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Examining How Asian American Women Experience Authority In The Workplace

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Dana Kaminstein, Ph.D.

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Examining How Asian American Women Experience Authority In The Workplace

Abstract

There is limited empirical research on how Asian American women interpret situations with workplace authority and how those conceptualizations of authority came to be. This qualitative study examines how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace. I draw from 15 semi-structured interviews with Asian American women to identify the cultural underpinnings that show how this group experiences authority in the workplace. The themes suggest that early experiences of authority affect how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace. The results show how Asian American women in the study were influenced by parents, respected authority, and experienced conflict with authority figures. Moreover, the interviews show that understandings of authority influence how participants in the study interacted with authority in the workplace. By investigating negative and positive experiences with authority in the workplace, I draw themes on how Asian American women in this study interpret the actions of authority figures. Lastly, I identify how this group makes meaning of their own authority in the workplace to reveal findings about their confidence and decision-making process. This study highlights the lived experiences of Asian American women in the workplace. Overall, the findings offer another perspective of authority in the workplace from the vantage points of Asian American women. Acknowledging cultural differences will contribute to the development of a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

Keywords

Asian American, women, authority, confidence, decision-making, mentorship

Comments

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Advisor: Dana Kaminstein, Ph.D.

EXAMINING HOW ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN EXPERIENCE
AUTHORITY IN THE WORKPLACE

by

Helen Xu

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
in the School of Arts and Sciences in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2021

EXAMINING HOW ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN EXPERIENCE
AUTHORITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

There is limited empirical research on how Asian American women interpret situations with workplace authority and how those conceptualizations of authority came to be. This qualitative study examines how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace. I draw from 15 semi-structured interviews with Asian American women to identify the cultural underpinnings that show how this group experiences authority in the workplace. The themes suggest that early experiences of authority affect how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace. The results show how Asian American women in the study were influenced by parents, respected authority, and experienced conflict with authority figures. Moreover, the interviews show that understandings of authority influence how participants in the study interacted with authority in the workplace. By investigating negative and positive experiences with authority in the workplace, I draw themes on how Asian American women in this study interpret the actions of authority figures. Lastly, I identify how this group makes meaning of their own authority in the workplace to reveal findings about their confidence and decision-making process. This study highlights the lived experiences of Asian American women in the workplace. Overall, the findings offer another perspective of authority in the workplace from the vantage points of Asian American women. Acknowledging cultural differences will contribute to the development of a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

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I appreciate the endless care and encouragement from my family and friends. By undertaking this research topic, I gained an opportunity to connect with many Asian American women about their experiences. My continued hope is to connect with so many more.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Senior Dean pushed open his office door and looked me in the eyes and said, “You did this wrong!” My supervisor, the most senior person in the organization, emerged from his office after reading an email on which I copied him. I was talking to the Program Coordinator about an event that we were working on together. He continued, “You should never address an email to a Dean by their first name!” His voice, noticeably louder, carried throughout the office. His longtime Administrative Assistant walked out of her office: “What is going on?” She tried to calm him down. Another Dean walked over to see what was happening, attempting to deescalate the situation by making a joke. The Program Coordinator stood silent. When my supervisor went back into his office, the Administrative Assistant said, “Don’t worry about him. This is how he is sometimes.” The other Dean held his hand out for a high-five and said, “Don’t worry about it.” The Program Coordinator asked me, “Are you okay?” I could not look anyone in the eyes as I wrapped up for the day. I felt frozen.

For context, my supervisor asked me to send an email to invite his colleagues to an event. I hurriedly recorded nearly twenty names on a notepad, as he rattled them off in passing. I investigated all the names in the School directory – some of the recorded names were nicknames. I double-checked my spelling and grammar and hit send. I made it a priority to execute on this task before I left for the day. I was three months into my new role and trying to establish myself as a reliable, hard-working graduate assistant. That day, I was very hard on myself, unable to see the situation from any other lens. At the time, I internalized this interaction, questioning my own worth and competence in the

workplace. At that moment, I felt as though I failed. I disappointed my supervisor and tarnished my reputation. I thought about the ways that I should have approached the situation differently. Perhaps, I could have asked for clearer instructions. Perhaps, I could have had someone review my email before I sent it. I experienced embarrassment and shame. As a younger Asian American woman in the workplace, I could not believe that I would allow myself to address someone with authority by their first name. It was so far from what I was taught growing up – respect people who are older than you and greet people by their titles. I felt like I was scolded for doing what I was told, but at the same time, I blamed myself for not knowing better in front of an authority figure in the workplace. I felt paralyzed in my ability to make sound decisions. I buried the situation, hoping that no one in the office would ever bring it up again.

This interaction described my initial understanding of authority in the workplace. At the time, I did not have the words nor theoretical understanding of what behaviors are tolerated, normalized, and imbedded into the organization – who can act in certain ways and who cannot. I learned about authority – who is considered an authority in the organization? What type of authority do they have? This interaction highlighted how employees responded to authority figures in the workplace.

I am interested in the topic of authority in the workplace from a sociocultural perspective. I am curious about how race and gender influence how individuals experience their workplace. More specifically, I reflected on how my identity as an Asian American woman affected how I made meaning of authority in the workplace. My own understanding of authority was heavily informed by my socialization and upbringing. I wondered how the experiences with authority growing up and authority in workplace

were connected – and if it were the case for other employees who shared a similar identity with me.

In this chapter, I introduce the research question: how do Asian American women experience authority in the workplace? This exploratory research gives voice and meaning to the experiences of Asian American women in the workplace through fifteen qualitative interviews. In Chapter 1, I describe how I arrived at this topic. Then, I offer a review of the literature related to authority in the workplace and Asian American women in the workplace, highlighting the connections with the research question. In the methods section, I detail the questions and methodology that guided my approach. Next, I discuss my assumptions about the topic and present opportunities for further exploration. In this capstone, I use the voices of Asian American women, in their own words, to formulate interpretations about how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace using thematic analysis.

Background

The loudest duck gets shot.

(Chinese Proverb)

The nail that sticks out gets hammered.

(Japanese Proverb)

The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

(American Proverb)

These three proverbs highlight the distinctive cultural differences between Eastern and Western teachings. The Chinese proverb and Japanese proverb show how voicing dissent leads to negative consequences, whereas the American proverb displays how speaking up is rewarded. The cultural norms in Eastern and Western societies contribute

to group dynamics that are present in social spaces, including the workplace. This capstone explores how Asian American women, a group that straddles multiple intersecting identities and cultures, make meaning of their experiences with authority in the workplace. This study will contribute to the literature on workplace authority from the perspective of Asian American women.

Moreover, there is increasing research that discusses the unique perspectives of Asian Americans: in career counseling (Leong & Hartung, 2003), cross-cultural supervision (Daniels, D'Andrea, & Kim, 1999), and counseling (Fouad & Bingham, 1995). In a similar way, there is an opportunity to explore organizational dynamics through a racialized and gendered lens and specifically investigate how authority is experienced by Asian American women in the workplace. Race and gender are social identities that can influence how Asian American women interpret their circumstances, including the workplace environment (Fong, 1997). This study addresses the salience of race and gender in the workplace to reveal how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace.

Capstone Relevance

My experiences with my capstone advisor and capstone reader informed this research topic. Dr. Charline Russo, my capstone reader, coached me through a process to identify a topic that I wanted to invest in. I arrived at the topic of Asian American women in the workplace based on my own observations and experiences. There were certain experiences with authority in the workplace that I discussed among close friends that were not found in organizational and management literature. Thus, I wanted to research what those dynamics were. When presenting this research topic to Dr. Dana Kaminstein,

my capstone advisor, I shared how I could contribute to the research on inclusive workplaces, specifically for Asian American women. I talked about focusing on the positive experiences of Asian American women. I was going to focus on the value of Asian American women to guide a more inclusive workforce. Then, he asked me why I was not discussing negative experiences. Why was I not talking about the negative experiences? In that moment, I was reminded that the discussion of negative experiences was rare for me. Personally, I tried to move on from negative experiences without unravelling the discomfort associated with conflicts and challenges. I felt as though these topics were inappropriate for the workplace. In this same way, I also recognized that I learned the most by reflecting on my own negative experiences and challenges shared by others. I developed as a stronger employee and a leader by being able to reflect and share lessons in a vulnerable way.

Earlier in the Organizational Dynamics program, Dr. Kaminstein presented me the opportunity to discuss my experiences as an Asian American during his course on organizational teams and group dynamics. Instead of describing the established literature on Asian Americans or sharing my experiences in a positive or neutral way, I offered my experiences as an Asian American the way that I experienced it. I talked about the racism and discrimination that I experienced growing up and then in the workplace. It was one of the first times that I felt my Asian American identity was affirmed. This invitation to share both positive and negative experiences felt validating. It served as an opportunity to teach and inform my peers about my experience. Speaking up about negative experiences created an opportunity to build connection, reduce isolation, and inspire conversations for meaningful organizational change. The purpose of this capstone is to amplify Asian

American women's voices, which is often missing in the literature and mainstream society.

Overview of Literature

There is limited research on Asian American women in the workplace. In fact, Fong (1997) claimed that this group is an understudied minority. To date, authority in the workplace has not been examined empirically from the vantage point of Asian American women. There is limited research on what contributes to how Asian American women make meaning of their experiences with authority. The existing bodies of social psychology literature on authority show how individuals and groups respond to authority through obedience and disobedience, personality and attitudinal traits, or individual and group responses to situations (Morselli & Passini, 2011). Authority describes social positions and roles within an organizational hierarchy (Smith, 2002) and the power to control human and organizational resources (Zeng, 2011). Most of the organizational literature on workplace authority focuses on authority attainment, the process and outcomes for accessing senior executive positions. Researchers found that women and minorities are less represented in top positions in an organizational hierarchy (Zeng 2011; Huffman & Cohen 2004; Smith 2002; Wright et al. 1995; Mintz & Krymkowski 2010; Elliot & Smith 2004; Smith & Elliot 2002).

The existing literature on Asian Americans in the workplace describes the discrimination that this group faces, including: facing stereotypes for being quiet, passive, submissive (Kiang et al., 2017; Rosette et al. 2016; Tinkler et al. 2019); the "bamboo ceiling" to describe the barriers to advancing to senior roles (Yu 2020, Huang 2020; Hyun 2005); and racial mistreatment (Huang, 2020). Xu and Davidhizar (2014) wrote a

non-empirical article describing how cultural differences influence how Asian American nurses navigate their workplace. This article offered insight into how this group experienced their professional environment to suggest how they respect authority, have a collectivist orientation, and navigated conflict (Xu & Davidhizar, 2014). Furthermore, the research on Asian American women is focused on achievement gaps (Yu 2020; Gee & Peck 2017) and workplace discrimination (Huang 2020; Yu 2020). Chow (1994) discusses the implications of being a “double jeopardy of Asian American women” to highlight how they may face disadvantages for their race and gender. The empirical study by Chow (1994) focuses on the challenges of Asian American women at work to suggest coping mechanisms. The results of the study suggest how Asian American women respect authority and deal with supervisors (Chow, 1994). This capstone research furthers these findings by focusing on how Asian American women make meaning of their experiences with authority in the workplace.

Research Question and Methodology

This capstone study used qualitative interviews to collect data from Asian American women. I used purposeful sampling to find participants from a range of industries and positionalities within an organization. I conducted 45-60-minute interviews using a video conferencing tool. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of all participants. I used a semi-structured interview template with thirteen open-ended questions covering four categories: identity in the workplace, experiences with authority in the workplace, definitions and perceptions of authority, and closing questions. After the interviews were transcribed, text from the interviews were coded to form three categories and eleven themes. I formed interpretations and findings from

direct quotes and observations of participants using thematic analysis. These methods were used to investigate the research question: how do Asian American women experience authority in the workplace?

Assumptions

There are several assumptions to consider when researching this topic. To begin, I assume that Asian American women experience authority differently than women from non-Asian cultures in the United States. By asking questions about upbringing, I assume that these understandings were learned at an earlier age. While Asian American women may experience authority in the workplace a certain way, I assume that it is related to their racial or gender identity to some extent. With that said, I must also consider the risk and benefits of forming generalized interpretations from a diverse population. The term “Asian American” can be limiting, as it encompasses many and varied experiences. I assume participants have some level of understanding of what it means to be Asian American and more specifically, an Asian American woman. Thus, I cannot assume the salience of race and gender in the workplace. Next, it is assumed that participants have had both negative and positive experiences with authority. During the interview, I ask the participants to recall specific challenges or positives experiences with authority in the workplace and what they have thought about the situation since then. Then, I assume that there is a connection between how authority was handled growing up and how participants experience authority in the workplace.

Positionality

I identify as a second-generation Asian American woman, meaning that I was born in the country that my parents immigrated to. I worked at a range of American

universities that vary in the percentages of Asian/Asian American students on campus. Some of the departments that I worked for include: Multicultural Student Center, Asian American Cultural Center, Office of the Dean of Students, Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, and Office of Academic Affairs. My current daily work does not directly serve Asian American women. In addition, I served in leadership roles for an international organization that serves Asian American women. Because of these experiences, I became more aware of how social identities influence how a person experiences their undergraduate career, and now the workplace. These experiences informed my interest to explore the experiences of Asian American women within the workplace.

This research topic is important to me because I believe that my intersectional identity as an Asian American woman continues to shape my perspective in the workplace. This identity is very salient to me because it has informed the way that I move through the world. For example, I can recall times that I modified my behavior based on my perception of authority in the workplace. These conditioned responses often conflicted with the American workplace values of voicing dissent, celebrating personal achievements, and challenging norms. For example, I am comfortable deferring to formal authority figures, seeking consensus, and highlighting group achievements. Personally, I felt a sense of loyalty to protect those who are above me in the organizational chart and greater sense of respect for colleagues depending on their titles and roles, especially early on in my career.

With that said, I also experience strength and empowerment through exploring my own racial and gender identity. I value intergroup dialogue because I believe that

affirming the diversity within groups moves organizations towards progress.

Additionally, I value affinity spaces that support specific populations by locating common ground. My own perception of authority in the workplace has evolved as I learned more about organizational dynamics. My own experiences of being confronted with complex workplace dynamics served as the motivation for this research. There is value in investigating how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace as it will benefit underrepresented communities and organizations in the future.

Capstone Overview

For my capstone, I examine how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace through a qualitative research study. In the next chapter, I offer an overview of the current literature on Asian American women in the workplace and authority in the workplace. I identify the gaps in literature. Then, in Chapter 3, I describe the methodology used to investigate this research topic. Next, in Chapter 4, I present the results of the study with eleven themes, derived using thematic analysis. Finally, I offer my interpretations of the findings using the data and existing literature in Chapter 5. In the discussion, I detail practical implications, future research opportunities, and a summary of this capstone research study about how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I summarize the current literature based on themes related to the research question: How do Asian American women experience authority in the workplace? First, I offer a working definition for the key term: Asian American. Then, I provide an overview on authority, Asian Americans in the workplace, Asian American women in the workplace, and research on Asian American women and authority in the workplace. Next, I identify gaps in literature to frame my research on how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace.

