

Invisible Asian Americans: the intersection of sexuality, race, and education among gay Asian Americans

Anthony C. Ocampo^{a*} and Daniel Soodjinda^b

^a*Department of Psychology and Sociology, Cal Poly Pomona, Pomona, USA;*

^b*Department of Liberal Studies, California State University, Stanislaus, Turlock, USA*

Most research on Asian American education has centered on addressing and deconstructing the model minority stereotype. While recent studies have highlighted the socioeconomic and cultural heterogeneity among Asian American students, few have examined how sexual identity and masculinity mitigate their academic experiences. In this article, we draw on the educational narratives of 35 Asian American gay men to address this gap. Though research on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students has emphasized bullying, our findings show that the relationship between sexuality and schooling is more nuanced than studies suggest. Our article reveals that while anti-gay bullying is prevalent, Asian American gay students play up aspects of their racial identity and even strategically capitalize on the model minority stereotype to evade harassment. Ultimately, our study highlights the need for educators to remain mindful of how the intersection of sexuality and race affect the school climate and educational experiences among gay students of color.

Keywords: Asian American; gay; educational experiences; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT); model minority; bullying

High school was tough. I hated it. It all started my freshman year when people started to suspect that I was gay and started to bully me. It lasted all through high school and into senior year. I spent lunch every day by myself in the library studying. I was a loner. And I even thought about suicide my senior year. There were a lot of Asians at my high school, and even a few gay people. ... They all made me feel so different.

Randy,¹ 31, Chinese American

Despite the bullying that Randy faced in high school, he eventually grew up to become a successful registered nurse in Daly City, California. Nonetheless, these memories of social isolation remain vivid in his mind,

*Corresponding author. Email: acocampo@csupomona.edu

even more than a decade after the incidents had passed. His classmates, Asian American peers included, verbally bullied him. Rather than intervene, his teachers remained passive bystanders to the harassment. On another level, Randy felt conflicted in his identities. As an Asian American, he felt he did not fit the stereotypical white images of gay culture depicted in the mass media. As a gay man, he felt his sexuality negated his ‘model minority’ status within his ethnic community. Randy later shared that he consciously used his academic achievements to overcome the social challenges and pressures he faced as a gay Asian American man.

Randy’s narrative raises an interesting puzzle: What is the relationship between sexual identity, ethnicity, and the school experiences of gay Asian American men? Rather than approach gay identity as a deficit (Akerlund and Cheung 2002), we argue that gay Asian Americans navigate their sexuality and race strategically within their educational lives. At times, they even use education as a conscious strategy to mitigate the homophobic and racialized climate of their schools. There has been extensive research on the *respective* consequences of race and sexuality on kindergarten to twelfth grade (K-12) experiences (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007; Pascoe 2007). However, relatively few studies directly address how the intersectionality of these identities relates to education, particularly for Asian Americans. The existing discourse on Asian American education has overwhelmingly focused on the development and deconstruction of the model minority stereotype (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007; Teranishi 2002), and the limited discussion of gay Asian Americans has not generally addressed their educational lives (Hom 2009; Manalansan 2003). Drawing on in-depth interviews with gay Asian American men from the San Francisco Bay Area, this article addresses the gap in the literature. First, we examine how sexual identity affected gay Asian Americans’ interactions with classmates and teachers. Second, we demonstrate how gay identity interacts with the expectations these men face from their surrounding social networks to be both heteronormative and a model minority.

School environments are a crucial site for the development of racial, sexual, and gender identities (Diamond and Savin-Williams 2009). Through their social interactions with peers and teachers, young people assign meanings and values to these different identities. Research suggests that gay students of color face the most challenges because of the inherently heteronormative and ethnocentric climate of most schools (Pascoe 2007; Taylor and Peter 2011). For gay Asian Americans, K-12 school experiences provide a platform where they are socialized with ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ ways of ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman 1987) and ‘doing race’ (Jackson 2003). While these socialization processes are diverse for gay Asian Americans – depending on the demographic makeup of the school, the climate toward gay students, and the familial and community understandings of gay identity – our findings reveal that gay Asian Americans

aim to find congruence with their competing identities. In this respect, education also provides them an important sphere for resistance against their marginalization (Meyer and Stader 2009).

Our findings aim to inform the pedagogical strategies of educational practitioners who work with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students of color. Most research shows that K-12 teachers, administrators, and other school personnel have generally been complicit when homophobic offenses occur (Pascoe 2007; Warwick, Aggleton, and Douglas 2001). When they do consider LGBT students' needs, they often draw from strategy frameworks that fail to consider the intersection of race and sexual identity. In other words, the intervention strategies addressing bullying and the coming out experience do not explicitly consider the different needs of white versus non-white gay students (Pritchard 2013). This is problematic because almost half of LGBT students of color encountered harassment while in high school due to both their racial and sexual identities (Kosciw et al. 2012). Additionally, the negative impact of bullying on grades appears to be more severe for LGBT students of color (Kosciw et al. 2012).

Asian American students in general are often missing from the discourse on bullying, an oversight likely attributed to model minority stereotypes. For example, a recent policy report on bullying by the American Education Research Association left Asian Americans out altogether (AERA 2013). The omission of Asian Americans, let alone gay Asian Americans, is a symptom of how educational practitioners unconsciously adhere to the model minority stereotype when developing policy recommendations. This study brings the struggles of gay Asian Americans in schools to the forefront.

