heavily racialized urban centers are also well documented, such studies have found disadvantaged Vietnamese youths tend to identify with and are racialized similarly to structurally disadvantaged African American youth in their neighborhoods (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In addition to their differential educational experiences from their Chinese and Korean peers, Vietnamese immigrants also have different experiences with race. Zhou and Xiong (2005) argue that Vietnamese immigrants' "visibly large group size and high ethnic concentration may galvanize group-based discrimination against individual members" (p. 1143).

Despite such differences in immigration contexts, histories, and experiences in the United States, Asian Americans' socioeconomic and educational trajectories are still largely portrayed as that of the "model minority." This monolithic representation has important implications for the ways in which Asian Americans understand what inequality and success mean in the ethnic communities as well as the larger U.S. society, especially in relation to their ethnoracial identities. Straying from the typical Asian American "model minority" stereotype often leads Asian Americans to disidentify pan-ethnically—consider themselves "not Asian (enough)," develop pan-minority consciousness, and/or see themselves as "acting black/white" (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ocampo, 2014; Yano & Akatsuka, 2018). Then, the Asian Americans'

conceptualization of racial projects, while grounded in the model minority typology, may vary by ethnically heterogeneous experiences of inequality, which pan-ethnic approaches cannot adequately capture.

We seek to address this gap in the literature. *For the purposes of this paper, we conceptualize racial projects as the simultaneous interaction between the material (structural) and the discursive (cultural), and we extend the racial project concept to understand how students speak race through their description of their perceptions of the sources of inequality among ethnoracial groups in the U.S.* Consequently, we examine how Asian American students discuss inequality as a type of racial project precisely because the students inform us as to *why* some ethnoracial groups do better than others in U.S. society.

We have laid the groundwork for using the RFT to explore how ethnic-specific racial projects may influence the ways in which Asian Americans assign meanings to inequality in the U.S. and how racial projects are employed differently across social location. In so doing, we advance RFT by illustrating that racial projects for Asian American first-generation students are situated along a structure-to-culture inequality spectrum or what we subsequently coin the *Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum*. By placing emphasis on the individual meaning-making process, we move away from the pan-ethnic approaches to Asian American experiences and instead, focus on how diversity in ethnicity may operate differently at the individual and (pan-ethnic) group levels (see Brubaker, 2004 and Jiménez et al., 2015 for similar approaches to ethnic diversity). After presenting our findings, we will discuss in more detail how we situate the sources of inequality within the *Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum*.

Methodology

The project was an exploratory and comparative case study of first-generation students at a large, four-year university in the United States. Case study design methodology was employed because it allows the researcher to focus on a phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2017). “The First-Generation College Student Inequality and Opportunity Project” ascertains college students’ understandings of the factors they perceive as contributing to inequality and opportunity in the U.S. The data for the current study come from this larger study exploring differences in perspectives of 226 Mexican, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and white American identified first-generation college students, from 2014-2016²—see **Table 1**—at a selective, public research-intensive university classified as an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) on the West Coast.

Table 1. Demographics of participants, 2014-2016

Race/ethnicity	Men	Women	Total
White	19	24	43
Chinese American	21	19	40
Korean American	24	17	41
Vietnamese American	22	26	48
Mexican American	26	28	54
Total	112	114	226

These groups were selected because they are the largest ethnoracial groups at the university. It is important to note that all the students identified as first-generation college students in the U.S. Moreover, many Chinese and Korean American identified students in this sample

classified their immigrant parents with positive and highly selective premigration selectivity³, such as obtaining technical skills and vocational credentials in their home countries, but not postsecondary degrees. As such, we consider students with parents who attended technical and vocational institutions outside of the U.S. (but not obtaining postsecondary degrees) as first-generation college students in the U.S.

Participants were recruited through associations with multicultural education courses, ethnic studies courses, social science courses, STEM majors, campus organizations, and involvement with community organizations. Snowball sampling, use of social networks, and direct approach in public situations were used. This sampling technique was employed to attain a reflective portrait of the larger population of first-generation college students on the university campus that were also from one of the five ethnic groups under study. The final group of student participants represented a wide range of majors on campus, and the racial breakdown reflected the larger demographic profile of the student body. Of importance to note is that all these students entered college with similarly strong academic profiles despite mixed K–12 public schooling experiences, as we will highlight in phase two of the study (not presented in this article). The sample reflected primarily upper-class juniors and seniors.

Open-ended interviews were conducted that consisted of three main foci of interest: (1) How students explain inequality and opportunity in America, (2) What ethnic group they believe does best in society and why, and (3) What students believe are the consequences of inequality. Interviews lasted an average of 45-60 minutes, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interview data was coded into three different waves. First, open coding was conducted to capture the major themes and recurring words and phrases that were related to the informants' perceptions of inequality. Then, the long list of open codes was re-coded and collapsed into three significant groups: (1) same opportunity, (2) sources of inequality, and (3) consequences of inequality. Lastly, these three significant groups were further taken apart and coded into thematic responses. We then organized these themes into percentage of respondents who stated each as a reason.

