

“What we're fighting for is the same”: Grounded theory of Asian American activists’ racial and
activist identity development while fighting anti-Black racism

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Abstract

The events following the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the death of George Floyd highlighted the complicated relationship between Asian and Black Americans and the necessity of cross-racial solidarity amongst these groups. Further research is needed to investigate how Asian American navigate their racialized experiences to fight against anti-Black racism. The current study investigates the process of becoming an activist fighting anti-Black racism with a sample of East and Southeast Asian Americans. By exploring the critical incidents and narratives of Asian American activists, this qualitative study aimed to examine how racial identity development influences the development of an activist identity. Using critical constructivist grounded theory (Levitt, 2021), this study explored the experiences of 13 East and Southeast Asian American activists through timeline activities and semi-structured interviews. Findings from the study revealed that Asian American activists fighting anti-Black racism navigate six stages throughout their racial and activist identity development. These six stages are marked by the following six categories: (1) erasure of Asian and Black experiences (2) exposure to anti-Asian and anti-Black racism, (3) deepening understanding of racism through education, (4) critical reflection of racialized experiences, (5) witnessing effective cross-racial solidarity, and (6) developing a collective path towards liberation for Asian and Black communities. These six stages reflect the core category that Asian American activists engage in activism at different points in their life, based on the negotiation of their racial identity among contextual factors. Findings from this study highlight the complexities of engaging in social change work for other racial minority groups while navigating unique challenges associated with one's own minority group. Implications for research, clinical work, advocacy, and directions for future scholarship will be discussed.

Keywords: Asian American, activism, anti-Black racism, grounded theory

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Chapter One

Introduction

Rationale and Significance

In 2020, the simultaneous occurrence of George Floyd's death and the protests that erupted afterwards and the increasing xenophobia against Asian people in America during the COVID-19 pandemic represents a moment in history where the racial injustice of both Asian and Black Americans was revealed (Ho, 2021; Yellow Horse et al., 2021). The murders of individuals from Black communities and the urgent response to protests during a global pandemic highlighted the pervasive nature of anti-Black racism (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). The increase of hate crimes against Asian Americans and scapegoating that blamed Asian Americans for the creation of COVID-19 also depicted Asian Americans as targets of racism, despite the popular belief that Asian Americans are protected through their perceived proximity to whiteness (Li & Nicholson, 2021). These parallel experiences emphasized how structural racism, or the system of institutions, policies, and cultural and social norms that interact to uphold white supremacy and produce enduring, negative outcomes for racially marginalized groups, deeply impacts both Asian and Black communities (Bailey et al., 2021).

During 2020, many Asian Americans engaged in protests and rallies to fight against both anti-Asian and anti-Black racism (Kim & Lee, 2023). However, this period also brought attention to the complex relationship between Asian and Black Americans, following news that a Hmong American police officer, Tou Thao, was a bystander in the death of George Floyd (Litam & Chan, 2021). The events of this time revealed that Asian Americans experience racism yet also remain complicit in systems of oppression that perpetuate anti-Black racism and uphold white supremacy. The year 2020 served as an opportunity for Asian Americans to reflect on their

positioning with the United States' racial landscape and how it shapes solidarity with other communities of color, including Black American communities.

Asian American Racial Triangulation

Literature on Asian American racial identity in the United States suggests that Asian Americans hold a unique position in the racial landscape, often described as “middlemen,” “honorary Whites” or “model minorities” (Hartlep & Hayes, 2013, p. 123). This is reflected in Kim’s (1999) racial triangulation theory, where she proposed that Asian, Black, and White racial groups in the United States are positioned along two axes - superior/inferior and insider/foreigner statuses. The superior/inferior axis is used to indicate the level of privilege and status a racial group has, where White Americans have typically been seen as the superior group and Black Americans as an inferior racial group. The insider/foreigner status axis is used to reflect whether a racial group has been accepted as American or viewed as an alien or foreigner. Across these dimensions, Asian Americans experience “relative valorization” on the superiority dimension compared to Black Americans and “civic ostracism” on the insider status dimension (p. 107). This racializes Asian Americans to be viewed as superior to Black Americans and inferior to White Americans, while also being unable to experience the privileges of citizenship and civic engagement that Black and White Americans do (Kim, 1999). This contributes to the complex racial sphere that Asian Americans navigate, as they experience a form of privilege through their relative valorization, while still experiencing racism and discrimination through civic ostracism. Because of the contradictory roles of relative valorization and civic ostracism, it is crucial to understand how Asian Americans navigate their racially triangulated identity to support or oppose interracial solidarity and activism with Black Americans.

Throughout history, the relative valorization of Asian Americans has been used to undermine Black-led political movements by centering the role of individual/cultural values, rather than systemic injustice, in maintaining the racial order (Jung, 2006; Suzuki, 1977; Cho, 2021). For example, when Asian laborers arrived in the 19th century as a new labor source after the emancipation of Black slaves, they were described as being more docile and intelligent than Black slaves (Jung, 2005). This new labor source was used to undermine the demands of recently freed Black slaves, suggesting that Black laborers were easily replaced by less radical and more intelligent Chinese laborers (Jung, 2006; Yu, 2022). In 1966, the term “model minority” first cropped up to describe Chinese and Japanese Americans as being capable of achieving economic success by using their cultural values to peacefully navigate the United States economic system. Asian American groups were being compared to Black Americans who advocated for better living conditions through protests in the Watts Riots of 1965, suggesting that success could be achieved without involvement in political action (Suzuki, 1977; Cho, 2021). The term “model minority” came into existence at a time where racial tension between Black and White communities were high (Chou & Feagin, 2015). This reveals the ability of dominant media to deflect from real racial inequity between those in the White dominant group and those in the Black minority group by focusing on differences between two racial minority groups (Chou & Feagin, 2015). The model minority stereotype has become one of the most recognizable forms of relative valorization experienced by Asian Americans (Yoo et al., 2010).

To better understand the model minority myth’s impact on Asian Americans’ role in racial justice movements, recent research has examined the internalization of the model minority myth and its impact on racial attitudes, support for other communities of color, and political action (Le et al., 2024; Ouch & Moradi, 2022; Yi & Todd, 2021). The internalization of the

model minority myth has been used to describe the extent to which Asian Americans take on the beliefs of the dominant society, including beliefs that Asian Americans achieve success through hard work, and they are treated fairly without racism (Yoo et al., 2010). Researchers found that those who internalize model minority beliefs were less likely to support collective action for other communities of color (Ouch & Moradi, 2022), endorsed lower interracial solidarity (Yoon et al., 2023), and were more likely to oppose affirmative action for Black Americans (Yi & Todd, 2021). Furthermore, internalized model minority myth beliefs are also associated with greater anti-Black attitudes (Le et al., 2024; Yi & Todd, 2021) and lower support for Black liberation (Matriano et al., 2021). Internalized model minority beliefs also inhibited inclusion and identification with the BIPOC label, which was negatively linked to lack of activism for Black communities (Lieng et al., 2024). These results suggest that, when Asian Americans internalize beliefs about their relative valorization compared to Black Americans, it weakens cross-racial solidarity and activism while perpetuating anti-Black racism.

While perceived as successful, Asian Americans are still targets of racism due their position as a civically ostracized group (Kim, 1999). Asian Americans are also often viewed through the perpetual foreigner stereotype, positing that Asian Americans will never be able to take on an American identity due to their distinct cultural values, regardless of nativity or immigration status (Huynh et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2023). The view of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners has led to racism and violence against them throughout history, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Japanese internment camps, and other forms of systemic exclusion (Young et al., 2022). In 2020, the spread of COVID-19 and the increase of hate crimes against Asian Americans served as another example of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia (Gover et al., 2020). There are mixed results about how Asian American experiences of discrimination

may shift one's political attitudes related to Black Americans. Researchers have found that experiencing or perceiving racism against Asians can increase positive attitudes, feelings of similarity or closeness with Black American, and support for BLM (Chen & Chan, 2025; Craig & Richeson, 2012). However, researchers have also found that experiences of discrimination do not necessarily predict more political commonality with Black Americans (Nicholson et al., 2020) or contribute to support for Black Lives Matter (Merseeth, 2018). These mixed results suggest that there may be other factors, beyond discrimination, that contribute to Asian American political attitudes and actions supporting Black Americans. Researchers found that perceiving higher occurrences of anti-Asian discrimination were related to higher linked fate beliefs, or the idea that one is a part of a larger group of racially minoritized groups (Chen & Chan, 2025). Expanding on this, Lieng et al. (2024) found that those who experienced anti-Asian discrimination were more likely to feel included in and identify as BIPOC, resulting in increased collective action for Black communities. Similarly, linked fate was shown to predict support for BLM and political activity that challenged systems of oppression (Chan & Jasso, 2021; Merseeth, 2018). While Asian Americans experience discrimination and racism, it may be necessary for them to recognize how their experiences of discrimination connect to larger themes of oppression for other Communities of Color in order to engage in collective action.

Racial Identity Development and Activism

Throughout this research project, the term *racial identity* will be used to describe one's perceptions of self and others, given their membership within a particular racial group that is influenced by societal perception, stereotypes, and systems of power (Helms, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1999). As such, racial identity development is a process that is impacted by the differential racialization in the United States, making the identity development process of one racial group

distinct from another (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Within racial identity development models for People of Color, there is an acknowledgement that White racial identity is seen as the superior, dominant identity in society, whereas other racial identities are seen as inferior, marginalized identities (Sue & Sue, 2015). Because POC are often subject to societal messages that the White racial group is superior, they often experience internalized racism, referring to the process by which people in marginalized racial groups will come to believe racist messages about their own racial group (Pyke, 2010). Examples include believing one's racial group is inferior, believing racist stereotypes, and striving to meet White standards of living (Pyke, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2015). While the identity development process may differ across racial groups, Helms (1995) argues that a main theme for racial identity development for POC involves recognizing and overcoming internalized racism to express a positive racial self-concept. Early racial identity development models focused specifically on the development of a Black identity, but more recent models have since expanded to examine racial identity for other racially minoritized groups or People of Color more broadly (Sue & Sue, 2015).

Two racial identity development models that focus on the experiences of People of Color include Helms' (1995) People of Color identity development model and Atkinson et al.'s (1998) racial/cultural identity development (R/CID) model. Both racial identity development models depict a similar pattern of development, which include: conforming to the dominant White racial group's culture, recognizing the oppression faced by marginalized racial groups, rejecting the dominant White racial group, learning more about one's own racial group, and developing respect for one's own and other racial groups. Even racial identity development models specific for Asian Americans, including Kim's (1981) Asian American identity development and Nadal's (2004) Pilipino American racial identity development model, follow a similar developmental

trajectory. While Kim's (1981) study was limited to a Japanese American women sample and Nadal's (2004) study was limited to a Pilipino American sample, they both identified that racial identity development begins with an orientation toward one's own ethnic identity, but individuals move toward a desire to identify with the dominant identity and culture as they interact with and engage in society. As they are exposed to experiences of discrimination and develop political awareness, they learn more about and grow appreciation for their own racial identity and can respect other racial/cultural groups. The main distinction of Asian American identity development models is the inclusion of their orientation toward their ethnic identity. The Pilipino American identity development model also expanded on the Asian American identity development model to provide context about the impact of colonization on Pilipino Americans, as well as account for their experiences of being marginalized in the Asian American community (Nadal, 2004). These developmental models are useful in helping researchers identify how members of racially minoritized groups experience internalized racism and how they navigate racial experiences to develop a positive view of self and other racial groups.