Education as a site of identity construction and resistance

The meanings, values, and consequences of both racial and sexual identities are socially constructed (Omi and Winant 1994; Seidman 2003). While the intention of education is centered around learning, studies in sociology and education show that schools are a central site for racial and sexual identity development. People learn what it means to be Asian American and what it means to be gay from their interactions with peers, counselors, and teachers, especially since ethnic and sexual minorities remain relatively invisible in the academic curriculum. In schools, there is a widely assumed, yet problematic stereotype that Asian Americans are model minorities (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007; Teranishi 2002). When it comes to sexuality, students who are LGBT (or even perceived to be LGBT) are significantly more likely to be verbally and physically harassed – a phenomenon prevalent not just in the US, but also in Canada, Australia, and the UK (Meyer and Stader 2009; Taylor and Peter 2011; Warwick, Aggleton, and Douglas 2001). These verbal and physical abuses, coupled with the general complicity of teachers

and staff, cause LGBT students to develop feelings of inferiority, relative to their heterosexual peers (Pascoe 2007). The narratives of gay Asian Americans help shed light on the inequalities that are embedded within the cultural ethos of schools. Their responses also help inform the windows of opportunity for gay students of color and allies to exercise agency in addressing the problem. Below, we discuss how existing studies on Asian American and LGBT educational experiences not only highlight some of the challenges that gay Asian American men face in schools, but also fall short of addressing the unique struggles that are associated with their intersectional identity.

What about sexual identity?

The absence of LGBT perspectives in Asian American education literature

The lion's share of research on Asian American education has attempted to explain their educational achievement, relative to other racial minorities in the US. Fueled largely by the problematic implications of the model minority myth, researchers have painstakingly focused their energies on unearthing the underlying mechanisms behind Asian American educational outcomes, including their socioeconomic advantages vis-à-vis other minorities, ethnic-based institutional resources within the immigrant community, and 'positive' racial stereotyping on the part of teachers and counselors (Shih, Pittinsky, and Ho 2011; Zhou 2009). This persistent concern with debunking the model minority stereotype has meant that researchers have paid relatively less attention to important non-educational outcomes that occur within the boundaries of Asian Americans' school lives, such as gender socialization and sexual identity development. As such, gay Asian Americans remain relatively invisible in existing studies of Asian American education.

Sexual identity greatly complicates the educational experiences of gay Asian Americans in a number of respects. Numerous studies show that Asian Americans feel tremendous pressures and obligations to excel academically, both as a signal of respect for parental sacrifices and as a means to ultimately securing a good job in the long term (Schneider and Lee 1990). In many Asian Americans' families, being a good student is synonymous to being a good child. Thus, on numerous dimensions, being gay disrupts one's ability to fulfill these expectations, given that families generally display an aversion toward non-heteronormative sexual orientations (Akerlund and Cheung 2002). First, being gay adds an additional variable of stress, as many gay Asian Americans struggle with finding compatibility between their sexual and ethnic identity (Hahm and Adkins 2009). Second, opting to embrace one's sexual identity might alienate gay Asian Americans from accessing

educational resources within the co-ethnic immigrant community. Lastly, being gay often leads to increased levels of harassment within the school setting, which in turn could impede gay Asian Americans' ability to excel academically, thus further alienating them from family units and the larger ethnic community (Hahm and Adkins 2009; Lee 2004).

The school setting and academic achievement constitute a mechanism by which Asian Americans view their position vis-à-vis members of their racial community. For example, Lee (2004) notes that Korean Americans who perform poorly academically feel discouraged from identifying and affiliating closely with their co-ethnic community, for fear that their subpar academic performance detracts from the 'ideal' Korean son or daughter. In fact, many of the social aspects of high school have the potential to further alienate gay Asian American students. Besides the oft-cited experiences of harassment, junior high and high schools are full of heteronormative rituals that further marginalize gay Asian Americans. Social situations that often bring classmates together – discussing crushes, attending dances, recounting dating experiences – continually remind gay students that they do not fit in, a situation possibly worsened by the rigid gender roles Asians Americans internalize as part of their culture (Hom 2009).

What about race?

The absence of race in research on LGBT bullying and school climate

Although the recent coverage of LGBT youth-related suicide and bullying has brought attention to understanding the school experiences of sexual minority youth, researchers have spent less attention on the needs of LGBT youth of color. Numerous studies have focused on the ways in which bullying negatively shapes the daily experiences of gay high school students and have found that bullying can lead to mental health issues and negative effects on academic achievement (Kosciw et al. 2012; Walls, Freedenthal, and Wisneski 2008). Gay students' educational experiences are often plagued by verbal harassment and physical assault from classmates, a lack of protection from school personnel, and an overall lack of support from parents and peers. For example, a recent LGBT K-12 student survey found that 82% of students were verbally harassed for their sexual orientation, 18% were physically harassed, and 37% reported that school personnel did nothing in response (Kosciw et al. 2012). Additionally, students who experienced higher levels of victimization were less likely to earn higher grade point averages than students who were not bullied, and of those who were bullied at least 31% skipped school at least once a month because they felt unsafe (Kosciw et al. 2012). Asian American gay students, however, can be targeted for bullying relating to both their racial and sexual identity, which complicates how they negotiate their multiple identities as well as their relations with different social circles on campus.

