The Meaning of Honorary Whiteness for Asian Americans: Boundary Expansion or Something Else?

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Abstract

Research on interracial intimacy divides between quantitative comparisons of interracial and same-race marriages and qualitative studies of existing interracial unions. This article bridges the divide by examining how interracial dating histories differ from same-race dating histories among Asian Americans, a group that sociologists consistently regard as potentially having attained a racial status as “honorary whites.” Synthesizing the literatures on ethnic boundaries, homogamy, and interracial intimacy, the author examines the role of boundary processes in differentiating same-race and interracial dating histories. What does becoming honorary whites, as indicated by participation in racial exogamy, actually mean for Asian Americans? Using a unique sample of 83 Asian Americans with a wide range of dating histories, the author finds that social networks are a crucial mechanism for differentiating racial endogamy and exogamy. In addition, my results show that becoming honorary whites has critically involved boundary repositioning, rather than boundary transcendence, blurring, or expansion.

Keywords

interracial intimacy – boundaries – social networks – Asian Americans – adoptees

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Introduction

In *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), the U.S. Supreme Court declared that the last remaining miscegenation laws were unconstitutional. This ruling not only legalized interracial marriage but also committed the nation to seeing interracial intimacy as a public symbol of racial progress (Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch 2012). In private, however, many Americans still regard interracial intimacy as more acceptable in the abstract than in practice and preferable in other people's families rather than their own (Bonilla-Silva 2010). American sociologists have long conceptualized interracial intimacy as a measure of race relations that indicates white acceptance of non-whites, and traditional theories of assimilation have characterized racial intermarriage as marital assimilation, i.e. the final stage in group relations before previously distinct groups amalgamate into one group (Gordon 1964). Critics of assimilation theory, however, argue that even though marriage shrinks social distance between spouses, it does not eliminate the salience of racial difference for their natal families, the broader society, or even the spouses themselves (Childs 2005; Chong 2013; Root 2001; Song 2009; Steinbugler 2012; Vasquez 2015).

A shortcoming of this body of work is its division between two literatures with inverse strengths and weaknesses: (1) a quantitative literature that examines the distribution of same-race and interracial marriages to estimate the relative social distance across various group boundaries (e.g. Qian and Lichter 2007) and (2) a qualitative literature that examines the experiences of existing unions to identify and describe the contemporary social barriers that committed interracial couples confront (e.g. Steinbugler 2012). As a result, we know relatively little about the process through which racial acceptance and assimilation occurs because the qualitative research explores relationship formation primarily among interracial couples, whereas the quantitative research compares same-race and interracial relationships but employs data that only indirectly indicates social processes.

My solution is a qualitative comparison of same-race and interracial dating histories that combines the qualitative literature's attention to the process of relationship formation with the comparative approach of the quantitative literature. In brief, I analyze dating histories using an approach similar to that of comparative-historical sociologists for conducting both cross-case and within-case analysis (Brady and Collier 2004). Examining how interracial dating histories differ from same-race dating histories permits the qualitative exploration of the social process underlying quantitative explanations of homogamy, i.e. the prevailing tendency for marriages between socially similar

partners. Matthijs Kalmijn (1998) famously distilled these explanations into three general factors: (1) the constraints of marriage markets, (2) the preferences of marriage candidates, and (3) the interference of third parties beyond the candidates themselves, i.e. the state, the church, and the natal family. In his synthesis, these three factors influence an implicit two-stage process by which individuals are (1) socialized to adopt endogamous preferences that are subsequently (2) maintained in practice, i.e. dating and intimate relationships that lead to marriage.

Accordingly, this paper examines the socialization and maintenance of racial endogamy in same-race and interracial dating histories. Specifically, I examine the boundary-making processes associated with their similarities and differences. Which boundary processes distinguish same-race and interracial dating histories? Is it those processes involved in the socialization of endogamous preferences, those involved in the maintenance of endogamous practices, or is it both? More generally, what comprises the field of boundary processes leading to either same-race relationships or interracial relationships? I apply these questions to a unique sample of 83 Asian Americans, most of whom were raised by white adoptive parents ($n=55$) supplemented with a smaller sample raised by co-ethnic biological parents ($n=28$). The sample includes respondents with a wide range of dating histories from individuals who have exclusively dated other Asians, to those who have exclusively dated whites, to those who have dated both Asians and whites.

Asian Americans are a compelling case for the study of racial boundaries because they are the single pan-ethnic grouping that sociologists consistently regard as potentially having attained a racial status as “honorary whites” (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Tuan 1998; Yancey 2003). I use the term *honorary whites* to refer to an intermediate rank in a racial hierarchy that has historically reserved the highest status for whites. Under certain conditions, select non-whites may become socially perceived as honorary whites, such as when the apartheid regime of South Africa designated Japanese persons as whites after Japan became the nation’s largest trading partner. In particular, transracial Asian adoptees are a compelling sub-group of Asian Americans because their socialization in White families gives them an exceptionally intimate familiarity with white culture. Indeed, their acceptance among whites may surpass even that of third and later generation Asian and Latino ethnics (Macias 2006; Tuan 1998). In contrast, sociologists have expressed less agreement about how much whites have extended conditional acceptance to black immigrants, light-skinned Latinos, and select multiracials (Gullickson and Morning 2011; Roth 2012; Waters 1999).

In this paper, I examine what becoming honorary whites, as indicated by participation in racial exogamy, actually means for Asian Americans. In the sections that follow, I first use a boundary approach to sharpen sociological conceptions of honorary whiteness before refining Kalmijn's synthetic theory of endogamy to include racially specific boundary processes. Then I describe the unique sample of same-race and interracial dating histories, my analytic strategy, and the central finding of three "tracks" of dating experiences from adolescence through adulthood before presenting the analysis of the socialization of dating preferences and their maintenance into adulthood. Lastly, I discuss my conclusions and their implications for theories of honorary whiteness and for future research on interracial intimacy. In brief, I argue that for Asian Americans, becoming honorary whites has critically involved their individual repositioning on the white side of a persistent white/Asian boundary, rather than their collective acceptance as either non-blacks or members of a racial middle (O'Brien 2008).