Racial identity development models have some implications for activism, as the last stage of the racial identity development model (called incorporation/integrative awareness) emphasizes that individuals reach a security in their own racial identity and may develop a commitment to fighting for social justice for their own and other oppressed groups (Atkinson et al., 1998; Helms, 1995; Nadal, 2004). Based on the racial identity development models, experiences with discrimination, education, and navigating internal conflict are all precursors that lead them to the last developmental stage. When thinking about activism for one's own racial minority group, researchers have found that Asian Americans who experience discrimination have a greater awareness of racism, which ultimately increases engagement in own-group activism (Chang et

al., 2023; Jun et al, 2024; Tran & Curtin, 2017). Specifically, Chang et al. (2023) found that discrimination leads to psychological distress, which then increases awareness and motivation to resist racism. Additionally, Tran and Curtin (2017) argue that discrimination may be enough to prompt engagement in activism, even if they do not have the structural knowledge of racism. The current literature reflects how understanding one's own experiences with racism and developing awareness of anti-Asian racism can promote engagement in activism. A critique of current racial identity development models is that the stages tend to focus on individuals' perceptions of self, their racial identity, and the dominant racial group, which may promote activism fighting anti-Asian racism, but not necessarily anti-Black racism (Kim & Lee, 2023).

While other racially minoritized groups are not explicitly discussed when thinking about how Asian Americans develop in their racial identity, Nadal (2004) and Atkinson et al. (1998) do describe how different stages also impact their attitudes toward other racial minority groups. As individuals move from early to later stages of their racial identity development, they move from discriminatory to positive perceptions of other racial minority groups. As Asian Americans experience discrimination, meet people who do not adhere to racial stereotypes, and learn new information, they begin to question their own belief that it is possible to distance themselves from their racial identity (Sue & Sue, 2015). These experiences lead them to become increasingly curious about the oppression experienced by other racial minority groups and eventually facilitates the development of support for all oppressed groups. A growing body of literature has examined how Asian Americans make sense of their connection to other Communities of Color. Researchers have found that, when Asian Americans develop a recognition of their shared experiences of oppression with other Communities of Color, they are more willing to engage in action to challenge oppression (Kim et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2023;

Litam & Chan, 2021; Merseth, 2018; Saavedra & Yoo, 2021). While these studies highlight the value of thinking beyond one's own racial identity group to engage in action for other Communities of Color, this process is not reflected in current racial identity development models, as they rarely discuss how Asian Americans come to understand their own racial identity in relation to other racial minority groups.

A major limitation inherent in current racial identity development models is that they do not consider the relationships between BIPOC groups in this process. For Asian Americans, framing their racial identity development solely in relation to the dominant group overlooks a key part of their racialized experience, which is that they are a racially triangulated group in the United States. The existing models and studies primarily view discrimination and shared oppressed identities as factors that move individuals toward activism fighting anti-Black racism, but do not examine how Asian Americans' position of privilege through relative valorization may make it more or less challenging to engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism. For example, Asian Americans have identified that the model minority myth often minimized their experiences of racism and discrimination, making it more difficult for Asian American concerns to feel like they are represented or taken seriously in racial justice movements, potentially making it more difficult to engage in cross-racial solidarity (Museus, 2022; Wang & Santos, 2023). However, Lin (2020) described how acknowledging one's relatively valorized racial positioning may prompt more nuanced discussions about solidarity between Asian Americans and other Communities of Color. Mistry and Kiyama (2021) describe the importance of grounding the Asian American developmental processes within a social context where racial stratification does occur by considering how Asian Americans are subjected to dominant narratives like the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes.

Shared History of Asian-Black Activism

Due to the racially triangulated positioning of Asian Americans, they have often been viewed as a population that is uninvolved in politics, racial justice movements, and activism (Yellow Horse et al., 2021; Yi & Todd, 2024). Additionally, dominant narratives about the relationship between Asian and Black communities often describes the interest of Asian American communities as conflicting with Black American interests (Lee et al., 2020) and frame Asian Americans as perpetrators of anti-Black racism (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). However, the rich history of solidarity between Asian and Black American communities suggest that their relationships are more nuanced than what is typically known (Ho, 2021; Litam & Chan, 2021)

Throughout history, we see examples of Asian and Black communities working together to achieve their shared goals (Chung, 2001; Fujino, 2024; Kim, 2020). In the 1960s, the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) supported the Black Panther Party, emphasizing the importance of supporting the liberation of all oppressed people (Fujino, 2024). The AAPA was also involved with the Third World Liberation Front, which was comprised of three other organizations centering the experiences of Black, Native, and Chicano students (Fujino, 2024). Through strikes on college campuses, the Third World Liberation Front aided in the development of ethnic studies programs at the University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University. In 1967, Japanese and Black American community members in San Francisco developed an organization advocating for fair and affordable housing options (Kim, 2020). After the Los Angeles riots of 1992, Korean and Black communities came together to develop community policing programs to increase safety and prevent crime in two inner city neighborhoods (Chung, 2001). Additionally, Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs are two well-known Asian American female activists who worked alongside Black leaders and

communities to fight for social justice (Chang, 2020; Onishi & Chen, 2017). While this is not an exhaustive list of Asian-Black solidarity throughout history, it illustrates some examples of how Asian-Black relationships have been built out of close proximity and a mutual desire to service minoritized communities.

In more recent times, Asian Americans have also shown support for Black liberation movements, like Black Lives Matter (Leroy, 2017). One example of this includes Letters for Black Lives, an organization created in 2016 where Asian Americans wrote letters to their community to express support for and spread the message of the Black Lives Matter movement (Arora & Stout, 2019; Leroy, 2017). Studies coming out during this time aimed to examine factors that led to Asian American support of Black Lives Matter, including exposure to state-sanctioned violence (Hope, 2019), perceptions of discrimination and beliefs about how one's own interests are tied with other BIPOC (Merseeth, 2018), and witnessing support of BLM from others (Arora & Stout, 2019). Scholars put out a call to action to approach conversations about Asian-Black solidarity with a critical lens that examines the role of white supremacy in maintaining injustice (Leroy, 2017; Tran et al., 2018).

In 2020, the rise of anti-Asian racism and the continued violence against Black Americans with the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked a racial reckoning (Anand & Hsu, 2020; Gonzalez, 2022). This racial reckoning allowed society to identify the prevalence of racism for racially minoritized communities, the role of white supremacy in perpetuating violence, and that issues experienced by Asian and Black communities were connected (Anand & Hsu, 2020; Gonzalez, 2022). Additionally, it brought to light the complex relationship between Asian and Black Americans, particularly with Tou Thao's (a Hmong American) role in the death of George Floyd (Litam & Chan, 2021). This sparked conversation

about Asian American's proximity to whiteness, while still being a racial minority group that experiences racism and has historically shown support for Black communities (Litam & Chan, 2021). Recent scholarship, since 2020, has brought an increased focus on how the racial triangulation of Asian Americans, as both model minorities and perpetual foreigners, can impact the development of support for Black communities and engagement with Black justice movements (Lieng et al., 2024, Litam & Chan, 2021; Matriano et al., 2021; Yellow Horse et al., 2021). These studies provide insight on how personal experiences of Asian Americans can facilitate or bar support and engagement in fighting anti-Black racism. However, it also highlights some of the limitations of the current literature. To our knowledge, Litam & Chan (2021) is the only published qualitative study that identifies the process of developing solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement with an Asian American sample. They interviewed 25 Asian Americans who were engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement to gain a better understanding of how Asian Americans move toward thick solidarity, which involves recognizing the shared struggle of minoritized communities without equating their distinct racialized experiences as being the same (Litam & Chan, 2021). The results provide meaningful insight about how events, contextual factors, actions, and intervening conditions can aid or impede action toward thick solidarity. In particular, the study highlighted that the development of a collective oppressed identity was crucial for engaging in action. However, given the focus of the study on events occurring during 2020 and specifically looking at support for Black Lives Matter, the study provides limited insight on other events that prompt engagement in activism and alternative forms of activism amongst Asian Americans. Thus, additional research is needed to examine the experiences of Asian American activists.

Current Study

As identified in the literature review, the current body of literature does not sufficiently examine how Asian American racialized experiences influence their understanding of racism and commitment to racial justice. Additionally, current developmental models fail to account for the relational nature of racialization, providing limited information on how Asian Americans navigate and understand their connection to Black Americans. In the current study, we sought to gain an understanding of the developmental processes Asian American activists go through to develop in their racial and activist identities while working to fight anti-Black racism. Our primary research questions were:

1. What is the process by which Asian American activists develop their activist identities?
2. How is their activist identity development influenced by their racial identity development?
3. What are critical incidents in Asian American activists' lives that drive them toward action fighting against anti-Black racism?

Through this study, we aimed to identify ways that Asian Americans understand their racially triangulated identity, make meaning of their personal experiences, and navigate tensions between Asian and Black communities to move toward activism fighting against anti-Black racism. Results contributed to our understanding of the sociocultural and psychological processes that influence Asian American activism. Results helped us identify strategies for researchers, clinicians, and social justice advocates to better support Asian American activists while navigating challenges associated with racial and activist identity development. Additionally, it

helped identify means of challenging systemic oppression through the growth of effective cross-racial coalitions between Asian and Black Americans.

Critical Race Theory & Asian Critical Theory

Critical race theory (CRT; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) is a theoretical framework that has shaped the current study. CRT was developed by a group of activists and individuals from the legal profession to examine the relationship between systems of power, race, and racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Additionally, CRT is used as a tool for activism, as it works to understand how to challenge current systems of power and oppression (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). The basic tenets of CRT include beliefs that racism is pervasive in the systems and institutions we occupy, race is socially constructed, and racially minoritized groups are racialized differently throughout history to serve the needs of the labor market (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). The tenets of CRT are used within this study to examine the role of systemic racism and differential racialization in marginalizing BIPOC communities.

Asian critical theory (AsianCrit) is a subset of critical race theory that was created to highlight the histories, experiences, and issues within Asian American communities (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). By modifying the tenets of CRT to reflect the Asian American experience, scholars hope this will promote more nuanced discussions about their relationships with other communities of color and engagement in cross-racial solidarity (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). AsianCrit emphasizes how dominant stereotypes, such as the model minority and perpetual foreigner, contribute to the perception of Asian Americans as an invisible, passive, and monolithic group (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, Yoo et al., 2022). AsianCrit is used in the current study to understand how East and Southeast Asian individuals navigate the complexities of racialization throughout their racial and activist identity development to fight anti-Black racism.

Furthermore, this study aims to uphold the tenet of storytelling, present in CRT and AsianCrit, which emphasizes and values racially minoritized voices to counter dominant stereotypes and societal messages (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study reflects the tenets of AsianCrit by highlighting East and Southeast Asian American narratives of resistance and solidarity with Black Americans.

Chapter Two

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Following institutional review board approval, participants were recruited through research announcements on social media (e.g., Instagram), professional network listservs (e.g., Asian American Psychological Association, American Psychological Association Division 17: Society of Counseling Psychology, Division 44: Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, and Division 45: Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race), and program Listservs (counseling psychology, Asian American studies). Research announcements were also disseminated to other sources (community networks, classes) via Asian American activist organizations and researchers.

The research study was advertised as an opportunity for East and Southeast Asian American participants to share critical incidents that led them to fight against anti-Black racism and how one's racial identity is tied to their activism. The flyer stated that the study required participants to complete a 30-minute timeline activity about their critical incidents and a 60–90-minute semi-structured interview. Prospective participants were recruited through a link included in the e-mail or the QR code on the flyer to the eligibility survey on Qualtrics. Three hundred and eighteen responses were collected through the Qualtrics survey. The first author used purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, ethnicity, and gender/sexual identity across the participants who were selected to participate. Twenty-six individuals who met the eligibility criteria were invited via email to participate and were asked to complete the informed consent form. After providing informed consent, participants were sent instructions to schedule a time to participate in the semi-structured interview, fill out the demographics survey, and complete and

upload their critical incidents timeline activity (see below) document to a Qualtrics survey.

Fourteen participants completed the demographics survey, timeline activity, and semi-structured interview. However, one participant's interview and timeline activity were removed from the final dataset because their responses suggested that they did not engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism. Thus, the final dataset included demographic and qualitative data from 13 participants (See Table 1 for pseudonyms and demographic information).