The attention that has been paid to bullying sexual minority youth has led to research on anti-bullying programs that can exist at the school, district, or community (AERA 2013). They consist of large-scale prevention interventions, teacher education courses that focus on bullying, and the development of safe school environments (Polanin, Espelage, and Pigott 2012; Walls, Kane, and Wisneski 2010). One attempt that seems to capture all three of those areas is the development of gay–straight alliances (GSAs) which attempt to reduce prejudice, discrimination, and harassment within the school via student-run programming (Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer 2006). Moreover, in the past two decades the expansion of GSAs has led to over 3000 groups, with many offering individual support to LGBT students, which in turn alters the campus climate to be more inclusive and safe (Garcia-Alonso 2004). Similarly, students who participate in GSAs report positive psychosocial factors related to sexual identity, greater self-efficacy, and an increased sense of school identity. The organizations, however, tend to attract students who have developed their sexual identity more fully than others and fail to recruit students who are in their early stages of coming out (Pascoe 2007). Unlike the case of white gay students, LGBT students of color are faced with negotiating between two identities, one relating to race, and the other to sexual identity, and are less likely to join GSAs because the ideologies and values may not be compatible to their particular sense of gay identity.

Data and methodology

In this article, we draw from 35 in-depth interviews with Asian American adult men living in the San Francisco Bay Area. All of the respondents identify as gay or queer, though their degree of openness about their sexual identity varies. All are openly gay to their close friends, but about a third have not disclosed their sexuality to their immediate and nuclear family. The men are of different Asian ethnicities, with most of them being of Chinese, Filipino, or Southeast Asian descent. Respondents were either second generation or 1.5 generation, meaning they migrated to the US before their teenage years. The sample was also socioeconomically diverse. About half the sample identified as middle class and the other considered themselves low-income or working class.

San Francisco provided a strategic site for conducting this study. First, the city has a longstanding gay community in the Castro District, in which gay Asian Americans have a visible presence. Second, the San Francisco Bay Area is also one of the largest Asian American settlement areas in the US, with Asian Americans comprising about 40% of the total population. Third, there is tremendous diversity within the gay Asian American population. There are a number of organizations, social events, and public venues that are frequented or are catered toward gay Asian Americans. The

presence of both gay and Asian American communities is empirically beneficial because it allows us to examine how gay Asian Americans navigate their multiple identities across different social contexts.

Respondents were recruited through a number of means. We attended both ethnic-specific and mainstream gay venues in San Francisco and recruited subjects through casual interactions. We also attended meetings at organizations and community centers targeted toward LGBT Asian Americans. Directors of these centers also made announcements and sent out recruitment flyers on our behalf through email and social media sites. Finally, we also recruited respondents through snowball sampling methods, but we limited each original subject to a maximum of two referrals so as not to collect data from a closed network of Asian Americans.

Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and took place either in local coffee shops or in respondents' homes. During the interview, several themes were discussed, such as experiences growing up in an immigrant household or neighborhood, school experiences both in and out of the classroom, social relationships before and after coming into their sexuality, encounters with racial or sexuality based discrimination, romantic relationships, and friendships. Because most of the men came out in their early twenties, their memories of gay experiences during K-12 were retrospective in nature. Most admitted that they would not have had the capacity to discuss their sexuality in any context during their elementary and high school years. While some critique retrospective interviews as less precise than ethnography or 'real time' accounts, retrospective data from gay Asian American men reveals the commonalities in their experiences that can inform knowledge building and interventions for this invisible population (Budach 2012).

Despite extensive efforts to develop a diverse sample, this research is limited in a few respects: First, the experiences of Asian American gay men living in the San Francisco Bay Area should not be seen as fully representative of all LGBT Asian Americans. San Francisco has a unique history as one of the Meccas of both gay and Asian American social movements in the US (Espiritu 1992). Second, the dense presence of both gay individuals and Asian Americans means that respondents in this study navigate race and sexuality in ways that are distinct from gay Asian Americans living in places in which the presence of these populations is minimal and perhaps less welcomed. For example, unlike places similar to San Francisco and Los Angeles, many cities do not have thriving gay public spaces, let alone sites that are almost entirely committed to gay Asian Americans. While this means that the generalizability of the findings is limited, this research nonetheless has the ability to highlight social phenomenon experienced by gay Asian Americans and LGBT people of color at large, such as the negotiation between ethnic identity and sexuality, the strategizing of coming out within the context of immigrant communities, and the struggles involved with being gay within intergenerational social networks.

Navigating rough terrain***Being gay and Asian American in schools***

Consistent with previous studies, many gay Asian American men in this study described school as overtly hostile toward gay people. For most, this hostility toward gay people first became salient in junior high school, when young men started to go through puberty. Aaron, a 28-year-old Chinese American health and science reporter, said his first bullying experience occurred when he was 11-years-old.

Q: Did you ever experience bullying as a kid?

A: Maybe not to the point where I was afraid for my safety. But I remember in the hallways, if I screamed like a girl or made some comment, there would be guys who would push me in the lockers and call me ‘fag’ or ‘cocksucker’ in front of a big group of people. I was pretty sensitive so I shut down a little bit.

Aaron’s remarks demonstrated how young boys who deviated from gender norms were publicly shamed for their behavior. In addition, as his story showed, such behavior often went unchallenged by other students who themselves feared being associated with someone who was potentially gay. Despite being physically harmed, Aaron’s description also illustrated how gay Asian Americans downplayed the seriousness of these violent occurrences, something that gender scholar C.J. Pascoe argues is easier to do when such behavior is dismissed as ‘bullying’ rather than outright ‘harassment.’ In the end, Aaron reasoned that he was bullied ‘because I was so effeminate.’ The tragedy of this remark is in the way Aaron assigns blame for the harassment. Rather than attribute the violence he encountered to the intolerance of his classmates or the indifference of teachers, he implicitly blames it on his own actions. This cognitive process in how Aaron understands the root cause of bullying further explains why homophobic violence persists in schools. Victims learn to keep silent, assume a lack of accountability or safety, and ultimately view themselves and their own actions as the impetus for harassment and violence.