A Boundary Approach to Honorary Whiteness

In the sociology of race/ethnicity, boundary approaches have provided a language for understanding group relations as driven by collective interests instead of cultural dissimilarities (Saperstein, Penner, and Light 2013). These approaches build on the work of anthropologist Fredrick Barth "who rejected a view of ethnicity that stressed shared culture in favor of a more relational approach emphasizing that feelings of communality are defined in opposition to the perceived identity of other racial and ethnic groups" (Lamont and Molnar 2002:174). Initially, sociologists examined the variations in ethnic identification that result from "a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes ... i.e. what you think your ethnicity is, versus what they think your ethnicity is" (Nagel 1994:154). Research in this vein found that the dialectical process rests on an asymmetry in power between whites and non-whites that facilitates the transformation of traditional cultures into symbolic ethnicity, panethnic identity, and racialized ethnicity (Nagel 1996; Tuan 1998; Waters 1990).

Since then, Michele Lamont and Virag Molnar have distinguished between (1) *symbolic boundaries*, that is, "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" that are "necessary but insufficient conditions for the existence of (2) *social boundaries* [emphasis ours]" which are "objectified forms of social differences manifested

in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities [and which are] also revealed in stable behavioral patterns of association" (2002:168-169). Thus social boundaries are the subset of symbolic boundaries that constrain and pattern social behavior, and in these terms, racial boundaries have been both symbolic and social in the United States, whereas ethnic boundaries have become largely symbolic, especially among whites. More recently, Rogers Brubaker and Andreas Wimmer have criticized this initial approach for reifying the race/ethnicity distinction in U.S. history (Brubaker 2009; Wimmer 2013). Instead, they emphasize the role of boundaries as strategic tools for defining social situations and thereby conceptualize them as not only historic legacies that structure the present but also ongoing processes that may lead to changes in historic boundaries.

Wimmer along with Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) have proposed that boundary change involves certain elemental strategies or processes which I selectively integrate as follows: (1) boundary transcendence which refers to the weakening of a boundary that results in its replacement by another kind of boundary, (2) boundary blurring which refers to the weakening of a boundary that results in a new interstitial zone or buffer, (3) boundary expansion which refers to the shifting of a boundary to include previously excluded people, practices, or things, and (4) boundary repositioning which refers to the reclassification of individuals or groups across a persistent boundary. I propose that the disagreement over which of these elemental strategies best describe the situation of honorary whites is at the heart of debates over racial stratification.

In recent years, the term *honorary white* has become identified with the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva who predicts a "Latin Americanization" of U.S. race relations wherein the historic white/non-white color line is shifting to a three-strata system with whites at the top, honorary whites in the middle, and collective blacks at the bottom (2010). Bonilla-Silva explains the emergence of honorary whites as part of a white strategy to preserve racial privilege, by diverting non-whites from seeking political unity to competing for a relatively higher status.

An important precursor to Bonilla-Silva's work is Mia Tuan's examination of the racial status of Asian Americans in her book, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?* (1998), in which she attributes the rising status of Asian Americans to the historical conjuncture of (1) media representations of Asians as a model minority that served to "rebut" the civil rights movement and (2) changes to immigration policies that ended a near-century of Asian exclusion while favoring the admission of professionals. Her explanation of honorary whiteness is a critique of the model minority thesis that attributes the post-civil rights status of Asian Americans to their "superior" strategy for upward mobility, in

contrast to black and other minority movements for legal, political, and cultural empowerment. Whereas Tuan and Bonilla-Silva regard honorary whiteness as an enduring rank in the U.S. racial hierarchy, George Yancey regards the emergence of honorary whites as foreshadowing the redefinition of whiteness to include non-black minorities, similar to its earlier redefinition in the early 20th century to include “the Polish, Russians, Ukrainians, and Italians” (2003:2). First suggested by Herbert Gans (1999), this prospect has become a major expectation in U.S. sociology (Lee and Bean 2004).

In terms of boundary processes, I propose that the model minority thesis suggests that the historic white/non-white boundary has been transcended by an inclusive American/non-American boundary that is consistent with what Bonilla-Silva characterizes as the official rhetoric of Latin American nations, e.g. “We are all Puerto Ricans” (2010:183). To be generous, the proponents of the model minority thesis regard the rhetoric to be real, and they cast the non-whites who continue to make race-based demands, as initiating unnecessary boundary strategies. In contrast, Tuan and Bonilla-Silva counter that the historic boundary has been blurred to admit either Asian Americans or a broader group of honorary whites into a buffer zone between whites and blacks. More distinctly, Yancey argues that the historic boundary is expanding to include select non-whites, shifting the definition of whiteness to include non-blacks. For the model minority thesis, the white/honorary white boundary and the white/other non-white boundary are both only symbolic boundaries. For Tuan and Bonilla-Silva, the white/honorary white boundary remains a social boundary whereas for Yancey, the white/honorary white boundary is merely a symbolic boundary. Glossed in these three major positions, however, are Wimmer’s more nuanced distinctions between: (1) individual repositioning, e.g. passing as white, (2) collective repositioning or reclassification that leads to ethnic group disappearance, and (3) boundary expansion as exemplified by the case of ethnic Italians and Turks in Switzerland, who still primarily practice co-ethnic endogamy despite sharing with the Swiss a social boundary against newer immigrants (2013).