Background

To investigate this research question, it is important to understand the literature on organizational authority and the experiences of Asian Americans more generally. Cheng and Thatchenkery (1997) found that there was no peer-reviewed research on Asian Americans and workplace diversity in organizational literature prior to 1996. One of the reasons for this lack of research was that Asian Americans are viewed as the “model minority” (Huang 2020; Lai 2013; Chen & Thatchenkery 1997). There is a significant body of literature that details the “model minority” myth, which depicts Asian Americans as hard-working, high-achieving, and successful members of society, and more specifically employees in American organizations (Huang 2020; Kiang et al 2017; Lai & Babcock 2013; Cheng 1997; Fong 1997). The model minority myth depicts Asian Americans as being “too successful” to be considered a disadvantaged minority (Cheng 1997). It creates a wedge of resentment between other ethnic minorities (Shen et al.,

2011). Some outcomes include: not being viewed as an underrepresented minority in academics or economic structures, lower return on educational investment, pay inequity among white counterparts, poverty rate is higher than European Americans, and underrepresented in management positions (Oyserman & Sakamoto 1997; Cheng 1997; Fong 1997). In addition, researchers found the bifurcated distribution of Asian Americans, as some are “economically well off but run into a glass ceiling, whereas others are disadvantaged” (Cheng, 1997, p. 277). This assumption that Asian Americans are the model minority erases the depth and diversity of experiences, especially challenges, among this group. The model minority myth contributes to the pressure for Asian American students to achieve high standards at times leading to mental health concerns (Shen et al., 2011). Therefore, the model minority image is generalized and neglects the unique social traits and challenges of specific ethnic groups.

Definitions

First, it is important to note that there is no fixed definition for the term “Asian American” in the literature. The term is used to refer to a broad group of people with family origins in countries in Asia and that live in the United States (Bui & Turnbull, 2003). The intentional use of the term “Asian American,” for the purpose of this paper, is rooted in a socio-political definition to highlight a shared cultural identity. This term was developed because of the political awakenings of the Civil Rights era to raise awareness about discrimination and racism and offer support across ethnic groups (Le Espiritu & Espiritu 2011; Park 2008; Kitano & Daniels 2000). However, the term “Asian American” can also be limiting, resulting in stereotypes and a monolithic view of a vastly diverse diaspora of people. Park (2008) published a study on the “pluralized meaning” of a racial

label to suggest that the definition of what it means to be Asian American has expanded due to demographic and cultural factors. Ethnic and religious diversification, the model minority stereotype, and generational differences contribute to a more complex cultural identity (Park, 2008; Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997; Lee 1996; Chow 1994). In accordance with racial identity development theories that describe the formation of an ethnic understanding through incremental stages (Helms, 1995), Park (2008) suggests that salience of race and ethnicity has a broad range among Asian Americans.

While the literature recognizes the diversity among Asian Americans, there are also generalized similarities across Asian ethnicities. Leong and Hartung (2003) report that Asian and Asian Americans exhibit values such as a collectivist orientation, family-based norms, saving face, and interdependence. In a study about Asian American women, Fong (1997, p. 92) summarizes Asian values:

Like filial piety (Nievera, 1980), obedience to authority (Chow, 1982), subjugation of the individual to the group (Fujitomi & Wong, 1976), a quiet and passive acceptance of one's situation (Matsudo et al., 1970), self control, self-abasement, and a strong sense of family solidarity, are quite in contrast to American values which emphasize individualism, egalitarianism, independence, future-orientation, and mastery over one's environment (Furuto, 1992; Kluckhohn, 1951) (Fong, 1997, p. 92).

This quote highlights the differences between Asian and American cultural values. In addition, Bui and Turnbull (2003) note that Asian Americans value family ties, education, and respect for authority and the elderly. There is an emphasis on hierarchy in the patriarchal family system (Bui & Turnbull, 2003). In this capstone, the term Asian

American is used to locate common themes across a diverse, multicultural group of people to offer insight into how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace.

Authority

Although authority has been researched extensively in social psychology and sociology, it has been discussed in a variety of ways. Morselli and Passini (2011) found that social psychology research focuses heavily on authority at the individual level. Morselli and Passini (2011) offered a comprehensive and concise overview of authority in social psychology:

Social psychology has studied the way people respond to the demands of the authority, through obedience and disobedience. Focus has mainly been placed on personality and attitudinal traits (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levenson & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1998), individual responses to situations (Milgram, 1974), or group dynamics (Tajfel, 1981) (Morselli & Passini, 2011, p. 291-292). To summarize, social psychology research is focused on individual responses and interpretations of authority. In this section, I provide an overview of how authority has been studied in organizations by describing: what is authority, who has authority, how authority is executed, and authority attainment.

First, the literature provided insight into what is authority. The study of authority is relevant because it describes the everyday influence among people (Morselli and Passini, 2011). The sociologist, Max Weber, described authority as:

Probability that a command with a given specific context will be obeyed by a given group of persons... The important difference between power and authority

consists in the fact that whereas power is essentially tied to the personality of individuals, authority is always associated with social positions or roles... authority is a legitimate relations of domination and subjection (Smith, 2002, p. 510).

In this way, authority is explained by the social relationships and influences between individuals and within groups. In the organizational context, workplace authority is defined by the “power to participate and influence the decision-making process regarding an organization’s operation and personnel” (Zeng, 2011, p. 313). It describes the power that individuals have over other individuals or groups (Morselli & Passini, 2011). Workplace authority is measured not only by responsibilities like hiring, firing, and other personnel decisions but also describes the formal position in an organizational hierarchy (Zeng, 2011).

In addition, the literature contributes to the understanding of who has authority. Smith (2002) found two primary classifications of authority: control over organization resources and control over human resources. Smith (2002) offered a comprehensive overview of the sociological literature and dimensions of authority: *ownership* described the form of control over production and power of others, *sanctioning authority* described the ability to pay or promote others, and *decision-making or managerial authority* related to an employee’s positionality with the organizational hierarchy (p. 511). In this way, authority is described by the control over resources.

Moreover, the literature suggests that authority is executed in different ways. In an article about group analysis, Green and Molenkamp (2005) defined authority as “the right to do work” and assume responsibility and accountability for actions (p. 5). They

summarized the distinction between “formal authority” and “personal authority.” An example of this type of formal authority is an employee’s job description that outlines their duties. Moreover, personal authority is what Green and Molenkamp (2005) describe as “The way an individual *takes up* formal authority” (p. 5) or the way that someone executes their formal authority. They propose that social identities and cultural background are among several factors that influence how someone enacts their authority (Green & Molenkamp, 2006). Formal descriptions contribute to who has authority, but other factors like ambition, competition, politics, personal values and beliefs influence how they execute their authority.

More commonly, the organizational literature discusses authority attainment, the ability to access top management positions. Researchers who study authority attainment found how gender led to workplace inequity for women (Huffman & Cohen 2004; Smith 2002; Wright et al. 1995). Moreover, researchers studied the experiences of authority attainment at the intersections of gender and race to find that women and minorities are less represented in top executive roles (Zeng 2011; Mintz & Krymkowski 2010; Elliot & Smith 2004; Smith & Elliot 2002; Smith 2002). Smith (2002) found that “Despite significant advancement in the overall socioeconomic status of minorities and working women, race and gender remain important impediments to their attainment of authority” (p. 509). The gender and race disparities in the workplace were related to the racial and gender demographic makeup and exclusionary processes that kept “authority elites” in positions of authority (Smith, 2002). Studies discuss how authority is exercised in the workplace among racial groups. Smith (2002) found that “Regardless of the way authority is measured, one consistent finding seems clear: Minorities are less likely than

whites to exercise authority at work even when all known determinants of authority are taken into account” (p. 525). Smith (2002) also highlights that the literature about authority is limited to Black and White Americans. These studies highlight a multitude of individual and institutional factors that contribute to who has authority in the workplace, what type of authority they carry, and how they execute authority.

While there have not been direct studies that investigate how Asian American women make meaning of their experiences with authority, the literature shows that Asian Americans respect authority. Authority has cultural implications. For example, Xu and Davidhizar (2004) highlight the cultural values related to authority:

Confucianism emphasizes devotion to parents, family, and friends, cultivation of the mind, and self-control. Asians are taught and socialized to respect authority whether it be household heads, community leaders, managers and administrators in the workplace, or government officials or leaders. The legitimacy of their unquestioned respect for authority is based on kinship, seniority, or loyalty. In return, superiors in traditional Asian cultures are expected to treat their inferiors like members of a family and the boss-employee relationship is much "thicker" (p. 49).

In this way, Xu and Davidhizar show the influence of Confucius’ teachings about deference to authority on East and Southeast Asian cultures. For additional context, Fong (1997) offers an overview of the Asian American family hierarchy dynamics. From a cultural perspective, authority is based on sex, generation, and age, and men have more financial and decision-making power (Fong 1997; Pyke & Johnson 2003).

Asian Americans in the workplace

The existing bodies of literature about organizational diversity are mostly focused on Black and White participant groups, predominantly men (Smith 2002; Cheng, 1997). Leong and Gupta (2007) and Lai (2012) focus on the experiences of Asian Americans, who have otherwise been ignored in the organizational literature. Most of the literature on Asian Americans in the workplace focuses on the discrimination that this group experiences (Yu 2020; Berdahl & Min 2012; Fong 1997).

The literature on Asian Americans in the workplace discusses a few key areas: stereotypes, the “bamboo ceiling,” and racial inequity in the workplace. Asian Americans are less likely to be leaders of an organization due to the stereotypes of being passive, submissive, deferential and quiet (Kiang et al., 2017; Rosette et al. 2016; Tinkler et al. 2019). Huang (2020) notes that these stereotypical characteristics “are antithetical to leadership and workplace success.” Huang (2002) continues by describing the consequences of violating the stereotype:

Unfortunately, not adhering to such stereotypes can also elicit negative reactions, forcing Asian American workers to navigate the fine line between being ‘too passive’ and ‘too authoritarian’ (Williams, 2014; Woo, 2000), a double standard that white workers do not necessarily face (Berdahl & Min, 2012) (Huang, 2002, p. 5).

Asian Americans face stereotypes that they are more deferential and passive than other groups, which influence leadership opportunities (Chen 1999; Lin et al. 2005). Xin and Tsui (1996) discussed the “impression gap” that addresses how Asian Americans focus on their jobs instead of themselves in their relationships with supervisors, leading to lower career mobility (Xin & Tsui 1996; Chen & Thatchenkery 1997).

Additionally, the literature on Asian Americans in the workplace focuses on leadership and career advancement. More specifically, the literature discusses the “bamboo ceiling,” a term coined by Hyun (2005) to describe the cultural factors that hinder organizational advancement and workplace equality (Yu 2020; Huang 2020, Hyun 2005). The bamboo ceiling is the figurative barrier and process to career advancement despite levels of education and expertise (Huang, 2020). In a more recent review of labor market data, Lee and Kye (2016) found that Asian Americans do not achieve the same level of success that their education levels predict, highlighting earning disadvantages in the disaggregated data. Asian Americans were found to have lower return on investment for their education due to their lower social capital (Lee & Kye 2016; Chen & Thatchenkery 1997; Cheng 1997). Sun and Starosta (2006) studied the perception of invisibility, how members have been ignored or neglected in dominant social spaces, among Asian American professionals to identify if this group experienced treatment that was different from the majority population. They found that the Asian American professionals in the study “thought it best to accept invisibility, to work harder, and to swallow their frustration without comment” (Sun & Starosta, 2006, p. 119). This finding contributes to the stereotypes of Asian Americans being submissive, revealing that they may find it difficult to express frustration in the workplace.

In a study about the early experiences of second-generation Asian American professionals, Huang (2020) identified three major constraints in the workplace for this population: limited family and community networks, racialized microaggressions, and negative stereotyping. Huang (2020) suggests that there is underreporting for racial mistreatment among this population. In addition, Xu and Davidhizar (2014) described the

conflict and communication styles of Asian American nurses in a non-empirical article to reveal how cultural values influence how this group navigates the workplace. They claimed that Asian American nurses respect authority, have a collectivist orientation, avoid conflict, or navigate conflict in a less confrontational way (Xu & Davidhizar, 2014). While there is limited research on Asian American women and authority in the workplace, researchers have studied manager relationships of Asian American professionals. Ryan and Hendricks (1989) in an article about culture and communication suggest that supervisors of Asian or Asian American employees should recognize a supervisee's adherences of Asian values, such as humility. This study notes the role of perceived narcissism and attention-seeking, which is minimized in Asian cultures. Xin and Tsui (1996) studied the influence tactics of Asian American managers, relative to their Caucasian-American managers. While the study did not find major differences between the influence tactics between Asian Americans and Caucasian-Americans, they found that there were differences when speaking to superiors versus subordinates. They found that Asian Americans in the study used more ingratiation or friendliness when speaking to a boss (Xin & Tsui, 1996). The literature on Asian Americans in the workplace is focused on discrimination, achievement gaps, and affirms how culture may impact their experiences in the workplace. Research suggests how they interact with authority.

Asian American Women in the Workplace

Despite limited research on Asian American women in the workplace, the stereotype of Asian American women is heavily documented in the literature. Asian American women are often portrayed as submissive, quiet, humble, hardworking,

obedient, and eager to please (Li, 2014). Ghavami and Peplau (2013) find that “submissive” can be gendered in its experience, meaning the general stereotype is experienced by Asian American women as discrimination. First, I provide an overview of the discrimination that this group faces in the workplace.

According to a recent study by Yu (2020), Asians comprise of 6.2% of the American labor force. While Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the United States, Asian Americans, more specifically women, are the least likely to become executive leaders (Yu 2020; Gee & Peck 2017). Researchers conclude that the workplace discrimination and socialization of Asian American women create barriers to access leadership roles in organizations (Huang 2020; Yu 2020). They experience disadvantages for being a gender and racial minority, which Chow (1994) describes as the “double jeopardy of Asian American women.”

Tinkler et al (2019) also discuss the backlash that Asian American women receive when they are socially deviant and appear too dominant, concluding that Asian American women were also the least fit for leadership regardless of behavioral style. The tension created by stereotypes contributes to the challenges related to attaining managerial roles (Rosette et al., 2016).

This study showed how the experience of Asian American women differed from Asian Americans as a group, highlighting the intersections of identity in the workplace, within families, and ethnic groups. Race and gender, among other social identities, influence participation in the workplace (Fong, 1997).

Research on Asian American Women & Authority in the Workplace

While there is limited research on how Asian American women make meaning of their experiences with authority in the workplace, the findings in the research on Asian American women suggest that they have deferential views towards authority (Chow, 1994). Smith (1990) found that Asian Americans women had lower narcissism scores compared to Caucasian and Hispanic participants; results showed the influence of cultural values of modesty and respect for authority on the scores. This finding showed that Asian American women valued relationships over individualism (Smith, 1990). In a chapter of “Women of Color in U.S. Society,” Chow (1994) discusses how Asian American women experience the workplace and the coping strategies when they encounter discrimination and unfair treatment. Chow (1994) used a cross-sectional survey and interviews to examine the social factors on workplace outcomes of 161 Asian American women from the four largest Asian subgroups in the Washington D.C. area. In the findings, Chow (1994) discussed how Asian American women dealt with supervisors. She wrote:

Being brought up in a tradition of deferring to authority, many Asian American women sometimes found themselves in situations that caused difficulties in dealing with supervisors who, in their mind, represented figures with such omnipotent authority that were not easy to challenge. Given that fact that workers, mostly powerless, depended on the goodwill of the supervision of bosses, conformity and compliance became important concepts for these women to follow” (p. 213).