The consistent casual usage of gay epithets in schools served to devalue and stigmatize respondents’ sense of gay identity. Interestingly, respondents downplayed the severity of classmates using gay slurs. When asked whether gay people were mistreated in his middle school and high school, Martin, a 28-year-old Chinese American employment recruiter, recalled: ‘It was just kind of jokes and stuff. It wasn’t super hateful, like hate crimes, but it was just joking around, always saying, “That’s so gay.” It was the cool kid thing to do to ostracize the gay kids.’ The tone of Martin’s remark demonstrated the degree to which anti-gay comments were tolerated and unsanctioned by other classmates and teachers. Moreover, his

comment highlighted how homophobia functioned as a form of symbolic capital, particularly among boys in his school. Not only were terms like 'fag' or 'gay' used as proxy terms for 'stupid' or 'lame,' heterosexual boys slurs to assert their masculinity over other boys. In his freshman year of high school, Jeremy, a 32-year-old Filipino American registered nurse, recalled being taunted in his homeroom class:

One of my friend's older brothers, he was named EC. He was one of the popular jocks and he was sitting at the back with his friends. I remember he was a bully. He would say, 'Look at that fat faggot at the front of the room.' At that point, all of his friends started laughing. That's when I realized I'm not supposed to act that way.

Jeremy described himself as having feminine tendencies as a child and as an early teen which made him a target for the 'popular guys' like EC. For Jeremy and others, such ritualistic harassment of feminine boys helped to bolster their popularity among their school classmates. To make matters worse, nearly every respondent stated that the anti-gay, anti-feminine harassments went unchecked by school authorities, which further worsened their sense of safety let alone acceptance at school.

Having observed the negative reception and treatment of gay students, many Asian Americans attempted to deflect gossip about their sexuality by playing up their masculinity. Parker, a 24-year-old Filipino American nursing student, said he was tormented by a classmate while attending St. Richard's Elementary, a small Catholic School in the East Bay. This harassment was so severe that Parker spoke as little in his class and at school as possible, as he feared that his 'feminine' way of speaking would become the subject of ridicule. However, upon graduating from eighth grade, Parker moved to a large public school where he enjoyed the opportunity to be more anonymous within the student body. He also changed his style of dress:

In high school, I remember consciously changing everything about my look. I started to buy and wear baggier clothes and flannels and certain types of sneakers. More of a hip-hop look. I remember too that whenever I talked, I made sure to lower my voice so that people wouldn't make fun of me.

Unlike in elementary school, Parker's choice to deploy a more masculine presentation of self – one based on the styles of racial minorities living in urban contexts – allowed him to develop more relationships and build his confidence in the classroom. His baggy clothes and deeper voice functioned as an armor of sorts to evade the bullying and taunting that feminine boys experienced. Similar to Parker, Jeremy recalled his strategy after being called a 'fat faggot' in his freshman year of high school. He said:

That's when I was trying to change myself to be part of the cool crowd. I stopped talking like a Valley girl and stopped sounding or acting like a girl. Once [EC and the other guys] found out I was cool, then my gayness just slipped away for them. I suppressed it. They were like, 'He's not gay anymore.'

Rather than pay attention to his academics, Jeremy spent most of his time hanging out with a racing crew, an activity popular at the time among Asian American male youth. In many respects, acquiring knowledge of body kits, 'souped-up cars,' spoilers, and rims served as his protection against the harassment he once suffered. Even though it came at the cost of hiding his true self, Jeremy was able to climb the social ranks of his high school because in his view hanging out with EC and his friends and fixing up cars was antithetical to being gay.

Asian American men recall that puberty was a particularly difficult time to deal with sexuality because of the increased prevalence of traditional heterosexual rituals in school. Many said they consciously engaged in the same rituals as their heterosexual friends – talking to girls, checking girls out at school and in magazines, expressing who their crushes were, and even becoming physically intimate with girls. However, nearly every respondent said they 'knew in their gut' that something was off. This sentiment was exemplified by Martin, who uncomfortably recounted his first dating experience: 'Eighth grade, I tried to date a girl but it felt really weird. She felt like a sister to me. I never kissed her or anything, but it felt so weird.' Kirk, a 30-year-old Filipino American human resources specialist, recalled a similar uncomfortable memory when he took a road trip with a female friend and co-worker of his:

Q: Have you ever had any type of relationship with someone of the opposite sex?

Kirk: I had, yeah, and it just wasn't good. It's actually really embarrassing. One time, I took a road trip to LA with a girl to Disneyland. We had worked together for four years. We were staying at a hotel and we got really, really drunk one night, and she asked me if I had ever done anything with a girl. I was about 18-years-old. I told her I hadn't done anything, and she asked me if I wanted to. We started doing stuff, and I had to stop it. It was really embarrassing. I was like, 'No, I can't. This is not working.'

Kirk's presentation of self was one that many young women might find attractive. He was athletic, handsome, and carried himself in a reserved, yet confident manner. Interestingly, Asian American men who might similarly 'pass' as straight were often confronted about why they 'just didn't date girls if they could.' In the end, most respondents would go through the motions of making out, sometimes even having sex, but said they 'didn't feel any connection' and 'didn't feel any spark' when dating girls.