In this light, interracial intimacy provides an opportune case for examining the boundary processes associated with racial stratification. The major explanations of honorary whiteness identify intermarriage rates as a core indicator of status differences among non-whites, in particular the higher intermarriage rates of Asians and Latinos in comparison with those of blacks.¹ Second, the

1 Only residential segregation rivals the focus on intermarriage in studies of racial stratification, because income is more sensitive to non-ethnic mechanisms and because wealth data for non-black non-whites is scarce.

quantitative literature on ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic homogamy provides a theoretical model that includes non-ethnic mechanisms, which boundary theorists regard as critical for distinguishing the actual consequences of boundary-making from spurious associations resulting from the non-ethnic factors (Wimmer 2013). Last but not least, the qualitative literature on interracial intimacy identifies additional mechanisms that are distinctive to relationships that cross racial boundaries and help counter the tendency of boundary approaches for excessively de-ethnicized research designs (Bonilla-Silva 1999). I now turn to integrating the latter qualitatively identified mechanisms into the quantitatively specified model of homogamy.

Locating Boundary Processes in the Socialization and Maintenance of Endogamy

Kalmijn's synthetic explanation of intermarriage² is actually a classification of hypotheses, on the causes of "endogamy and homogamy with respect to race/ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status," into three factors that he characterizes as "complementary elements of a single theory" (1998:395, 398). These factors include both ethnic mechanisms that can be characterized as boundary processes and non-ethnic mechanisms, in particular, *the marriage market* or the pool of available candidates that sets the basic conditions for whether intermarriage is more or less likely. The critical constraint on the marriage market is relative group size, as smaller groups are less able to find endogamous partners and will have higher rates of exogamy regardless of any preference for endogamy (Blau 1977).

Within the constraints of opportunity, *the preferences of marriage candidates* serve as criteria for evaluating each other: "Potential spouses are evaluated on the basis of the resources they have to offer, and individuals compete with each other for the spouse they want most by offering their own resources in return" (1998:398). The core criteria are (1) socioeconomic resources that can be pooled to produce family economic well-being and status and (2) cultural resources that can be pooled to produce a shared lifestyle, social confirmation, and affection. Within the process of mutual evaluation, preferences "do not by themselves translate into homogamy and endogamy with respect to social characteristics" (Kalmijn 1998:400) except (1) when resources are externally

2 I generalize Kalmijn's approach to non-marital intimacy by expanding the marriage market to a broader "dating market."

correlated with group membership or (2) when partners actively use social characteristics as filters for screening potential spouses, prior to actually evaluating potential partners. In other words, the boundary-making inherent to filtering is an exception within a primarily group-neutral process of mutual evaluation.

Into this process, *third parties* other than the candidates themselves intervene with the goal of preserving “the internal cohesion and homogeneity of the group” (Kalmijn 1998:400) through two types of actions: (1) socializing the candidates with a sense of group identification in order to normalize endogamy and (2) threatening to apply sanctions, and indeed applying them, to police behavior. For Kalmijn, the family has become the most influential third party in contemporary Western societies where the state has withdrawn from policing endogamy and religious authority has declined in influence except when families choose otherwise.

Families socialize their children to prefer endogamy directly by communicating their preference for co-ethnic partners and indirectly by communicating the family’s membership in a particular ethnic group, i.e. group identification. In contrast, the qualitative literature on interracial intimacy emphasizes the role of families not only as sources of ethnocentrism but also as nodes of racial socialization that convey messages from the broader society about the relative positions of racial/ethnic groups (Bonilla Silva 2010; Dhingra 2007; Dorow 2006). For example, in Vasquez’s study of the marriage patterns of Latinos (2015), her respondents report a gendered process of family socialization wherein Latino men encountered actual or symbolic violence from the families of the white girls whom they dated in adolescence, while Latinas encountered social distancing or outright rejection from the families of the white boys they dated. Sometimes the white families directed their sanctions at Vasquez’s respondents, but at other times, the targets included white family members. Significantly, she also finds that her Latino respondents recalled their own families’ similar responses to their dating African Americans but not whites, revealing that their families drew a social boundary based on racial hierarchy and not merely ethnocentrism.

Similarly, Kalmijn treats the maintenance of endogamy as family consistency with earlier ethnocentric socialization, whereas qualitative research has identified the salience of relative group position in the reactions of not only family members but also potential partners. When dating whites, Vasquez’s respondents reported gendered racial reactions: Latino men experienced flat rejection by white women while Latinas experienced hypersexualized attention from white men (2015). In other words, Latino men encounter white

women who filter them out of their dating market (Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009), thereby maintaining the white/Latino boundary. On the other hand, Latinas encounter white men who seek to filter them into a distinct sexual market (Vasquez 2011), thereby maintaining the white/Latino boundary in their dating market. In turn, Latinos and Latinas interpreted these experiences as indicating the incompatibility of whites and Latinos and also the superiority of non-racist Latinos over racist whites as relationship partners, i.e. what Wimmer characterizes as boundary inversion or the moral reordering of a persistent boundary (2013).

In sum, the socialization of endogamy involves the communication of (1) ethnocentric boundaries by natal families, i.e. we are group A, and group A is preferred to non-A groups, and (2) relative group position, i.e. group A is preferred to group B, by both natal families and the families of potential partners. Similarly, the maintenance of endogamy involves reminders of family attitudes, additional racial socialization through the reactions of potential partners, and their own interpretations of those experiences. Whereas Kalmijn's synthesis of the literature on homogamy emphasizes the role of family ethnocentrism, qualitative research on interracial intimacy also emphasizes family racial socialization and dating experiences. One would thus expect family communication to play a critical though not exclusive role in distinguishing same-race and interracial dating histories. Racially endogamous dating histories should be primarily associated with greater family interference in their children's romantic preferences, ethnic identities, and dating practices, whereas racially exogamous dating histories should be associated with lesser family socialization and maintenance of romantic boundaries or even with active family support for transcending, blurring, or expanding boundaries.