Of the 226 students in the larger study sample, most of them were between 18 and 26 years of age. In terms of gender, 50.5% (114) identified as women and 49.5% (112) identified as men. The racial/ethnic identification of students in the larger study sample included 24% (54) Mexican American, 21% (48) Vietnamese American, 19% (43) white American, 18% (41) Korean American, and 17.6% (40) Chinese American students. A substantial number of Mexican American students in this sample reported being raised in low-income households, as 94% reported that they received free or reduced cost lunch during their K-12 education and identified themselves as lower income based on their parental education and occupation. Of the 129 interviews with Asian American respondents, Chinese American and Korean American students in the sample tended to self-identify as middle- to upper-income, and Vietnamese American primarily self-identified as lower- to middle-income. Among the Asian American students in the sample, 48% (62) identified as women while 52% (67) identified as men. With the exception of the white respondents and a few Mexican American students who identified as 3+ generation in the U.S., the majority of the students in this sample were children of immigrants whose parents were classified as 1st generation or 1.5 generation immigrants in the United States.⁴

For purposes of this paper, we concentrate on coded data derived from group (2) sources of inequality, and the 129 interviews with Asian American respondents. Given our interest in racial projects and understandings of inequality, we paid close attention to codes or phrases related to cultural and structural explanations of inequalities based on the Racial Formation Theory. First, we present descriptive data of students' responses to sources of inequality on the overall Asian

American sample by gender, and then we present responses separately by gender and ethnorace. We end the chapter with an articulation of the findings captured in a structure-to-culture spectrum that best captures Asian American first-generation students' perceptions of inequality as racial projects.

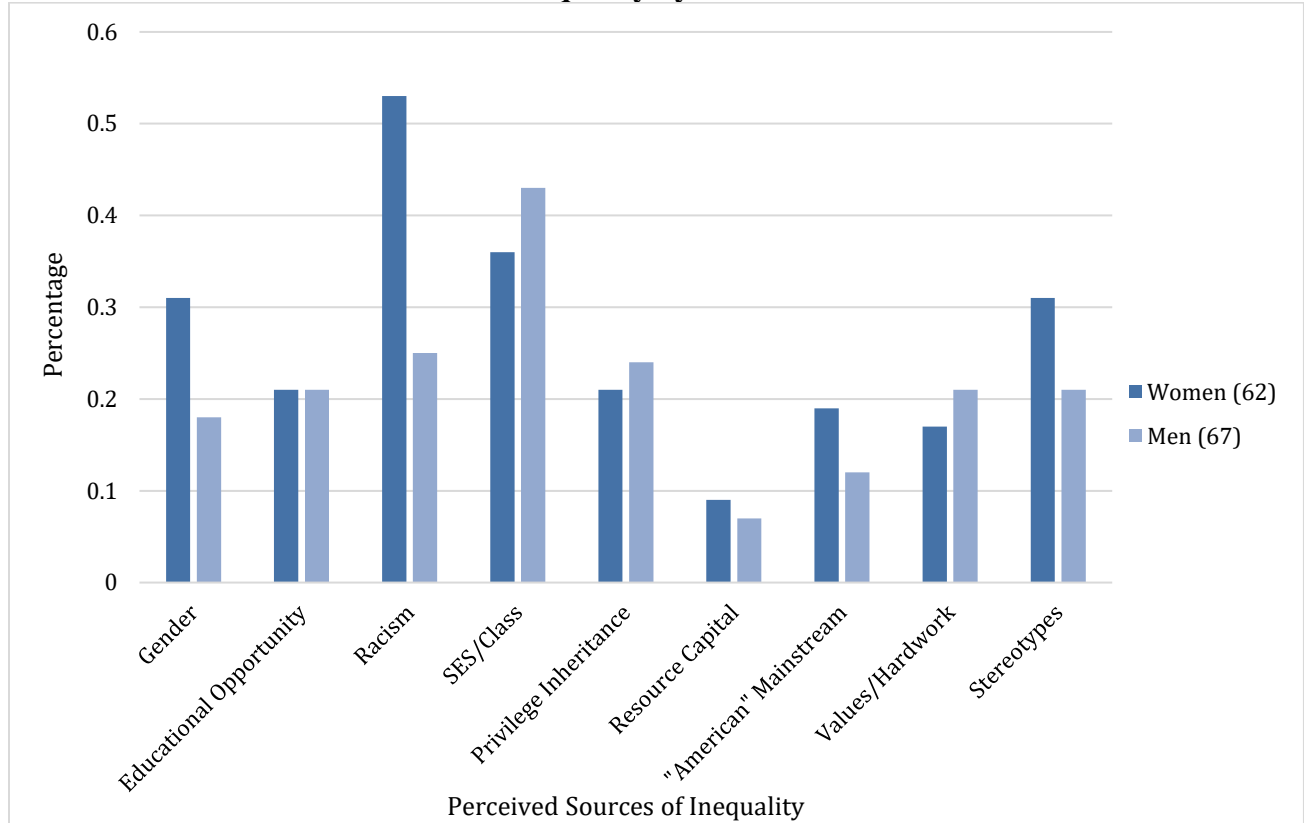
Descriptive Results

From the 129 interviews with Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese American first-generation college students, we identified the nine most discussed themes as the main sources of inequality. These include gender, educational opportunity, racism, SES/class, values/hard work stereotypes, privilege inheritance, resource capital, and "American" mainstream.⁵ We further organized these nine themes according to the structural-to-cultural continuum. We placed **gender, educational opportunity, racism, SES/class, privilege inheritance, and resource capital** on the side of **structural** as these themes reflected ways that students spoke of the material conditions of sources of inequality. Privilege inheritance was placed on the structural part as it was described as inequities beginning from birth since certain people were simply born into more advantaged conditions. Resource capital reflected the community level conditions that students felt contributed to inequality and is understood as access to better schools, hospitals, parks, and other community resources. Educational opportunity was broadly defined as inequality in educational opportunities.