Nonetheless, many maintained such heterosexual relationships on the surface to avoid being gossiped about, particularly when they had to attend public school rituals such as school dances and senior prom.

The pressure to not be gay pushed a few respondents to actively partake in stigmatizing more feminine gay classmates as a means to divert attention from their own struggles with sexuality. Shin, a 28-year-old Chinese American graduate student, said that he did everything to ‘convince [himself] that he could live that [straight] lifestyle,’ including maintaining one serious girlfriend through high school. When I asked him about the opportunity to befriend other gay students at his school, he responded:

There were gay people in high school, but I didn’t really affiliate with them. I was scared to affiliate myself with them because I knew I was gay, and I wasn’t ready to come out. ... The ones that were out were flamboyant, even if they didn’t claim it; I think it was just well known. Something we didn’t really talk about.

Similarly, Ryan, a 28-year-old Vietnamese American business analyst, noted his own experiences with gay classmates: ‘I met my first gay classmate [my] first year in college through a mutual friend. He was very flamboyant and it made me take a step back. I felt like it was a caricature of being gay. I thought, “I don’t want to be that”.’ Such remarks came mainly from Asian American men who self-identified as more masculine. In the front stage of school hallways, their identity was based on who they publicly hung out with, and respondents whose presentation of self was more gender conforming did not want to lose any masculinity points. Interestingly, in the back-stage, they admitted never having an actual problem with feminine gay men on an interpersonal level. As Peter, a 25-year-old Filipino American registered nurse noted, ‘Outside in the real world you were cool with them, but they never got introduced to your friends [at school] or your parents. It’s the stigma.’ As the narratives of Shin, Ryan, and Peter demonstrate, the anti-gay climate helped cultivate anti-gay sentiments even among Asian Americans who knew that they themselves were same-sex oriented.

The presence of gay teachers did not necessarily improve the school climate for gay students. Even when gay teachers were present in schools, their sexual identity was, at best, tacit and at worst, publicly sanctioned by homophobic students. Marvin, a 34-year-old Japanese American human resource strategist, remembered being aware of his same-sex attraction ‘as far back as [he] can remember.’ However, in his early teenage years, he was unaware of how his feelings linked up to gay identity in part because of how gay issues were swept under the rug at his school. He recalled, ‘I had a teacher who was, in retrospect, pretty obviously gay, but I was none the wiser. It was seventh grade, and I thought he was just kind of feminine, but I didn’t know he was home with another guy.’ Other respondents like

Andrew, a 25-year-old multiracial Filipino American teacher, recalled their gay teachers being overtly harassed by students.

Q: Were there any ‘out’ teachers at your high school?

A: There was one. During my senior year there were a series of incidents in which students set a fire in his classroom and wrote ‘fag’ in red paint all over it. This happened right after I decided to come out too. It was rough.

The irony of Marvin and Andrew’s respective stories are that these teachers had the potential to be role models and support networks for gay students. However, given the way that gay identity was perceived as taboo and even deviant, such opportunities never came into fruition.

The gay–straight alliance: the limitations of LGBT student organizations for gay Asian Americans

Although there are many high school and college LGBT organizations on campuses across the country, many respondents found the organizations to be inaccessible or out of touch with what their needs were. At the high school level, respondents found GSAs to be limited in their racial/ethnic makeup, while others felt the organizations were too political or disorganized. One respondent stated, ‘Yeah, my high school had a GSA, but they didn’t do anything and I didn’t feel any connection with whoever else was there.’ Other respondents were reluctant to join these organizations because they saw them as open targets for discrimination. Andrew, for example, grew up in a small conservative community. When students from his high school decided to start a GSA organization, the community fought back. He said, ‘Right after they started a gay–straight alliance, there were a bunch of people in the community who came out and protested the GSA on religious grounds, saying it was promoting a sin or sex club on campus.’ These protests affected Andrew’s coming out experience and caused him to regret his actions. He goes on to say that, ‘After this all happened, I started to retreat a little.’ In realizing that it wasn’t ‘okay’ to be gay in his neighborhood, Andrew decided to suppress his gay identity and focus on his academics and martial arts. It was clear to him that coming out was a mistake. Likewise, other students who witnessed the GSA’s struggles also felt unmotivated to come out. When discussing how others reacted towards the situation, Andrew recalled, ‘There was this one guy who told me he’d rather die alone and sad than come out of the closet after he saw what the GSA went through.’ Here, the very establishment of a GSA brought a hostile environment to Andrew’s campus and forced LGBT students back into hiding. Although the GSA had good intentions, Andrew felt that their intentions backfired.

When discussing their lack of interest in joining GSAs, some respondents also explained how their campus organizations were ‘unorganized,’ ‘too political,’ or ‘lacked diversity.’ For some, a clear mission and agenda was missing from their GSA, causing it to eventually transition into a high school clique. Joe, a 22-year-old Taiwanese American college senior at UC Berkeley, described the cliquishness of the GSA that he belonged to:

I have no idea what we did during our GSA meetings. I don’t think we really did anything. It was easy. I’d just hang out with the same people each day. There were six of us, me and five guys who identified as straight or bisexual.

Although Joe’s experience with the GSA may have supported his identity as a bisexual, his remarks demonstrated how the organization was little more than a collection of friends with an official name attached to their group. They did not sponsor organized events or activities, as he had wished, but he did admit that it provided a safe space to explore his sexuality. Nonetheless, Joe felt a conflict that being part of the GSA would somehow cancel out his identity as a model student in his high school. In part due to the lack of success of his high school GSA, Joe felt minimal motivation to partake in any of the LGBT organizations at his college.

