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## Exploring Racial Injustice Conversations in Intergenerational Asian American Households Following The Death of George Floyd: A Case Study

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EXPLORING RACIAL INJUSTICE CONVERSATIONS IN INTERGENERATIONAL  
ASIAN AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF GEORGE  
FLOYD: A CASE STUDY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Art

by

Jasmine Nicole Lopez Itliong

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING RACIAL INJUSTICE CONVERSATIONS IN INTERGENERATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD: A CASE STUDY

by

Jasmine Nicole Lopez Itliong

This study explores intergenerational racial injustice conversations in Asian American households by focusing on conversations that occurred following the death of George Floyd. Asian American historical oppression, Eastern versus Western ideologies, and intergenerational communication conflict present several challenges for navigating conversations about racial injustice among family members. Given the important role of family in facilitating identity and fostering support, this study also considers the implications of mental health and well-being of Asian Americans associated with their ability to communicate about racial injustice. Informed by Racial Triangulation Theory and Family Communication Patterns Theory, four in-depth interviews were conducted, along with a self-exploration, among first and second generation self-identified Asian Americans living with intergenerational family members. Participants either attempted to or engaged in racial injustice conversations following the death of George Floyd. Findings point to present day racial tension and communication patterns that impact successful navigation of racial injustice conversations in intergenerational Asian American families and provide potential resources to promote mental health and well-being.

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To my dad, who stepped up despite losing our rock, to make sure we continue forward.

And to my mom, who didn't need me to prove anything to her to be proud of me.

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## **Introduction**

When George Floyd's name became the topic of conversation all over the world and on every social media platform, conversations around the dinner table began to focus on how family members felt regarding current racial injustices. Discussions that were once filled with news updates on the 2020 COVID-19 shifted towards how to address topics around systemic racism and the skepticism of the U.S. justice system. While many households generated these discussions about civil changes, unlawful killings towards Blacks and Black Americans, and systemic racial oppression, some Asian American households avoided these topics altogether.

Asian Americans have held a long history of racial oppression that challenged their abilities to stand alongside civil rights movements and create hesitation allying with Black Americans, such as high racial tensions following the Vietnam War and subjugation of Asian families in Japanese internment camps during the Second World War (Nittle, 2021). Even after decades of Asian migration to the U.S., discrimination towards Asians continued. Following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and subsequent ideologies behind "yellow peril," Asians were considered a threat to the American economy and were thought to bring competition and disease to the U.S. (Lee, 2016). Racial oppression expressed towards Asian communities during migration was largely attributed to the prominent physical differences such as the shapes of the eyes or the color of the skin (Wang, 1981). Even after the removal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the allowance for Asians to become citizens, racial oppression continued to thrive in American society, dubbing Asians as the "forever foreigner" and promoting the belief

that full citizenship was impossible (Trieu & Lee, 2018). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a resurgence in racism towards Asian Americans due to the origin of the virus (Kwong, 2020). As such, Asian Americans continue to face discrimination and oppression even though many Asian American families want to believe their racial inequalities ended well after migration, evidenced by the 1960 Asian American Civil Rights movement (Sue et al., 2007).

A feature of Asian American households that sets them apart from Black and Black-American households and arguably complicates racial equality beliefs is the Model Minority Myth (Wing, 2007). The Model Minority Myth refers to the belief that being in a higher position of economic wealth and success comes from accelerated assimilation to Western ideologies and the status quo. In the U.S., the Model Minority Myth created the mirage that Asian Americans were above the racial injustices held upon Blacks and Black Americans. Unfortunately, the Model Minority mentality acts to suppress conversations related to racial injustices towards Blacks and Black Americans within Asian American households out of fear of losing their place and social status in the U.S. (Chew, 1994; Chou, 2008; Chun, 1980; Wu & Wang, 1996).