The **cultural** aspects of the spectrum refer to the discursive manner in which students discussed sources of inequalities. We placed elements of ideology or values in the cultural end of the spectrum. **Values/hard work** were identified by students as cultural dispositions that groups had that encouraged success and in the case of the Asian American group spoke in terms of "Asian" values and a hard work ethic. **Stereotypes** reflected ways students discussed negative expectations for advancement of groups. **Mainstream** reflected students' positions on traditional "American" ways of being and described that there was an "American" mainstream and "othering" of groups and that being identified as part of the mainstream conferred advantages. While there is slight variation among Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese American respondents, we find structural factors—such as racism, socioeconomic status, and privilege—and cultural factors—such as stereotypes and values—as the most salient explanations students offered for sources of inequality among groups.

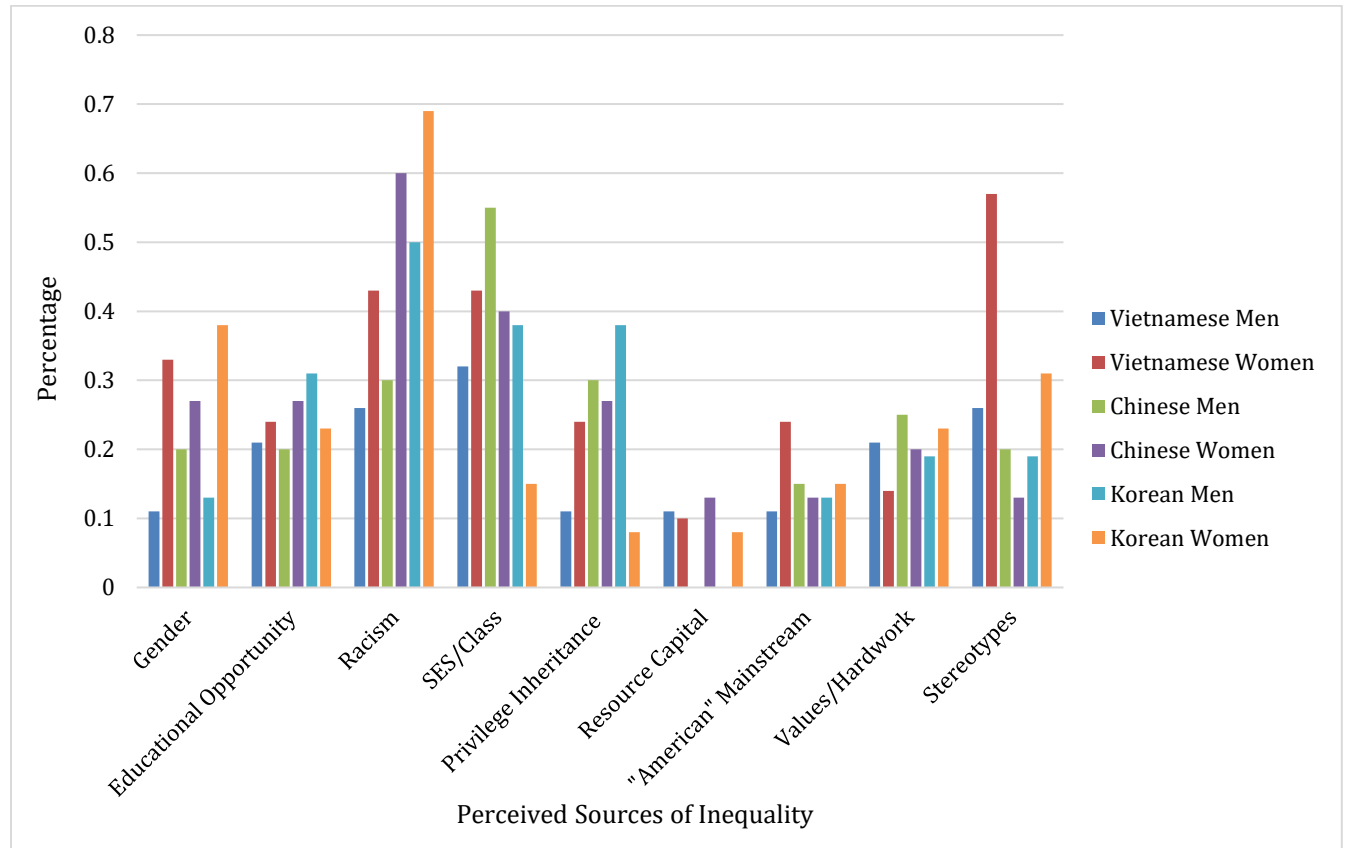
Table 2 shows that Asian American identified men and women had varying opinions regarding factors of inequality. More than half of Asian American women (53%) identified racism as the main sources of inequality, whereas only 25% of Asian American men held the same perspective. Conversely, higher proportions of men (43%) perceived socioeconomic status/class as one of the main sources of inequality compared to women (36%). The third most frequent source of inequality identified among Asian American women were stereotypes and gender with 31% of the women respondents identifying these as a main source of inequality. On the other hand, the role of privilege inheritance was the third most popular response among Asian men (24%). We further disaggregate by ethnic group below.

Table 2. Perceived Sources of Inequality by Asian American Women and Men



When exploring differences among ethnorace groups, each had nuanced gendered responses—see **Table 3**. For instance, the majority of Chinese American women (60%) identified racism as an important factor of inequality, whereas Chinese American men were more likely to identify socioeconomic status as a main source of inequality (55%). Similarly, Korean American men and women had different opinions regarding sources of inequality. More than two thirds of Korean American women (69%) and half of Korean American men perceived racism to be a top factor that contributes to inequality. Many Korean American women also identified gender (38%) and stereotypes (31%) as top contributing factors to inequality. Korean American men noted that socioeconomic status (38%) and privilege inheritance (38%) were important sources of inequality. Vietnamese American respondents highlighted stereotypes as important factors for inequality more so than Korean American men or Chinese American men or women. More than half of Vietnamese American women (57%) and slightly over a quarter (26%) of Vietnamese American men identified stereotypes as an important factor in what they perceived were sources of inequality. The Vietnamese American men and women both perceived SES/class as a source of inequality.