In contrast to Joe’s experiences, other respondents found their GSAs to be too political. They simply wanted a safe space on campus to socialize and feel accepted; they had no interest in being activists for the gay community. Moreover, when GSAs became too politicized, access to joining the organization became limited to a specific type of student. Gary, a 30-year-old Filipino American pharmaceutical researcher, attended a high school that he characterized as safe for openly gay students. The school had a politically active GSA that started a respected anti-gay bullying program with regular events on campus. Student harassment and safety, however, were not prominent in Gary’s list of concerns as he felt that his more gender normative presentation allowed him to evade the bullying behaviors more common among feminine gay classmates. At the top of his list was his need to feel normal and accepted by his classmates and friends.

Q: Were there many people in your high school who were gay and out?
 Gary: Yeah, there were but I didn’t hang with them. They were the typical ones – mostly gay stereotypical white guys and lots of lesbians. You only knew of them because they were part of that activist LGBT club.

Based on Gary’s comments, it is clear that he did not feel comfortable with the GSA’s mission, and did not appreciate the organization’s absence of diversity. Additionally, his comments echoed those of other respondents who reflected on their college experiences with LGBT organizations on University campuses. For example, Allen, a 28-year-old Taiwanese

American, tested several different LGBT organizations at UC Berkeley and couldn't relate to any of them:

I joined a lot of LGBT orgs on campus, but I found them to be a lot more political than I was hoping for. It's hard for me to describe, but it's like that radical, queer political bent that I think a lot of people, especially around Berkeley, have. I'm not saying they're wrong, but to me they're just angry. It wasn't the community I was looking for.

Respondents like Gary and Allen, who were in their early stages of coming out, did not want to be activists or create political movements on their campuses, they only wanted a network of friends they could identify and 'be normal' with.

Building symbolic capital

Education as conscious strategy

For many of our respondents, academic achievement played a central role in how they framed their identity to their parents. Respondents used their grades to distract their parents from the pressures of living a heteronormative lifestyle. When reflecting on his parents relaxed parenting style, Nathan, a 32-year-old Laotian American marketing employee, stated, 'As long as I got good grades, my parents let me do whatever I wanted to.' His grades, in turn, distracted his parents from questioning his sexual orientation. This continued throughout his college years, and because of it Nathan never felt the need to officially come out to them, even though he felt they suspected it. When reflecting on the relationship with his parents, Nathan stated: 'When my dad was alive, he would always defend me to his friends. He'd be like, "Oh yeah, we're just going to get him a mail order bride in Laos. He's busy focusing on school and work."' But I think my dad knew. He would never ask me who I'm dating.' Through earning good grades, Nathan was able to escape the difficult experience of coming out to his parents, and in doing so was able to evade any feelings of disappointment that may have surfaced if his sexuality was discussed.

The process of using education as a distraction was also a strategy employed by gay Asian Americans whose parents found out about their sexuality and disapproved of it. To protect themselves from the constant criticism of their lifestyle, respondents rechanneled their parents' attention to their academic achievements. When asked how his parents felt about gay people, Peter noted, 'Whenever there was a gay guy portrayed on TV, they would be disgusted. And whenever there was family gossip that someone might be gay, it was immediately like, "Gross".' When his parents began to suspect that he was gay, Peter denied it, and instead excelled in school as a way to distract them.

- Q: What do you think being gay meant to your parents?
- P: Being gay is the worst thing possible. It's like they made a gay son. It's horrible. It's going to get in the way of school. It's going to get in the way of your social life. It's going to get in the way of how people think about you. It's going to get in the way of everything. It's going to get in the way of how other people think about them because they raised a fag, right? So it was a big concern for them. But once all the good grades started rolling in, and all the awards started rolling in, they were saying, 'Look, he's potentially gay and he has hung out with these guys that we suspect are gay. But all this stuff is coming in.' It worked against any negative thoughts they had about me. They were happy with the awards, every trophy, every plaque, everything.

Peter went on to explain that because of his academic achievements, 'things were awkward but not hard.' For him, parental acceptance was like playing a game of chess – he had to strategize his actions, predict his parents' every move, and make sure that every interaction was well thought out. For the most part, his parents left him alone, but the lack of acceptance nonetheless damaged his self-esteem and sense of identity.

Education also provided opportunities for gay Asian Americans to literally escape the social communities in which they felt pressured to be straight. In his hometown of Stockton, Jeremy attended a school where 'everyone knew everyone.' There he felt compelled to act overtly masculine, cover up any feminine behaviors, and maintain a serious girlfriend. His only outlet for his sexuality was to develop virtual friendships with other gay men (mostly Asian Americans) online and watch gay pornography on his home computer. Never considering himself more than an average student, Jeremy saw his schooling as a potential social and financial outlet, and eventually committed to becoming a nurse so he could move to Los Angeles. He told his girlfriend that school was the reason he had to break up with her: 'It's not working out. I want to go to Cal State Fullerton (in Southern California) to find myself. It's not you, it's me.' During the interview, Jeremy's face lit up as he described his first year living away from the Bay Area:

It was very, very liberating! I think that's one of the reasons why I chose Cal State Fullerton. It wasn't just because of the nursing program. It was just to finally start acting like myself. It was fun! I loved it! I would get drunk, go to Rage, and luckily I had friends who would take care of me. They were already out [of the closet], and they would take care of me when I got really wasted. A total 180 from life in Stockton! I loved moving down to Fullerton. I loved being able to be me.