This study focuses on how Asian American struggle at work and suggests coping mechanisms. The women in the study faced challenges such as “supervisors’ perception

of their inabilities, disrespect for Asian women, unreasonable work assignments, unfair performance evaluation, accusation of job errors, inappropriate decisions regarding promotion, intolerance of language accents, and suspicion of discrimination” (Chow, 1994, p. 213). Participants reported how frequently they confronted these issues with supervisors, and the analysis revealed some variations depending on occupational level, ethnicity, and nativity (Chow, 1994, p. 213). This capstone provides an in-depth examination of how Asian American women experience authority since this 1994 study, which examined the experiences of Asian American women in the workplace more broadly. There has not been a study that investigates authority in the workplace through the vantage point of Asian American women. This study seeks to understand how Asian American women make meaning of their experiences with authority in the workplace.

Gaps in the Literature

There is a substantial amount of literature that discusses authority, but there is little research on how employees experience authority in the workplace, particularly from a racialized and gendered lens. While there is an increasing amount of literature on Asian Americans in the workplace, there is limited research on Asian American women employees. Furthermore, the existing literature about Asian Americans and Asian American women in the workplace offer insights into workplace inequity, discrimination, and authority attainment, but there is room to further research how Asian American women make sense of the workplace. The current bodies of literature indicate that Asian American women respect authority; however little research has investigated how understandings of authority impact their responses to authority in the workplace. There is an opportunity to use qualitative research methods to examine how Asian American

women make sense of their experiences with authority in the workplace. In this capstone, I focus on the how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace from their perspective, which addresses some of the above gaps in the literature. By bringing attention to Asian American women, a group that straddles multiple identities, this research adds their voices to our understanding of authority in the workplace. This study contributes to the body of literature that discusses the experiences of diverse employees.

Conclusion

To understand how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace, it is important to review the existing literature on authority and Asian American women in the workplace. In this chapter, I offered a working definition for the term “Asian American” based on the literature about Asian Americans. I use the term “Asian American” to describe shared experiences among a diverse, multicultural group of people from various Asian ethnicities. I provided an overview of authority from social psychology, sociology, and organizational literature. The literature showed that authority is described in many ways: what is authority, who has authority, how authority is executed, and how authority is attained. Authority described the power and influence that individuals had over other individuals or groups. In addition, I reviewed the research on Asian Americans in the workplace and Asian American women in the workplace. The literature suggested that Asian Americans inequity in the workplace in the form of stereotypes and lack of authority attainment. Then, I summarized the research on Asian American women and authority in the workplace. An overview of the literature revealed that Asian American women respected authority in the workplace. In Chapter 2, I highlighted the gaps in the literature and discussed the ways in which this capstone

research begins to address these gaps. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology used to investigate how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the methods used to examine how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace. This research was conducted using semi-structured interviews to investigate how fifteen Asian American women experience authority in the workplace. In this chapter, I explain the methodology, research question, method, sample, and data analysis process for the data. Finally, I describe how I mitigated researcher bias in this study. The research protocol was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania and given a notice of exemption authorized by 45 CFR 46.104, category 2 in November 2020.

Methodology

Interviews were used to collect data and listen to how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace. The purpose of the interview was to gain information about the experiences of the participants by listening to their voices and the language they used. Therefore, I approached this research question using qualitative research methods to investigate participant experiences. Qualitative research is used to understand how participants make sense of their social circumstances, experiences, perspectives, and histories (Ritchie et al., 2013). It is important to highlight that the focus of this study is on how Asian American women experience authority.

This study used a semi-structured interview format to allow the researcher to use open-ended questions to explore participants' thinking more extensively (Gill et al., 2008). While an interview template was used to keep focused on the research question, this structure gave me flexibility to explore the research questions with participants. I

recorded, transcribed, and coded the interviews to identify themes. Transcripts were recorded verbatim to provide direct quotes to support the themes. By researching the experiences of Asian American women, I provide accounts of a group that is often absent in the literature or overlooked in mainstream society.

Research Question

This study explores the research question: how do Asian American women experience authority in the workplace? Authority is a broad topic with the potential for various interpretations of the term. It is vital to note that the term “authority” was intentionally not defined to allow Asian American women to explore the issues of authority from their own experiences. I used qualitative research methods to gather information on how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace.

Method

This study used a semi-structured interview protocol with thirteen open-ended questions to explore the research question. The length of time to enroll all subjects and complete the study was one month. I distributed a recruitment email in November 2020, planning to conduct interviews in December 2020. The length of a subject's participation time in the study was between 45-60-minutes for the interview. I documented key insights or observations on a notepad during and after each interview.

Interview Design

When conducting the interview, I provided a brief overview of the study and established rapport with the participant. I familiarized myself with the template before beginning the interviews, so the interview felt more natural (Gill et al., 2008). The interview protocol (Appendix 1) was divided into five parts. The first part included two

questions that focused on identity in the workplace. The second question was designed to prompt participants to reflect on the salience of their identities in the workplace and at home.

The next part contained four questions about the participant's experiences with authority in the workplace. Participants were asked to recall a challenge or negative experience with authority in the workplace and describe the outcome. This question was followed by "What have you thought about this situation since then?" allowing participants to reflect on their understanding of the experience. Next, participants were asked to recall a positive experience with authority in the workplace and describe the outcome. Similarly, participants were asked to reflect on what they had thought about the situation since then. Participants were asked to describe at least two specific experiences with authority in the workplace to yield specific details and key insights. The interview template used the words "authority in the workplace" rather than "authority," to draw a distinction between different parts of the interview. For example, the next part asked participants about their definition of authority growing up for comparison.

The third part included five questions about the definitions and perceptions of authority. Participants were asked how they thought about authority in the workplace. They were asked to reflect on who has authority in their workplace from their perspective and the type of authority that they carried. This question allowed participants to create their own definition of authority in the workplace using their own words. After that, participants described how authority was handled in their family growing up. It is important to note that questions about family were discussed after the experiences with authority. This sequencing is intentional, so participants were not primed to think about

their upbringing. This question was used to create a distinction between workplace dynamics and family dynamics. Then, participants were asked to recall their understanding of how authority was handled when they were growing up. This question was designed to uncover what understandings of authority influenced their current perception of authority in the workplace. Lastly, I asked about how the participants' experiences with authority growing up influenced their views and feelings about authority today. This question was designed to offer participants a time to reflect on any similarities or differences between the two contexts. These questions allowed participants to define authority using their own words to address the research question.

At the end of interview, I asked participants "What do you wish there was more of as an Asian American woman in the workplace?" The original interview protocol did not have this question. However, as Coyne (1997) noted in an article about theoretical sampling, qualitative research allows researchers the flexibility to modify the emphasis in the early stages of the research process. I added this question to highlight an emerging need. To illustrate, when asked, "Is there anything else you want to share about authority in the workplace that I have not had a chance to ask you?" the first two participants offered a solution. This question was incorporated into the interview template in subsequent interviews. Finally, I asked participants if there was anything else that they wanted to share about authority and the workplace. This question was open-ended to encourage participants to offer any final thoughts or reflections about authority and the workplace.

Sample

The participants in this study were fifteen Asian American women who worked for a minimum of five years. While the experience of Asian American women is not a monolithic one, this study used this participant criteria to locate themes among diverse experiences. In this section, I discuss how I recruited participants and the characteristics of the sample.

Sample Recruitment

The study used purposeful and theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Coyne, 1997) to select participants with a diverse range of experiences. As Coyne (1997) suggested, sampling for qualitative research can be complex because of the flexible procedural design in comparison to quantitative research. The study used purposeful sampling to increase the diversity of the participant pool and reach people outside of the primary researcher's network. I used this type of sampling to select participants based on the needs of the study (Coyne, 1997). This approach was used to optimize rich data with sufficient representation across ethnicities, industry types, and levels within an organization.

I used the following groups to distribute the initial recruitment email: a faculty and staff association at a private University, alumni network of an Asian-interest student organization, and my personal connections. I used this approach because of my affiliation with these groups. Recipients of the email were invited to share this research opportunity with their own networks to extend the recruitment efforts beyond my personal network. The recruitment email cited the purpose of this research study: to investigate how Asian American women experience their workplace. The words "authority" or "authority in the

workplace” were deliberately removed from any recruitment materials to reduce participant bias.

After they expressed interest in the study, fifteen participants were emailed an informed consent form to review. During the interview, I described the interview protocol and reiterated to participants that participation in the research was voluntary and confidential. To ensure confidentiality, no drafts of the capstone paper contained personal identifiable information. Identifiable information from the recording was removed within 24 hours of the interview transcription. Participants selected a first name to serve as a pseudonym in place of their real name.

Characteristics of Sample

This research study recruited volunteers with the following eligibility criteria: identify as Asian American, identify as a woman, and have had a minimum of five years of work experience. The study did not include any other restrictions from a demographic standpoint. Thirty-one volunteers demonstrated their interest to participate in the research study. Out of the thirty-one respondents, one volunteer reported that they did not meet all the eligibility requirements. Four volunteers notified the researcher of their interest past the participant recruitment period. Fifteen participants were selected to schedule an interview using purposeful sampling. Most volunteers self-reported demographic information in the email expressing interest to participate in the research study. In addition, most volunteers included an email signature that displayed information about their title, industry type, and current location. I personally knew some of the volunteers who expressed interest and thus had a general understanding of their professional background. These factors were used to diversify the participant pool when a certain

industry was saturated. Fifteen participants agreed to participate in the research study by scheduling an interview and completing an informed consent form.

Participants were asked to disclose demographic information after the interview was completed and the data was coded. This process was intended to maintain subject confidentiality and reduce researcher bias when coding the data. The demographic information was used for the sole purpose of documenting numbers (Tables 1-6 found in Chapter 4).

Data Analysis

In this section, I describe the process used to code the interview data and develop themes from the results. The data from the individual interviews were coded and organized thematically into three overarching categories and eleven themes to address how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace

Coding

First, I used the application, Google Recorder, to transcribe the interviews. The accuracy of each interview transcript was verified by playing back the recording and modifying any discrepancies. I accounted for errors in punctuation and quotations, which the transcribing application was not able to accurately document. After the transcripts were verified, I highlighted large sections of related text or quotations. This study used multiple cycles to analyze the data in various contexts. Descriptive labels were recorded in the margin of the document based on environmental factors, personal factors, shifts/realizations, specific situations, perceptions of others, and reactions. I recorded any emerging themes and key insights in a separate document. Then, each section of related text or quotations was coded in an Excel spreadsheet by respondent ID, question number,

quote, and descriptive codes. I developed three categories and eleven themes based on the total of 77 descriptive codes. I paid close attention to any changes between the understanding of authority in the workplace and growing up. The descriptive code that was recorded the highest number of times was “Parents” with 21 citations across 15 interviews. There were several descriptive codes that only appeared once or twice across all the transcripts. During the coding process I recorded any of my initial thoughts, reactions, and emerging themes in a document.

Theme Development

This study used thematic analysis to explore the experiences of participants. I used Nowell, et al.’s (2017) method of striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria for thematic analysis. First, I became familiar with the data by recording my initial reactions and reflective notes. Then, I generated initial code descriptions in the margin of the transcripts to document emerging themes. After, descriptive codes were organized in an Excel spreadsheet. I defined and named the initial categories and themes. I used multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the analysis including taking field notes and referring to the raw interview data to test for accuracy. Field notes were helpful to document any quotes that were contrary to the emerging themes and to uncover a more complex understanding of the experiences. Finally, I synthesized the findings and structured an outline to show the connection among the themes. Interpretations were based on the interview data, observing the participants during the interview, and discovering the themes in the data.

Researcher Bias

To mitigate researcher biases, I used the method of peer debriefing to provide an external check on the research process. I had the initial questions vetted by the research group, which was comprised of my capstone advisor, a writing support person designated by my capstone advisor, and me. The transcripts were available upon request for the research group to review throughout the entire study. I documented all peer debriefings and meetings. The research team met at least once a month between April 2020 to April 2021 to discuss the research process, review procedure, and share findings.

Conclusion

I approached this research by using a qualitative methodology to better listen to and understand the voices of Asian American women. Fifteen Asian American women were recruited using purposeful sampling to represent multiple ethnicities, industry types, and positionalities within an organization. I used a semi-structured template with thirteen open-ended questions to create consistency among the interviews. I used thematic analysis to identify themes that addressed how Asian American women experienced authority in the workplace. Next, I present the results from this qualitative study in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the results of my interviews based on the research question: how do Asian American women experience authority in the workplace? This chapter is organized by three overarching categories related to the research question and semi-structured interview protocol: understandings of authority, experiences with authority in the workplace, and speaking. Eleven themes emerged from the interview data. First, I present the demographics of my sample. Next, I discuss the participants' understandings of authority. Then, I detail the experiences of Asian American women with authority in the workplace. Finally, I offer how participants described speaking up in the workplace.

Demographics

Fifteen Asian American women discussed their experiences with authority in the workplace. This group showed the diversity of experiences that exist among Asian American women. During the interviews, participants disclosed multiple aspects of their identity. However, I did not ask participants for their demographic information until after the data was coded. I presented open-ended questions to allow participants to use language that was most fitting to their own personal experience. Tables 1-6 include the demographic data. All demographic information was de-identified in this chapter to protect the confidentiality of participants. Participants selected pseudonyms for the research study.

I used tables to organize the demographic information into broader categories, but it is essential to note the range of responses. There was the highest level of variance among how participants reported their ethnicity (Table 1). For example, one participant

used the term “Japanese” while another participant used the term “Japanese American.” Some participants used a hyphen between words (“Cambodian-Chinese”), while some participants used a slash (“Chinese/Taiwanese”). Four participants identified as ethnically Chinese, but they specified a region like “Hong Kong Chinese” or used a multi-ethnic identifier such as “Cambodian-Chinese.” I made an intentional decision to not provide pre-determined options for demographic information with the exception for education (Table 4).

When participants were asked to self-report their gender identity, two participants used the term “woman” and 13 participants used the term “female.” The remaining tables reflect participants’ age, highest level of education completed, years working full-time, and industry type at the time of the interview. Participants were also asked to share their title at the time of the interview. The responses included: Assistant Dean for Student Services, Assistant Director, Assistant Vice President for Intercultural Programs, Associate Director, Associate Director for Student Life, Freelance Strategist, Internal Audit Supervisor, Internal Auditor, Payroll Analyst, Project Manager, Senior Advisor Research & Innovation, Senior Manager Global Marketing Campaigns, STEM Partnership Manager, and Vice President.