Prior to the interview, participants were asked to complete a timeline activity. A timeline activity was used as a tool for participants to organize and reflect on their experiences as an activist fighting anti-Black racism (see Sheridan et al., 2011, Pell et al., 2020), including those shaped by microlevel and macrolevels contexts (Bagnoli, 2009). The timeline activity also provided participants with an opportunity to highlight significant events, or critical incidents, over the course of a lifetime that are relevant to the research questions (Baú, 2024). Furthermore, timelines have been used while researching marginalized and vulnerable populations to broach difficult topics and share their voices, while allowing participants to proactively decide what they may or may not want to share with the researchers (Kolar et al., 2015; Pell et al., 2020).

Participants were asked to plot three points on a timeline that represent important events that influenced their journey to becoming an activist who fights against anti-Black racism.

Participants were told they would have an opportunity to discuss each point further during the semi-structured interview. Participants were allowed to complete their timeline with pen/paper or a digital medium like Microsoft Word or Adobe Acrobat but were required to submit their timeline digitally through Qualtrics. The Qualtrics survey included a submission portal and asked participants if they consented to their timeline being used in the publication of the results. The

first author reviewed the timelines and removed any identifiable information to ensure participant confidentiality.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author via Zoom between January 2024 and June 2024. The interviews ranged from 61.9 to 104.5 minutes ($M = 80.1$, $SD = 14.5$). The initial research questions were developed by the first author, which were reviewed by the second author and four other graduate students. Feedback from the second author and four graduate students was incorporated to ensure clarity and consistency in the research questions. The first author conducted a pilot interview, which was not included in the final dataset, with a colleague who identifies as a southeast Asian American activist. From the feedback received, questions were added to the final protocol, either in the interview protocol or eligibility survey, to ask how participants' intersectional identities influence their relationship to activism and what identities are reflected in their activist spaces. For completing the timeline activity and interview, all participants received a \$25 gift card for their time and energy invested in this research project. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom. Each participant chose a pseudonym that would be used to refer to them throughout the research project. The first author reviewed transcripts to remove identifiable information and errors. The participants were asked to review their deidentified transcripts and timelines to ensure accuracy and privacy. Each participant was given one week to notify the first author of any changes they would like made to the transcript and timeline. Four participants requested changes in their transcripts, such as censoring locations for privacy and providing corrections for errors in the transcript that did not accurately portray their lived experiences. These changes were incorporated into the final transcripts.

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

The research team is made up of individuals within the counseling psychology field and reflects diverse social identities related to race, ethnicity, immigrant generational status, gender, and sexuality. The first author is a first-generation doctoral student who identifies as an East Asian/Chinese American, second-generation immigrant, queer, cisgender woman. The second author is the advisor of the first author and an associate professor of counseling psychology and identifies as a Latina heterosexual cisgender woman. The third author is a first-generation doctoral student who identifies as a South Asian/Indian, immigrant, queer, and genderqueer person. All members of the research team have experience with qualitative research and have conducted research projects about the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities.

Throughout the project, members of the research team met to discuss their positionalities, biases, and assumptions about the project. In the early stages of developing this project, the first author met one-on-one with the second author to discuss personal experiences that motivated her to conduct this study. The first author shared her frustration with her undergraduate Asian American (comprised primarily of East and Southeast Asian Americans) community, particularly feeling like efforts to engage in cross-racial solidarity centered on Asian Americans' own experiences of discrimination and colorism and were not sustained over time. Reflecting on her own frustration, the first author explored her own journey to engaging in advocacy fighting anti-Black racism. This journey included taking educational courses taught by Black women that allowed her to confront the pervasive anti-Blackness in U.S. society, recognizing her own role in upholding the model minority myth, and engaging in opportunities to further learn about power and oppression in society. These experiences shaped the research questions and interview protocol.

When thinking of who to recruit as part of the sample, the first author recognized that her knowledge and previous interactions with the Asian American community were centered around primarily East and Southeast Asian Americans. This allowed her to be more familiar with the experiences and stories of Asian Americans who identified as part of these communities, compared to those in South Asian American communities. The first author's decision to only include East and Southeast Asian Americans was motivated by the desire to not misrepresent the experiences of South Asian Americans or homogenize the journey of engaging in activism for all Asian Americans. The first author explored feelings of fear around not accurately sharing their experiences and causing harm to racial ethnic groups she did not belong in. However, when the third author was added to the study (after the recruitment materials were already created), they shared their own thoughts about not including South Asian Americans as part of the sample. The third author shared their understanding that South Asian Americans are often not represented in studies claiming to represent Asian Americans and feel marginalized from the Asian American community. The third author expressed frustration that South Asian Americans were not included as part of the sample but acknowledged over the course of the project that researchers have their own limitations when conducting psychological research that is informed by one's own experiences. As a result of these conversations and reflections, the first author is careful to explicitly name that the data and model developed from this project are specific to East and Southeast Asian Americans, as opposed to the broader term Asian Americans. The first author continued to reflect on how this decision impacted the data throughout the course of the project and recognized the implications of this decision (see discussion).

During data collection, the first author met with the research team to discuss assumptions and biases she held while hearing participants' experiences. First, the first author highlighted the

role of higher education in facilitating engagement in activism for Asian Americans, questioning whether Asian Americans would be able to fully engage in activism without higher education. The second author challenged the idea that higher education is necessary to engage in activism. The first author acknowledged that she, as an East Asian/Chinese American woman, has the privilege of accessing higher education spaces, which has served as the backdrop to her learning and understanding of anti-Black racism. Within educational institutions, the first author's presence is not unexpected in this space and other's perceptions of her as a "model minority" allow her to maintain access to this space. However, this access is not afforded to all members of the Asian American community, in the same way it is not afforded to all members of the BIPOC community. This acknowledgment allowed the first author to not overinflate the role of education in facilitating engagement in activism but appropriately question why education may play a significant role in facilitating engagement in activism among East and Southeast Asian Americans. Secondly, the first author expressed surprise that participants' description of their activism deviated from her perception of activism. This highlighted the team's working assumption that activism looked like being on the frontlines of protests, being loud, and demanding our needs be met. While the research team came in with their own biases about what activism looks like, open-ended interview questions asking participants to personally define and describe their activism created space for participants to share the paths they take in fighting anti-Black racism. Through these discussions, the research team remained mindful of these working assumptions to not cloud the data analysis process.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Constructivist grounded theory is a qualitative research method that centers participants subjective experiences while navigating social processes, and acknowledges the role of the

researcher as someone whose experiences will also shape the theory that is developed (Charmaz, 2017). Critical-constructivist grounded theory extends the theory by attending to how systems of privilege and oppression influence participants' experiences and research findings (Levitt, 2021). The current study used critical-constructivist grounded theory to explore the experiences of East and Southeast Asian American activists in their journey to fighting anti-Black racism. Consistent with critical constructivist grounded theory, the qualitative data was analyzed through five key steps: unitizing, labeling units, constant comparison, creating a hierarchy of categories, and creating a core category (Levitt, 2021). The first author engaged in open coding, where data analysis started shortly after data collection began. For each of the interviews, the first author used line-by-line coding to identify segments of text and label them with a meaning unit that corresponds to the research questions. The first and third authors independently reviewed and coded the first three interviews. Then, the first and third authors met to discuss similarities and differences within the coding structure to establish consistency for future interviews. From this point on, the first and third authors engaged in line-by-line coding for each of the subsequent interviews.

After a significant portion of the data had been collected (9-10 interviews), the first author began forming axial codes that developed into a hierarchy of categories (Levitt, 2021). Using constant comparison of the meaning units, higher-order categories were created to reflect the experiences of participants and draw connections between the meaning units. These categories were further analyzed to develop a core category, which the final grounded theory is based on. The third author reviewed the categories and core category to audit and provide feedback. The first and third authors met to discuss and finalize the categories and core category.

Lastly, the first and third author met to select participant quotes that reflect the categories in the theory.

Memos, researcher reflexivity, audits, and member checking were used to increase the study's trustworthiness (Birks et al., 2008; Dodgson, 2019; Morrow, 2005; Lloyd et al., 2024). During data analysis, the first and third authors wrote memos for each participant following line-by-line coding to record personal reflections, participant connections to larger sociopolitical concepts, and notable themes in participant's interview. For example, the first and third authors discussed the role of education in facilitating activism for this sample and feelings of fear related to how the current administration's goal of limiting access to resources (critical race theory, gender and sexuality studies, etc.) may disrupt one's engagement in activism. The first and third authors met regularly to discuss codes, resolve disagreements, and reflect on their experiences while coding. In these meetings, the first and third authors discussed our own connection and disconnection with participants' experiences as Asian Americans, reflected on how our identities as Asian may influence coding structure, and shared reactions to unexpected codes/themes that came up during data analysis. The third author reviewed and agreed with the categories and model developed. The second author was not involved in the initial coding process and acted as an auditor to review the coded interview transcripts, axial codes, and final core category. The auditor reviewed the 13 transcripts, proposed grounded theory model, and results section. The auditor verified that the data analytic process seemed logical, clear, systematic, and thorough and the grounded theory model generated by the first and third authors accurately reflected the data and emerged from the transcripts. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to review the results and model of the study before publication. All participants were given two weeks to provide feedback to the first author. Through member checking, the participants verified the

results and confirmed that the interpretation of quotes, categories, and final grounded theory model accurately reflected their lived experiences.

Table 1*Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Generational Status	Cisgender	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Years involved in Activism
Koi	39	Asian/Asian American	Japanese American	Second generation	Yes	Cisgender woman	Pansexual	15
Brene	25	Biracial/Multiracial Asian/Asian American	Vietnamese	Second generation	Yes	Woman	Bisexual	4
TL	25	Asian/Asian American	Chinese	Second generation	Yes	Woman		12
Jenn	24	Asian/Asian American	Chinese	First generation	Yes	Genderqueer	Queer, pansexual	10
Macy	19	Asian/Asian American	Chinese	1.5 generation	Yes	Cis	Queer, bi, ace	5
P	27	Asian/Asian American	Taiwanese	Second generation	Yes	Man	Heterosexual	12
SC	29	Asian/Asian American	Chinese American	First generation	No			10
Ntsuab	31	Asian/Asian American	Hmoob	First generation	Yes	Femme	Queer	10+
Trisha	25	Asian/Asian American	Vietnamese	Second generation	Yes	Woman	Straight, questioning	5
Puffton	21	Biracial/Multiracial White Asian/Asian American	Asian American	Second generation	Yes	Woman	Heterosexual	3
Bob	34	Asian/Asian American African American/Black/Descendent of the Black diaspora	Chinese and Jamaican	Second generation	Yes	Masculine	Queer, gay	15+
VR	48	Asian/Asian American	Asian	Adopted	Yes	Woman	Straight	40+
Frogmaster	20	Asian/Asian American	Hoisanese/ Cantonese/ Chinese	Second generation	Yes	Cisgender woman	Bisexual, demisexual	5

Chapter 3

Results

Critical Incidents

Prior to the semi-structured interview, participants were required to complete a timeline activity to reflect on critical incidents that have shaped their journey to becoming an activist fighting anti-Black racism. Participants shared experiences/events on their timeline activities that can be summarized into three categories: 1) witnessing discrimination of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), 2) receiving education on race and racism, and 3) taking opportunities to engage in advocacy work. The discrimination of BIPOC folks refers to the unfair treatment of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color based on their racialized identities and membership in historically marginalized groups. Participants shared their own experiences of discrimination, as well as witnessing unfair treatment of other BIPOC individuals and communities. Participants also shared that receiving education about race and racism was a critical event in their activist journey. This involved seeking out resources and spaces to critically analyze the pervasiveness of racism and its impact on racially minoritized groups. Lastly, participants shared that taking opportunities to engage in advocacy work was a valuable contribution to their activist journey. Engaging in advocacy work involved supporting causes fighting injustice for marginalized groups. Critical incidents will be discussed further in relation to the stages of racial and activist identity development, as they often helped participants progress from one stage to the next.