Table 3. Perceived Source of Inequality among Asian American Students by Ethnorace and Gender



Taken together, our descriptive findings show that there exist nuanced differences in what Asian American students perceive to be important contributing factors to inequality by both gender and ethnicity. Whereas women are more likely to name the roles that racism and gender may be playing in (re)producing inequality, men are more likely to attribute inequality to disadvantages, such as socioeconomic status and privilege inheritance. With regards to ethnicity, more Korean American respondents focus on racism as their understanding of sources of inequality, while Chinese and Vietnamese American respondents exhibit more heterogeneity in what they consider the most important factors of inequality. While the majority of respondents perceived structural factors as the most salient, many of the Asian American students noted important cultural factors such as (negative) stereotypes and “Asian” values as what they perceived were sources of inequality.

Explanations of Inequality as Racial Projects Among Asian American Students

In the following sections, we further explore ethnic and gender differences as representations of racial projects whereby student perspectives are viewed as *the simultaneous interaction between the material (structural) and the discursive (cultural)*, and we extend the

racial project concept to understand how students speak race through discourse of their perceptions of the sources of inequality among ethnoracial groups in the U.S. This process allows us to explore how ethnic-specific racial projects may influence the ways in which Asian Americans assign meanings along a structure-to-culture inequality spectrum—that we will illustrate in a figure after we introduce the findings—where movement along this continuum reflects either a larger critique of structures to the opposite end where individual actions or efforts are implicated. The following further unpacks how these three different groups fit within such a conceptualization of inequality. We present findings separately by each ethnoracial group to illustrate these perceptual differences in explanations of inequality as racial projects.

Racial Projects among Chinese American Identified Students: “The Current Structure of American Society Creates Inequality”

Among Chinese American identified respondents, inequality in the United States was constructed through larger forces that produced stratification for individuals of various backgrounds. To build on their structurally formulated racial projects, Chinese American respondents noted the ways in which inequality was institutionalized and rooted in imbalances of power. These respondents suggested that People of Color deal with this structure and must navigate unequal structures. Tony illustrates how inequality is perpetuated through U.S. society:

The current structure of American society creates inequality. Individuals can be both oppressed and enabled by structures outside, and larger, than themselves. Those that have the most representation have the most power in institutions such as government and media, and therefore control present discourse. Minorities generally do not benefit from their current discourse, and this creates inequality in opportunities in America.

His sentiments, much like other Chinese American respondents, push back against narratives that suggest that individuals are at fault for their own inequality. Tony’s and many other Chinese American students’ perceptions of inequality are not only created by larger forces, but also reinforced and maintained through society. From his account, there are uneven power imbalances that impact how certain groups are able to perform. His response also sheds light on how these power dynamics impact minority groups differently than those in positions of power such as whites. Tony is representative of the way Chinese American respondents pushed back against individualistic perspectives of inequality. The racial projects employed by Chinese American respondents identified the ways race and power impacted how individuals were able to do in their life and educational trajectories. More importantly, they mentioned the ways these power imbalances served as a way to either help or prevent people from acquiring certain positions.

Our data revealed gendered differences in perceptions between Chinese American men and women. Compared to Chinese American men, Chinese American women were more likely to identify inequality through an intersectional lens. That is, Chinese American women were more apt to mention the impact of race, class, and gender on one’s life prospective and outcomes. When Chinese American men talked about inequality, they included broader terms such as “limited opportunity” or “privileged positions” without naming the social locations that either produced or limited opportunity. Such as in this case, Steven, a Chinese American student, mentions, “Good and bad opportunities exist for everyone, however, some people are born with certain privileges and having those privileges fosters a feeling of superiority.” His broad response to inequality suggests that he is aware of social hierarchy but does not mention *how* “good” and “bad”

opportunities manifest themselves in people's lives. On the other hand, Chinese American women's responses, like Ashley, reflected a more intersectional perspective on inequality:

Inequality means individuals faced different obstacles which hindered them from acquiring [the] same amount of success others do. Opportunity is a kind of life events that brings along risks and gains. Inequality occurs because of many reasons. Socioeconomic and race are two essential elements. America is seemed to be an equal society but it is not exactly. People of color still encounter various degree[s] of discrimination in many aspects of life.

Chinese American women, compared to Chinese American men, were more likely to identify concrete social locations that impacted how individuals experienced inequality. While Chinese American men broadly identified the existence of inequality, Chinese American women were able to talk about inequality in relation to intersectionality. To this end, the racial projects Chinese American students used to explain inequality differed by gender.

Chinese American students employed racial projects that shed light on the ways they perceive inequality shapes the lives and outcomes of Americans. In their descriptions, they highlighted the structure of U.S. society as their perceived reasons as to why inequality persists and why minoritized groups are disproportionately affected by this stratification. Chinese American women were more likely than Chinese American men to identify other social locations, such as race and socioeconomic status, in their formation of racial projects. To this end, Chinese American men drew on sociocultural definitions of inequality and opportunity, whereas Chinese American women operated under a structural framework that acknowledged a systemic problem of inequality but also discussed its impact across varying social locations. The descriptions and formulations of racial projects for Chinese American students were often rooted in structural explanations. Chinese American women's racial projects centered on how one's positionality influenced inequality; albeit, in dichotomous terms.