Table 1. Ethnicity

ETHNICITY	
Chinese	4
Chinese/Cambodian	1
Chinese/Hong Kong	2
Chinese/Taiwanese	1

Hmong	1
Indian	2
Japanese	2
Korean	2
Taiwanese	3
Vietnamese	1

Table 2. Gender

GENDER (self-reported identifier)	
Woman	2
Female	13

Table 3. Age

AGE	
25-29	5
30-34	5
35-39	3
40-44	0
45-49	0
> 50	2

Table 4. Education

EDUCATION (highest level completed)	
Bachelors	4

Masters	9
Ph.D.	2

Table 5. Years Working

YEARS WORKING (full-time)	
< 10	10
10-14	2
15-19	1
20-24	0
> 25	2

Table 6. Industry Type

INDUSTRY TYPE	
Consulting	1
Education/Higher Education	8
Finance	2
Non-Profit	1
Sports & Entertainment	1
Technology	2

Category 1: Understandings of Authority

Participants defined authority in two different contexts: authority in the workplace and authority growing up. This category will describe who the participants reported had

authority in their lives and the type of authority they had. Three themes emerged from the data: parents, rank and power, and mentors.

Theme 1: Parents

All participants commented on the role of their parents when describing who had authority growing up. Thirteen of the fifteen participants reported that their parents possessed authority when they were growing up. Parents made decisions and implemented rules. Often, early definitions of authority were described in dichotomous ways. Three participants used the phrase “black and white” to describe how authority was handled growing up and two participants talked about authority being unquestioned. Cassie noted, “If my parents said so - like it was so. No talking back, no negotiating. Like that was it - that was the final say.” Similarly, Deborah believed that she could not deviate from the rules. Lori described her perception of authority from childhood into adulthood:

When I was a child just - you're just supposed to listen to what your parents say and that's that. As I've grown into a young adult and then adult, I found myself challenging them a little bit more here and there, and that I've also learned, needs to be done the right way.

She noted that she had to be calm and approach the situation with empathy; then, they were ready to negotiate. Challenging someone or the status quo had to be “done the right way” to achieve an intended outcome in her family life and work life. Two other participants used the words “the right way” to describe how they manage their interactions with their parents and then authority figures. They commented on how interacting with authority figures required a certain amount of skill and intentionality.

Out of the fifteen participants, six participants specifically mentioned that their father had authority and described the gender dynamics within their families. They described overt and covert dynamics in the family that highlighted a patriarchal system. For example, Wendy said, "It's layered. It was unspoken. It was the male, right?" Her grandfather ate first when he lived with her family. Beth said that in her "very traditional Taiwanese American family," "technically the father's voice, you know - the lead male's voice is the one that matters." Six participants used the word "traditional" to describe a patriarchal family structure. For example, Shirley noted that although both of her parents had authority when she was growing up, her father's opinion mattered the most. She explained, "If he doesn't say anything - that's great. But if he says something, that means 'uh oh, you're in trouble.'" Shirley was one of three participants who commented on the division of roles between parents. Likewise, Tina noted that her father was not "super present" in her life, but his authority was correlated with managing misbehavior. She said, "Anytime we would act up, Dad would come in and then, he would definitely put us in our place." Tina commented on the masculine and feminine traits associated with roles within her family; she acknowledged that masculinity and femininity were "social constructions." However, she believed that she was the "alpha" in her family because of her dominant personality. At times, she felt that she had more authority than her mother.

Moreover, four participants recognized their own authority growing up in relation to their parents. They talked about the shared responsibilities that they had in their family, such as caring for siblings, working to support their parents, translating documents, and answering the phone. Two participants noted that their parents did not have authority over them growing up. Monica did not grow up with a patriarch in the family. She said

that her mother gave her “full authority and power to do whatever she wanted to do in the world.” She said,

Not growing up in a very traditional sense of like family structure - that allowed me to do things differently than let's say my peers, who did grow up with a very strong father presence. Because in Asian culture, like the, you know - it's very much the father who dictates the finances, who dictates, you know, the decisions that are happening in the house. And I think for my mom, because she, you know, was kind of figuring herself out too in her own power - we just kind of had a lot of range to do whatever we wanted to do.

This understanding informed her interactions in the workplace; Monica said that there was no limit to her talent and potential, especially in comparison to her peers who grew up with strong father figures. When describing authority growing up, all participants mentioned how their parents informed their understanding of authority. Five participants cited that teachers had authority growing up. Two participants noted that elders had authority. In addition, two participants talked about how their older brothers had authority in the family. With that said, nine participants commented on modeling respect for authority regardless of what that authority said or did.

The first theme discussed how parents influenced how Asian American women experienced authority in the workplace. Parents were the authority for thirteen of the participants, and often this authority was unquestioned. Participants commented on developing a strategy to approach authority figures “the right way.” The next theme discusses the understandings of rank and power.

Theme 2: Rank and Power

In the context of the workplace, authority was most frequently defined by someone's position in the organization. Ten participants said that authority in the workplace was held by their manager and individuals who were of higher rank in the organizational hierarchy. Six participants elaborated on their definition of authority by discussing power. Cassie said:

It has a slightly negative connotation to it. You know, there's a certain amount of power that comes with the word authority, but it doesn't really have to mean that. I'm sure if I were to look at this in the dictionary, it's quite objective. It's just you might fall into a certain role and in certain contexts.

As Cassie mentioned, the definition of authority in the workplace was more complex than the dictionary definition. The question about who had authority in the workplace and what authority they carried elicited many distinct descriptions. Authority in the workplace was defined by having: power (6 participants), influence (6), responsibility for a task (5), expertise over content (4), knowledge of organization (4), decision-making ability (4), supports employees (3), experience with age (3), confidence in role (2), rewards employees (2), titles (2), "right" credentials (2). Authority was someone who: had social capital, saw potential in employees, looked at an organization with social identity perspective, navigated conflict diplomatically, was the highest paid, and counseled employees.

Power was discussed in detail by six participants. Monica said that authority had the power to decide where the funding went, who the organization hired, and who they did not hire. Moreover, Tina described authority as someone's position on an organizational chart. However, she said it took a while to learn who "actually holds

power;” she defined this as the ability to make decisions that impacted her or made quick changes in an organization. Six participants talked about the use of influence to demonstrate power. Influence was required to change behaviors, actions, goals, and the vision of people in the organization. Lori talked about power in the context of creating change. She said that at first, she thought that the workplace was unfair. Her understanding of power helped her develop a strategy in the workplace. She commented:

Maybe it's okay to have like a male like colleague or whatever be my champion, you know what I mean? Like instead of me riding that wave. Like be more strategic about certain things and then you know, once I'm in a position of power, be able to make change structurally down, instead of like fighting my way up.

Lori said that this change in mentality helped her look at certain problems and communicate with authority differently. Three other participants discussed the importance of finding others, including managers and colleagues, to use their power to advance their personal efforts.

Like Lori, Beth recognized that there were instances when others had more power than her in the organization. Beth defined authority as, “people in positions of authority and power higher than me.” She commented:

So, I would say there are obviously people with positional authority, right? ‘I can make this happen because I'm the Dean or I can make this happen because I'm the Division Chair - and what I say, goes.’ I would say in some of these not-so-well-defined - at least in my organization - the white males of the team of any variety, as in whether they identify as queer, whether they, you know - visible, identified

white males, right? Have almost always held more power in the voices when they say things, when they make decisions, when they ask for things and resources.

Beth continued by describing how she managed this dynamic in the workplace.

Some of the times, I have worked through those voices to get what I want in versus making the ask myself - if that makes sense. So, when we're talking about power, [it is] not necessarily authority. But I would say power and the ability to get things done. I know that isn't always necessarily through my own voice, speaking up for the issues of which I'm - you know meant to be there for. So, I will work the system. To make sure that the voices that I'm representing are being heard. That may not always be through my voice.

Beth developed an approach to situations with authority figures. In both examples, Beth and Lori identified men as people with power in their organization. Lastly, Jane associated power with privilege. She said that the position is only one element of defining authority. Jane said that an entry-level professional is not as “close to the power and privilege” to make decisions at the organizational level. In the second theme, participants described their understanding of authority figures as people with rank and power. Power was used to describe the ability to influence decisions and make change. Some of the participants described how they used the power of authority figures in the workplace to advance their own efforts. The third theme describes mentors.

Theme 3: Mentors

Six participants talked about mentors or being mentored by someone with authority in the workplace. This theme describes the actions that mentors took that contributed to participant's professional growth and development. Catalina said that

women are not conscious of their “own self-sabotage” and mentorship opportunities were helpful to mitigate it. Mentors did not have to be women, as having a male mentor offered her another perspective about how differently men and women approach situations in the workplace. Wendy said that her only Asian American mentor was male, and many of them were white, Caucasian men.

First, Cassie noted that teachers were an example of mentors because they offered guidance; five participants considered teachers to have authority. Maya described a former mentor who was “the best boss ever.” Mentors were described as caring and nurturing. Maya said she looked up to her mentor because “she treated her staff really well.” She invited them to meetings and events where they could grow professionally. Simran admired her supervisor because she was a woman in a senior role. Secondly, her supervisor brought other staff members into the room. For example, her supervisor brought her staff who was working on the project to the discussion with senior leadership. It allowed her staff to demonstrate their knowledge of the project. Ruby looked forward to mentoring individuals in her organization. She said, “Guide them and mentor them. You know, be that authoritative figure - but also, you know, still be kind to them.” It was important for her to be relatable to her colleagues. She described finding the balance between being a friend and delegating tasks.

On the other hand, when Deborah described a negative experience with authority in the workplace, she noted that she “didn't feel like I was getting a learning experience. I wasn't being mentored.” She felt that her colleagues were disappointed in her, which contributed to her lack of motivation to stay in the organization. She did not feel like she was growing or learning from her experiences based on a negative encounter with a

manager. Shirley described the potential benefits of having a mentor. She shared her observations:

Having mentors, I guess, to just really help work through this concept of... cultural expectations that Asian woman should take care of the kids. Or if they're going to work, then really being like able to do it all, which is just almost impossible

She said that there were a lot of mentor programs for students but not many opportunities for all age groups or life circumstances.

The third theme showed how Asian American women understood authority through the presence of mentors. Mentors were described as nurturing in personal and professional contexts; they invited their employees to discussions, gave them exposure to people with power, recognized their efforts, and allowed them to learn from mistakes. Six participants described positive experiences with authority by describing their relationship to mentors in the workplace. To summarize, there were three themes that emerged from the data to describe understandings of authority: parents, rank and power, and mentors. In the next section, I discuss experiences with authority in the workplace.

Category 2: Experiences with Authority in the Workplace

In the first category, participants shared their understandings of authority. In this section, I provide examples of changes in understandings about authority in the workplace. Four themes emerged from the interviews: respecting authority, executing tasks, conflicting values, and establishing trust. For each theme, I include an example from one participant to demonstrate how experiences with authority led to a response to authority in the workplace.

Theme 4: Respecting Authority

Ten participants noted that they were taught to respect authority growing up. Authority included people like parents, grandparents, older family members, teachers, and the elderly. Ruby, who came from a “very traditional Indian family,” was taught to never speak up against elders. Moreover, three participants spoke about respecting titles. For example, Tina described what it was like when she went over the other people’s houses: “We always had to bow to like older folks and then had to say, ‘thank you’ and their title.” She continued to describe how this related to authority: “You know, you say, ‘thank you, Uncle’ and then go up, ‘thank you, Great Uncle... ‘thank you, Ma’am.’ So, it is respect, which means that there is authority, right?” She said that she was “not always cognizant of it” but understood that this level of respect existed. They were the rules that were reinforced in her family. Similarly, Maya was taught to respect authority; she grew up bowing when she passed certain people like elders. Respecting authority translated to the workplace: “I do tend to respect those titles, and they used to be actually very intimidating to me. That, you know, I had a hard time.” Talking to people with a “very high-level role” was harder for her than talking with her staff. Simran reflected on how her views of authority impacts her today. She explained why it is was difficult for her wife to call her parents by their first name: “Because they [parents] are in this traditional Indian, South Asian structure where there is deference to authority.” When reflecting on how deferring to authority impacted her today, she shared:

When you have to be in a position, where you have to make your argument - or you know, you have to kind of cultivate and shape your idea now - it's so hard to do. Because growing up, right? It was just like a more of a deferential thing.

Whether it was your parents, or you know, for me, thinking about like my Sunday school teacher or whoever it was. Just all of those people. I was trained to interact with them the same way, and so that translates to work, certainly as a young adult. Simran described how she could not say a professor's first name until halfway through her Master's program. She said, "I had to learn that you know, to call someone 'Sue' instead of 'Doctor So-and-so.'" Simran commented that she still found herself struggling with that when she emails people. She added, "I find this incredible need to put too many exclamation points in emails. Even if it's a quick response. I have like a salutation, you know?" These messages of respecting titles were ingrained in her growing up; "there are structures in place and exist, and you know – work with them. You don't go around them."

For three participants, age and experience were key factors for respecting authority. Jamie admitted that when she started her career, she perceived anyone who was older than her as someone who had authority and treated them with respect. She recalled:

I automatically assumed that whoever has been working for five, ten, twenty, years just knows that much more. And is, just that much better almost. And I almost treated them, as if they were not like, real people. But they were more like - I was almost treating them like they were all my bosses or all my like teachers or something.

She noted that her perception of authority shifted from "black and white" thinking to a more complex understanding of authority when she started getting promoted. Six years later, she realized that she was at the same level of her career as the "crazy, high ranking people" when she started. She shared:

I can break out of that [cycle] myself by actually interacting with people, talking to them, and learning about their experiences - and like, their thoughts. And then, them sharing their thoughts back to me – [them] saying you need to break that cycle within your own head.

Jamie’s perception of authority in the workplace shifted after she understood her colleagues more. She used to rely on age and experience to inform her of who had authority, but now, she learned to break this automatic association through conversations with authority figures.

At times, expectations of authority were violated, which caused participants to question their respect of authority. Maya expected authority figures to be very knowledgeable and responsible, but this was not always what she observed. She continued by saying, “And I think in some ways, even though I respect them, you know for their positions. I don't necessarily always respect them as employees or individuals.” She shared that this dynamic frustrated her because:

People are able to be in those positions without having all the knowledge or skillsets to effectively do their job. And sometimes they might have all that, but they don't do their job very well because they have other priorities.

Maya and Cassie talked about authority going to those with the “right” credentials rather than those who produced the best work for the organization. They desired more meritocracy in the organization, rather than assumptions based on titles and positions.

Moreover, four participants talked about the difference between respecting authority and deferring to authority. They described how early understandings of

authority influenced their views about authority today. For example, Monica commented on her views of respecting authority. She said:

One of the messages was definitely respect my elders, right? Respect people who are older than me, not whether they are wiser than me. But they're older, and they have more years of experience. I think that is something that I do - like transfer over, in a respectful way, right? Like not just respecting authority for the sake of like age and power, but recognizing that, like, my elders do have something to say and that I can learn from them. That I don't know it all. I don't have the answers and I'm still learning.