East and Southeast Asian American Racial and Activist Identity Development Model

Findings suggest that for Asian American participants in the current study, racial identity and activist identity development were two processes that unfolded simultaneously. Consistent with other racial identity development models, the results are categorized into stages (Atkinson

et al., 1997; Kim, 1981; Nadal, 2004). The stages represent a phase of development, characterized by unique beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Findings reveal that Asian American activists fighting anti-Black racism in the study developed in their racial and activist identity by moving through six stages, exemplified by the following six categories: (1) erasure of Asian and Black American experiences; (2) exposure to anti-Asian and anti-Black racism; (3) deepening understanding of racism through education; (4) critical reflection of racism in personal and interpersonal interactions; (5) witnessing effective cross-racial solidarity; and (6) developing a collective pathway for the liberation of Asian and Black communities. As participants progressed through these stages in their racial and activist identity development, Asian American activists deepened their understanding of their own and other racial identity groups and strengthened their commitment to sustained activism fighting anti-Black racism. These stages are sequential, as earlier stages typically preceded later stages. However, the progression through these stages is not linear, and participants may cycle through as they develop in their racial identity and activist identity.

The rest of the results section is structured to introduce a subcategory, which corresponds with a stage in one's racial identity development, and then discuss how this stage influences one's engagement in activism in the activism implications section.

Erasure of Asian and Black American Experiences

At the earliest stage of their racial and activist identity development, participants shared experiences where discussions of race were not highlighted in K-12 educational settings. When information related to race was discussed, it often erased the experiences of Asian and Black Americans in the United States. The erasure of Asian and Black American experiences refers to the lack of depth and visibility of the histories, contributions, and struggles of these minoritized

racial groups in educational curriculum. This often led to a lack of awareness and understanding of one's own and others' racial experiences for participants in the sample. For example, when learning about United States history, SC said, "The [teachers] just hide history when it gets to the brutal part of history, in terms of talking about slavery and stuff. It was just like touch on it on the surface and move on." While information about slavery was presented, SC's narrative highlights that there was little opportunity to engage with the topic critically or acknowledge the brutality associated with slavery. Similarly, Brene described:

Through grade school, we learned about Martin Luther King, we learned about Rosa Parks, but I think it was more geared towards [racism] is something that happened in the past, not so much that this is something that's still happening now.

Brene's experience suggests that her school's educational curriculum included learning about Civil Rights activists in the 1960s and their work fighting against racism but did not recognize that racism continues to persist in the United States. SC and Brene's narratives highlight how Black experiences are erased through education systems, preventing them from gaining awareness of the impact of race and racism in the contemporary United States.

Participants also described an erasure of Asian American history when learning about historical time periods and events. For some participants, Asian American history was not discussed at all. Jenn described her experience:

I think a lot of teachers adopted a colorblind approach, where they were just like "everyone's the same, don't talk about [race], we won't make any issues" . . . When they did mention segregation . . . they would just mention White and Black people and that was it. I remember trying to assume, as a child, like Asians are subsets of White - because

they would show us the pictures of the water fountains [for Black and White people] and then I was confused and nobody really expanded on it.

Jenn's experience reflected that discussions of race were often minimized or ignored within an educational setting by promoting messages that racial differences do not exist. Additionally, Jenn highlighted how Asian American experiences were not included when talking about historical events, like segregation and the Jim Crow era. These experiences led to confusion about the treatment and position of Asian Americans throughout United States history. When Asian American experiences are discussed, limited information is available. TL shared:

They give [Asian Americans] one chapter in our U.S. history book . . . or not even one chapter, one paragraph.

TL described how Asian Americans are not often included in textbooks about United States history and that information shared is often brief and non-comprehensive. For example, a participant shared how Asian American organizing is not often discussed due the erasure of this history. Macy stated:

I wish there was a bigger, more prominent history of Asian American organizing. There is a history, it's just often erased. It's often downplayed. It's often hidden. You have to put in so much energy to find those nuggets of history.

Macy's experience reflected difficulty with gaining access to information regarding Asian American history, specifically around organizing. This precludes awareness of Asian American history and their role in fighting injustice.

This stage highlights the erasure of Asian and Black American lived experiences in education systems. While Black American history is often taught about in K-12 education, the erasure of Black experiences is done by minimizing the historical presence of racism and

denying the current impact of racism. Meanwhile, the erasure of Asian American experiences occurred through lack of inclusion and representation. This stage is marked by a lack of awareness of the salience of race and how one's own racial identity may impact their lived experiences.

Activist Implications. There is little engagement in activism fighting anti-Black racism at this stage due to lack of awareness and education about race. Without information readily available, participants may not be able to understand how one's racialized identity impacts their own and other's lived experience or identify when experiences of racism are occurring. Given that both Asian and Black narratives are erased in U.S. history, there is little space to learn about the experiences of each racial group, the connections between these communities throughout history, and how racism continues to persist in the United States.

Exposure to anti-Asian and anti-Black Racism

As participants move into the next stage of their racial and activist identity development, they described being exposed to anti-Black and anti-Asian racism, or encountering events that signify that these racial minority groups were inferior to White, dominant groups. Participants developed awareness of anti-Black and anti-Asian racism by witnessing direct or vicarious experiences of discrimination against Asian Americans and Black community members. For participants, learning about racism targeting Black Americans occurred through interpersonal relationships, social media, and racial justice movements. Trisha shared how a discussion with a friend allowed her to better understand how anti-Black racism can lead to lack of positive regard and support for Black Americans. She said:

One of my closest friends throughout college in my first year . . . he was Black, and he was just sharing with me he wanted to be a doctor, but these barriers existed . . . And he

was sharing about his experience in school and how some of his teachers were just not even giving him attention just because they're like this guy's not gonna make it. And he was like “yeah, I felt like I had to prove them wrong.”

Trisha’s narrative highlighted her developing awareness of how anti-Black racism serves as a barrier to success and can deeply impact one’s experience navigating through education systems. When reflecting on their exposure to anti-Black racism, some participants shared that the publicized murders of Black community members and subsequent development of social justice movements in the United States brought their attention to the anti-Black racism present in society. Koi shared:

It was very clear to me, growing up, that there was a lot of colorism and anti-Blackness ... even in other non-Black communities. But, I don't think it really became clear to me until I had an awakening, maybe in the early 2010s, where I think, myself, along with a lot of folks in our nation, were really faced with a lot of injustice [and murder] being perpetrated against Black people and a lot of Black youth and therefore, culminating in the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Participants described how the murders of Black community members, including George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Oscar Grant, and Michael Brown, increased their awareness of harm being perpetrated on to Black American communities. The Black Lives Matter movement also heightened the visibility of Black experiences and anti-Black racism. This is exemplified in Brene’s narrative, where she said:

Earlier in my life, obviously, I didn't have the interest, I didn't have the knowledge . . .

There was like almost a willful ignorance on my part. But then, I think, after social media

really blew up the Black Lives Matter movement, that did me a favor because I was able to see these stories and then really take it to heart and start learning actively.

Brene described how exposure to the Black Lives Matter movement gave her greater insight on Black narratives and experiences, which prompted her to learn more about anti-Black racism.

Many participants also described their own experiences of anti-Asian racism, which led to an increased awareness of how anti-Asian racism manifests. SC shared her experience where she received xenophobic comments from another student. She said, “I remember a Caucasian male student said very negative things to me, like telling me to go back to China.” The verbal harassment SC received in an interpersonal interaction highlighted the perception of Asian Americans as immigrants and foreigners. Participants also shared about experiences of being “othered,” where they were seen as being fundamentally different from the dominant identity group based on their racial or ethnic identity. Ntsuab described:

One of the upperclassman formed a [Hmong] Living Learning Community and this was on a floor in one of the dorm halls and these two White girls wrote a message in the girl’s bathroom saying, “you guys take Hmong pictures and you don’t see us taking American pictures. You guys talk really loud after hours and you never get yelled at. You guys, your food stinks, it smells like cats and dogs on this floor.”

Ntsuab identified how university spaces, even ones designed for Hmong students, were not exempt from racist incidents. This highlighted the pervasiveness of anti-Asian racism through experiences of being othered and stereotyped by the dominant racial group. The above participants described experiences with overt racism where participants’ experienced discrimination openly through verbal and written communication. However, other participants

shared experiences with covert racism, where discrimination was communicated more subtly through biases, exclusionary practices, and expectations to assimilate to the dominant culture.

Brene said:

I didn't feel like the minority until college when I joined the sorority . . . I felt like I was always comparing myself to White women, like maybe I'd be prettier if I was White, maybe I'd be more popular, I'd get into a more popular sorority, guys would be attracted to me if I was White. I did have a phase where I dyed my hair blonde [and] wore colored contacts . . . It was just the experience of being in a sorority within a larger Greek community that valued whiteness.

Brene's experience of being minoritized in a predominantly White space signaled that White standards often excluded Asian Americans from obtaining the same level of access and desirability that White Americans do. As individuals, organizations, and institutions signal a preference for the dominant culture over the minoritized culture, one may internalize racism and make attempts to fit in to reap the benefits of being a dominant group member.

Finally, some participants named exposure to instances where anti-Black and anti-Asian racism occurred simultaneously, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Bob stated, "Let's remember two things were simultaneously happening between 2020 and 2023, where there was the response to George Floyd's murder and all the activism there and simultaneously, we saw increasing violence against Asian Americans." Participants further described the impact of witnessing both anti-Asian and anti-Black racism happening at the same time. Koi noted:

I also included on my timeline the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the start of 2020 and it was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic occurring and a lot of

anti-Asian sentiments happening and all of that kind of coming together . . . It was such an emotionally hard time for folks in the BIPOC community because there was such an onslaught of racial bias against a lot of different communities.

The poor treatment of Asian and Black Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that both groups are targets of racism. Additionally, it highlighted that racism effects the emotional health of the communities, as separate racial minority groups (Asian and Black communities) and as a collective (BIPOC community). Findings suggest that Asian American activists become aware of anti-Asian and anti-Black racism through their exposure to discrimination. Participants become increasingly conscious of the impact of holding a racially minoritized identity on their lived experiences, including being emotionally and physically harmed due to others' perceptions of racial minority groups.

Activist Implications. Exposure to anti-Asian and anti-Black racism facilitated increased engagement in activism because participants experienced a sense of personal connection to Black Americans who are also being treated unfairly. Frogmaster shared:

In my college, I met somebody and he drove me home. We were talking and I was like, “dude, this place sucks, I get looked at and I get discriminated against. I didn't know people were like that.” And he was like, “oh, I didn't know that someone who is Asian American could also experience those things here because I experience them, and I thought it was just a Black person thing” . . . I would never be able to know truly what Black people feel and face. But I know my experiences and I know that, for me, it was shitty enough that I wanted to do something about it. So I wanna do that for other folks, like I wanna be able to advocate for other people because it was shitty for me, like it shouldn't be shitty for other people.

Frogmaster's experiences provided her with insight on the negative impacts of racism on individuals, which contributed to her desire to advocate for change. Other participants also shared how their exposure to anti-Asian racism and anti-Black racism contributed to their engagement in activism. When asked about what led Macy to fight against anti-Black racism, she stated:

I've witnessed a lot of traumatic things that has happened to me, other People of Color, Black people, Brown people. I don't want to believe that this is just how it is forever. I want to believe that there is a world where this doesn't happen.

The findings highlight that participants' exposure to anti-Asian and anti-Black racism prompted feelings of connection for the Black community, particularly as they identified the negative impact it has on members of both communities. This prompted participants to engage in activism to fight against anti-Black racism and promote change.