Data and Methods

I employ data from an earlier study on the racial/ethnic identities of transracial international adoptees born in South Korea. The data are composed of life-history interviews with a sample of 55 adopted Korean Americans and 28 non-adopted Asian Americans who grew up in the West Coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington. The adopted respondents were recruited from a gender-stratified random sample of international adoption placement records, with the years of placement restricted so that respondents would be at least 25 years of age during their interviews in 2000. The non-adopted respondents were recruited first from (1) referrals from adoptee respondents to non-adoptees of similar age and gender who grew up in the same communities and

second from (2) snowball sampling among non-adoptees in the larger communities surrounding adoptees and (3) responses to calls for participation for respondents who grew up in certain communities in certain decades.

Despite the different recruitment procedures, the adoptee and non-adoptee samples are relatively similar. As intended, the non-adopted Asian Americans grew up in communities more comparable to those of the adoptees than to the communities of a nationally representative sample of Asian Americans: Whereas roughly 95% of the Asian American population lives in urban rather than rural places (Lott 2004), only 53% of the adoptee respondents and 79% of the non-adoptee respondents grew up in metropolitan areas. The adoptees range from the mid-twenties to early-fifties, and the non-adoptees range in age from the mid-twenties to mid-forties, with mean ages of 35.9 and 33.4, respectively. There is also a 2:1 female-to-male ratio among both adopted Korean Americans (37 women:18 men) and non-adopted Asian Americans (18 women:10 men), which approximates the sex-ratio in the adoptee sampling frame prior to gender stratification. That said, the adoptees are all ethnically Korean and technically 1.5 generation, whereas the non-adoptees are a pan-ethnic sample that includes not only Koreans but also Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese, who are primarily 2nd generation (U.S. born), some 1.5 generation, and a few later generation respondents. More significantly, less than half of the adoptees had completed a college degree in contrast with almost 90% of the non-adoptees.

My co-principal investigator and I based the interview questionnaires for each sample on the questionnaire used by Tuan (1998) in her study of the salience of race and ethnicity for multigenerational Chinese and Japanese Americans. We asked the respondents about the race and ethnicity of the people they had dated in high school, in early adulthood, and into later adulthood, probing for reflections on their experiences with romantic partners from different racial/ethnic groups. With respect to our positionality, we are 1.5 generation Taiwanese American non-adoptees who were raised in the Southeast and West Coast, mostly in urban areas, and who have participated in ethnic, pan-ethnic, and pan-minority organizations. Most adoptee respondents regarded us as curiosities for being similarly acculturated as themselves despite our having Asian parents, while the non-adoptee respondents largely regarded us as fellow Asian Americans despite our ethnic differences. The interviews, which ranged in duration from one hour to five hours, were audio-recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis, though field notes were also written before and after each interview. In this paper, I focus on their answers to the questions about dating and relationships while also drawing on relevant aspects of their broader life histories.

My analytic strategy was a synthesis of grounded theory with the basic logic of comparative analysis (Brady and Collier 2004; Ragin and Robinson 2009). First I coded the transcripts, compared coded text, and developed the codes into general concepts within chronological sequences (Charmaz 2006). Consistent with Timmermans and Tavory's call to substitute abduction in place of induction in grounded theory methods (2012), I then re-reviewed the literature with greater attention to the inducted concepts and sequences and refined the coding and data analysis accordingly. The primary inducted concept was the dating and relationship history of the respondents, rather than simply their current unions. To enable comparative analysis, I coded every respondent's dating history to identify the cross-case patterns that framed within-case processes, rather than only coding cases until I reached theoretical saturation. Accordingly, I classified every respondent by (1) whether they had never dated whites, had dated whites but not had relationships with them, or had relationships with one or more whites and (2) whether they had never dated other Asians, had dated Asians but not had relationships with them, or had relationships with one or more Asians. I found that some respondents had exclusively dated Asians while others had exclusively dated whites, whereas the modal group ($n=40$) had dated both whites and Asians albeit asymmetrically: Most had only dated but not had a relationship with other Asians, whereas only one had only dated but not had a relationship with whites. Furthermore, only a few had dated other non-whites, and they also did not characterize these experiences as relationships.

Following Kalmijn (1998), I re-examined this range of dating histories in terms of the socialization and maintenance of racial endogamy and identified three tracks of experience defined by the conditions that distinguished racially endogamous dating histories from racially exogamous dating histories. During childhood and adolescence, it was the racial composition of respondents' communities (predominantly white community/other community) that distinguished same-race from interracial relationship preferences, whereas during adulthood, it was the racial composition of respondents' friendship networks (Asian American network/other network) that distinguished endogamous histories from exogamous histories. I classified respondents who grew up in predominantly white communities and persisted into adulthood without Asian social networks into the empirically dominant track of "exogamy maintained" ($n=59$: 44 adoptees and 15 non-adoptees). I classified respondents who grew up in other communities and persisted into adulthood with Asian American social networks into the theoretically expected track of "endogamy maintained" ($n=9$: 3 adoptees and 6 non-adoptees). Third I classified respondents who grew

up in predominantly white communities but replaced or supplemented their non-Asian networks with a circle of Asian American friends into the third track of “endogamy emergent” ($n=15$: 8 adoptees and 7 non-adoptees). Lastly, I examined each track for boundary processes, identifying each track’s distinctive processes while considering variations along family type, gender, age, ethnicity, generation, and educational attainment.