Racial Projects among Vietnamese American Identified Students: “The Color of My Skin Affects How Much Equality I Have”

Vietnamese American students conceptualized a more nuanced understanding of racism by placing their own experiences of discrimination in their conceptualizations of inequality. For instance, compared to the Chinese and Korean American respondents (except Korean American women), Vietnamese American students were more likely to mention that stereotypes were a top contributing factor to inequality. Vietnamese American women were more likely (57%) than Vietnamese American men (26%) to report [negative] stereotypes as a source of inequality. When asked why stereotypes were an issue, Megan described the ways in which her experiences of racism as a Vietnamese American individual shape the opportunities she is presented with:

The color of my skin affects how much equality I have and also opportunity like jobs and other aspects of life. Inequality always accompanies opportunity, especially when an opportunity is desirable and limited. I don't think I have the same amount of opportunities as white people do. As an Asian, I still feel excluded from the main society.

Megan, like other Vietnamese American college students, was able to draw on her lived experiences—racism and working-class backgrounds—to showcase her perceptions of how inequality continues to be pervasive in the U.S. More importantly, responses like Megan's demonstrate the diverse experiences of racism (both lived and understood) that take place among these three ethnoracial groups. While Chinese and Korean Americans suggested that racism is an

important contributor of inequality, they were less likely to personally identify themselves with racism. On the other hand, Vietnamese American respondents placed their lived experiences at the forefront of racism to demonstrate the ways ethnic prejudice affects their community.

Both Chinese and Vietnamese American respondents operated under more of the structural perspective on the inequality spectrum. However, Chinese American women and Vietnamese American women in this study often employed more nuanced conceptualizations of their understandings of the various inequalities that shape the lives of individuals in the U.S. Vietnamese American women were more likely than Vietnamese American men to select [negative] stereotypes as a top contributor to inequality. Vietnamese American women's responses illuminate the ways stereotypes among/against the Asian community erase the unique experiences of other Asian Americans.

Vietnamese American students were more likely to detach themselves from the "Asian" category and identify with their national origin category. Their responses shed light on the ways the "Asian" term undermined the great diversity of this group. These respondents were more likely to share their unique experiences as Vietnamese-identified individuals in their discussion of inequality in the United States. Conversely, Chinese and Korean American respondents identified with the category of "Asian" and did not address the homogenization of Asians in their discussions of inequality. Korean American respondents were more likely to report that Asians and whites were the ethnic groups to do the best in the United States, subscribing to Asian exceptionalism views. And while Korean American women (as we will observe below) named stereotypes as a source of inequality, they often referenced stereotypes but only within groups. That is, of the Korean American women that spoke of stereotypes, it was about the men culturally being provided with more opportunities than women receive in Korean families.

Vietnamese American respondents suggested that their unique experiences within the Asian community were often neglected and overlooked through Asian stereotypes. Cynthia pushes back against the notion that all Asians fall under the model minority myth:

I believe white does better in the society. Some people may say Asian is model minority. However, not all Asians are the same. Maybe some Chinese and Japanese do better in the society. I still find so many Vietnamese families have quite low standard of living. Sometimes I am embarrassed because of the stereotype of Asian, such as good at math, exam takers. Some of them even believe all Asian American can earn a good living. Maybe, but I am from low-income family.

Vietnamese American respondents were more likely to push back against ideals of homogeneity among Asian groups. Cynthia's narrative sheds light on how her background as a low-income student also impacts her ability to do well. While she suggests that whites are an ethnoracial group that do the best in society, her response also suggests that Asians are culturally expected to perform well. However, Cynthia felt that her ethnoracial identity as a Vietnamese American individual impacted her experiences in a way that deviated from other Asian groups. Cynthia is representative of the ways the Vietnamese American students in this sample perceived inequality from both the larger United States context and among the Asian American community.

Vietnamese Americans in this sample, in general, and Vietnamese American women, in particular, were able to articulate nuanced understandings of inequality and stratification compared to the other Asian groups. They were more likely than the other groups to not only shed light on racism and class differences, but also to push back against the model minority stereotype. Students shed light on how they did not feel as though that the model minority myth captured their experiences. More importantly, they felt that this image minimized their unique experiences as

ethnoracialized Asians. The racial projects used by Vietnamese American men and women employed a framework that centered their own experiences as minorities both within their Asian ethnoracial group and the larger mainstream society. While ethnoracial groups had different conceptualizations of inequality, gender provided further nuance in their understandings of inequality.

Racial Projects among Korean American Identified Students: “Our Success is a Reflection of Our Hard Work”

Korean American respondents, much like Chinese and Vietnamese American respondents, identified inequality as a systemic issue—rooted in the fabrics of the U.S. However, when prompted further about inequality, many Korean American respondents pushed back on the question of inequality and offered a more positive outlook, qualitatively placing cultural representations as an important piece in the inequality puzzle. For instance, when asked to explain inequality, John responded:

I actually think America is a very equal country. As a capitalist country, we get what we deserve. Our success is a reflection of our hard work. We are living in the land of opportunity. This nation gives credit to those who worked hard.

While the interview question prompted their perceptions of inequality, John, much like other Korean American first-generation college students in our sample, opted to completely change the question by providing a response that elicited rhetoric of opportunity and success. Similarly, Andrew echoed these sentiments as John:

Well, I believe opportunity is almost equal for everyone, and it is up to each individual to take the opportunities to succeed. Also, inequality is the outcome of the success of each individual; those who did not take opportunities to succeed will see inequality against them, and those who saw success through opportunity will see inequality favoring them!