Though assimilation and submission to the Model Minority was ideal for Asians to feel included in America, Whites and Blacks believed them to fit in their own category, excluding them from being an American citizen but also from being part of minority groups. Racial Triangulation Theory reflects this phenomenon, such that Asians are triangulated within the field of racial positions in relation to Whites and Blacks, being neither insiders nor outsiders (Kim, 1999; Xu & Lee, 2013). This ideology suggests that

Asian Americans experience a unique racialized identity that can be challenging to navigate, especially when it comes to collaborating and fighting against racial injustice yet unable to feel as if they belong to any group.

Another challenge affecting communication about racial injustices in Asian American households, predominately in intergenerational families, is the differences in generational beliefs and expectations of communication behaviors. Family Communication Patterns Theory suggests that all families follow a dominant communication pattern (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). In Asian American families, many nurture the importance of family hierarchy, where those who are valued as authority figures are often seen as the ones to dictate whether an issue is considered important to address amongst everyone (Kim, 1985). Most immigrant grandparents and parents raise their children to follow the lineage and traditions that emphasizes being respectful and submissive to elders (Kim, 1985). Potentially in opposition to the assumptions of Family Communication Patterns Theory, the children and grandchildren of immigrant Asians with Asian families, also known as the first and second generations of those who migrated to America, typically begin to adopt the western ideologies and values that ultimately challenge traditional Asian beliefs, often resulting in miscommunication and conflict between intergenerational family members. Given the relative apprehension towards discussing racial injustices, if elder family members oppose conversations related to racial inequality, younger generations may feel unable to communicate concerns and with no outlet and struggle to cope with the recent events pertaining to racial injustices.

Previous research suggests that the inability to discuss distressing information could have negative impacts on individual well-being (Lee et al., 2009). When individuals feel unable to communicate their beliefs or express differences in opinion with family members, individuals may feel a loss of cohesion and familial identity (Panelo, 2010). For foreign-born and U.S.-born Asian families, familial identity and cohesion is a big part of the culture reflecting collectivism, where all decisions are based around what benefits the family before the individual (Chang et al., 2013). When Asian family members become distanced and subsequently lose their sense of identity and familial cohesion due to the denial of these longstanding ideologies, the results often lead to poorer mental well-being (Nguyen et al., 2015). This inability to communicate about distressing topics among family members has the potential then to negatively impact individual mental health including heightened anxiety and symptoms of depression (Horstman et al., 2018). In addition, conversational features common in Asian American households, such as lack of open communication and high levels of conflict, are associated with poorer mental health commonly identified among younger generations in intergenerational Asian American households (Lee et al., 2012).

Taken together, recent events coupled with historical racism towards Asians and the challenges of intergenerational communication in Asian American families point to reasons why conversations related to racial injustice may be difficult to navigate and may not even occur. The inability to communicate about concerns related to recent events of racial injustices may incite or exacerbate anxiety and/or depressive symptoms. Thus, the goal of this work is to explore the experiences of those attempting to discuss racial

injustices within their intergenerational Asian American households, taking into consideration how racial triangulation and communication patterns may impact the ability to engage in these conversations, as well as the potential implications on perceived mental health.

As principal investigator of this study, it is important to acknowledge my personal relationship to this work. I am a second-generation Asian American and a Communication Studies graduate student at San Jose State University. Racial representation and activism are important to me on a personal and academic level. I have experienced my own struggles to communicate racial injustices with intergenerational family members in the wake of George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement. These interpersonal communication challenges inspired me to learn more about other Asian American intergenerational family experiences related to racial injustice. As such, I offer my own reflections in this research to accompany those of my participants. Reflecting on my own experiences presents my positionality towards this research and adds to an underrepresented group's growing voices in family communication research. My experiences will be analyzed alongside those of the participants, grounded in theory and evidence.

## Literature Review

In order to understand the challenges surrounding discussions about racial injustices within Asian American intergenerational families, it is important to review how racism is defined, the various types of racism that exist, and how racial injustices are broadly communicated in society.