I acknowledge certain limitations in the respondent sample: We only interviewed Asian Americans and not also their white partners, friends, or family members; thus I do not have data on the actual exchange of boundary strategies between whites and non-whites. Nevertheless, the data highlights the perceived boundary processes (Alba and Nee 2008) to which the respondents oriented their boundary strategies (Wimmer 2013). In addition, the non-random and pan-ethnic character of the non-adoptee sample, along with its smaller size, means that the analysis may not capture significant variations among Asian Americans, especially between ethnic groups. In particular, I cannot assess Bonilla-Silva’s speculation that different Asian ethnicities have different racial statuses (2010); that is, they may fall into both the honorary whites and the collective blacks of his tri-racial system. That said, his allocation of ethnic groups into strata is “heuristic rather than definitive” (2010:179), and indeed he inconsistently classifies Filipinos into both the collective black and honorary whites without comment (2010:180, 186). The limits of the non-adoptee sample are somewhat offset by their recruitment from multiple sources of referral rather than the frequently necessary reliance of qualitative research on ethnic organizations (c.f. Dhingra 2007; Nemoto 2009; Vasquez 2015). The sample’s lesser selectivity on networks and “joiners,” however, comes with a trade-off: the sample may select instead for Asian families that are less ethnically identified and thus less interested in ensuring racial endogamy. This might explain the relatively small fraction of respondents who had exclusively dated other Asians, roughly 10% in contrast with the 30% found in nationally representative data (Shiao, Kao, Joyner, and Balistreri forthcoming) especially if the missing families were more willing to immerse their children in ethnic networks during adolescence.³ In sum, my sample is better suited for examining the boundary (1) between whites and honorary whites than those (2) between honorary whites and other non-whites or (3) among Asian Americans.

3 These families might have revealed the logically remaining track of “exogamy emergent.”

The Socialization of Dating Preferences

Only a few Korean adoptees, all raised in predominantly white communities, remembered their parents' expressing racial preferences about their romantic partners. Specifically, five women were expressly forbidden from dating "inter-racially." Emily Stewart, a 27 year old mother and homemaker, recalls questioning her mother's preference that she and her sister not date blacks, Latinos, or other Asians:

[O]ne weird thing about my mom is, she didn't want me dating any guys from other ethnic groups. *She kind of treated me as if I was white.* [Emphasis mine] And I had some Asian friends that- she didn't want me dating them ... I was dating this Hispanic guy ... and she didn't want me to date him because he wasn't white. And [I thought,] "Well, what do you think I am?" It was some weird version of racial stereotyping, "I don't want you to date interracial." So, you want me to date a white guy. But that's interracial, isn't it? [My mom] said, "Well, that's different."

Emily's mother did not regard Asians besides her daughters as socially equal to whites, i.e. she maintained the white/non-white boundary by thinking of her Asian daughters as if they were white. Revealingly, she did not transcend, blur, or expand the boundary to include Asian Americans collectively, but rather only repositioned individual Asians across the boundary. For adoptees like Emily, their parents' dating preferences seemed to contradict normative principles of racial equality and colorblindness. As Linda King, a 26-year old graduate student, put it, "It was confusing because I was, you know, raised with the idea that all races are supposedly equal and you are not supposed to see color and this kind of thing."

By contrast, most adoptees did not experience their parents' racial attitudes as inconsistent with the kind of "colorblindness" that prevailed in their white communities. Indeed, most showed discomfort at the mere idea that their white parents might think about their romantic lives in racial terms. Holly Littell, a 26 year old television commercial salesperson, briefly raised the possibility that her adoptive parents influenced her to primarily date white men:

Both [my brother, also an adoptee] and I are attracted to white people ... [I] don't know why ... and [we] actually talk about this all the time ... I don't know if that has anything to do with us being raised by white- being around, you know, a white family and all that. But I think it

does, for some reason. So I think that if we were raised by Asian parents, then it would be different. And maybe- I don't know, I don't know. My parents don't push anything on us like- You know, they could care less about who we date or the color of their skin or anything.

After swerving from the possibility with "I don't know's," Holly also tries to protect her parents' reputation as non-racists, but she misses the question of why her parents decided to raise her and her brother in a predominantly white community.

In such communities, adoptees faced mixed messages about their social acceptance and encountered frequent stereotypes and assumptions about Asian people, which cued them to where Asians stood in a racial hierarchy relative to other racial groups. These stereotypes were typically based on common media depictions of Asians (c.f. Hamamoto and Liu 2000). Some drew on the model minority stereotype, i.e. smart, driven to succeed in school, and good in math, while others relied on gender specific stereotypes, i.e. being a socially awkward nerd or being good at martial arts for boys, or being exotic or submissive for girls. Although the assumptions made were usually more positive than those made about other non-whites, they threatened the respondents' individuality and reminded them of the status of Asians relative to whites. The modest intensity of these reminders is revealed in adoptee Gwen Owens' response to an incident that occurred when the now-41 year old office manager was a teenager:

It was when I got my driver's license. 'Cause, you know, you have to put your mother's name [on the application,] and my mother's name is Jade. And [the DMV agent] looks at [it] and [says], "Oh, you know, a lot of you people over there have names like that." And I go, "What do you mean [by] 'you people'?" And he says, "Well, you know ... you Oriental people." And I said, "Buddy, my mother is just as white as you are, if not more white" (laughs)! And I said, "And her mother named her Jade. She doesn't have a drop of Oriental blood in her anywhere unless I gave it to her when I bit her" (laughs)!

Notably, the success of her response depended on both her wits and her ability to reposition herself as near-white via her mother after the agent positioned her "over there" – socially far from himself. Rather than encountering a consistent "whites only" message when they stepped outside family situations, most adoptees learned that exceptional individuals like themselves could cross the

white/non-white boundary. Indeed, most adoptees found that other white families did not object to their children's dating them and indeed trusted their sons and daughters to distinguish which individuals were acceptable as dating partners.