Korean American respondents subscribed to ideals of meritocracy; that is, ideals that promote the notion that one can achieve anything they work for (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). These ideals of meritocracy are rooted in individualism and subscribe to beliefs of “Asian” values. While not explicitly stated, their beliefs in meritocracy posit that racism is merely a “thing of the past” and that all individuals are able to achieve their aspirations due to the structure of opportunity they perceive in the U.S.

Compared to the Chinese and Vietnamese American respondents, Korean American respondents were more likely to acknowledge structural inequality but also suggest ways in which America can provide opportunities for upward mobility. Sophia shares these sentiments as she describes how background factors, such as race, class, and gender, may shape one’s outcomes. She notes that while inequality is present in the United States, one’s dexterity and talent is enough to supersede issues of oppression:

America is extremely unequal. Half how hard you work, and half what your background is. So, for example, for African Americans, if they know that they’re not gonna get jobs or something like that, they are less inclined to try, but if you try harder, you would do better.

Sophia illustrates her point by drawing on racism against African Americans. While 47 percent of Korean American respondents identified racism as a top factor that contributed to inequality, they were also likely to report that these were things they could overcome. Noted by Eddy, “There may

be racial inequalities that may hinder opportunities to certain individuals, but that can all be overcome through effort and discipline.” These participants acknowledge that racism is present and opportunities are unevenly distributed between those with power and those without power. Sophia pushes back against notions of inequality to suggest that African Americans are still able to overcome these obstacles, if they simply worked harder. To this end, first-generation Korean American college student respondents identified the existence of inequality, but suggested work ethic as a method to navigate the inequality present in the United States.

Both Korean American men and women shared a similar discursive view on their understandings of the sources of inequality. Like Chinese American women, Korean American women were more likely to discuss explicit examples of inequality. However, Korean American women, unlike Chinese American women, were more likely to discuss the ways in which opportunities to overcome these obstacles were present. Several sentiments captured the ways in which the notion of “half hard work and half inequality” was pervasive among Korean American men and women respondents who self-identified as middle- to upper-income and thus resource-rich.

Nearly 60% of Korean American respondents reported that Asians were the ethnic group that did best in the United States. For these respondents, Asians did better because of “Asian” values. Lacy shares her reasoning as to why Asians do much better:

Asians, because I feel that Asians dominate the population in America. Even though there are a lot of Americans because it is America, Asians get their education and I feel that they have an advantage when starting businesses because they know how to globalize. They didn’t just grow up in America, they grew up in a different nation, so they know each respective culture, knowing how to approach people in each country, so they know how to globalize.

Korean American respondents deemed Asians as successful because, on the surface, they appeared to be doing quite well. To them, they perceived that Asians dominated in educational attainment, had high incomes, and excelled in careers compared to other ethnic groups as this was most noticeable in their social circles. The only other group to do better that was mentioned was whites. In addition to this, they also identified with the term “Asian” and felt themselves represented in that category.

In their responses of inequality, Korean Americans further utilized a cultural perspective to describe stratification in the U.S. While they acknowledge the presence of racism, stereotypes, and discrimination, Korean Americans are more likely to fall under the cultural perspective of the inequality spectrum. Korean Americans formulated their racial projects centered on discursive attitudes of inequality. While gender impacted the ways Chinese and Vietnamese American discussed inequality—as we noted in the previous sections—Korean American women and men both implemented cultural explanations in their discussions of inequality.

Situating the Discourse of Racial Projects Within a Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum

The findings suggest that Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese American students conceptualize inequality in the U.S. in ethnically distinctive ways. Korean American students acknowledge structural inequality but use culture to explain the prevalence of inequality. Chinese American students mentioned how society privileged certain individuals through socioeconomic status and race. However, their conceptualizations of inequality were often described in dichotomous terms between the rich and the poor and Black-white racism. Vietnamese American

students centered their own experiences in their discussions of structural inequality. These findings fill important gaps in present literature on inequality consciousness and the importance of investigating ethnic heterogeneity among Asian Americans (Chambers et al., 2014; Conchas, 2006; Cruces et al., 2013; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Ocampo, 2014; Okamoto 2014).

Based on the findings, we advance the *Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum* (RFIS). The RFIS best captures the ways Asian American respondents conceptualized racial projects regarding inequality in the U.S. We shed light on *how* Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese American identified students conceptualize the factors that contribute to their understandings of inequality in the RFIS as racial projects that simultaneously link the material (structural) and discursive (cultural). Our descriptive data suggest that Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese Americans view inequality in the U.S. as a product of unequal power distribution, racism, income inequality, lack of resources and opportunity, and stereotyping. However, further analysis of the interview data suggests that their perceptions of inequality differ across ethnic and gender lines. We suggest that the **Figure 1**, the RFIS, best captures how the respondents describe their understandings of inequality in the United States vis-à-vis structure and culture and hence as racial projects.