### Defining Racism

Grosfoguel (2016) defines *racism* as a hierarchy made to separate those who are inferior to those who are superior through political, cultural, and economic means and reproduction. Racism has been brought up to objectify and categorize a group of people, mainly people of color, and allow those who hold power to keep it. Though direct racism using violence or fueled by hatred is seen as direct discrimination towards marginalized people and taboo in today's day and age, different types of racism continue to decorate society in different ways.

*Racial ignorance* stems from the idea that if one does not experience direct racism or has not been aware of it being done to others, then they are unable to understand or believe racism exists (DiAngelo, 2011). The divide between White Americans and people of color is often incriminated in the subtle thoughts of a perceived separation between "them and me" or the belief that a person of color is similar to any White American person struggling today. This kind of racism allows those who have not seen or experienced discrimination to change the focus from the traumas of racial injustices to their warped sense of equality.

These ideologies are consistent with the term *cultural racism*, where cultural practices are seen as justifying racism. Cultural racism gives White Americans an advantage to find dissimilarities in minority groups, whether racial, ethnic, or cultural, and endorse subtle racial remarks by defining the remarks as cultural “differences”, such as calling Asians “Orientals” (Bonilla-Silva, 2005). This pushes those who are willfully ignorant of society’s problems of racial injustices to find a new way to preach their prejudices and still be considered unproblematic. Whether or not one is willfully ignorant to the need for change, these ideologies of ignoring the difficulties Blacks and Black Americans face are still prominent and practiced in society.

*Racial injustice*, a more defined branch of racism, looks at inequality from a political and social standpoint. Racial injustice is reflective of *systemic racism*. Systemic racism, where racism is found hindering different systems within society (Young, 2011), looks at what racism in all major societal institutions has become- a reality of practiced bigotry and prejudice (Feagin, 2013). Some examples of systemic racism can be found anywhere, such as in education where the school system teaches kids about history depicting Black Americans as slaves or people of color as foreigners (Gienapp, 2021). Systemic racism has continued to hinder and suppress marginalized people and promote inequality for those unable to speak out due to fears of losing their jobs, or worse, their lives. As such, systemic racism fosters racial injustice, where discrimination based on race is high, but the ideas of influence based on race are considered absent in the product of appeasing to the interests of whiteness, or the white frameworks infused in societal institutions (Coker, 2003; Feagin & Elias, 2013; Hanson & Hanson, 2006).

## **Societal Efforts to Communicate about Racial Injustice**

Today, the conversation about racial injustice is broadcast across all aspects of society; celebrities, politicians, teachers, and family members of all ages, both locally and abroad, are advocating against racial injustice. Actor and musical artist Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino, is among those widening the path for conversations about how the U.S. addresses racism with his song, “This Is America.” The music video provides a representation of racism by lending portrayals of historical events and media depictions of Blacks and Black Americans today, highlighting the 49% increase in acts of violence towards people of color since 2015 (Supratman & Wahyudin, 2019).

Similarly, scholars such as Yeboah (2020) are identifying new ways to bring attention to racial injustice. Using the works of her production to portray racial trauma experienced by Blacks and Black Americans, Yeboah (2020) portrays the voices of four women who have lost family members to police brutality, and follows the performance with the question: “what are we going to do about it now?” Yeboah’s production highlights the effects of systemic racism in police brutality. Her performance and research consider how a system made to protect its people has become something Blacks and Black Americans generally fear, leading them to live under the guise of guilty until proven innocent. With the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Ma’Khia Bryant, and many others as a result of police brutality and systemic racism, racial injustice continues to be an important topic of conversation.