Interestingly, Jeremy came to excel in his nursing program when in his high school and early community college years he would earn relatively poor to average grades. Moreover, school provided him a new social environment

where expectations to be straight did not exist. He had no long-term family or friends who knew him as ‘straight,’ which in turn gave him the opportunity to develop meaningful gay friendships, become involved in his first serious romantic relationship, and ultimately live an openly gay lifestyle without the stress of surveillancing his everyday behaviors.

For some respondents, the ability to utilize education as a conscious strategy depended on the racial demographics of the school context. Pressured by the model minority framework, several of the East Asian respondents felt that their parents, teachers, and social networks held unreasonably high academic expectations that prevented them from even exploring sexuality. Peer acceptance was discussed as being important in their lives, and many worried about rejection due to their sexuality. With that, many respondents felt pressured to place academics at the forefront of their identity as a means to distract themselves, and others, from their feelings towards the same sex.

Martin’s story illustrated this relationship between sexual identity, academic achievement, and social acceptance quite well. Due to the nature of his parents’ work, Martin’s family was very transient while growing up, causing him to attend three different high schools. Each school was located in a neighborhood with contrasting racial demographics, with his first school having the fewest Asian Americans and each consecutive high school increasing in population. As a result of this, making friends was challenging for Martin, forcing him to assimilate at each campus even if he didn’t appreciate the group norms. When comparing the schools, Martin felt that his first high school (with fewer Asians) was ‘easy’, but when he switched to the second school with more Asians he stated, ‘This school was much more challenging. It was like 80% Asian. It sounds terrible to say but the highly populated school of Asians is really competitive.’ With a new competitive campus culture and an overwhelming need to be accepted by his peers, Martin had to ramp up his study habits and work harder. Fitting in was key, and being gay was secondary, so he had to adjust. Moreover, his motivation to do well in school was fueled more by his need to feel validated by his peers rather than his desire to maintain a high grade point average.

The insecure feelings of acceptance Martin experienced with his friends echoed that of other respondents who discussed the academic expectations of East Asian Americans and its relation to sexual identity. Evan, a 29-year-old Korean American scientist, felt he had to live a double life in high school because he struggled with his sexual identity, while at the same time, felt compelled to excel in school.

Q: What were your friends like in high school? Were any gay?

E: No, there weren’t any gay people at my high school. At the time, I felt like I was the only one. I felt like I had to do this gay thing on

the side and I lied a lot. Like I was this normal kid hanging out with his cool friends, living this normal life. All my friends were smart and I had to keep up. By junior year I was in five or six AP classes. It's not that I'm so smart, to be really honest, I think in hindsight it's just what was expected of me. It wasn't something that I wanted to do. I got there by example. Everyone seemed to be doing it, so I had to. But then there was this other side of me that just wanted to go home and look at gay porn or find gay people to talk to online.

It wasn't until he went to Boston University, 3000 miles from his hometown that Evan felt he could openly explore his sexual identity, and when thinking back to his high school experiences he felt ashamed to have lied so often to his friends. Additionally, he felt that studying and high grades provided access to certain East Asian friendship networks, and that by playing the stereotypical Asian role he would be 'normal.'

Discussion and conclusion

Although recent coverage of LGBT youth related bullying and suicide has uncovered the heteronormative school settings that exist in K-12 and post-secondary schools, less attention has been paid towards the way in which racialized school settings affect LGBT youth of color. This is problematic for gay males of color since many of these students become marginalized based on their racial and sexual identity. This is especially the case for gay Asian American males, who are challenged with developing their sexual identity while also grappling with the negative effects associated with the model minority stereotype. At the K-12 level, there has been extensive research on the ethnic identity of Asian American students, and an equal degree of research relating to LGBT identity development. However, sexual identity complicates the educational experiences of Asian American students, and research that examines the way in which these two variables interact is overlooked. Due to this, our study examined how sexual identity affects gay Asian American men within the context of school settings and academic pressures.

Among LGBT students, K-12 and post-secondary schools are hostile environments for individuals who might deviate from their gender norms. Within this context, bullying, gay micro-aggressions, and discrimination that devalue and stigmatize gay individuals are common. In an effort to confront the hostile school environments, many schools have supported student-run organizations that support their LGBT student body. The organizations, GSAs or LGBT resource centers on college campuses, are meant to provide safe spaces for gay students. However, several respondents in our study felt that the GSAs lacked diversity or were too cliquish, thus limiting their access to the organization's support features. The limited access to the GSA, coupled with the hostile environment LGBT students of color must

live in, prevents gay Asian men from exploring their sexual identity, and instead forces them to focus on their academics and masculinity in order to develop secure relationships. Our findings revealed that some gay Asian American men negotiated their identity by suppressing their sexuality while using academics as a scapegoat. For example, some respondents felt validated when they lived up to model minority expectations by excelling in honors classes and earning good grades, while others used academics to fit within the norms of their social networks.