Figure 1. Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum

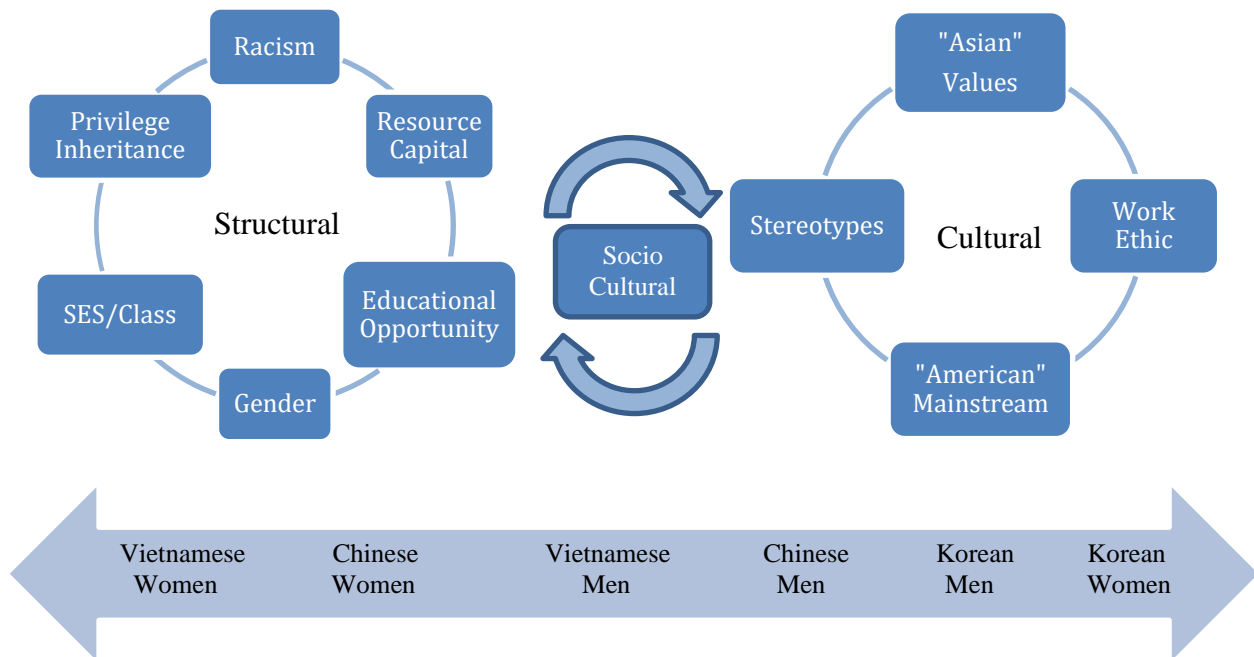


Figure 1 captures how our respondents’ racial projects on sources of inequality shape where students fall on the spectrum. Vietnamese American women demonstrated the most intersectional descriptions of structural inequality as they repeatedly described the ways that institutionalized racism, socioeconomic status, and the lack of resources shaped the outcomes of minoritized groups—including their own ethnic group. Chinese American women are also positioned on the structural side of the spectrum because their racial projects centered on how material differences in society influenced life outcomes for individuals. Vietnamese American

men and Chinese American men were placed in the center of the spectrum as they perceived inequality through a sociocultural lens. These students mentioned structural issues but also referenced how culture influences one's experiences with inequality. Korean Americans are on the cultural side of the spectrum. While Korean American students acknowledged the presence of inequality, these respondents were more likely than Chinese and Vietnamese American students to suggest that one could overcome inequality. Many Korean American respondents suggested that "Asian" values, work ethic, and cultural traits could be used to overcome barriers individuals faced. For instance, while Korean American students acknowledged that structural conditions such as racism continued to infiltrate today's society, they simultaneously posited that minoritized groups would be able to overcome these barriers through hard work and discipline. Both Korean women and men employed cultural understandings as representations of inequality in their responses.⁶

Together, we show that Asian American students perceive racism, socioeconomic status, and privilege as uniform factors that impact inequality; however, these factors are discussed differently across ethnic lines, reflecting ethnically heterogeneous characteristics and histories among Asian Americans. For instance, Korean and Chinese American students' conceptualizations of inequality as structurally contextualized cultural experiences may be explained by their positive immigrant selectivity—these immigrants enter the United States with higher levels of education than the general American population on average (Feliciano, 2005, 2006). Being positively selected allows immigrants to transmit high levels of human capital to their offspring. The group-level positive selectivity among Asian immigrants has significantly contributed to the establishment and reinforcement of the Asian American model minority archetype. Yet, Vietnamese immigrants, on average, do not present the same level of immigrant selectivity as their Korean and Chinese counterparts (Lee & Zhou, 2015). The demographic profile of the respondents in this sample primarily resembles what scholars have reported in past studies; that is, Korean and Chinese American students identified as middle- to high-income family background while the Vietnamese sample described themselves as lower- to middle- income.

Immigrant selectivity and relevant structural dis/advantages among Asian Americans shape their cultural understandings of inequality. Most notably, the "Success Frame," a narrow and specific interpretation of what "success" looks like (Lee & Zhou, 2015), may inform ethnically distinctive conceptualizations of inequality and ways to overcome structural constraints found among our respondents. Frames are analytical tools by which people observe, interpret, and make sense of their social life (Snow et al., 1986). The Asian American success frame narrowly defines success in material and structural senses, as getting straight As in high school, attaining a degree in a prestigious university, and securing a well-paying job in one of the four coveted professions: science, engineering, medicine, or law (Lee & Zhou, 2015). Relatedly, scholars have found that Asian Americans buy into the "American Dream" as they believe that upward mobility is both possible and achievable (Zhou & Kim, 2006) and that Asian students are able to draw out advantages from positive stereotypes (Ochoa, 2013). Therefore, the interaction between structure and culture that establishes Asian Americans' racialized positioning and experiences in the larger American society may also shape their interpretation of inequality as structurally established, but culturally driven, as found in this study.