Another effort to advocate against racial injustice is the Black Lives Matter movement, which began following the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was

fatally killed by a police officer in 2012. The movement was founded by three Black-American women who created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media platforms, stating that the world does not protect its Black folks within all systems and that Black lives are constantly targeted for racial discrimination and hatred (Carney, 2016). Though the Black Lives Matter campaign has been a prominent force pertaining to social justice issues in the U.S. since its inception, George Floyd's death became the catalyst for many people to acknowledge racial injustices and recognize that they cannot be ignored. Large gatherings all over the world were held to protest the unlawful killings of George Floyd as well as Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others who recently died due to police brutality and a failed justice system that ignored requests for police reforms. These protests were broadcast across media platforms demanding racial equality in the justice system, specifically when it came to law enforcement. Protests occurred in over 60 countries on almost every continent, and continue to occur, despite the worldwide pandemic that incited an emergency shutdown in March 2020 (Dave et al., 2020; Isaacs et al., 2020). The push for change demanded a call-to-action demonstrated through rallies, petitions, social media postings, graffiti artworks, and engagement in difficult conversations about racial injustice held between friends and families. These events become important and relevant for conversations within Asian American households to support and ally justice for Black Americans, especially during a time when Asians and Asian Americans have become a prime target due to a rise of Xenophobia and hate crimes.

## **Racism and Asian Americans**

Foreign-born and U.S.-born Asians have often turned to silence as a response to racial injustice due to histories of racism and backlash. Despite past generations desire to assimilate and adhere to the social hierarchy influenced by the Model Minority Myth, many Asian Americans are advocating against the Model Minority notion for both their cultures, and other people of color, demanding equal representation for all.

### ***Historical Racism***

As described earlier, Asian families have migrated to the U.S. for centuries and are part of the largest immigrant group to date. While looking for the chance to experience the “American Dream”, many Asian immigrants were confronted by direct racism, discrimination due to their physical features, through acts of hatred and violence (Wu & Wang, 1996). Asian immigrants were ineligible to be citizens and often referred to as animals, with continued discrimination in the years leading up to the Asian American Civil Rights Movement (Lee, 2015). Due to the extensive years of abuse towards Asian immigrants, submission and assimilation towards Western ideologies became key to survival; a lesson taught to many first- and second-generation Asian family members to ensure a safe and secure future (Lee, 2015).

An example of the longstanding racial tensions in the U.S. towards Asians dates back to the 1850’s during the growth of the Transcontinental Railroad that was built from 1863-1869, where the U.S. brought workers from overseas, especially workers from China (An, 2016). This immigration effort promised financial stability for Chinese men working to provide for their families back at home. However, many of those recruited

were forced into labor camps without regards to safety, residence permanence, and health (Eng, 2001). Despite the discrimination, torment, and hardship, over 90% of Chinese men successfully built almost the entire Western half of the Pacific Railway (Chang, 2019; Maniery, 2004), supporting the U.S.'s national growth for decades to come.

Chinese immigrants were not the only Asians who faced discrimination in the U.S. In 1942, Chinese and many other Asians were forcefully ostracized and put into Japanese internment camps after Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor in World War II (Hirasuna, 2013; Maniery, 2004). Despite many Japanese-Americans trying to start a new life within the U.S. and having little-to-no ties to the war with Japan, U.S. forced Japanese-immigrants and Japanese-Americans to "relocation" camps as a means of a military necessity (Maniery, 2004). Japanese families lost their homes and were forced into hard labor, tormented and starved solely due to their ethnicity and their cultural backgrounds, and made to believe they were "dangerous" and "aliens" in comparison to other U.S. citizens. Within the camps, Japanese-Americans were asked a series of questions towards their loyalty to the U.S., indirectly coercing Japanese-Americans to deny their culture and ethnicity in order to live as a free American citizen (Hirasuna, 2013). When the Supreme Court ruled the decision to remove all "relocation" camps in 1945, many Japanese families were able to start anew, but the history and experiences within the camps contributed to generations of Asians to feel the need to assimilate quietly and as quickly as possible.

After years of discrimination and violence against Asian Americans and the success of the first Civil Rights Movement, Asian Americans found their voice to speak out

against racism and the need for equality that led to the Asian American Civil Rights Movement in 1960 (Wei, 2010). The rise for Civil Rights pushed many Asian Americans to realize commonalities between themselves and Black Americans and demanded justice for themselves and their families within the U.S. (Wei, 2010). The movement brought Asian injustices to light, with the end of the Vietnam War, the need to pay back those who suffered from the internment camps, and for greater diversity in education, such as ethnic studies (Nittle, 20221; Wei, 2010). Though the movement was small and mainly active among younger Asian American generations, the effort created a big impact in many Asian communities for the need to fight for equal rights.