So what do these findings mean for educators? On a practical level, our findings help inform the pedagogical strategies of educational practitioners. In K-12 schools, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel, are accustomed to learning how to work with their gay, lesbian, and bisexual student population from theoretical frameworks anchored on the experiences of white gay youth. By exploring the interaction between race and sexuality of Asian American students, we point out that LGBT student identity is complex for gay students of color. On a school climate level, Asian American student identity needs to be discussed among educational practitioners through professional development programs or teacher education courses so that they are more mindful of their complex identities. Additionally, school sponsored organizations like GSAs and LGBT resource centers also need to be mindful of the complex identities secured by gay students of color and must make purposeful efforts to support their unique needs, such as how to account for the interplay between immigrant families and gay communities. In the K-12 classroom specifically, teachers must develop positive dispositions towards their gay student population and be more inclusive of minority gay role models, characters, and leaders in their curriculums while also creating environments that are free of bullying, stereotyping, or discrimination. Teachers must be proactive in taking a stance that supports LGBT identity, and this position must be communicated with parents, school personnel, local communities, and the Asian American community at large. Finally, given how studies of LGBT students in the US context often provide a model for educators for Canada, the UK, and Australia, this study can help inform policies that can better address the needs of sexual minority students of color (e.g., aboriginal, immigrant), who tend to have less access to social support in schools than their white counterparts (Taylor and Peter 2011).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Cal Poly Pomona and California State University-Stanislaus for their funding assistance with this project. We are also grateful to Armand Gutierrez and Gabriel Sanchez for their research assistance throughout difference phases of this study. This article also benefited from feedback received during the annual meetings of the Pacific Sociological Association, Association of Asian American Studies, as well as presentations of the work at Stanford University, Cal Poly Pomona, and Sacramento State University.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. All of the names of participants and organizations in this article are pseudonyms.

References

- Akerlund, M., and M. Cheung. 2002. "Teaching beyond the Deficit Model: Gay and Lesbian Issues among African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans." *Journal of Social Work Education* 36 (2): 279–292.
- Association American Educational Research. 2013. *Prevention of Bullying in Schools, Colleges, and Universities: Research Report and Recommendations*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Budach, Gabriele. 2012. "Part of the Puzzle: The Retrospective Interview as Reflexive Practice in Ethnographic Collaborative Research." In *Multilingualism, Discourse, and Ethnography*, edited by S. Gardner and M. Martin-Jones, 319–333. Abingdon, GB: Routledge.
- Diamond, L., and R. Savin-Williams. 2009. "Adolescent Sexuality." In *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, edited by R. Lerner and L. Steinberg, 429–523. New York: Wiley.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. 1992. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Garcia-Alonso, Pedro. 2004. "From Surviving to Thriving: An Investigation of the Utility of Support Groups Designed to Address the Special Needs of Sexual Minority Youth in Public High Schools." PhD diss. Loyola University.
- Goodenow, C., L. Szalacha, and K. Westheimer. 2006. "School Support Groups, Other School Factors, and the Safety of Sexual Minority Adolescents." *Psychology in the Schools* 43 (5): 573–589.
- Hahm, H., and C. Adkins. 2009. "A Model of Asian and Pacific Islander Sexual Minority Acculturation." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 6 (2–3): 155–173.
- Hom, A. 2009. "Stores from the Home Front: Perspectives of Asian American Parents with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons." In *Contemporary Asian America*, edited by M. Zhou and J. Gatewood, 303–313. New York: NYU Press.
- Jackson, John. 2003. *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kosciw, Joseph, Emily Greytak, Mark Bartkiewicz, Madelyn Boesen, and Neal Palmer. 2012. *The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools*. New York: GLSEN.
- Lee, S. 2004. "Class Matters: Racial and Ethnic Identities of Working Class and Middle Class Korean Americans." In *Becoming New Yorkers*, edited by P. Kasinitz, J. Mollenkopf and M. Waters, 313–338. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Manalansan, Martin. 2003. *Global Divas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Meyer, E., and D. Stader. 2009. "Queer Youth and the Culture Wars." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 6 (2–3): 135–154.
- Ng, J., S. Lee, and Y. Pak. 2007. "Contesting the Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner Stereotypes." *Review of Research in Education* 31 (1): 95–130.

- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Pascoe, C. J. 2007. *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Polanin, J., D. Espelage, and T. Pigott. 2012. "A Meta-analysis of School-based Bullying Prevention Programs' Effects on Bystander Intervention Behavior and Empathy Attitude." *School Psychology Review* 41: 47–65.
- Pritchard, Eric. 2013. "For Colored Kids Who Committed Suicide, our Outrage isn't Enough: Queer Youth of Color, Bullying, and the Discursive Limits of Identity and Safety." *Harvard Educational Review* 83 (2): 320–345.
- Schneider, B., and Y. Lee. 1990. "A Model for Academic Success." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 21 (4): 358–377.
- Seidman, Steven. 2003. *The Social Construction of Sexuality*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Shih, M., T. Pittinsky, and G. Ho. 2011. Stereotype Boost: Positive Outcomes from the Activation of Positive Stereotypes. In *Stereotype Threat*, ed. M. Inzlicht and T. Schmader, 141–158. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, C., and T. Peter. 2011. *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools. Final Report*. Toronto, ON: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust.
- Teranishi, R. 2002. "Asian Pacific Americans and Critical Race Theory." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 35 (2): 144–154.
- Walls, N. Eugene, Stacey Freedenthal, and Hope Wisneski. 2008. "Suicidal Ideation and Attempts among Sexual Minority Youths Receiving Social Services." *Social Work* 53 (1): 21–29.
- Walls, E., S. Kane, and H. Wisneski. 2010. "Gay-straight Alliances and School Experiences of Sexual Minority Youth." *Youth & Society* 41 (3): 307–332.
- Warwick, I., P. Aggleton, and N. Douglas. 2001. "Playing It Safe: Addressing the Emotional and Physical Health of Lesbian and Gay Pupils in the U.K." *Journal of Adolescence* 24: 129–140.
- West, C., and D. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1 (2): 125–151.
- Zhou, Min. 2009. *Contemporary Chinese America*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.