Simultaneously, our findings suggest that Vietnamese immigrants and their children, who on average do not have the resources to do as well as their Korean and Chinese counterparts (Zhou & Bankston, 1999; Zhou & Xiong, 2005), may experience and understand their racial positioning as well as inequality in the larger society differently. Unrealistic expectations of achievement and

success without proper material and structural support and resources can lead to increased feelings of psychological distress (Yano & Akatsuka, 2018), difficulty navigating internalized racism (Gupta et al., 2011), and pressures of invisibility beliefs among Asian groups—particularly for Asian groups who do not feel as though they belong in the “Asian” category. Thus, while success frames and the relevant model minority stereotype may appear positive on the surface, inability to establish and reinforce such frames with material resources and structural advantages among relatively disadvantaged Vietnamese Americans may explain their different conceptualizations of inequality from Korean and Chinese American students as captured in this study. These differences may also account for why Vietnamese American students are the only Asian American group in this study to openly discuss their own experiences of inequality.

Given this, we argue that the *RFIS* captures how inequality is conceptualized across first-generation Asian American college student respondents and informs contemporary racial projects that link both representation and social structure. More specifically, the *RFIS* reveals not only that structural and cultural forces interactively inform individuals’ understandings of inequality, but further variation among these individuals in their social locations and characteristics influence the ways in which members of the same pan-ethnic group perceive different realities of social inequality. *RFIS* is therefore a construct used to organize how Asian students perceive inequality as racial projects, highlighting how nuanced understandings of inequality inform ethnically distinctive interpretations and enactments of racial projects.

Conclusion and Implications

This study builds upon Omi and Winant’s (2014) Racial Formation Theory by exploring the conceptualizations of inequality and opportunity among three pan-ethnic Asian groups through what we advance as the Racial Formation Inequality Spectrum. We find that Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean American first-generation college-going students develop and employ different racialized meanings of inequality in the United States. These distinct racial projects among Asians are important for several reasons. First, the different conceptualizations of inequality and opportunity demonstrate the important role of sociohistorical processes in the development of these perspectives. These three Asian groups have different migration histories and contexts of reception to the United States—and these factors shape how they perceive the social world they live in. Second, these formulations of stratification carry consequences for each Asian group. Korean Americans who employ more cultural understandings of inequality can further perpetrate misguided notions that shape equity and inclusion efforts on university campuses. For instance, the reproduction of merit-based success can minimize the unique struggles and experiences of marginalized communities, within and outside their ethnic group—especially within higher education contexts. Third, Vietnamese American students discussed structural barriers that shaped the lives of minoritized groups. They placed their own experiences as Vietnamese American students at the center of their discussions of inequality and opportunity; thus, shedding light on the importance of intersectionality that higher education leaders ought to take into consideration to truly promote diversity, equity, and inclusivity efforts.

Employing a comparative case study of Asian American students from three distinctive ethnic backgrounds, we have shown that ethnically-specific individual social locations complicated students’ viewpoints and conceptualizations of disparities. In so doing, we show that their understandings of inequality are simultaneously informed by ethnically-specific sociohistorical processes of racialization and integration, regardless of one’s awareness of such processes, which are often overlooked in the discussion of Asian Americans. Employing a *Racial*

Formation Inequality Spectrum reveals such nuance that exists within a pan-ethnic group and sheds light on the importance of understanding racial formation among and across ethnic groups to fully capture the development of racial perspectives among members of U.S. society. Therein lies the utility of racial projects to understand contemporary explications of how ethnic groups perceive inequality in the U.S.

Given this, the employment of *RFIS* could benefit future studies of other minoritized groups in investigating nuanced and heterogenous conceptualizations of inequality as an interactive discursive process between structural and cultural forces, contributing to the larger process of racial formation. Moreover, this study found gender-specific variation in understandings of inequality in the United States among Asian American students included in the study. Future studies employing *RFIS* should take explicitly intersectional approaches in investigating the relationship between gender and other relevant socio-demographic factors like sexuality and disability status and individual conceptualizations of inequality and its implications for the larger societal racial formation processes. Lastly, we have shown *how* Asian American students conceptualize inequality and posited that such conceptualizations may be rooted in the socio-historical processes that are ethnically distinctive. Yet, exactly *why* students' conceptualizations vary along *RFIS* remains unknown. Future studies should build on current research by examining this variation and justification that occurs at individual level as well as ethnic-group levels.

As social and economic inequality continue to pervade the everyday lives of Americans, it is important to take into consideration how different groups in the U.S. understand the current structure of inequality to inform higher education success. While much of social science research centers on the consequences of societal inequality, incorporating the voices of Americans can help illuminate how inequality is experienced at the ground level. Understanding societal inequality from various angles can help scholars and higher education stakeholders implement policy that addresses the concerns of various American groups and ensures their ultimate success.

NOTES

¹ With the exception of the first author, the listing of authorship is in alphabetical order and does not represent the level of contribution from each coauthor—all contributed equally to the final article.

² Data collection occurred prior to the election of Donald J. Trump.

³ See the seminal work of Cynthia Feliciano for a thorough explication of positive premigration selectivity. Feliciano, C. (2005). Does selective migration matter? Explaining ethnic disparities in educational attainment among immigrants' children. *International Migration Review*, 39(4), 841-871.

⁴ First generation refers to immigrants who arrive in the United States as adults, whereas the 1.5 generation refers to immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. For further elaboration, see Feliciano (2005; 2006).

⁵ Because respondents were allowed to freely discuss their opinions regarding factors that contribute to social stratification in interviews, they were allowed to identify more than one factor as the “top” factor. As a result, combined percentage of each response categories are over 100.

⁶ This is not to suggest a binary between Korean American interpretations between culture and structure, instead Korean Americans can be seen more like inequality straddlers. That is, they

locate material (structural) forces as inequality in their responses but complicate this through discursive interpretations of culture; thus, the interaction of the discursive and material.

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