Monica talked about learning from people who had more experience than her in the workplace. In addition, Beth did not go “directly against authority” when she disagreed with someone with authority. She described being “somewhat indebted” to people who helped her in her life. She said there was a way of problem-solving around authority to get what she needed instead of going directly against them. Lori said that she respected authority because they influenced her career; “Maybe they could promote me. If something bad happens, they can demote me. They can fire me. So, that's not as always there. So, it's always like a cautious respect.” The fourth theme of respecting authority described the ways in which participants responded to authority. The next section highlights an example that demonstrates how Wendy’s understanding of authority affected her response to authority in the workplace.

Example 1: Wendy “Subliminal Messaging”

Wendy offered a particularly thought-provoking example about how respecting authority impacted her experiences with authority in the workplace. Growing up, she was

the “third parent” in her home. From a young age, she felt that she had a lot of autonomy. She explained:

I actually had a lot of autonomy mostly because of the English barrier, actually. So, as my English got better - it got much better. Because of the fact that I was learning English, I became like the de-facto secretary of the house. Always answering the phone. When there was someone visiting the house, I would be the one that had to like manage paperwork and fill everything out.

That said, it did not mean that she did not care about what her parents thought. When asked what messages she took from how authority was handled growing up, she responded:

Despite the fact, my parents gave me a lot of autonomy to navigate and basically make my own moral judgments. There was still a subliminal suggestion of respecting authority. Definitely teachers, for example. There were some people in my family who worked as police officers, like there was just a general level of respect that needed to be there. And that you should listen, obviously. And thankfully, there wasn't ever anything from authority figures that ever brushed me the wrong way when I was growing up, so I do consider myself quite lucky.

For Wendy, authority was to be respected but not respected blindly. She acknowledged the importance of understanding her own authority but cited the “subliminal suggestion of respecting authority.” When asked how she thought her experiences with authority influenced her views and feelings about authority today, she said that she held her ground. Wendy offered:

Sometimes it's still comes as a shock to me when I'm entering new corporate spaces. And I think that's my new challenge as I am preparing to enter into a larger company and work with people who have more experience, especially in group projects.

She commented on the ability to learn from others with more experience. She continued:

I think I'm learning how to – when it is appropriate to step back and realize that it's not my chance. I'm supposed to be more of a team player and when I should be taking initiative. I think that still comes as a struggle... But it's a lot of sensitive code switching that I find myself doing.

Wendy recognized her desire to learn from people with more experience and described how she negotiated the messages that she received growing up. The fourth theme of respecting authority emerged from the interviews to describe how participants experienced authority growing up and in the workplace. Some participants were “trained” to respect authority based on factors like titles, age, and experience. They discuss how deeply ingrained early understandings of authority were in their lives. They modeled a degree of respect towards authority in the workplace whether they agreed or disagreed with an authority figure. The next theme is executing tasks.

Theme 5: Executing Tasks

Five participants described how they executed tasks from authority in the workplace. The word “execute” was used in the interviews. The expectation was to do what a manager asked them to do. For example, Jamie’s managers told her to “stop just being a do-er” and start taking on more initiatives and strategy. They encouraged her to talk to more people, have opinions, and create solutions. Similarly, Monica explained:

I think as I grow older and as I mature, but I think historically authority has always been you know that they have all power and they have the answers and whatever they say goes and I follow or I execute based on whatever needs to happen.

She described the shift. She said that as she matured and changed positions, she saw her relationship with authority as more collaborative; she described it as “co-creating” instead of “just doing.” Five participants talked about wanting flat organizational structures. Simran wanted to approach authority in a “flatter way” now. She said it was hard for her because it was not her family structure growing up. She explained:

I just think that's kind of a juxtaposition. I strive towards having something that's more, you know, looking at authority as more of a consensus-based thing now.

And still catch myself in those moments - of feeling that it's not right.

She said it was a feeling that she was “continually trying to combat.” Similarly, Wendy said that she was “super sensitive” to making things flat in the organization, which to her, meant making things transparent and open in the workplace. In this theme, participants described “just doing” tasks assigned by authority. Later, the understanding of their relationship with authority shifted from a more top-down relationship to a flatter structure. The next example shows a shift in how Lori experienced authority in the workplace.

Example 2: Lori “Like someone’s extra limb”

Lori spoke in detail about “challenging the status quo” or seeing things from a different perspective. She claimed that the point of bringing new talent into the workplace

was to introduce fresh ideas. When asked about how her experiences with authority growing up had influenced her views and feelings about authority today, she responded:

I think that as one grows up, not having the ability to challenge authority is actually quite crippling because you're not able to make decisions for yourself. You don't learn that decision-making process because you're always looking to Mom, or looking to Dad, or looking to someone else to make that decision for you. So, I think that really impedes maturing - and the independence that is necessary as an adult.

She reflected on how these earlier messages influenced the workplace.

Unless you want to be someone who is always just an extension of somebody else, like someone's extra limb. And, I - I've been in that role before, right? In a couple previous jobs. I felt like I was my manager's extra leg or extra arm - just doing whatever he said.

Lori shared an example of when she felt like she was her manager's "limb." Her work was heavily monitored and constantly checked by a manager. She felt like a "clone, just brainlessly doing work that is not your own." The work was unfulfilling and "soul-sucking."

Her perspective changed as she progressed in her career. She shared an example of when she had questions for her manager about a certain strategy for a "huge" product transition; she described the process as "really nebulous." At the time, she did not know what to do. Through conversations with her manager, she realized that they were both trying to figure it out together. She commented:

You know, he may have ideas and stuff - but he's relying on me to make things happen and not just be like one of his extra limbs doing the execution portion of this project. It's 'Hey, you have a brain - and like, you go make it happen.'

Her manager reminded her that she had a role in the project, and it was not to simply execute tasks that he delegated. Lori shared that challenging someone or the status quo needed to be done "the right way." Empathy was the underlying foundation to persuade someone; empathy was a part of her strategy when talking to her parents or colleagues. In this example, Lori went from serving as her manager's "extra limb" to someone who was encouraged to have more autonomy over tasks. The theme of executing tasks emerged from the interview to show how participants carried out their job responsibilities. Some participants described how "crippling" it felt to "just do" without thinking. At times, managers reminded them of their own authority and autonomy in the workplace. In sixth theme, I discuss experiences with authority in the workplace that resulted in conflicting values.

Theme 6: Conflicting Views

Six participants described experiences with authority in the workplace that created conflicting views. In this way, participants talked about how they did not agree with the values of an authority figure, personalities, or feedback. Jane talked about how her values did not align with her new boss who was "so much more political." Jane did not believe she was as political as her boss. Her friend told her that she had to learn to be "more political" or the "writing was on the wall." Jane said she was looking for a place that was more aligned with her values – a place with more trust in the organization, a place that gave her more joy.

A clash in views was also associated with conflicting personalities. Six participants mentioned how different personalities led to conflict. For example, Tina described pushing against authority. She said:

I'm really like an easy-going person, right? If I were to have the conflict, it would be internally. And it would be very brief, because I try to be very mindful and think of just recognizing the things that I can't control and then also empathizing and recognizing that like we just all have different values systems.

Tina said that her learning was informed by her military background. She said,

Whenever a decision is made - and I disagree with that decision - I have some sort of like internalized conflict around that. Maybe because of my like previous experiences, right? And especially like with the military - like you're almost like trained that there is a hierarchy.

Tina noted that she was quick to “compartmentalize;” what meant that she recognized how she may have different value systems than other people. At the end of the day, she recognized the hierarchy within her organization. Authority was at the top where decisions were made. Ruby commented that she developed her own leadership style based on what she observed from past leaders. Specifically, she did not want to be like the “bad authority.” She said, “I think it was all the bad that I went through - to realize that I don't want to be that person, nor do I want someone else to go through that same authority.” She wanted to set her own example based on her experiences.

Furthermore, Cassie described herself as someone who “took time to deliberate and build consensus.” She felt confident in her ability in the workplace, but if her personality did not reflect the personality of authorities, then she felt like she was “seen

as less than.” She later described an aggressive approach by authorities in the workplace. In a similar way, Catalina described how her manager “critiqued her” and said that she had to push back more and “say ‘no’ more.” Catalina continued:

That is very much her style but it's not necessarily my style, and I felt like I got successful and I got to the point of my career because I was very collaborative and willing to work with people. I never just said I never say like firm no. I'm always willing to work with someone and come to mutual goals or agreements.

Catalina said that this comment bothered her because the feedback that she received from her manager was “not her style.” In a similar way, Shirley was asked to act differently. She described an account with a supervisor; “She basically said, you know, I need you to just stop being so perfect - like you don't have to submit things so perfectly. I just need you to submit it.”

She reflected on this statement:

For me like it's not a matter of perfection, it's a matter of getting it right. And she had used the words, kind of like, ‘I need you to stop living in La-la Land and realize that sometimes, like just turning the work in, is okay. Perfect doesn't necessarily mean better work.’

Shirley described how this impacted her. She said that the comment “bothered her” because she was being seen as an “over-perfectionist.” She commented on her upbringing:

And I don't know if some of that is attributed to you know, maybe growing up, you know Asian culture and so forth - that that played a role...perhaps like needing to have some - like doing it right but also, just the nature of my work.

In these examples, participants in this study were given feedback from authority figures that they did not agree with. Authority figures told them to be “more assertive” or “less perfect” which raised their awareness of their cultural identity. The next example describes a time when Monica experienced conflicting views.

Example 3: Monica “Stop Moving the Chairs”

Monica described a negative experience with authority in the workplace and her thoughts of the situation since then. She recalled a time that she had an annual performance review with a supervisor, who she had a “great relationship” with at the time. She shared:

One of the things that he told me to improve on was that I should stop moving the chairs. And this was so weird because, at our center, there's like a lot of space where - whenever there's a big event - we have to move all the tables and chairs from the students studying and then put it into a like a lecture space. And usually, the Administrative Assistant does this, right? Like she moves all the things and chairs. That is her role in the hierarchy of things.

Monica noticed that the Administrative Assistant was moving the furniture around by herself, so she offered to help. Though she was never directly asked to help, she continued to do it throughout the years because it was helpful. She shared what she thought of the situation:

I think by nature that comes out of my collectivistic training, right? My cultural values of community and harmony - and like helping each other out instead of this very individualistic worldview.

Monica mentioned values such as collectivism, community, and harmony. She said it felt very natural for her to take a break from her emails and help. She continued to describe her annual review with her supervisor:

He was like 'That's not your job, you're not supposed to be moving the tables and chairs. And, you know, as an Assistant Director, I would challenge you to think about your X, Y, Z' in terms of the big picture and all of that stuff.

Monica noted that she appreciated this challenge, but at the same time, she left that conversation with a negative feeling. She reflected on how she felt about the situation since then:

I just feel really sour about it, and I still don't know how to make sense of it. But I just know that, like, in my in my gut it just felt like - I'm being disciplined to, you know, behave a certain way in order to be in positions of leadership.

She continued by offering her interpretation and understanding of the conversation:

Professionally, I needed to stay in my lane and do what my job task was. But at the same time, my values and the way that I was raised as an Asian Hmong person would not - like kind of contradicted that. And so, I think that that was one incident that I could really reflect on and think about you know, dealing with like positions of power, and hierarchy, and authority - and where do I fall in that.

In this way, a personal value was not congruent with the message that she received in the workplace. Monica reflected on her own value system, and the way that she wanted to lead and role model. The sixth theme of conflicting views emerged from the interviews to describe experiences when participants did not align with authority figures. In this way, participants reported times when conflicting views led to negative experiences with

authority in the workplace. Some of the participants experienced tension and internal conflict when their values or personalities did not align with authority. In the next theme, I describe how participants discussed trust.

Theme 4: Establishing Trust

Seven participants talked about trust within an organization. Ruby earned a certain level of credibility and trust with her team after being at the organization for some years. She said that her team was open to new ideas, despite everyone's age. This team environment made her feel more confident to assume more authority in the workplace. Cassie noted the benefit of time and trust with others because it allowed her to understand the "good and the bad." For example, she learned that a terse or blunt comment to her was not a reflection of her, but instead a depiction of how the other person operated. Similarly, Monica described the importance of building trust before "doing the work." She described the importance of getting to know someone. In this example, she shared how a new senior leader asked her about what motivated her and why she enjoyed working at her current organization. When asked about what she thought of this interaction, she continued:

I think just the fact that they care about who's in the organization and to just kind of build community first, right? And to build trust before we do the work, because there's so much work to be done. And if we don't trust each other in our process then it makes it really difficult... Like, 'oh yeah, you got my back' or like you know, if you send this email it's not because you're angry.

Establishing trust reduced misunderstandings, especially when employees were new.

Lastly, Shirley talked about trust being important when working with a manager; she valued someone who trusted her ability to do her job. She said that her parents did not trust her growing up. Therefore, she valued situations when she was treated as trustworthy. Additionally, Beth offered a descriptive example about how trust played a role in her organization. She noted that in a crisis, trust played a large role:

People. In crisis. Don't really have - you have to trust everyone to do what they can because you can't do everything yourself, right? And so, the crises have built us into a much better team.

She said that in a crisis, the team had to delineate and think quickly. There was less time for “other biases” to get in the way. Beth commented, “You have to work with what's in front of you. We really don't have the long-term to look at.” She admitted that trust helped her team manage a crisis. She said that in her opinion, a crisis focused her team, including leadership, to work towards the same goal. Three participants talked about trust reducing bias or stereotypes in the workplace. Building trust allowed colleagues to get to know one another beneath the surface or beyond racial and gender stereotypes. Beth noted:

So, I'm not saying it works this way every time, but I'm saying this particular situation - the crisis focused us to all be working towards the same end. And as a result, some of the extraneous bias factors didn't come into play... I'm not saying that that is what happened but that's how I see it.

Earlier in the interview, Beth discussed how she was judged based on her “outer visible identities” as an Asian American woman. In this example, Beth discussed how a crisis brought the team together and mitigated “extraneous bias.” Trust emerged as a theme in

the interviews to describe how Asian American women experienced authority in the workplace. In the next example, Shirley discusses a change in her understanding of authority.

Example 4: Shirley “Choices were made for me”

Shirley said she lacked the agency to make decisions on her own because there was a lack of trust growing up. She spoke in detail about how early messages influenced her experience in the workplace and at home. She recalled:

My parents didn't quite trust me a lot growing up and my ability to make decisions on my own. So, a lot of choices were made for me – especially, you know, like - this is what you have to do on the day-to-day. But also, this is what your future is going to look like. For me, that kind of paralyzed me.

She later described how this experience impacted her ability to understand and respond to challenges. Shirley recalled a time when her career track did not go the way that she expected:

Like every time a barrier happened, I didn't know how to overcome that. And so, again - a lesson learned for my kids. I am trying to parent in a way that allows them to understand their choices... so that if they have come across a barrier, especially later in life - when it comes to their careers or whatever - that they're able to figure out how to overcome that and not be so paralyzed like I felt like I was growing up.

Shirley defined what she valued in a supervisor at work. It was important to her that a supervisor was not “one-sided” like her father; someone who only directed her. She wanted a supervisor who was open with her because there was not a lot of transparency

growing up; sharing information was deemed as irrelevant in her household. She related her experience to the workplace:

I didn't really understand why certain decisions were being made. And why certain decisions couldn't be made. And so again, applying that back to kind of the workplace or even as an adult, just trying to be have a supervisor that can kind of talk me through why decisions are being made, so that I can understand that.