That said, some encountered racial attitudes that made a difference and in gendered ways. Female respondents reported subtle rejections; for example, Melissa Garvey, a 29 year old chiropractor's assistant, speculated on why she had not been more popular with the opposite sex: "[M]y idea in high school was, people didn't ask me [out] because I was Asian ... All these blond hair, blue eyed girls around me and ... I didn't [just] fit what- the idea of what the guys wanted." In comparison, male respondents reported explicit rejections from white parents and white daughters. Christopher Hurley, a 51 year old train engineer, recalls "I had about two instances where- I tried to go out with this one girl and then the mother said, you know, 'I want my daughter to date, you know, her own kind.'" Even in these cases, though, white parents communicated their preferences without the displays of violence and social distancing commonly directed at blacks and Latinos.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these negative experiences did not discourage either male or female adoptees from dating whites. Regardless of whether they experienced rejection from whites, most persisted in regarding white partners as an invisible norm against which Asians were comparatively visible. As Ella Scott, a 27 year old customer service manager, quipped, "I'm not attracted to Asians. Because I'm Asian, I guess I look in the mirror and that's enough for me." In other words, she regarded Asian partners instead as "redundant" to herself. Likewise, when fellow adoptee Ryan Hilyard explores why he has little attraction to Asian women, the 29 year old internet sales representative admitted a similar feeling: "It's almost [like] I'm hitting on myself (laughs)." This indicates a level of white preference that far exceeds Wimmer's conception of boundary expansion (2013) wherein whites become acceptable alternatives to the persistent practice of co-ethnic endogamy and that is instead more consistent with recurring findings of a categorical preference for whites over Asians among intermarried Asian Americans (Chow 2000; Fong and Yung, 1995-1996; Lee 2004; Nemoto 2009).

My findings indicate that in predominantly white communities, adoptees simultaneously experienced (1) a collective distancing as racial others and (2) an individual reception as potential exceptions to expectations about Asians. In fact, I suggest that they faced a standing invitation to reposition themselves on the white side of the white/Asian boundary in the domains of both friendship and romantic relationships.

In comparison, the only adoptees who regarded other Asians as natural partners during adolescence were those raised in more diverse communities with sufficient Asian Americans for friendships. These respondents expressed dating preferences that inverted the white/non-white boundary to an ethnocentric preference for Asians over non-Asians. Brian Packard, a 27 year old technical writer, reported, "All my girlfriends have been Asian ... So either they're Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Japanese," but struggled to explain why. When questioned about the racial composition of his friends, he responds:

Interviewer: Is it maybe because ... [m]ost of your friends are-

Brian: Possibly. Most of my friends are Asian. So their friends are Asian.

Brian reasoned that it was simply normal for an Asian to prefer Asians as romantic partners and friends, even across ethnic lines since his current girlfriend is Vietnamese American. For respondents like him, dating other Asians grew out of belonging to racially bounded social networks, similar to the white networks surrounding most of the other respondents. In sum, adoptees only developed endogamous preferences when their parents raised them in more diverse communities that allowed for friendships with other Asian Americans.

I now turn to the question of their similarities with their non-adopted counterparts. Almost every non-adopted respondent spontaneously mentioned their parents in relation to their dating histories or showed greater certainty than did their adoptee counterparts when fielding questions about their families' views on race and intimacy. It was simply taken for granted that their Asian parents had clear preferences and indeed preferred that they date and marry not merely other Asians but specifically co-ethnics. As Chinese American Bobby Yep, a 44 year old food services director, put it, "I think it was always my mother's wish that I would marry within the Chinese." Furthermore, non-adoptees remembered being held to cultural expectations that their non-Asian friends did not have to follow, hearing their parents voice negative stereotypes about other Asian ethnicities and non-whites, and witnessing their parents respond to discrimination by whites. In spite of these messages, however, most non-adoptee respondents had exclusively white dating histories in adolescence. Similar to the adoptees, they also entered early adulthood with the sense that dating other Asians was an unnatural restriction, a sentiment best expressed in the prevalent view that dating other Asians actually felt incestuous. When asked about her dating history, Andrea Theanh, a 29 year old corporate human resources recruiter, describes her one experience dating

another Asian: "In my whole life I've only gone out with one Asian guy, and that was just a blind date (laughs). And I looked at him the whole time thinking he was my brother."

Like their adoptee counterparts, the only non-adoptees who entered early adulthood regarding endogamy as a norm were those raised in more diverse communities that had sufficient numbers of Asian Americans for friendships. When Viet Thai, a 29 year old Vietnamese American engineer, was asked why he primarily dated Asian women, his answer contrasts the naturalness of associating with other Asians with its interruption by internalized racism (Pyke and Dang 2003).

I just think Asian people understand each other. I don't know how to explain it ... If you ask me, I think maybe it's true for almost all Asian guys you meet that they've gone through a period of self-hate, and ... during that period ... it's like you try not to do anything Asian.

For Viet, this period ended in high school when the numbers of Asian students increased substantially, and his friends since have been predominantly Asian. By contrast, most of the non-adoptee respondents had predominantly white friends through adolescence. As a result, their parents' efforts at socialization produced an ethnocentric boundary that remained only symbolic. In sum, I found that, in contrast with the literature, the role of families in shaping their children's dating histories in adolescence was typically indirect.

The Maintenance, and Development, of Dating Practices

By the time of their interviews in adulthood, the proportion of respondents who had ever had a relationship with another Asian had almost tripled. Among both adoptees and non-adoptees, those who reported continuously dating other Asians from adolescence into adulthood, i.e. those on the "endogamy maintained" track, were respondents who had grown up in more diverse communities. They reported having had no dating experiences with whites and thus had no opportunity to experience rejection from white partners or their families. Perhaps not surprisingly, the non-adoptees within this group did not report any additional pressure from their Asian families probably because their parents felt little need to police a boundary that their children never crossed. Instead their continuously Asian networks were sufficient for maintaining endogamy.