Amidst civil rights efforts, systemic racism against Asian Americans continues to be a major problem for foreign-born and U.S.-born Asians. Asians and Asian Americans have been discriminated against in the workplace due to stereotypes and prejudices like the belief that, if they are unable to sound American, they would be difficult to work with (Museus & Truong, 2013). Other discriminations Asians and Asian Americans have felt include the need to change their names due to the struggles of pronunciation by non-Asian colleagues or the push to assimilate to Western food due to the differences in smell and taste (Museus & Truong, 2013). Recently, the rise of systemic racism toward Asian and Asian Americans have grown due to the pandemic, where hatred and hostility have become poignant within U.S. institutions. Asians and Asian Americans have been blamed for the closure of jobs and the rapid death rate, and because of the racist accusations, some Asians and Asian Americans felt they had no choice but to leave their own place of employment (Gardner et al., 2021).

Throughout history, the experiences many Asian-immigrants and Asian Americans faced were often filled with racism, hatred, and violence due to their cultural and ethnic background, their physical features, or the decisions made by their homelands that continue to affect their lives today. For these reasons, many Asians felt the need to assimilate in hopes of living a safer and healthier life in the U.S. These efforts contributed to a perceived Model Minority identity that may have helped Asians feel included within American society. However, it may have also suppressed the ability to freely speak out against racism. The next section considers the Model Minority Myth phenomenon in more detail.

### ***Model Minority Myth***

As more Asian immigrants perceived the need to assimilate to the Western ideologies of the U.S. a stereotype began to form among White Americans towards Asian immigrants: The Model Minority Myth (Lee, 1996). Standing as a basis for racial stereotypes, The Model Minority Myth became a framework for people of color to achieve and allow themselves to be systemized depending on their hard work and acceptance of assimilation (Poon et al., 2016). The Model Minority Myth became a passage for many White Americans to racially profile and allow indirect racism (such as colorblind racism, systemic racism, and racial ignorance) upon other people of color based on their standards of achievement and growth, which stems from Europe's Middleman Model Minority (Poon et al., 2016). Though Asian immigrants may have found this stereotype to be forthcoming in the success of their migration and an

acceptable path for future generations, many first- and second-generation Asian Americans viewed this stereotype to be oppressive (Lee, 1996).

The Model Minority became an excuse for White Americans to have control over a racial group and use them as an example for Blacks and Black Americans. The discrediting of another group's struggles of racial oppression became a way to rate hardships in the U.S. and allowed for *colorblind racism* (defined as a branch of ignorance towards a person of color that removes historical discrimination and racism, implying everyone is treated equally and fairly) to exist (Bonilla-Silva, 2005; Madea, 2005; Poon et al., 2016). Asians were placed on a pedestal above other marginalized groups through the Model Minority Myth, separating them from Blacks and Black Americans that facilitated a socio-political status in the hierarchy of society. The Model Minority Myth acceptance resulted in perceptions that Asians were not associated with the racial struggles of Blacks and Black Americans, thereby fostering ignorance to various racial injustices (Edmonds & Killen, 2009; Kohatsu et al., 2000). As violence continued to rise with hate crimes and incidents towards Asians and Blacks in recent years, the expectations for Asians as the Model Minority have become unclear. As a result, many Asian Americans are left feeling like "perpetual foreigners" (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, n.d., as cited in Zhang et al., 2021), which suggests Asians will never be able to fully assimilate and be wholly accepted as an American.

Other Asian immigrants subscribed to the Model Minority Myth mentality to the extent that they believed to be in direct competition with other minorities and would disassociate themselves from other minorities to benefit themselves, especially during

current events related to racial injustices (Smith et al., 2017). This social stereotype continues to play a role in Asian Americans' beliefs of not being held to the same standards as other marginalized groups due to the pretense created by White Americans (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As many Asian Americans continued to subscribe to the ideals of the Model Minority Myth, conversations of racial injustices were not viewed as a priority and often ignored.