Deepening Understanding of Racism Through Education

After gaining awareness of anti-Asian and anti-Black racism by witnessing or experiencing discrimination, participants often sought out resources to deepen their understanding of how social and political forces shape the lives of racial minority groups. Many participants shared how access to educational resources that explicitly addressed racism, inequality, and systemic oppression deepened their understanding of how racism manifests and operates. Some participants learned more about anti-Black and anti-Asian racism through informal means like books, social media, and documentaries. For example, Macy stated:

I started watching people [who created video essays] on YouTube. And some of them included Youtubers like Khadija and FD Signifier, who make a lot of really awesome content about a bunch of stuff, but definitely centering around knowledge and education,

critical analysis on pop culture, systemic racism, masculinity politics, race and gender, all these topics that were also not really taught in school.

Macy's narrative highlighted social media as a learning space to discuss and reflect on topics not discussed in her K-12 education curriculums. Many participants also highlighted how other educational settings, like university courses and student organizations, served as valuable spaces to learn about racism. Trisha shared:

When I went to college and I got a chance to delve more into Asian American classes . . . like this is where we learn[ed] more of the official theories, like the model minority myth [and] race relations in scientific terms.

Trisha's narrative described how universities provided access to courses dedicated to exploring Asian American experiences and connections with other racial groups. Ntsuab elaborated on how courses offered a space to interrogate racism's relationship to systems of power and oppression:

I think what was most useful was that, in those [Critical Race Theory] classes, we learned the academic words of how certain scholars and theorists have talked about some of these issues . . . So, we started talking about what is hegemony? What is racism? How do we understand white supremacy? How do we understand colorism? What does it mean to think about the Black-White binary? And how do we understand Asian racialization?

Through education, participants developed the language to talk about race and racism. Additionally, the knowledge gained from these courses provided clarity about structural and systemic racism. Bob shared:

I could understand that there were patterns of bias and all of this. But then if you were to ask me in what institutions, through what laws, in what ways? I'd be like I don't know, it's

just everywhere. To me, systemic racism just meant a lot of racism, which is not what that means. So, when I finally learned how the government works, how nonprofits work, how these things work, then I could be like, “oh, that's what we're talking about.” And then, finally, I felt like I got like a much clearer sense of what people are talking about when they talk about racism as a structural issue.

Bob revised his definition of systemic racism to reflect how it is perpetuated through institutional structures. P provided an example of how he used knowledge he learned to better understand the mechanisms by which systemic racism is reinforced:

I was taking a college course. It was called the Constitution and People of Color . . . [we were] reviewing constitutional cases . . . and seeing just how blatantly racist they all were, reading the language, like these are legal cases that are the foundation of the U.S. And realizing wow, this is so racist, so discriminatory. How did this even come to be? And just acknowledging this history. And that was a much more systematic approach to understanding power, moving beyond the personal, the interpersonal. And I think this really shifted the way that I saw the world and saw how power was manifested and controlled and used at the expense of minorities.

By attending to history and examining how racism was being perpetuated in the United States legal system through policies and laws, P developed a more nuanced understanding of how systemic racism and power is pervasive within society. As participants learned more about race and racism, they were better equipped to understand their own experiences, as well as patterns of oppression throughout history.

Activist Implications. When participants had access to educational resources to learn about systems of power and oppression, many participants described how these resources meaningfully informed their engagement in activism. Macy shared:

I find it more fruitful to hold empathy. And that's why understanding systemic racism is so important, because even though there [are] terrible things that have happened, I tried to hold empathy, like not everybody was born like this, the way that people currently act and the way that institutions are set up aren't meant to be like this. It was intentionally molded to be like this and that's why people act XYZ and did XYZ and that really fueled my passion for activism and change.

Macy described the value of learning about systemic racism, as it allowed her to shift her understanding of racism as being perpetrated through individual actions to being shaped by larger systems of oppression. Doing so allowed Macy to hold empathy and continue engaging in activism. Additionally, as participants gained awareness of systemic racism, they incorporated this knowledge into their activist approaches. TL shared:

I found the nonprofits in Chinatown and started organizing within the Chinese American and Asian American community . . . And in that, we started talking a lot about gentrification and how that impacts marginalized communities the most . . . So then, that really pushed me to start thinking about how if racism and white supremacy is systemic, then we need, as People of Color, to start creating our own systems of support for each other. And how that could potentially look like, both in community work and as well as in schools.

At this stage in their racial and activist identity development, participants began questioning how they can challenge systems of oppression through their activism.

Critical Reflection of Racialized Experiences

At this stage, participants described engaging in reflection of how their personal experiences and intergroup dynamics are shaped by broader systems of oppression. Informed by the knowledge acquired through education, participants at this stage in their development reflected on how their thoughts and actions are shaped by racial stereotypes, historical contexts, and power structures. This section is made up of two subcategories: unpacking the model minority myth and 2) examining Asian-Black tensions.

Unpacking the model minority myth. As participants in the study continued to develop in their racial and activist identities, many of them recognized the salience of the model minority myth on their experiences as Asian Americans. Participants reflected on how the model minority myth, which upholds stereotypes that Asian Americans are a quiet, hardworking, and a successful racial minority group, impacted them. Unpacking the model minority myth included reflecting on messages they received about how Asian Americans are expected to act and how this influences their own behavior.

Throughout the interview process, each participant was asked about societal expectations for Asian Americans. Most participants described familiarity with the model minority myth and shared how it influenced the expectations other people had for Asian Americans in the United States. For example, Ntsuab shared:

We are agreeable. We're most likely law-abiding, good people, hard workers. We're not going to disrupt or rock the boat that much . . . I feel like how Asian Americans are racialized as model minorities continues to be the framework of how we are treated, how people see and view us.

Frogmaster expanded on the notion that the model minority myth influences how people

view and see Asian Americans. Frogmaster shared how the model minority myth connects Asian Americans to success and privilege:

I think a lot of people inherently see Asian Americans as successful people or will achieve success because it's like oh, this person is working really hard. I mean, that's the phrase that is attached to Asian Americans - "working hard". And I think [another] thing is they have privilege. And part of that is racial privilege, like in [the] model minority myth, we're told that we are in proximity to whiteness.

Frogmaster's narrative reflects how the model minority myth primarily associates Asian Americans with positive character traits and privilege. Participants recognized how these expectations influenced their own behavior. For example, P described:

I did benefit from this model minority myth of being seen as smart . . . the social expectations put on by everyone else around me was you must be good in academics. At the same time, being an Asian American, I think is oh, you're quiet, you're not a good leader, you're a good follower, you listen, you obey really well. I think these are just tropes that have continued for centuries in the U.S., and I still think it's true today. I did emulate that, maybe I did fulfill these expectations and promises for the most part.

P shared that he did fulfill expectations due to the messaging he heard around him. Trisha also shared how messaging she received informed her decision to uphold the expectations of the model minority myth. She stated:

I think growing up, my family did perpetuate [the model minority myth] a lot because they do really believe that Asians are the hardest working, they're the smartest ones, [and] they can do anything they put their minds to . . . I was on the bad end of the Minority Myth for a while because that was what was told to me as a kid.

Trisha described how model minority myth beliefs were also held by members of her family, which informed her beliefs about her own and other communities. While participants internalized some stereotypes and expectations and as a result, felt like it was their responsibility to adhere to them, participants also shared ways of resisting the model minority myth. Koi shared how she came to resist these expectations:

I think I push up against [the model minority myth] a lot. People just expect me to do more, do better than others and I'm like, "I have my own challenges, quirks, and barriers to doing things." But there's that sense of oh, you're always gonna get an "A" in everything that you do, you're always gonna turn things in on time, you're always gonna not make problems, not ask questions. You're just gonna do your work. And for a long time, I did . . . But part of me then began to realize, like why do I have to work twice as hard as everyone else? Still no acknowledgement, still no pathway to advancement. And I'm just being treated as the average person, even though I'm doing twice as much work as other people.

Koi's reflection on the model minority myth highlighted detrimental aspects of the myth, such as increased pressure to perform well; minimized challenges Asian Americans experience; and undervalued their contributions to work environments. This led her to push back against the model minority myth and acknowledge her own struggles and challenges as a complex individual, rather than exerting more energy and effort to meet others' expectations of her as a one-dimensional stereotype of the "model minority." Other participants also shared how they came to resist model minority expectations. Brene said:

So I think, it was kind of like I am the model minority. Like, yes, I am a minority, and I want to be the model minority. And then, that kind of like transitioned to no, I'm an

American, just like you are. I'm not a model anything. I'm my own person. All Asians are their own people. We're not one [monolith].

Brene described how she initially wanted to be the model minority, but that desire shifted as she recognized how this label perpetuated harmful ideas that Asian American experiences are monolithic and Asian Americans do not get to claim an American identity in the same way other racial groups can. As participants build awareness of the way the model minority myth functions in their own lives, they were also able to resist the idea of Asian Americans as model minorities.

Activist Implications. As participants discussed how the model minority myth impacts how others perceive Asian Americans, they described how this also affects their activism. Participants described how the model minority myth, which reinforces societal expectations to be quiet, successful, hard workers, was something they worked to resist as they engaged in activism. Engaging in activism against anti-Black racism required them to challenge the idea that Asian Americans would not speak out against injustice. Participants shared a variety of ways to resist against the model minority myth. For example, SC stated:

I'm a very talkative person, but I'm afraid to actually express my opinions in the public. Thus, people form the idea that I'm very quiet person . . . If I say something truthful, it's gonna have a negative consequence on me, so why should I say it? [Based on] how others perceive me . . . it's like how can I behave in a way that puts me in a safe ground? I feel like [the way] to do something is to actually participate in online forums.

SC described that she does not speak out publicly for fear that she will be persecuted. As a racially minoritized individual, SC shared that she often protects herself by acting in alignment with societal expectations of her. However, she engages in activism through online forums,

which grants her a level of anonymity while still allowing her to engage in action. Additionally, P shared:

I was expected to listen to my parents and listen to authority and [not] question . . . I think [my engagement in activism is] a more quiet activism . . . I still believe that we need people who are out on the streets and shout for change. I think that's really important. But I think, within activism, everyone plays a role. I think, for my role, it's a little bit more quiet, but I would still say consistent. Whether it's identifying opportunities for my other classmates . . . or just lend a hearing ear if there's any complaints that they have or they feel discriminated against by this institution/teacher/person of authority. We'll figure out together ways to address these concerns.

P shared that the activism he engages in could be perceived as more “quiet,” as it does not involve protesting or marching in the streets. He engaged in activism through his interpersonal interactions and communicating with those in power. SC and P’s narratives highlight how the model minority created tension between societal expectations and their personal desire to engage in activism. Participants described trying to navigate this tension by engaging in more subtle or less visible ways, while still disrupting the stereotypes that Asian Americans will be silent or complacent in white supremacy. Some participants also described how they strategically leveraged the societal perception of Asian Americans as the “model minority” to access dominant spaces. Once accessed, participants stated that they can subvert expectations and advocate for change for their own and other BIPOC communities. Koi described:

I realized the way that I'm perceived by others, even their biases of me as non-threatening or submissive gets me through the door . . . I can get through the door and then I can use that to redecorate whatever is inside.

Koi's story reveals how being viewed as the model minority does offer Asian Americans some level of privilege and access to power. Koi identifies that a strategy of resistance can be using this power to not further one's own success, but to use it as a means for collective action. Other participants described how engaging in activism itself was an act of resistance against the model minority myth. Brene shared:

I think, because of the model minority myth that we're just quiet and we just keep to ourselves, I want to be radically the opposite of that. So I'm an Asian person and I'm *loud* and I *care* and I'm *involved*. I'm not a passive person, as you perceive Asian people to be.

By being involved in action, Brene described how this directly challenged the stereotype of Asian American passivity and apoliticism. Participants' narratives reflected how their racialization in the United States impacts the way they are perceived by members of society, which then influences how they choose to engage in activism.