Shirley highlighted mentors and career managers who gave her a sense that they trusted the work that she did. They allowed her to make her own choices. She emphasized the importance of “creating a safe environment” to make mistakes without authority being overly critical; “I think everything growing up was very much, you know laid out for me so I wouldn't fail.” She valued a learning environment in the workplace. Six participants commented on the desire to learn in the workplace. In this theme, participants described ways in which trust was established in the workplace and when trust was lacking in the workplace. Participants described relationships with authority that fostered trust – creating an environment to learn and discuss decisions openly without a fear of criticism or judgment. Having trust in the organization mitigated misunderstandings in communication.

In summary, there were four theses that emerged from the category about experiences with authority in the workplace: respecting authority, executing tasks, conflicting values, and establishing trust. In the final category, I describe how participants related to “speaking up.”

Category 3: Speaking up

In the final category, eleven participants described their experience with speaking up. “Speaking up” was used to describe contributing opinions, advocating for self and others, challenging authority, and voicing dissent in both positive and negative ways. This category explores how Asian American women experienced “speaking up” in the workplace. Four themes emerged from the qualitative interviews: speaking up more, confidence, consequences of speaking up, and stereotypes.

Theme 8: Speaking up more

Seven participants discussed their experience with speaking up in the workplace. For Simran, she talked about being more assertive in the workplace; she said, “As sad as it sounds, I should probably interrupt more when I'm in meetings, you know. I think I wait too long before I speak up.” Similarly, Catalina had an “internal psychological struggle” in the workplace. She offered:

Because I think that people perceive me as an Asian American woman - that I might lack authority or I'm not strong enough...then I have to speak up on calls or volunteer for projects or something.

She spoke up more to combat the stereotype of a quiet, submissive Asian American woman, which is explored further in theme 11 about stereotypes.

Moreover, two participants were told to speak up more by their managers. At first, Jamie did not want to “step on other people’s toes” because she was younger than most of the people she was interacting with in the workplace, but her managers encouraged her to take more initiative. She said that she did not want to be perceived a certain way. To emphasize this point, she noted:

Hearing it from someone else made me really think... Maybe, I shouldn't always subconsciously think about not stepping on people's toes or thinking I don't have the authority. I guess at that point, to speak up.

This push encouraged her to voice her opinions in the workplace. She admitted that she executed on tasks in the beginning of her career. Later, she was told that “doing a good job was great,” but it was not going to get her anywhere. She reflected on the advice that she received:

You have to start trying to lead or trying to take more ownership. And having more of a say. If you're at the table, that means you have a voice. It's not like you're at the table to just take notes or just learn, right? It's a two-way thing.

She started to think differently after hearing this advice from her managers. Receiving feedback from authority to speak up more was valuable for her, as it helped her advance in her career.

Moreover, Deborah recounted a negative experience with authority questioning her ability to speak up in the workplace. In this example, Deborah described her daily routine of delivering letters for an authority figure to sign:

She kind of like scolded me. She was like, ‘Why don't you speak up or whatever,’ like ‘Why don't you speak up like Emily?’ And Emily was sitting right there. She just said some really mean things that felt very inappropriate in the workplace... I just started crying, and so I gave in my resignation that day. Like, I felt like I was doing what I was supposed to be doing or what was normal.

Deborah noted that the other people at her workplace were white women. She wondered if her race affected the way that she was treated in that situation. Growing up, Deborah

did not question her parents' decisions. She reflected on her fear of speaking up in the workplace:

And because of that, my first response is usually like - no response. Because as a kid growing up... I couldn't, I couldn't talk back. I couldn't, you know, say my opinion. Because if I said my opinion, then my Mom would get upset. And then would just continue to say why, you know, why she thinks she's right.

Deborah described a similar response to authority in the workplace. She said, "I think - I stop thinking. And then, I don't have an opinion." For Deborah, talking about herself did not feel genuine to her; she did not want to seem like she was trying too hard to get her place. However, she expressed a desire speak up in the workplace:

All these workshops, they're kind of like giving me motivation to speak up, and all of that. But I also think that just speaking up is not going to do anything, right? Like I need to speak up in an impactful way - that will like, you know, create action. And, so I don't think I'm there yet.

Two other participants specifically mentioned that speaking up should be done in a meaningful way. Deborah later shared that she did not have the confidence to advocate for herself. In the eighth theme, participants discussed their experiences with speaking up more. Speaking up was related to having a voice in conversations and in decision-making. This action or lack of action influenced how Asian American women experienced authority in the workplace. Some of the participants described an internal pressure to speak up more, while others were explicitly instructed to speak up more. Participants experienced a fear or hesitation to speak up more. The ninth theme is confidence.

Theme 9: Confidence

Moreover, five participants talked about their confidence in detail. Ruby equated speaking up to confidence. She was not a “super outspoken” person, but she gained a “backbone” in the workplace. When asked where she thought her confidence was derived from, she responded:

So the way I look at is - maybe that's why I didn't have confidence - because I wasn't able to speak up for myself or kind of learn that...But growing up, I don't, I don't see myself as being confident because I just never spoke up for myself because I didn't think I could.

Ruby added that confidence was a good trait, but overconfidence was perceived as arrogant. She valued people who were relatable and modest when speaking up.

Additionally, Catalina said that with time, she felt more confident in the workplace.

For three participants, it was easier to speak up when they were advocating for others. Jane described her philosophy when advocating for students. She empowered them to make the “right decision.” Maya was less hesitant to speak up if there was an issue that was hurting morale or if there was something that a Senior Manager may not notice. She spoke up to protect others, especially when there was injustice in the workplace. She felt more confident about bringing up questions or issues that she felt strongly about at this point in her career and life. Maya was more willing to express these views because she had enough experience. If she really needed to, she could leave the organization after “putting her two cents in.” In this way, Catalina and Maya felt more confident with years of experience. Beth also described advocating for students:

If I'm arguing for myself, and on my behalf - I will generally choose not to. I try to avoid conflict. If I'm advocating on behalf of a student or somebody who I think does not have a position of power in which to do so I will argue from the top of the building from here to Timbuktu, right? It's just how I'm wired.

Beth described a desire to avoid conflict; engaging in conflict was “antithetical” to how she saw herself. However, she spoke up for others. Lastly, Lori said it was important to her to “sound confident” in the workplace. She expressed, “I'm encouraged to not be shy to speak out to - you know have confidence - whether it's like faking it until I make it, which is something that I often do.” She found herself offsetting or overcompensating in the workplace by being “too aggressive” in her communication. She did not want to get “walked all over” in the workplace. She continued:

It's probably both things, you know. I'm being a little bit too strong with how I speak and what I say, but also - maybe people don't expect that from me, so it's taken as extra. Extra harsh and to be more specific, right? Maybe if I were a man, it would not be taken that way. I don't know. I'll never know.

Lori was one of four participants who talked about speaking up relating to aggression. At times, being perceived as aggressive was a consequence for speaking up. The theme of confidence described the ability to speak up in the workplace – at times, this theme seemed to indicate that speaking up was done with conviction or assertiveness. Some participants felt more confident when they spoke up on behalf of others. They talked about speaking up in the “right way.” In the tenth theme, I discuss the consequences of speaking up.

Theme 10: Consequences of Speaking up

Speaking up was not always easy, and at times, there were negative outcomes. Three participants described the consequences of speaking up. For example, Jane described the physical and emotional price for speaking up. Jane shared her thought process when speaking up:

I think that is what is holding me back now – is whether if something is worth it, you know? Whether it [speaking up] is achieving a greater purpose. And if not? You know, I'm not going to do it. Also, it's the personal cost... Particularly for Asian American women, you know?

When asked to elaborate on the costs of speaking up, she described the possibility of being terminated. Additionally, she described anxiety and depression as personal costs for speaking up.

Furthermore, Julia, who considered herself to be “very forthright and upfront,” recalled a negative experience with someone who had a “significant amount of social capital” at work. She described a time when she proposed a solution and received push back:

I was essentially kind of - subtly called a bitch and told that I was too aggressive and that I needed to take a step back because I was young and a woman. I needed to kind of be a bit quieter. But there was another person on our team - we had very, very, very similar personalities. While that person was also having similar conversations, was never ever told to sit back and be quiet. So certainly, it felt a little bit more loaded in that conversation with me.

When asked why she thought this may be the case, Julia noted that she was the first person of color on the team in many years. She was the first Asian American woman on

the team, which she perceived as the only difference between her and the other colleague. She did not want to assume it was because of her identity, but it was the piece that stood out to her. Julia was not the only participant who talked about violating the stereotype of a quiet Asian American woman. Three participants talked about how their colleagues did not expect them to speak up. For example, Beth described a time when she “fought back.” She recalled:

He literally stood out of his seat, leaned over a conference table, and started pointing at me and basically stating, you know. ‘You are not being inclusive.’ I mean literally shouting - wasn't stating.

She continued with her interpretation of the situation with an authority figure:

So, white man, right? Standing over me pointing at me and saying that you know, ‘You're not being very inclusive’ or in your thinking - or something to that effect. But I was very upset, like I did not show it in the room. But these are two white people of high authority, right? Essentially questioning the very essence of my job, which is to protect students and to protect my staff. And, and them not having walked in my shoes, right?

She shared how it felt; “It just it was very isolating. I needed to talk to many people after that.” She wondered if her race influenced the outcome.

Now I've had more than one person tell me - people who are white, who have told me that it's less about me being Asian. That it is about being an outspoken female. Not any better, but I just think it's interesting because I think, as the only Asian who is in a leadership position in this School - only one of two people of color, both of whom are female, on the senior leadership team - I think others can't

really say whether they think it's Asian or female, right?... But I think it's interesting how no one will admit that it is partially because I'm Asian. But I'll be really frank. I can't see it as anything else.

She acknowledged the intersectionality of her two identities and pervasiveness of race in the workplace. She believed these biases were unconscious. The concept of speaking up had racial undertones across all three examples. Some of the participants felt that they experienced “push back” from authority because of their racial identity. More specifically, they violated the stereotype of a quiet Asian American woman that does what they are told. This theme seemed to reflect the personal and professional consequences for speaking up. It is interesting to note that while speaking up more was encouraged in theme 8, it is also the source of these negative experiences with authority in the workplace in this section. The final theme is stereotypes.

Theme 11: Stereotypes

Although participants were not asked about stereotypes, eight participants commented on the stereotype or perception of an Asian American woman being quiet or submissive. When talking about her identities in the workplace, Lori shared that “It's just different. I don't want to take on the more demure – or way of behaving that maybe I do at home – in the workplace.” She expressed that this behavior would backfire on someone and get them walked all over in the workplace. For Wendy, she described how she would react if someone associated her with the stereotype, “If I ever sense from anyone, that this is something that they think I am - it probably will make me even, more like willing to step up.” She continued, “I wonder actually - if deep down in my psychology - it's, it could be because of the awful stereotype that's some Asian women

are very submissive.” She continued by saying that she was never like that. Participants had a consistent definition of the stereotype: a passive, quiet, and submissive person.

Furthermore, Cassie described the perception of a Japanese American as quiet and diligent, a perfectionist who followed the rules and got things done. She recalled why this perception created conflict for her:

Working with someone who is not – really pushes the boundaries right away. And that made me uncomfortable. And at the time, I think that my style of working made the person in an authority role, uncomfortable.

She noted that identity informed the way that she navigated these various situations in an organization. It created tension between her and authority in the workplace. Shirley also talked about the conflict of stereotypes in the workplace. She said:

Especially in an organization, in certain industries or organizations, where you don't see as many Asian women. I feel like, you know, that that's stereotype of what an Asian woman is like in the workplace is very rampant and I think that really hinders like one's ability to really be able to feel comfortable and to be able to really grow and advance.

Shirley said in that case, there was no one to lean on or look up to in the organization. In her experiences, she was the only Asian on the team or within the organization. It suppressed her ability to feel proud about her Asian American identity in the workplace. She reflected on the messages that she received growing up from her parents. She recounted:

I just need assimilate and I just need a plan to, like forget that I'm an Asian woman. And I need to stand up for myself. But also, I'm also uncomfortable - like

I need to be quiet. So, it's like this big kind of struggle with who I am, who do I want to be, and then I don't have anybody to really kind of lean on. And so, I think sometimes that's really unfortunate.

In addition, Shirley explained that her parents also taught her to not ask questions and do what she was told. She discussed the implications of this stereotype:

Often times, I get a lot of feedback that's like 'Wow, you ask a lot of questions' and I don't really hear a lot of my colleagues being told the same thing. And they also don't ask a lot of questions, perhaps. So maybe it has nothing to do really with my identity.

While she commented that her colleagues may not have been told the same thing, she shared that in the back of her mind, she wondered if they were questioning her behavior because she violated the stereotype of an Asian woman – that she should not be asking so many questions. She thought that people still thought of Asian women as timid and quiet, doing what they are told. In a sense, Shirley felt that she was “rocking the boat” because her actions were violating the stereotype. Shirley was not the only participant who had these thoughts in the back of her mind. Three other participants experienced negative situations in the workplace for violating the “expectation” of an Asian American woman, as described in theme 10: consequences of speaking up.

Navigating identity in the workplace was difficult. Deborah commented, “I feel like outside of the workplace, I am me. Like I can do whatever I want. I can say whatever I want. I have that freedom to be me. Um, but at work, I’m at work.” She described how she felt cautious about sharing her personal life at work because it may influence how others perceived her. Specifically, Deborah described that she did not want to fall into the

stereotype of as Asian American woman. In final theme, participants described how they did not want to be the timid and quiet stereotype. Stereotypes were barriers for them to connect with others in the workplace; they contributed to assumptions. At times, they created a sense of isolation when there was no one else like them in work settings.

Participants in these examples described how stereotypes made them feel about themselves and, in some instances, stereotypes served as a motivating factor to speak up more. To summarize, there were four themes that emerged to describe how participants related to the concept of speaking up: speaking up more, confidence, consequences of speaking up, and stereotypes.