### ***Racial Triangulation Theory***

One framework that may help to understand how the Model Minority Myth impacts racial injustice conversations in intergenerational Asian American households is Racial Triangulation Theory. While the Model Minority Myth focuses on the perception of Asians in the U.S. based on social expectations, Racial Triangulation Theory introduces the perspective of how White- and Black Americans view Asians and their roles within society. Racial Triangulation Theory looks at the ways in which Asian Americans are marginalized due to a societal need to distinguish between Blacks and Whites. Specifically, Asian Americans struggle to identify with the White America persona while trying to navigate associations with people of color who have felt injustices as part of being a minority group, namely Black Americans (Kim, 1999). Blacks and Black Americans have witnessed the societal rise of Asians, linked to the Model Minority Myth that White Americans have created, thus believing Asian Americans are unable to empathize to their racial issues, despite the similar backgrounds both ethnicities share. Due to these perceptions, Asians often fail to truly identify with either group, thus becoming a foreigner in both areas.

Racial Triangulation Theory operates on two dimensions, Whites or White Americans and Black or other people or color. Whites or White Americans have held the standard of the “superior” dimension in society and Blacks, or Black Americans are on the opposite dimension, where they are seen as the “inferior” race and ethnicity (Kim, 1999). Racial Triangulation Theory states that Asians are set to be multidimensional, where they are neither part of the “superior” or “inferior” dimensions. Due to the belief that Asians play a part in perpetuating the Model Minority, Blacks and Black Americans often feel Asians are part of the “superior” dimension, whereas Whites believe Asians to have the “perpetual foreigner” image that causes them to believe Asians are part of the “inferior” dimension. This perceived ostracizing from both groups towards Asians may help to explain the avoidance around discussions of current racial injustices.

Racial Triangulation Theory also considers that Asians are more susceptible to accepting the differences between themselves and Black Americans as defined by Whites and White Americans. Asians have pushed for assimilation and allowed for the Model Minority Myth to represent them, even though foreign-born and U.S.-born Asians continue to be discriminated against according to societal standards subscribed by Whites and White Americans (Tawa et al., 2013).

Racial triangulation has been used in previous studies to show that the single dimension held between Whites and Blacks do not allow a difference between the marginalized few, grouping all people of color to be one and the same (Xu & Lee, 2013). Studies also show that within this divide, stereotypes play a substantial role in determining where people “belong” on the line of division. Other studies have presented

racial triangulation as the “triangulation threat”, where the theory points out power and oppression held between both Asians and Blacks, and forces Asians to believe that if they do not fit the stereotypical problems and oppressions that Blacks and Black Americans feel, then they are not one of them and are considered the “model minority” (Lee & Outten, 2020; Tawa et al., 2013). Taken together, Racial Triangulation Theory will be used to explore whether reinforcing structures of the Model Minority Myth are present in participant experiences that could continue to hinder racial injustice conversations.

### ***Current Racism***

Another important consideration of this research is the increase of racism, particularly hate crimes, towards Asian Americans amidst the current racial justice movement. In 2020, the COVID-19 virus became one of the prime igniters for current hatred and racism towards Asians in the U.S. President Trump announced the nickname of the virus as the “Chinese Virus” when virus’ origins were identified as a small province in China (Litam, 2020). Asian immigrants and Asian Americans all over the nation were being targeted and terrorized with non-stop microaggressions, fits of violence, and propaganda (Croucher et al., 2020; Devakuma et al., 2020). Racial slurs continued to escalate following the acceptance of the “Chinese Virus” nickname by President Trump, and the declaration that the nickname was not considered a racial slander towards the Asian American community. For many, *xenophobia*, or fear of the other, became a societal response to the pandemic. As a result, racial trauma among Asian Americans and their family members became prevalent (Litam, 2020). In March-June 2020 alone, “more than 2,100 anti-Asian hate incidents related to COVID-19 were reported across the country”

(Donaghue, 2020), and the numbers continue to rise as the pandemic reaches the one-year mark.