Examining Asian-Black Tension. As they develop further in their racial and activist identities, participants described how they began to think more about their own racial identity in relation to other communities of color, specifically Black Americans. Some participants shared there is an antagonistic relationship between the Asian and Black American communities, rooted in the presence of both anti-Black racism in Asian communities and anti-Asian racism in Black communities. Examining Asian-Black tension involved reflecting on messages they received that highlighted discord between Asian and Black communities. Participants provided examples of these dynamics, highlighting how underlying racial stereotypes contributed to how these groups

are viewed and treated. Koi shared messages she received from others after the death of Trayvon Martin and the creation of Black Lives Matter. She stated:

I was having a lot of really difficult dialogues with family members who were like “Well, that doesn't really affect you, you're not Black” and a lot of anti-Black sentiments from people who are like “That young person must have been doing something.”

Koi described how she received messages that distanced Asian Americans from Black Americans, while also perpetrating negative and harmful stereotypes about Black Americans that they are violent or dangerous. Macy shared additional messages that perpetrate anti-Black racism in Asian communities:

At home, I was taught things like “[Black] people pop out babies because they want to get on welfare and that's how they want to “survive” or they're lazy and they don't really do anything and that's why they're poor. That's why you have to study super hard in school, so that you can get a good job and not end up on the streets and end up with these super large families.

Macy’s description of the messages she received at home highlighted how racial stereotypes of Black Americans often characterize them as lazy, irresponsible, and poor. These stereotypes often enabled anti-Black racism within Asian American communities. Additionally, participants shared their own experiences where anti-Asian racism was being perpetrated by Black Americans. VR shared, “During the whole Trump/COVID/China Flu thing, a lot of the violence against Asians was perpetrated by Black people.” VR described how Asian Americans experience racism because they are perceived as foreigners and immigrants. The term “China Flu” connected Asian people with the COVID-19 pandemic, where they were blamed for bringing the disease to the United States. This contributed to the xenophobia that Asian people

experienced in the United States and led to an increase of anti-Asian racism. Frogmaster expanded how Asian Americans are harmed by Black Americans engaging in anti-Asian violence. She explained:

I've had family members who are affected and who have almost been hate crimed or [have been] hate crimed. Oftentimes, their perpetrators are Black. There's the whole thing in media where the media is biased towards Black perpetrators than White perpetrators. There's that whole thing and I agree with that. *And* there's also the fact that my community is still being hurt by [Black people] who are doing this because they feel like they can harm Asian Americans or just laugh about it [and] rob folks.

Frogmaster shared how the media reinforces stereotypes that Black Americans are violent, while also highlighting the discord between two racially minoritized groups. Participant narratives of Asian and Black tension often highlighted the different ways that Asian and Black Americans experience racism based on their racial identity. For Asian Americans, they experience racism because they are perceived as foreigners. However, Black Americans experience racism because they are viewed as threatening, inferior members of society. The examples shared by participants highlighted how Asian and Black Americans continue to harm each other by upholding stereotypes about the other group, fostering mistrust and hostility between the two communities. As a result, individuals within each community may see their challenges as unique and isolated, rather than connected to a broader system of racial and economic inequality. Participants also shared recognizing how the focus on negative relationships between Asian and Black communities reflects the influence of white supremacy. Ntsuab explained:

I have few friends that talked about “well, back when we were growing up, the Black people treated us poorly”. That probably happened and I'm sorry that that happened to you. But to just know that's what white supremacy does, is that it pits us against each other so that we focus on the bad relationships that we have with each other.

Ntsuab's awareness of white supremacy allowed her to examine Asian-Black relationships with a critical lens, recognizing how conflict is highlighted to undermine unity against white supremacy. Participants also described how the racialization of Asian Americans contributes to the discord between communities, as the creation of the model minority myth has historically been used to weaken advocacy promoted by other BIPOC groups. Bob shared:

The model minority myth is something that particularly emerged a lot over the course of the late 1960s, early 1970s . . . post-Civil Rights Act, you had Latino communities, Black communities advocating for more, to say, “Hey, like it's great that we are not allowed to discriminate by law, but that is not a fix to centuries of oppression.” And the model minority myth was something that I make meaning of as developed by particularly White conservatives as a way to justify “Well, this is why we don't need any of that. Look at Asians. They were discriminated against and they're doing fine.”

By uplifting Asian Americans as model minorities, the myth maintains white supremacy by invalidating the marginalized experiences of Asian Americans and minimizing the need for ongoing advocacy for racial justice.

Activism Implications. As participants engaged in activism, they shared how ongoing tension between Asian and Black communities was mirrored in their activist experiences. Specifically, participants shared how tension between these two racially minoritized groups prevented effective cross-racial solidarity. While participants individually engage in activism

fighting anti-Black racism based on personal experiences and education, they shared barriers to coalition building between Asian and Black communities. Because both groups experience racism in different ways, community members may view activism against anti-Asian and anti-Black racism as separate. Ntsuab shared, “I think there's always this tension of why are you fighting for Black people when the Asians are suffering?” Additionally, Puffton said:

I feel like, as an Asian American, I'm already a minority, but I feel like I'm an even bigger minority when it comes to being an Asian American fighting against anti-Black racism. I haven't really heard of very many Asian Americans that are actively out there promoting, fighting against anti-Black racism. I think that a lot of that does still come from a culture clash between these two groups and how they view each other.

Puffton described feeling part of a small portion of the Asian American population that does engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism. She shared how the tension between Asian and Black communities leads to lack of visibility of Asian Americans fighting anti-Black racism. Participants also shared how viewing Asian and Black issues as distinct, separate issues made it difficult to discuss racism in a comprehensive and nuanced way. Bob shared his experiences in activist spaces as a mixed race (Asian and Black) person:

When I was in spaces that were primarily of Black people, organizing alongside other Black activists and all of that, like I did find it difficult to talk about Asian American issues and all that. When I did, it was like not well received . . . And on the flip side, I would sometimes engage with Asian American activists and stuff, but so many of them were really dismissive of my experience as a Black person. So many of them would primarily frame anti-racist activists, particularly for Black people, as like a barrier to Asian American justice.

Bob's experience highlighted the difficulties of bringing up Asian issues in Black spaces and bringing up Black issues in Asian spaces, as doing so was seen as detracting from each group's specific struggles and goals. Additionally, participants shared that Asian Americans experience erasure and exclusion from racial justice conversations, which contributes to feelings of neglect that make it more difficult to stand in solidarity with other BIPOC communities. VR described:

When I started being an activist decades ago, when there was talk about what do we do about racism? It was always about racism against Black people. [I was] just trying to say that there is racism against Asians, too and I had activists say to me you don't count. I've actually had that be said to me, both by individuals in community groups . . . I started out with just trying to say that Asian Americans also have a unique kind of position in some ways because we often do get erased as being "other." For a long time, you could only see [in] Black or White in a lot of progressive spaces and activist spaces. It was either White or Black and there was never space to talk about some of the particular localized or specific areas that Asian Americans do get targeted.

As participants engaged in activism, their reflections on the messages they received about Asian-Black relations helped them identify barriers to fighting anti-Black racism. In the absence of Asian American involvement or representation in racial justice spaces, participants found it difficult to move from individual actions to collective efforts in fighting anti-Black racism.

Witnessing Effective Cross-Racial Solidarity

As participants continued to develop in their activist and racial identity, they described being in spaces that were intentional about fostering relationships between racially marginalized groups. These spaces often included community organizations and university spaces that

promoted education, connection, and social justice. Within these spaces, participants shared experiences where they witnessed effective cross-racial solidarity, or observed moments when people from their own and other racial groups came together to fight against a shared struggle. Moments of effective cross racial solidarity included building relationships between racial groups, discussing concerns related to activism, and engaging in collective action. For example, TL described:

I got really involved in the Asian American spaces in college as well as the cultural centers. So, the cultural centers at [university name] has a very long history of student activism and cross-cultural solidarity because it was created in 60s during the Civil Rights Movement. So, it was like accumulation of the work of Black, Asian, Native and Latine activists all coming together at my school to fight for spaces on campus . . . [Budget cuts] sparked a whole campaign that the student staff of the cultural center led, and we protested against the administrators. We wrote a whole list of demands . . . Through that, we built solidarity with all the cultural centers, like Native American, Latine, Black and the Asian American Culture Center, and we all signed on to this list of demands.

TL described her experience being part of spaces on campus where activism was at the forefront of their mission allowed her to engage with members of other racially and ethnically minoritized groups and advocate for the demands of these groups. Participants also described how cross-racial solidarity can be practiced through conversations about the distinct experiences of Black and Asian communities, while also highlighting their shared struggle. Bob discussed:

The [Asian American justice community education space] has a particular way of approaching racial justice that is about thinking about cross-racial solidarity. Particularly,

grounding and understanding of Asian American experiences, not just within Asian Americanness and Asian American history, but also within a history of how race works, which Black people are a huge part of that story . . . Over the pandemic, let's remember two things were simultaneously happening between 2020 and 2023, where a) there was the response to George Floyd's murder and all the activism there and simultaneously, we saw increasing violence against Asian Americans. All I was seeing in every space I was in, it felt like there were these 2 parallel tracks that were not on the same page, very much in conflict with each other. And the first conversation I remember coming up in [Asian American justice community education space] was about *that* and about how this is really unhelpful and is not good.

Bob's narrative highlighted the importance of being in spaces that acknowledged the shared history of Asian and Black issues, which allowed community members to discuss how framing Asian and Black issues as isolated concerns prevented these Communities of Color from engaging in collective action. Participants described the value of being in spaces where the stories and needs of both Asian and Black communities could be honored. Ntsuab shared:

I went to grad school and I was just so tired and I didn't know who to talk to or what kind of friends to be with. I don't wanna talk to White people because they don't understand me. A lot of the Asian folks in my program are mostly international students and, many of them, in my experience, did not know how to talk about race or racism. I did not know how to interact with them. But there was actually a bigger Black community and so I tried talking with some of them. And then I learned that actually, I didn't really know how to connect with the Black folks in my program because they don't really understand what I go through as an Asian American. I didn't know what to do. It wasn't until I started

doing more work with this organization . . . And I learned that there is a community of Black folks that work closely with Southeast Asians and that they do understand. There are multiple different levels in which this organization is talking with different folks, with Southeast Asian folks about anti-Blackness, but also their Black community about how they can provide support for Hmong folks outside of just culture.

Ntsuab connected with a non-profit organization that centered work that benefitted both Southeast Asian and Black communities, a space that she was previously unaware of. Through this organization, Ntsuab witnessed what it looks like for these two communities to support each other by actively engaging in discussion and educating each other about concerns of their community.

Activist Implications. Participants described the benefits of witnessing effective cross-racial solidarity and the impact it had on their view of activism. Some participants shared that, through their experiences in these community organizations, they better understood what cross-racial solidarity looked like in praxis. Ntsuab explained:

At this time, when I started to work more with [Black and Southeast Asian non-profit organization], I learned that this is really what I was missing, like how do I actually come to a sense of cross-racial relationship, like real cross-racial relationship that it wasn't just a theory, but it's actually in practice.

Ntusab shared how witnessing cross-racial solidarity provided an example of how to move from education around social justice to engaging in action. Working within these spaces, participants developed a deeper understanding of the nuances of cross-racial solidarity work, like the importance of building sustained relationships. TL described:

It taught me a lot about the importance of building these relationships and being able to have these dialogues across communities and learn about each other's concerns. If we don't know, we don't know . . . And that was a very important lesson for me, about the relationship part - when we need each other, how do we get each other together? And that is through having prior relationships. Like how ineffective it would be if we didn't have these relationships and we suddenly need to mobilize. Then, it's like "oh, like, why should I trust you?" So, it was through relationship building and trust building could we better stand in solidarity with each other.