Karen Granger, a 26 year old bookkeeper, is an adoptee who has only dated Asians, mostly Koreans, and has long had primarily Asian American friends, having grown up in a more diverse community. When asked whether she had a preference for Asians, she was at a loss to explain why:

Interviewer: Have men of other races ever approached you for a date?

Karen: Um, maybe ... Maybe I just don't pay attention (laughs).

Her answer suggests that she simply filtered non-Asians out of her dating market. When I probed whether she thought being a male adoptee would have affected her dating history, she initially speculated that in that case she might have dated white girls but then reconsidered when I asked whether the Asian males she knew in high school ever dated white girls: "No, actually no ... A few, you know, the ones who were kind of like integrated or whatever, but no, not really." It is revealing that the only Asian males she recalls dating white girls were those who were not in Asian friendship circles like hers.

In contrast, the majority of the respondents did not date Asians in either adolescence or adulthood and instead had persistently exogamous preferences, i.e. the "exogamy maintained" track. Non-adoptee Lindsay Yang, a 30 year old bookstore supervisor, described how leaving home for college brought her into contact with Asians as potential dates, whom she promptly avoided:

I was more attracted to Caucasian guys than Asian guys because I was, you know, accustomed to seeing them ... And also going from [small town] to [big city], it was like, "Wow, there are all these people that look like me. That feels weird (laughs)." Because I didn't feel comfortable being the majority ... It was kind of like ... , "Oh my gosh, I want to be the minority, you know (laughs)?" I mean, I just liked being, you know, unique.

Lindsay attributes her preference for whites to her social environment, specifically their predominance in her childhood community and the positive visibility that it gave her as one of the few Asians. Indeed, her discomfort with not being the only Asian in a dating situation suggests how much her childhood community had socialized her to being a non-white token (Kanter 1977). In brief, she was accustomed not to a collective acceptance or reclassification of Asian Americans but to whites' overlooking her Asianness, i.e. repositioning her across the white/Asian boundary.

Some, however, did have a few experiences of dating other Asians, and their narratives of dating both whites and Asians reveal how exogamy, not

endogamy, exerted a social gravity on their dating preferences well into adulthood. When adoptee Ok-kyun Hollander, a 34 year old executive assistant, moved away from the white rural community of her childhood to work in a diverse metropolitan area, she found that white men were much less shy about showing romantic interest albeit in unwanted ways.

That's ... when I got inclinations that men- I knew the kind of guys who were looking strictly to date Asian girls ... 'Cause you can- I swear you can tell. If they're coming from a mile away, you can just tell ... They don't have to even say a word ... because they just look at you funny ... And I just want to deck 'em, you know.

Unlike Vasquez's respondents (2015), however, Ok-kyun interpreted her negative experiences with white male exoticization as indicating only a deviant subset of them, whereas she interpreted her negative experiences with much fewer Asian men as indicating her incompatibility with all of them. For respondents like her, their willingness to date other Asians meant evaluating them not as individuals but rather as representatives of their race, which typically confirmed the normative status of white partners.

Between the continuously endogamous respondents and the continuously exogamous respondents was the third group that had rejected endogamy in adolescence but then entered relationships with other Asians in adulthood, i.e. the "endogamy emergent" track. These Asian Americans grew up in white communities, but unlike their continuously exogamous counterparts, they started participating in Asian American friendship circles in early adulthood, typically by seeking social exposure to other Asians as a means for exploring their ethnicity. Natalie Johnson, a 41 year old business executive, is an adoptee who recalls that despite having had an early curiosity about her Korean roots, by adolescence she felt ashamed of looking so different from others. Her attitude changed immensely, however, after she entered college where she met non-adopted Koreans and other Asian Americans.

Natalie: My freshman year, I studied Korean. Sophomore year I lived with two Koreans ... Yeah, I totally, I really got into it freshman and sophomore year ... I had a Korean boyfriend. I met a lot of Asian Americans, in my classes and stuff.

Interviewer: What do you think [was] the spark behind that [exploration]?

Natalie: I took Asian American Studies and- I think that's where I really developed pride in being Asian. It's partly in numbers ... And meeting so

many people who were, you know, they were never ashamed of it, and I don't know if they were teased or not, but it just gave me a lot of pride.

Natalie regards her college experience as a counterweight to an earlier stigma about being Asian, a process grounded in her shift from a predominantly white community to an Asian American social network.

The college experience of non-adoptee Sandra Chan, a 31 year old academic advisor, provides a similar illustration of how ethnic exploration could lead to new social networks. Sandra shifted from being "afraid of all the other Asians because there were so many of them (laughs)" to "[m]y junior year [when] I was all about yellow power (laughs)." Revealingly, she remembers the ambivalence of white friends as well as her resentment that they could not empathize with her new sense of self and U.S. society.

Interviewer: Did you wind up dropping all your friends from before, then?

Sandra: Yeah. And they were all hurt ... They couldn't figure out why I had become so involved ... And I thought, "You guys are all so unaware. And you're my enemy" (laughs).

An implicit yet critical ingredient of her resentment was her sense that her friends seemed to prefer the "pre-exploration" Sandra that had been ashamed of her ancestry. In the language of Erving Goffman's conception of stigma (1963), she resented that her former friends preferred that she continue to *cover*, or minimize the characteristic that diminished her social status. In brief, she realized that they preferred her to remain "colorblind" to her own experiences and also, I suggest, to their whiteness (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

Rather than directly changing her dating preferences, however, her ethnic explorations placed her in networks where she met her future husband: "I wasn't even attracted to him at first. (laughs). I met him at a [pan-Asian] potluck at the very beginning of the year. [But] he was different. He was ... all about being a macho guy (laughs) ... That intrigued me because I wasn't used to that kind of Asian American guy." Like other female respondents on this track, she characterizes her husband as distinct from a stereotypically effeminate Asian man and thus an exception to her earlier preference for white partners. Respondents like Sandra shifted to dating endogamously because they pursued ethnic exploration that expanded their perception of natural partners to include "exceptional" Asians.