Conclusion

This chapter offered results from the fifteen Asian American women participants. Three categories with multiple themes emerged from the data: understandings of authority, experiences with authority in the workplace, and speaking. In the first category, themes suggested that parents influence how participants understood authority. For many of the participants, parents were the authority. They emphasized respecting authority figures, like teachers and elders. Moreover, the results showed that the participants in the study based their understanding of authority on an individual's rank and how much power they had. The themes suggest how power was executed in the workplace. Next, the themes showed how Asian American women in the study viewed mentors. Mentors were described as caring individuals who guided their personal and professional development. In the second category, the results provided insight for experiences with authority in the workplace. The interviews showed how Asian American women respected authority in the workplace despite whether they agreed or disagreed with them. The participants

described how they executed tasks that were delegated to them without challenging authority figures. These experiences with authority in the workplace resulted in conflicting views, oftentimes highlighting a clash in cultural values or personalities. Moreover, Asian American women discussed how trust with authority figures allowed them to be more comfortable in the workplace. In the final category, the themes showed how Asian American women spoke up in the workplace. Themes suggested that Asian American women felt pressured to speak up more due to the stereotype of being quiet and submissive. Other times, authority figures advised that they speak up more. Next, the themes revealed how Asian American women viewed their own confidence; they felt more confident when they were able to speak up. However, participants in this study discussed the personal and professional costs of speaking up. At times, they were reprimanded for speaking up. Finally, themes suggested how stereotypes affected how Asian American women experienced authority in the workplace. The stereotype of being a passive, quiet, and submissive employee influenced how Asian American women perceived their interactions with authority. They felt as though violating the stereotype created internal stress and tension with authority figures. Themes supported and provided insight for each respective category to better understand how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace. The discussion of the results, as well as recommendations and implications, will be shared in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this final chapter, I use themes from the data in Chapter 4 to develop findings to address the research question: how do Asian American women experience authority in the workplace? First, I discuss the ways in which I answered the research question by connecting the results to the existing bodies of literature. This section will detail consistencies, inconsistencies, and new contributions to organizational literature. Next, I provide limitations of this study. Then, I offer practice implications and opportunities for future research based on the findings. Finally, I summarize my reflections on the learning process. In this discussion, I offer a new perspective of authority in the workplace from the vantage points of Asian American women.

Summary of Findings

Based on the themes presented in Chapter 4, I propose four key findings from the interviews. The following section will discuss each of the findings to address the research question: how do Asian American women experience authority in the workplace?

1. **Early experiences of authority influence how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace** – Early experiences of authority and upbringing affect how Asian American experience authority in the workplace. Asian American women were taught who was the authority by their parents. In addition, Asian American women learned to respect authority. At times, the interactions with authority growing up differed from how Asian American women experienced authority in the workplace, which resulted in conflict.

2. **Understandings of authority influence how Asian American women interact with authority in the workplace** - The conceptualizations of authority influence how Asian American women interacted with authority in the workplace. At times, they developed strategies to cope with authority in the workplace. The study also shows how Asian American women speak up or do not speak up because of their perceptions of authority.
3. **Actions of authority figures influence how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace** - The actions of authority figures impact how Asian American women interpreted authority in the workplace. The results show how Asian Americans responded to negative and positive experiences with authority. The study describes how participants viewed speaking up in the workplace. Asian American women also described authority figures as mentors.
4. **Experiences with authority reveal how Asian American women perceive their own authority in the workplace** - Experiences with authority reveal how Asian American women perceive their own authority. When discussing their experiences with authority in the workplace, participants reflected on their confidence and decision-making ability.

In this section, I detail how the findings answer the research question through my interpretations of the results. I investigate how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace by connecting the results to the existing bodies of literature.

Finding # 1 - Early experiences of authority influence how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace

Parental Influence

All the Asian American women who participated in this study spoke about the different ways that their parents handled authority while they were growing up. The interviews show that the Asian American women in this study did not question their parents' authority – they displayed deference to authority figures. Several participants commented that if their parents made a decision, there was no room to challenge this decision. Respecting authority and deference to authority will be discussed in detail in the subsequent finding. Moreover, parents played a prominent role in determining who had authority while these women were growing up. As the Asian American women in the study entered the workplace, their understanding of authority was heavily influenced by how authority was handled growing up. Asian American women learned from their parents that authority was dictated by age, formal titles, and roles. This finding supports research that shows that Asians are taught to respect authority whether it be “household heads, community leaders, managers and administrators in the workplace, or government officials or leaders” (Xu & Davidhizar, 2004, p. 49). These early messages about deference to parental authority and who had authority were deeply ingrained beliefs that they carried into the workplace. The next finding discusses modeling respect for authority.

Respect for Authority

As summarized in Chapter 4, the interviews suggest that Asian American women were taught to respect authority (Xu and Davidhizar 2004; Fong 1997). Growing up, respecting authority was demonstrated by using titles to address authority figures, bowing to them, or deferring to their decisions. The findings support the literature on how Asians react to authority. Bui and Turnbull (2003) concluded that Asian Americans respect

authority and the elderly. Simran said she was “trained” to defer to parents and teachers growing up; she said that reverence to authority translated into the workplace, especially as a young adult. Simply put, they obeyed authority in the workplace. Often, they did not question the decisions of authority figures in the workplace. The participants in the study revealed that this deference to authority in the workplace sometimes led them to feel “paralyzed” or “crippled.” In this way, they did not feel like they had autonomy over their decisions, or they felt hesitant to speak up. Decision-making will be discussed in detail in a subsequent finding. This finding contributes to how respecting authority influences how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace, particularly their decision-making ability. Early experiences with authority influenced how Asian American women in the study enacted respect for authority in the workplace.

Conflict

It is clear from the study that early understandings of authority continued to affect how Asian women experienced authority in the workplace. At times, they were not cognizant of how their communication with authority was influenced by their upbringing. For example, Wendy said there was “subliminal messaging” to respect authority. Tina described how she was not always conscious of how she responded to authority; it was how she was “trained.” Asian American women in the study experienced conflict when some of their personal or cultural values did not align with the values of authority figures in the workplace. For context, Fong (1997) and Leong and Hartung (2003) described cultural values in Eastern societies to include: interdependence, collectivism, self-control, and obedience. Some participants in this study were taught these cultural values. When Asian American women in this study entered the American workplace, they felt pressure

to make independent decisions or challenge the status quo, which seemed antithetical to the values of collectivism and deference growing up.

Disagreements or differences in points of view with authority in the workplace served as a source of tension and conflict. To further emphasize the points about respecting authority, Tina commented on her experience in the military: “You’re almost like trained that there is a hierarchy.” As a result, she described an “internal conflict” when her value system was different than how authority was handled in the workplace. Asian American women in this study described times when their value system conflicted with what they experienced in the workplace. In one of the examples, Monica experienced conflict when her supervisor suggested that she “stop moving the chairs.” This statement suggested that moving the chairs was not an appropriate task given her more senior role. She described feeling “sour” about the situation and did not know what to make of it. She said the feedback conflicted with her values of “collectivism, community, and harmony.” Consistent with the research, Chow (1994) found that Asian American women may experience conflict when they are in challenging situations with supervisors who represent “omnipotent authority that were not easy to challenge” (p. 213). In this case, Monica described a positive relationship with her supervisor, but she still experienced conflict. This finding expands upon the research of how Asian Americans perceive conflict with authority. In summary, the results from the interviews show how parents influenced early experiences of authority, which later affected how the participants treated authority in the workplace. At times, their understandings of authority were challenged, creating a sense of conflict.

Finding #2 - 2. Understandings of authority influence how Asian American women interact with authority in the workplace.

Approach to Situations

The data provided insight into how Asian American women in the study approached situations with authority in the workplace. Some participants noted that they needed to speak up “the right way” or challenge the status quo “the right way.” In this phrase, they described an approach that aligned with their understanding of authority – one that maintained a level of respect for authority. To demonstrate this finding, Simran said, “There are structures in place and exist, and you know – work with them. You don’t go around them.” This statement shows how participants navigate an approach based on their understanding of authority. Moreover, Lori talked about developing a strategy to advance her own efforts through authority in the workplace. She said, “Maybe it’s okay to have like a male like colleague or whatever be my champion, you know what I mean?” She described her strategy to “ride the wave” instead of “fighting her way up.” The study suggests that Asian American women recognized personal barriers, like challenging the status quo or speaking up, or structural barriers, like not having the power to make changes. As Simran and Tina suggested, there was an emphasis on working within the hierarchical structure. The results show that the participants in the study developed strategies to respond to the personal or structural barriers. They wanted to create “flatter” ways to participate and “co-create” solutions with authority figures. There was an emphasis on collaboration, instead of a top-down approach. In this way, they were able to navigate authority in the workplace “the right way.” Next, I discuss how the interviews offered insight into the concept of speaking up.

Speaking up

The study shows how Asian American women speak up or do not speak up in the workplace. The data suggest that their understanding of authority influences their interactions. First, I discuss how women speak up. In Chapter 4, speaking up was used to describe voicing their thoughts; at times, voicing thoughts came in the form of voicing an opinion, dissent, knowledge, and decisions. Asian American women in this study described feeling the pressure to speak up more. This pressure was attributed to the belief that they had to combat the stereotype of a quiet and submissive Asian American woman. The results support the existing literature that Asian Americans are stereotyped as quiet, humble, deferential, and submissive (Li, 2014). Catalina described an “internal psychological struggle” when she felt that colleagues perceived her as an Asian American woman – someone who “might lack authority or I’m not strong enough.” As a result, she felt like she had to speak up on calls and volunteer for projects. Participants also felt that they needed to “overcompensate,” suggesting that because they thought they were perceived as quiet, then they needed to speak up more. Huang (2020) describes the characteristics of being quiet and submissive to be antithetical to workplace success. Asian American women in this study did not want to appear weak, as someone who was able to be taken advantage of, or someone without a “backbone.” This finding contributes to the literature on how Asian American women respond to stereotypes. The interviews suggest that they wanted to be perceived as confident in the workplace. Confidence will be explored in a later finding.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that participants in the study were taught not to speak up to authority when growing up. Deborah said she had a fear of speaking up in the

workplace; she said, “Because as a kid growing up... I couldn't, I couldn't talk back. I couldn't, you know, say my opinion.” In the workplace, she responded to authority in a similar way. She commented, “I think - I stop thinking. And then, I don't have an opinion.” This statement contributes to the understanding that Asian American women experience a sense of deference to the decisions of authority figures. In a similar way, Jamie was cautious around authority figures in the workplace. She did not want to “step on toes.” When she first started her career, she understood authority figures to be people who had titles that were higher than her title. She described authority figures as people who had more years of experience. Jamie said it was hard for her to see them as “real people.” In the beginning, she did not speak up as much due to her understanding of authority. I noticed how participants described speaking up; they said it caused conflict. Beth said conflict was “antithetical” to who she was. Jane described the personal and professional costs for speaking up: the tax on her mental health and risking possible termination. It was clear from the interviews that speaking up was difficult to do for some participants. For some, they said it was because of their personality or how they understood respect for authority figures. It is interesting to note that while some participants described themselves as “outspoken,” “forthright,” or “easy-going,” they also experienced challenges with navigating how to approach authority in the workplace. To summarize, Asian American women in this study have preconceived notions of authority upon entering the workplace. This understanding of authority influenced their responses and interactions with authority in the workplace. The next finding discusses how the actions of those in authority influence the behaviors of Asian American women in the workplace.

Finding #3 - Actions of authority figures influence how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace.

Speaking up

In this section, I continue to describe how Asian American women interpreted speaking up. However, in this finding, the data suggest that speaking up was either perceived in a positive or negative way based on the actions of authority figures in the workplace. Green and Molenkamp (2005) comment that personal authority is “the way an individual *takes up* formal authority” (p. 5). Taking up authority describes how someone executes their formal authority: a job description or prescribed responsibility. I mention this definition because authority can be enacted in different ways. In this finding, I share how Asian American women experience authority figures based on how authority is enacted. In the results, participants described what actions encouraged them to speak up more in the workplace. The data suggest that Asian American women in this study felt that they could speak up more when authority figures in the workplace encouraged them to do so. For example, Jamie’s managers gave her explicit feedback to take more ownership or try leading. She recounted what her managers told her: “If you’re at the table, that means you have a voice. It’s not like you’re at the table to just take notes or just learn, right?” This feedback helped Jamie think about her role in the organization; she was encouraged to voice her opinions instead of merely executing tasks. Similarly, Lori described a time when her supervisor told her that he relied on her to “make things happen” and not be “one of his extra limbs doing the execution portion of this project.” The study provided insight into how Asian American women in this study responded to direct feedback to take more initiative, as well as ownership. Authority figures

encouraged the women to use their voice to make recommendations and decisions. These examples were described as positive experiences with authority.

Next, the interviews suggest that the actions of authority figures also discourage Asian American women from speaking up in the workplace. When asked about negative experiences with authority in the workplace, some participants recalled instances when they were “scolded” or were shouted at by authority figures for speaking up. They described how authority was enacted in a negative and even harmful way. Beth said that this behavior from authority figures felt “isolating.” Some participants in the study said that they were perceived as “too harsh” or “aggressive” for speaking up in the workplace. This perception of self is consistent with Berdahl and Min’s (2012) study that found that women who speak up in the workplace are perceived as not agreeable. To further emphasize this point, Beth and Julia talked about how their race played a role in the outcome. They felt they were treated differently than their colleagues who were not Asian American. I noticed that both examples took place in meetings with other people; Xu and Davidhizar (2004) describe the concept of “saving face.” In a study about conflict management styles of Asian and American nurses, they explain:

Whereas Asians and Asian Americans typically use a less confronting style, it is essential for the manager to be perceptive of feelings that may not be directly expressed. It is also vital to avoid criticism and confrontation in front of others in a situation that would cause loss of face. For example, talking to employees in a private setting is often helpful to "save face." The manager should pay special attention to the concern of saving face because the Asian employee may not only fear personal loss of face but also may act to maintain face for the manager (e.g.,

by not asking a question that could put the manager in an awkward position) (p. 52).

In this way, the way that authority is enacted influences how Asian American women experience the situation. The actions of authority figures contributed to how Asian American women interpreted speaking up in the workplace in both positive and negative ways. Next, I discuss the findings on how people with authority were experienced as mentors.

Mentors

In the results, I discuss the themes of mentors and trust to show how Asian American women in this study valued mentors in the workplace. Mentors were people who enacted their authority in a positive and developmental way. For example, participants described mentors as authorities who: invited them to meetings, gave them exposure to senior leadership, gave them credit for their work, encouraged them to exercise their own authority. In fact, three participants talked about “paying it forward” to describe how they wanted to influence others in a positive way. Some of the participants described how mentors demonstrated an interest in their motivations and learning more about them outside of their formal roles. Monica described a positive experience with an authority figure; she said, “They care about who's in the organization and to just kind of build community first.” Asian American women in this study described mentors as relatable, caring, and nurturing. The results suggest that mentors did not have to be other Asian Americans or other women. However, it is clear from the study that Asian American women experienced authority in a positive way through mentorship. I noticed that some participants used the adjectives “authoritative” or “authoritarian”

interchangeably with the noun “authority” when describing negative experiences with authority. They used words like “person with power” or “supervisor.” When the Asian American women were asked to describe positive experiences with authority figures, they used words like “mentor,” “leader,” or “manager.” I found these terms to convey more closeness or trustworthiness in the relationship. Participants described authority figures as mentors when they showed an investment in them. They asked about their family; they shared professional development opportunities with them. Mentors enacted their authority by bringing Asian American women to the table, which meant inviting them to the decision-making process or giving them exposure to senior leadership. The Asian American women in the study described how their experience with authority figures became more collaborative; they felt as though they could approach authority figures in a more lateral way. In summary, Asian American women experience authority figures based on how authority is enacted in the workplace. The actions of authority figures matter. Authority is experienced as positive or negative based on how authority is enacted. In the final finding, I discuss how Asian American women perceive their own authority.

Finding #4 - Experiences with authority reveal how Asian American women perceive their own authority in the workplace.