TL reflected on mechanisms that allowed communities to foster strong relationships, including intergroup dialogue, building trust, and mutual support. Participants also shared the benefit they received from being in activist spaces that fostered collaboration between Asian and Black communities. Bob stated:

That [Asian American justice community education space] opened up conversations that I didn't even know that I needed. I, as a person, throughout my life, have been advocating for different parts of who I am . . . And so I was doing queer activism. I was doing activism for the thriving of Black people, because these are all things that I am. . . . All of the rest of my life and activism, I do feel like I spoke up for like Asian American issues and all of that, but I was never in a place where I got to talk about it fully without feeling kind of gross about it. And this was finally a place where I felt like that. And so that reinvigorated me . . . and reconnected me with the idea that I didn't have to pick. That I could advocate for justice without feeling if I was sacrificing different parts of my identities by virtue of the spaces I was in.

Bob described the relief he felt from being able to view the struggles of different marginalized groups as being connected and that activism for one group could benefit the others. Through these spaces, participants felt like they were able to offer and receive support through shared struggle, accountability, and action.

Developing a Collective Pathway Toward Liberation for Asian and Black Communities

In the last stage of one's activist and racial identity development, participants shared that they were able to identify the shared struggles of Asian and Black communities to fight against larger systems of oppression. Jenn stated, "We're not trying to fight amongst each other. We're trying to fight against these oppressive systems." Jenn described wanting to focus on fighting systemic structures, rather than continuing to engage in conflict between Communities of Color. Additionally, participants described recognizing how fighting anti-Black racism is interconnected with the fight against anti-Asian racism. VR shared:

If we focused in on fighting anti-Black racism, it would absolutely help on problems that we suffer as Asian Americans and the racism we suffer because we're looking at white supremacy and very far right ideas that any Person of Color should not live, should not exist. I think it's really shifting the spotlight onto that and recognizing that all lives won't matter until Black Lives Matter.

VR highlighted the belief that centering the concerns of the most marginalized racial groups can also create change that addresses the needs of other communities by addressing the core issue of white supremacy. Participants described recognizing that the pathways toward liberation for Asian and Black communities are shared. Bob explained:

At the end of the day, a lot of what we're fighting for is the same: 1) that we're connected because there's shared tools and shared avenues for justice 2) the obvious, I think the

thing that most people say, which I think is true . . . is that we also have a shared fate. The racism against Asian Americans, if you're a Black person, you have to care about it because if you allow that to happen, it's gonna happen to you and vice versa.

Bob described believing that Asian and Black American experiences cannot be separated from each other. Participants' narratives highlight a belief that the struggles of Asian and Black Americans are intimately tied together, and therefore liberation comes from a collective resistance against systems of oppression.

Activism Implications. Participants described how developing an understanding of the shared struggle of Asian and Black Americans impacted their activism. Some participants described how this led them to center anti-Black racism within their activist work. For example, Koi shared:

I think the journey that I've taken to understand the ways that anti-Blackness is at the core of racism and white supremacy is something that I constantly am reminded to center in my work. Regardless of the type of activism that I'm engaging in, whether it's leading conversations or engaging in dialogues with folks about the ongoing genocide in Palestine and thinking about people's ongoing racism with Asian American folks related to COVID-19 and all of those efforts, I think I do my best to try and help folks really conceptualize that from a place of anti-Blackness. Until we address anti-Blackness, all of these other issues and events are not going to be addressed or we're not going to heal from them.

Koi's shared pathway to liberation centers anti-Black racism to understand injustice that is occurring for all racially minoritized groups, emphasizing that racial liberation cannot be achieved without addressing anti-Blackness. VR described a different perspective:

I think, because all of my activist work is about systems and I recognize how short of a time we have on Earth and the project before us to eliminate injustice, I want to be like as efficient as possible . . . I don't know if I've ever approached tension or situation of racism thinking that it was based on individuals . . . I think that it's intimately tied to our unjust economic system, which I think thrives on racism and sexism and injustice. And I think our economic system, we, as a society, allow [it] to control us . . . So I believe that if there weren't racism, it would be very, very hard for our economic system to do what it does and to be as successful as it is . . . We actually have the keys to change it, like this isn't working for, so let's change it. We have the ability to do it.

VR shared her belief that racism, along with other forms of discrimination, is produced and sustained through an unjust, capitalistic economic system. By challenging capitalism, interlocking systems of oppression can be addressed, thus eliminating injustice in a comprehensive way. Participants not only engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism because they see the impact it has on the Black community, but because they see it as part of a larger system of power that impacts all racially marginalized communities.

Core Category and Grounded Theory Model: Asian American Activists Engage in Activism at Different Points in Their Life, Based on the Negotiation of Racial Identity and Personal Contextual Factors

The core category developed from the results is that Asian American activists have the ability to engage in activism at different points in their life based on the negotiation of their racial identity amidst personal experiences, knowledge, self-reflection, and interactions with others. The process of engaging in activism is dynamic and is shaped by time and context.

The grounded theory model (see Figure 1 below) for the East and Southeast Asian activist identity development model reflects this dynamic process, while also highlighting the importance of racial identity development in shaping activism. As Asian Americans experience increasingly nuanced and complex racial material that prompts racial identity development, they develop in their understanding of race and racism. This leads to negotiations of how to engage in activism during a particular stage in one's racial identity development, contributing to how one engages in activism and/or one shows up in activist spaces. Activist spaces can also serve as places where Asian American activists experience new racial material. The spiralized model is used to represent the process of engaging in activism as iterative, where East and Southeast Asian American activists come back to a similar sequence of encounter, reflection, negotiation, and engagement in activism throughout their life. However, as activists return to the cycle, they bring their experiences, knowledge, and lessons accrued from the previous cycle. This suggests that each cycle becomes more complex than the last, as activists build their understanding of systemic racism, capacity to engage in critical reflection, and strategies of engaging in activist work. As they move through these cycles, activists engage in activism with more awareness, depth, and intentionality.

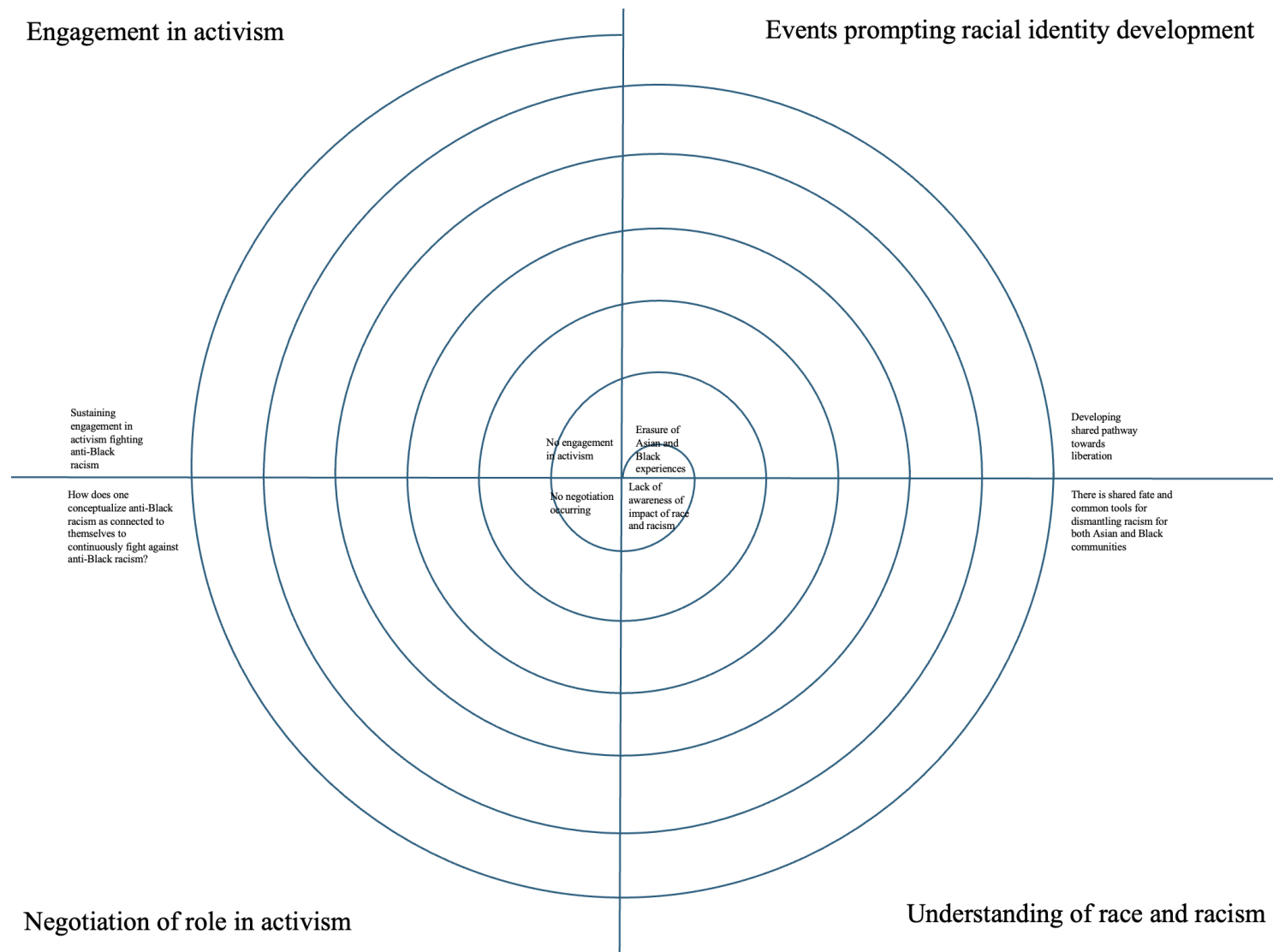


Figure 1

East and Southeast Asian American Activist Identity Development Model

Chapter Four

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Recent research on Asian Americans fighting against anti-Black racism has begun to examine the role of Asian American racialization in such engagement (Litam & Chan, 2021; Matriano et al., 2021; Yellow Horse et al., 2021). However, the current body of literature primarily focuses on Asian American engagement in the Black Lives Matter Movement, limiting our understanding of other ways Asian Americans engage in activism and how engagement connects to their racial identity development. This current study is one of the first to examine the role of racial identity development on Asian American activism fighting anti-Black racism and develop a process-oriented model regarding racial and activist identity formation. This study also builds upon prior dissertation projects that have explored the link between racial identity development and activism among Asian Americans (i.e., Chang, 2022; Segoshi, 2018).

The current study explored the experiences of 13 East and Southeast Asian American participants who self-identified as activists fighting anti-Black racism. Through in-depth interviews, participants described how they navigate and make meaning of racialized experiences, engage with Black communities, and foster effective coalition building. Additionally, the study produced a developmental model to examine how Asian American activists grow in their racial and activist identities over time, highlighting the recursive process of encounter, reflection, negotiation, and engagement in activism at different stages of development. The model offers a framework for understanding how Asian American activists build knowledge, relationships, and skills necessary for engaging in cross-racial solidarity with Black communities.

Racialization in the Context of Activism

Recent research has aimed to examine how experiences of discrimination (Chen & Chan, 2025; Craig & Richeson, 2012) and internalization of the model minority myth (Le et al., 2024; Matriano et al., 2021; Ouch & Moradi, 2022; Yi & Todd, 2021; Yoon et al., 2023) contribute to Asian American perceptions, attitudes, and support of Black Americans and Black social movements. The results of this study are consistent with research that has found that those who have experienced or perceived racism were more likely to have positive attitudes and experience feelings of similarity to Black Americans, as well as support Black social movements (Chen & Chan, 2025; Craig & Richeson, 2012). Asian American activists in this study described how personal experiences of discrimination and witnessing racism against Asian and Black communities contributed to their desire to fight against anti-Black racism. They described how these experiences contributed to feelings of connectedness with Black Americans, as they viewed both groups as being targeted and harmed based on race. Asian American activists in this study used their own experiences to understand how race manifests within society, prompting them to fight anti-Black racism.