In sum, as in adolescence, the influence of families in adulthood was indirect and largely occurred through the earlier choice of childhood community.

Instead, most respondents who had had relationships with other Asians did not experience endogamy in adulthood as something maintained from adolescence by either family interference or white rejection or exoticization. Instead, they experienced it as (1) indistinct from Asian American networks that they have had since their adolescence in a racially diverse community, or as (2) a side-effect of ethnic identity development in early adulthood. Behind both tracks to endogamy was a common participation in friendship networks that normalized Asians as dating partners; however, unless their participation began in adolescence, they still engaged in boundary repositioning, this time by recasting their Asian partners as racial exceptions.

Conclusion

My analysis of the dating histories of Asian Americans illustrates how the racial composition of residential communities and friendship networks shapes the meaning of honorary whiteness in post-civil rights America. First, I found that whether Asian Americans grew up in predominantly white or more diverse communities had a dramatic influence on whether they developed racially exogamous or endogamous dating preferences. Only a few of the white parents of Korean adoptees explicitly communicated racial dating preferences; nevertheless, their non-white children exclusively dated whites unless they also chose to raise them in more diverse communities with sufficient numbers of Asians for their children's friendship networks. I found the same community effect among the non-adopted Asian Americans, even though their families communicated clear preferences for co-ethnic in-laws and socialized their children with a sense of ethnic group identity regardless of community context. Adoptees ironically registered the prospect of dating other Asians as a lost opportunity for adding something "different" to their lives, whereas non-adoptees registered racial endogamy as a violation of the incest taboo. Besides the normative preference for romantic love, these distinct perceptions of endogamy also share the assumption that whites are inherently more heterogeneous than Asians. Therefore, the socialization of racially endogamous preferences requires a critical mass of co-ethnic or same-race peers to normalize the perception of Asians as discrete individuals.

Second, I found that whether Asian Americans had a circle of Asian American friends in early adulthood had a strong influence on whether their dating histories included Asian partners. Those who gained new Asian American networks, especially during college, shifted track from exogamous to endogamous practices, suggesting that sociologists should expand our understanding of

dating and relationship practices from the idiom of “maintenance” to that of “development.” As in adolescence, the development of racially endogamous practices also requires a critical mass of co-ethnic or same-race peers. Perhaps not surprisingly, the lower rate of college participation among the adoptees also meant that they were less likely than non-adoptees to encounter this critical mass or its associated shift from exogamy to endogamy.

This study illustrates the usefulness of taking a comparative approach to studying interracial intimacy. The comparison of same-race and interracial dating histories empirically confirms the important role of predominantly white communities found by earlier studies (e.g. Chong 2013) that focused exclusively on the intermarried and thus selected on the dependent variable. The comparison also identifies the critical role of social networks as a mechanism for both the socialization of racial preferences in adolescence and the development of racial dating practices in adulthood. Future research should examine whether more balanced friendship networks lead to integrated dating histories and whether these practices represent forms of racial acceptance that do not require the treatment of individuals as exceptions to their racial/ethnic groups. We should also examine how dating preferences and practices develop when the racial compositions of communities and networks are substantially different.

This study also illustrates the usefulness of a boundary approach for understanding honorary whiteness. Inconsistent with Wimmer’s conceptions of boundary expansion and collective repositioning (2013), my respondents neither (1) expand their range of acceptable romantic partners to include both Asians and whites nor (2) become reclassified as whites. Instead, I find that when Asian Americans practice exogamy, they socially distance themselves from other Asians, a strategy of individual repositioning that emerges from their socialization in white communities and their maintenance of white friendship networks into early adulthood. Consistent with Tuan’s (1998) and Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) conceptions of honorary whiteness, I find that both the white/honorary white boundary and the white/other non-white boundaries remain social boundaries for Asian Americans. Similar to the experiences of African Americans and Latinos in white neighborhoods (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Vasquez 2015), desegregation for Asian Americans often means integration into white spaces; however, my respondents uniquely find that individual acceptance in white networks also brings acceptance as dating partners. Future research should examine the process of community admission, friendship acceptance, and acceptance as dating partners for different racial/ethnic groups in predominantly white communities, with attention to the specific boundary processes that characterize interracial acceptance.

My core finding of the importance of friends in my respondents' dating histories provides an important refinement to Kalmijn's three-factor theory of endogamy (1998). Depending on their racial composition, these social networks could (1) convert the dating market from a non-ethnic constraint on opportunities into a racial preference for filtering potential partners, (2) either reinforce or frustrate their Asian families' efforts at socializing group identification and endogamous preferences, or (3) contradict the prevailing stereotypes of Asians, especially in predominantly white communities. In this light, third party "interference" in dating histories is actually interference with other third parties in an asymmetric field of racial/ethnic relations.

Without this shift in perspective, the white parents of Korean adoptees appear to be racially open in their relative non-interference with their children's dating and relationships, whereas the Asian parents of non-adopted Asian Americans appear to be ethnically closed with their explicit preferences and cultural expectations. I would instead argue that the demographic and cultural dominance of whites makes family interference largely unnecessary. In other words, interracial intimacy occurs not when the state, church, and family fail to interfere with "naturally exogamous" preferences but when predominantly white communities and peer networks have greater influence than Asian American networks and families, whereas same-race intimacy only occurs when Asian American networks and families have greater influence than the mainstream racial culture. In sum, the effect of racial hierarchy on dating histories is mediated by the balance of third-party influences that constitute the racial/ethnic architecture of dating markets (Fligstein 2001).

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