Confidence

The study provided insight into how Asian American perceived their own authority in the workplace. I noticed that while participants described their experiences with authority, they also offered profound reflections about themselves. Most notably, the Asian American women described their confidence. The results suggest that Asian

American women wanted to be perceived as confident in the workplace. Confidence was described as the ability to speak up, take ownership, and make decisions. Ruby shared, “But growing up, I don't, I don't see myself as being confident because I just never spoke up for myself because I didn't think I could.” She wanted to have a “backbone” to stand up for herself in the workplace. The theme about executing tasks showed how Asian American women did feel like they had authority to speak up, take ownership, or make decisions. Lori was adamant about not getting “walked all over” or taken advantage of in the workplace. She spoke in detail about wanting to appear confident so this would not happen.

The results indicate that Asian American women felt more confident in the workplace under certain circumstances: having more experience in the workplace, advocating on behalf of others, and establishing trust with authority. Some participants noted that they were more comfortable with voicing their opinion to those in authority as they progressed in their career; they described having more experience. Maya was hesitant to speak up at first, but she felt more confident at this point in her career. She said that if she really needed to, then she could leave the organizations after “putting her two cents in.” This statement suggests that seniority or years of experience allowed her to feel more confident in voicing her opinion. Moreover, some participants in this study described feeling confident about speaking up when advocating for others. Beth and Jane talked about advocating for students. They felt confident in speaking up on behalf of others. Maya described advocating for other staff members when she felt that there was injustice in the workplace. Finally, the Asian American women in the study felt more confident once they had established trust with authority figures. The interviews described

trust as the ability to learn from mistakes and discuss how decisions were made.

Participants discussed how trust mitigated misunderstandings with authority figures. For example, Cassie and Monica talked about how understanding tone allowed them to distinguish if authority figures were “angry” or just being “blunt” or “terse.” Therefore, they did not interpret the message as a negative one. The experiences with authority revealed how Asian American women perceived their own confidence in the workplace. The final finding discusses how experiences with authority influence decision making.

Decision-Making

Lastly, the themes in Chapter 4 suggest that experiences with authority influence how Asian American women interpret their own authority in the workplace. In this finding, I discuss how Asian American women experience their own authority through their interpretation of decision-making. Asian American women in this study described authority figures as people who made decisions; this understanding of authority was consistent when participants described both their upbringing and experiences in the workplace. Growing up, fathers were described as the decision-makers. They were associated with financial management, behavior management, punishment, and dominance. Shirley and Tina described the division of roles: their fathers were responsible for managing behavior and administering consequences for misbehavior. Participants alluded to masculine and dominant traits when describing their own assertion of authority. For example, Lori questioned if her experience with authority in the workplace would be different if she were a man. It is important to recognize how participants perceived gender; Smith (2002) found that “Despite significant advancement in the overall socioeconomic status of minorities and working women, race and gender

remain important impediments to their attainment of authority (p. 509).” Lori and Tina talked about adapting more masculine communication styles, which they associated with having authority to make decisions. These findings about race and gender contribute to the understanding of the authority attainment of Asian American women.

To further emphasize the point that authority is related to decision-making, Zeng (2011) described workplace authority by the “power to participate and influence the decision-making process regarding an organization’s operation and personnel” (p. 313). In some circumstances, the participants described not having the ability to make decisions for themselves. I found it interesting that some participants used words like “crippling” and “paralyzed” to describe decision-making. Shirley said that her parents did not trust her ability to make decisions on her own when she was growing up. This early experience with parental authority influenced her later in life. To highlight this finding, she described:

Like every time a barrier happened, I didn't know how to overcome that. And so, again - a lesson learned for my kids. I am trying to parent in a way that allows them to understand their choices... so that if they have come across a barrier, especially later in life - when it comes to their careers or whatever - that they're able to figure out how to overcome that and not be so paralyzed like I felt like I was growing up.

This statement shows how early experiences of parental authority and decision-making influence experiences at work. To further highlight this point, Lori noted:

I think that as one grows up, not having the ability to challenge authority is actually quite crippling because you're not able to make decisions for yourself.

You don't learn that decision-making process because you're always looking to Mom, or looking to Dad, or looking to someone else to make that decision for you. So, I think that really impedes maturing - and the independence that is necessary as an adult.

Asian American women in this study described how their understanding of authority influenced their decision-making ability as adults. These understandings of authority inform their perceptions of what they can or cannot do around authority in the workplace. These interviews show how restrictive and limiting it may feel to not have the authority or the ability to make decisions for oneself.

In this discussion, I described four key findings from the research study: early experiences of authority influence how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace, understandings of authority influence how Asian American women interact with authority in the workplace, actions of authority figures influence how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace, and experiences with authority reveal how Asian American women perceive their own authority in the workplace.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The fifteen participants represented a small sample size. While I was intentional about interviewing Asian American women that represented various ethnicities, different industries, and levels in an organization, there were many experiences that were not included. Therefore, it is important to note that the findings of this study are not generalizable to all Asian American women – a diverse group. In addition, there was a larger percentage of women who worked less than ten years in their respective industries. The study only reflects the working lives of Asian Americans; the results do not include

the experience of individuals who worked less than five years or are unemployed. Moreover, the participant pool had a high representation of people in higher education and live on the East Coast because of my personal affiliations. Additionally, there was no analysis about the intersections of other identities, such as sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, generational status, and religion, to name a few identities that participants mentioned throughout the interviews. Lastly, it is important to note that Asian American women who responded to the invitation of this research study may be particularly eager to discuss their experiences in the workplace. They may have had specific positive or negative experiences in the workplace that they wanted to discuss. Interested participants may have a heightened awareness about how their race and gender influence workplace dynamics.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study is to increase the understanding of Asian American women's experiences with authority in the workplace. These findings contribute to the research on authority and Asian American women in the workplace. Researching understudied minorities, such as Asian American women, will contribute to the literature on diversity and inclusivity in the workplace. During a time when there is a particular emphasis on equity, diversity, and inclusion in organizations, this study is timely because it investigates the experiences of Asian American women in the workplace. In this section, I offer practice implications for authority in the workplace and Asian American women in the workplace. The purpose of the practice implications is to understand how cultural differences and values inform how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace.

These practice implications are in the interest of creating a more inclusive workplace for Asian American women. We should recognize that the evidence here does not suggest a one-size-fits-all explanation for Asian American women in the workplace, but instead I offer another perspective for understanding authority in the workplace. Understanding experiences with a cultural lens may mitigate burnout, increase retention and satisfaction, and contribute to the personal and professional growth of Asian American women.

Implications for Authority in the Workplace

In this first section, I offer recommendations for handling authority in the workplace. It is important to note that for some Asian American women, their racial identity is especially salient to them in the workplace. Being cognizant of how Asian American women understand authority may offer insight into how they behave in the workplace. Findings from this study indicate that Asian American women experience speaking up in a variety of ways. For some, they may be hesitant to speak up or challenge authority because of they were taught to respect authority. Some Asian American women endured consequences for speaking up. For some participants, explicit permission to make more autonomous decisions helped them realize their own authority. To create an environment of learning and trust, authority figures should consider providing on-going feedback, discussing how decisions are made, and allowing time to learn from mistakes. Asian American women in this study valued mentors who invited them into the decision-making process or gave them exposure to leadership and opportunities. The women in this study described positive experiences when authorities in the workplace invested in them personally by getting to know them outside of the day-to-day roles and recognized

their contributions. Asian American women in this study felt more confident in the workplace when their supervisors demonstrated that they trusted them to make decisions or complete tasks. Authorities can facilitate the development of trust by discussing decisions and processes more openly.

Deborah reflected on a negative experience: “I felt like a dialogue could have been done. As a supportive manager, they would talk through your options with you.” Jamie added:

Sometimes people get feedback, and they never want to look back on the good or the bad. They just want to move forward. But this manager, I think does a really good job to kind of reiterate some of the points that he wants me to remember and wants me to continue to work on.

Trust can also be developed through informal events and conversations. To model inclusive leadership, authorities in the workplace need to be aware of their own biases and assumptions related to cultural diversity. Authority figures may have preconceived notions about Asian American women employees based on stereotypes. The study shows the negative impact of the quiet and submissive stereotype of an Asian American woman, so it is important to mitigate bias to reduce the harmful impacts. Finally, an understanding that conflict and tension may be caused by cultural differences is essential. Asian American women in this study showed how they respected authority in the workplace, which sometimes led to conflict or tension. In conclusion, an awareness of how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace may offer more insight into how to manage and more importantly, develop diverse employees.

Implications for Asian American Women

I use findings from the interviews to offer practice implications for Asian American women in the workplace. I hope these findings will inspire Asian American women to investigate their own workplace dynamics by reflecting on how they understand and experience authority. The data suggest early experiences of authority influence how Asian American women respond to authority in the workplace. Increasing awareness of how early experiences of authority influence behaviors in the workplace may encourage thoughtful conversations about speaking up, making decisions in the workplace, and navigating conflict with authority figures. Some of the Asian American women in this study described how their perceptions of authority changed through conversations with authority figures. For example, Jamie talked about “breaking the cycle” of her beliefs that authorities were “not real people.” She did this by interacting with authorities more and learning about their experiences. Having open, honest conversations with authority figures may build more trusting relationships that allow Asian American women to voice their own experiences in a safer way. Viewing workplace dynamics with a racialized and gendered lens may offer insight into responses to authority. How does race and gender impact how someone engages in the workplace? What cultural underpinnings influence responses to authority?

In conclusion, reflecting on why one does or does not behave a certain way in the workplace could offer meaningful insight. Adapt the interview protocol (Appendix 1) as well as the questions listed below as a self-reflection tool to explore experiences in the workplace. Use the questions as a coaching and conversation tool with authorities in the workplace to invite more conversations about how to support professional development and growth.

Questions about authority:

- What informed my understanding of authority?
- When is a time when I experienced conflict with authority in the workplace?
- How does my understanding of authority influence how I interact with authority figures in the workplace?
- How do I respond to authority? In what ways is this an appropriate response? What would I like to do differently?

Questions about speaking up:

- What contributes to why I do or do not speak up more in the workplace?
- What is at stake if I speak up? What is at stake if I do not speak up?

Questions for self-reflection:

- How confident do I feel at work?
- In what ways does the stereotype of an Asian American women impact me?
- Whom do I consider a mentor and why?
- What would make it easier for me to interact with authority figures?

These questions may provide a starting point to discuss identity in the workplace and authority in the workplace. Honest conversations about identity in the workplace may mitigate feelings of isolation and inspire connection and empowerment for Asian American women. They may offer insight into why someone does or does not voice dissent to authority.

Future Research

There is an opportunity to research how various populations experience authority in the workplace. While this research study investigates the experiences of Asian

American women, the methodology is appropriate to uncover dynamics with authority in the workplace within other groups. For example, future research could explore the similarities and differences among understudied minorities like African American women and Native American and Indigenous women. It would also be interesting to study Asian American men and compare the findings to this study. Furthermore, it is difficult to discuss the findings about Asian American women without acknowledging the impact of race in the United States. Because Asian Americans navigate an experience that is different from their white colleagues and different from communities of color, there is a need for research and practices to be inclusive of Asian Americans.

Conclusion

As a second-generation Chinese American woman growing up in a predominantly homogenous area, I did not think about how my upbringing and social identities affected my experiences. Growing up I did not reflect on how my race and gender influenced how I navigated the world. This research study gave me the opportunity to explore organizational dynamics through a qualitative study to investigate the experiences of Asian American women. By researching a specific group that I belong to, this study made me feel less alone in the workplace. There were common threads across many diverse experiences. This study uncovered opportunities to support the professional development of Asian American women by understanding the dynamics surrounding authority.

Additionally, the interview experience elicited unique responses from each respective participant. Cassie described the interview as cathartic. Beth said the conversation was emotionally draining. Simran did not think she had ever verbalized some of her responses before. In addition, Deborah said she never thought about her

identity related to her experience in the workplace. Wendy said she felt good after the interview but was confused, “tripping over how I navigate through my identity.”

Moreover, Julia said that she “felt good” about the interview but was surprised by the question about family. Lori said she was surprised that I asked a lot about authority; she said, “I didn’t know you were going to go in that direction” and affirmed that talking about authority was needed. Each set of experiences was unique and personal.

With that said, I felt connected to each participant, as they were sharing their experiences, some of which were very personal and negative experiences. All fifteen participants used the phrase, “you know” in their responses. The phrase “you know” appeared 996 times across all fifteen interviews. I was surprised by the number of times it was being used during the interviews, and then even more so, when I was coding the interviews. For example, one participant said, “She was quite strict with me growing up, you know? No TV.” I resisted the urge to react and comment in the moment and say “same.” Another participant shared, “And it's been joked about, you know, being the quiet Asian person who doesn't say or disrupt anything.” I wanted to respond with empathy and validation to say, “I know the feeling.” Nonetheless, there were numerous moments when a participant described an experience, and I genuinely did not know what it was like to have that experience. However, I could empathize.

I am confident that the phrase “you know” was used more often because of my role as an Asian American woman asking the questions. With that said, I wonder how many Asian American women assume that their experiences and cultural differences are understood by their colleagues. Even more so, I wonder how many Asian American

women tolerate and normalize negative experiences in the workplace and do not speak up.

Every time I stopped the recording with participants, I felt like there was more conversation waiting to be unleashed—conversations that positioned Asian American women at the forefront without judgment. There was an opportunity to locate common ground among diverse experiences, professional industries, and levels within the organization to reveal how Asian American women experience authority in the workplace. Undertaking this research gave me my bold opportunity to speak up.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Template

Duration: Between 45-60-minute interview

Interview Script

Hi [Participant Name]. How are you doing today?

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. It means a lot to me that you have taken the time to share your experience with me. The purpose of this interview is to investigate Asian-American women's perceptions and experiences in their workplace.

As a reminder, your information will be kept strictly confidential, and the research paper will not contain personal identifiable information. Do you have any questions about the purpose of this study or the terms outlined in the consent form?

As a quick overview, this interview will take between 45-60 minutes. I While I have questions prepare, I invite you to treat this interview as a conversation. If you still agree, I will start the recording for the interview. **[Start recording]**

Great, thank you. I do not want to assume how people identify themselves from a cultural or social identity perspective. So, to get us started...

Interview Questions*Identity in the Workplace*

1. How do you identify yourself? (Prompt: social identities)
2. What aspect of your identity is most salient at work? Why? Is this most salient aspect of your identity also salient at home? Why?

Experiences with Authority in the Workplace

3. Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge (or negative experience) with authority in the workplace? What was the outcome?
4. What have you thought about this situation since?
5. Tell me about a positive experience with authority in the workplace? What was the outcome?
6. What have you thought about this situation since?

Definitions & Perceptions of Authority

7. How do you think about authority in the workplace?
8. Who has authority in your workplace from your perspective? What type of authority do they carry?
9. How was authority handled in your family growing up?
10. What messages did you take from how authority was handled when you were growing up?
11. How do you think your experiences with authority growing up have influenced your views and feelings about authority today?

Closing

12. What do you wish there was more of as an Asian-American woman in the workplace?
13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about authority and the workplace that I have not asked you?