While this study does not examine the extent to which one internalizes the model minority myth using a measure, the narratives of Asian American activists did support the finding that resisting the model minority myth contributed to more nuanced engagement in activism fighting anti-Black racism. Many participants reported ascribing to and internalizing the model minority myth at earlier parts of their life, given the messages shared with them from members of society. Many participants shared that the model minority myth does not benefit Asian Americans. Rather, it negatively impacts them as it minimizes their experiences of racism, conflates the experiences of all Asian Americans, and creates division between Asian and Black

communities. This led them to more readily resist the model minority myth. By resisting the model minority myth, participants engaged in activism where they voiced their concerns and aligned themselves with Black social justice movements.

This study also reveals some of the complexities that Asian American activists navigate as they work to understand their position within the United States racial landscape. Given the position of Asian Americans as both an oppressed (compared to White Americans) and privileged group (compared to Black Americans), their resistance against the model minority myth is often associated with a loss of safety associated with their privileged position. Thus, Asian American activists may negotiate how they are able to engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism given this positioning. Asian American activists provided a range of examples of how they negotiated their role within the context of their racialization. Some Asian American activists described engaging in more “quiet” or less public forms of activism, while still challenging the silence associated with the model minority myth. Other activists described resisting the model minority stereotype by being “loud” or subverting expectations once access to privileged spaces is granted. The current study adds to the literature on the internalization of the model minority myth (Le et al., 2024; Ouch & Moradi, 2022; Yi & Todd, 2021; Yoon et al., 2023) by examining Asian American activists’ narratives and experiences of the model minority myth. The current study reveals the importance of resisting the model minority myth in fighting anti-Black racism and the ongoing negotiation of Asian Americans’ conflicting social positions.

Collective Identity is Crucial to Sustaining Activism Fighting Anti-Black Racism

The scholarship on Asian American engagement in activism has shown that those who develop a collective identity, where they are able to understand their own oppression as being connected with other BIPOC groups, are more likely to engage in action to challenge oppression

(Kim et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2023; Litam & Chan, 2021; Merseth, 2018; Saavedra & Yoo, 2021). The current study supports the idea that Asian Americans developing a collective identity is crucial to sustained engagement in activism fighting anti-Black racism. Asian American activists within the study identified that recognizing Asian and Black shared history, differential racialization, and systems of oppression aided in the development of this collective identity.

Additionally, the current study expands on recent scholarship by outlining the process Asian American activists take to develop a collective identity. Asian American activists described that taking on a collective identity often occurred at later stages of their racial and activist identity development. This suggests that a collective identity is not an immediate result of awareness to racism, but a response to evolving knowledge, self-reflection, and experience. The results of the study do not suggest that Asian American activists are unable to engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism until they develop this collective identity. On the contrary, Asian American activists can fight against anti-Black racism due to personal experiences of discrimination, awareness of systemic racism, and witnessing solidarity between Asian and Black communities. However, a collective identity deepens Asian American activists' commitment and sustains their motivation to fight anti-Black racism.

Developmental Model for Resisting White Supremacy with Black Americans

A distinct contribution of the current study is the Asian American racial identity development model that deviates from traditional frameworks of development for Asian Americans (Kim, 1981; Nadal, 2004) and People of Color (Atkinson et al., 1998; Helms, 1995). Traditional frameworks for racial identity development for Asian Americans and People of Color have typically centered the process building a positive self-concept to resist white supremacy (Kim, 1981; Atkinson et al., 1998; Helms, 1995; Nadal, 2004). The current developmental model

aims to highlight the process of developing a relational understanding of one's racial identity to build meaningful connection with Black Americans to resist white supremacy. The current model highlights how Asian American racialization has historically been tied to the racialization of Black Americans, maintaining the oppression of both groups under white supremacy.

Specifically, Asian American activists in this study described how the model minority myth and racial triangulation contribute to their understanding of race and racism. Using these frameworks, Asian American activists were able to critically examine their positionality and relationship with the Black community to develop a collective racial identity and fight against anti-Black racism.

The current developmental model also underscores how racial identity development is tied to activism, as one's engagement in activism is influenced by their exposure to different types of racial material, including experiences of racism, education on manifestations of racism, and meaningful interactions with the Black community. Asian American activists shared how encounters with increasingly complex racial material prompted them to continually revise their understanding of race, racism, and their role in fighting anti-Black racism. As they encountered and made meaning of racial material, participants shared they were able to engage in activism in more nuanced and sustained ways. Additionally, one's engagement in activism also allowed them to encounter new types of racial material, such as experiencing conflict and solidarity between Asian and Black Americans in activist spaces. Through an iterative process of encounter, reflection, negotiation, and engagement, this study emphasizes that racial identity influences engagement in activism, but also that activism can shape racial identity development.

Implications for Clinicians

Mental health clinicians can apply the findings of the study to working with Asian American clients who engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism. Litam and Chan (2021)

provided implications for mental health clinicians in their discussion, including providing validation of oppressive experiences, promoting awareness and education through exploration of emotional experiences, and exploring ways of resisting white supremacy. Additionally, it may be valuable to explore how activists can develop in their identity as a member of the Asian American community and a member of a collectively oppressed BIPOC community (Litam & Chan, 2021).

The findings of the current study suggests that racial identity development is crucial in one's activist identity development, as events promoting awareness of one's own racial identity often led to engagement in activism. Therefore, mental health clinicians can use this grounded theory to encourage clients interested in fighting anti-Black racism to explore their own racial identity. This process includes reflecting on their experiences of privilege and oppression, learning about Asian American history, and examining their relationship to whiteness. Additionally, mental health clinicians may explore with clients how Asian Americans are racialized in relation to other races, examining how dominant racial stereotypes of Black and Asian Americans contribute to internalized racism and anti-Black racism. Mental health clinicians can validate the difficulties of navigating the complex racialization of Asian Americans and how this can impact their decision to engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism. Furthermore, mental health clinicians can aid in clarifying client's values, as well as negotiating how one can engage in activism that aligns with their values, culture, and ability.

Mental health clinicians may also explore with clients the benefit of engaging in activism fighting anti-Black racism. Engaging in activism for other communities of color may foster positive feelings of connectedness and belonging with members of racially minoritized groups, agency associated with resisting dominant stereotypes, and empowerment in fighting against

shared oppressive systems. Clinicians can also provide the perspective that there is no correct way of engaging in activism, as engaging in activism is a dynamic process that is shaped by the sociopolitical climate, personal experiences, and knowledge. Clinicians can aim to center clients' intentions for fighting anti-Black racism, as well as explore motivating factors that allow for clients' sustained engagement in activism.

Implications for Social Justice Advocacy

The findings of this study suggest that there are opportunities for Asian American activists to engage more deeply with activism for the Black community when there are opportunities to form relationships with members of the Black community. When these relationships are developed, they are more readily able to honor the experiences of both Asian and Black communities by recognizing the different racialization of each group. Recommendations for organizations hoping to encourage cross-racial solidarity among Asian and Black communities include examining how race is discussed within the organization and sharing information about the histories of Asian and Black communities within the United States. The hope is to recognize the distinct but shared oppressive experiences to develop a collective identity as BIPOC impacted by systems of oppression. Additionally, it may be beneficial for these communities to address tensions present between Asian and Black communities to gain perspective of the others' hesitation in engaging in cross-racial solidarity. These conversations can include discussing the prevalence of anti-Black racism within Asian communities, anti-Asian racism within Black communities, power differentials between communities, and systemic racism as reinforcing division within communities. It is important for social justice advocates to consider how to cultivate safe spaces for learning, building trust, and promoting relationships between these two communities.

Additionally, the study highlights the challenges Asian American activists face as they fight anti-Black racism. These challenges include navigating one's racial identity within the context of American history and in relation to the Black American community. Efforts to engage in activism for the Black community may also be complicated due to the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism within the Asian American community and lack of visible representation of Asian American activists engaged in this work. Social justice advocates may explore the benefits of mentorship programs that include activists at earlier stages of their racial and activist identity development with those further along in the process. This may promote feelings of understanding and community between Asian American activists, leading to sustained engagement in activism fighting anti-Black racism.

Implications for Education Systems

In participants' experience, many of them cited the value of academic institutions as spaces to learn more about race and racism through their undergraduate and graduate programs, student organizations, and other academic resources. Specifically, participants described transformative experiences while taking critical race theory and ethnic studies courses, where they were able to engage in critical reflection and increase their critical consciousness of systemic racism, power, and oppression. This highlights the importance of such courses being offered and therefore, should be retained as university offerings.

While participants described gaining awareness of structural racism through these higher education systems, they also described the relative lack of explicit conversations within K-12 education systems. This suggests that it may be important for K-12 education systems to discuss race and racism as part of their academic curriculum and incorporate the experiences of BIPOC, including Asian and Black communities, when teaching children about United States history.

Additionally, it may be beneficial for educators to receive training about how to effectively engage in discussions about race and racism, examine their own racial biases, and address the systemic inequities pervasive within the education system.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study contributes to the body of literature exploring the experiences of Asian American activists, there were multiple limitations related to the sample size, demographics, and analysis of the study. First, the study broadly describes the experiences of East and Southeast Asian Americans as they develop in their racial and activist identities. Therefore, there was little focus on the intersectional experiences of East and Southeast Asian American and how different aspects of their positionality impacted their engagement in activism. The current study did not examine differences in experiences based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender, immigration status, generational status, or age. However, Asian American communities reflect diversity in these identities that may influence their relationship to anti-Black racism, including differences in how they perpetuate or resist anti-Black racism. Future studies may examine how different identities impact one's engagement in activism fighting for anti-Black racism.

Second, this study was limited to participants who self-identified as East and Southeast Asian Americans, excluding members in the Asian American umbrella who fell outside of this identification. As a result, the results of this study are not generalizable to all members of the Asian American diaspora, including South Asian Americans. Future research could examine racial and activist identity development among South Asian participants within the context of their racialization, history in the United States, and relationship with white supremacy.

Third, the study sample size was limited to 13 participants due to difficulties during recruitment. While engaging in the recruitment process, the first author found it difficult to

recruit East and Southeast Asian American individuals who identified as activists. The first author received multiple inquiries as to whether their engagement in social justice or advocacy work was included in the first author's definition of activism. The first author encouraged all interested individuals to fill out the eligibility survey if they self-identified as an activist. Thus, saturation for data analysis was not reached. For more robust findings, future research could aim to examine the experiences of East and Southeast Asian American fighting anti-Black racism with a larger sample size. Additionally, future research may aim to mitigate difficulties in recruitment by having members of the Black community nominate East and Southeast Asian individuals who they believe engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism. Furthermore, researchers could conduct an Asian-Black dyadic study to examine Asian and Black experiences of developing cross-racial coalitions to fight against anti-Black racism.

Lastly, all participants within the sample attained some level of higher education, limiting our knowledge of Asian American activists fighting anti-Black racism from different educational backgrounds or ways of knowing. Future research directions could include building long-term relationships with community-based organizations to expand the scope of participants with different educational backgrounds and motivations for engaging in activism.

Conclusion

This qualitative study contributes to the limited body of literature that examines the connection between racial identity and activist identity development among Asian Americans. Findings indicate that, for Asian American activists, their racial identity development is intimately connected to their activist identity development. This study underscores ways that Asian American activists navigate their racial identity in ways that foster connections with Black communities and resist white supremacy. Participants' experiences reflect the struggles and

empowerment Asian American activists face as they engage in activism fighting anti-Black racism, with the hope that doing so will also aid in their own liberation. By centering the lived experiences of Asian American activists, this study hopes to document the contributions of Asian Americans in anti-Black racism work and motivate others to fight for systemic change across diverse contexts, roles, and institutions.

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Vita

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