Violence towards Asians have risen since the start of pandemic (Gonzales, 2021). Even more recently, in the beginning of 2021, hate crimes and violence against Asian Americans became national news. An 84-year-old Thai man died after being attacked in San Francisco, CA; a 91-year-old Asian man was shoved to the ground in Oakland, CA; a 64-year-old woman was robbed in San Jose, CA; a 61-year-old Filipino man was slashed across the face in New York City; and a Filipino U.S. Navy veteran was killed by police following a mental health crisis in Antioch, CA (Chan & Amerlash, 2021; Kaur, 2021; Yancey-Bragg, 2021). Due to the recent violent attacks towards Asian people, Asian communities have come forth, pleading with authorities to address these racist acts, acts that are reflective of the “Yellow Peril” era, where Asians, (specifically Chinese) were often depicted as villains in media (Kaur, 2021; Shim, 1998). Though reports have been filed on Anti-Asian racism, many cases are turned away or are not classified as such (Gonzales, 2021). Many Asian Influencers on social media platforms are also speaking up against the current rise of crime, and demanding justice for these crimes. Instagram user, David Yi, whose Instagram name is @seoulcialite with 15.8K followers, posted a call to action that generated over 1,765 reposts and shares: “For far too long Asian Americans have been told they are the Model Minority, and they have proximity to whiteness. Which is a dangerous excuse to mean that violence against our bodies isn’t considered racist. It excuses those who harm us as doing so not being of anti-Asian hate or sentiments” (Yi, 2021). In light of recent attacks on Asian communities,

#StopAsianHate was adopted across media platforms, where celebrities, influencers, branding companies, and the fashion industry have stepped up to advocate an end to Asian hate crimes and incidents (Gonzales, 2021). The hashtag was co-founded in 2011 by Cynthia Choi, who is also a co-director of Chinese for Affirmative Action, to allocate for more coverage on a topic that is generally overlooked by news coverage and those within the justice system (Gonzales, 2021; Memesita, 2021).

### ***Asian American Activism in Support of Black Lives Matter***

Though historically Asian households have often been silent about racial injustices towards marginalized people (Alvarez et al., 2006), specifically Blacks and Black Americans, many Asian American youth that are first or second generation have begun to address the racial disparities highlighted by George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement. As more Asian Americans began to embrace the Western ideologies of individualization, their opinions on racial inequalities and social justice also started to grow (Merseeth, 2018). Ho (2020) connects her Asian American roots of racism with Anti-Black racism, acknowledging that Asians and Asian Americans have a power to stand for those who are unable to, and that the problems Black Americans face are no different from what Asians have historically felt. Leroy (2017), another Asian American activist scholar addressing racial injustices, argues the need for more Asian Americans to take on the responsibility to fight against police brutality and the need for change within Asian familial households, namely in terms of promoting open dialogue related to racial injustices. Leroy (2017) suggests that progressive Asian American generations have the

power to address both Asian households and the broader U.S. on an important stance: Asian Americans and Black Americans are fighting the same fight against racism.

Following the need to fight against racism and the rise of attacks on Asian communities, various activism efforts have begun in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and racism towards Blacks and Black Americans. The hashtags #Asians4BlackLivesMatter and #StopAsianHate have spurred efforts to call out systemic racism. #Asians4BlackLives began in Oakland when police murdered Eric Garner. The Asian community in Oakland and beyond rose up to offer their support. The hashtag pointed to the Asian and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community's recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement and "by recognizing that AAPI was greatly influenced by Black struggles for liberation, A4BL [Asian 4 Black Lives] returns to the roots of the Asian American social formation and its debt to Black liberation movements" (Asians For Black Lives, n.d.). While these hashtag movements have inspired some Asian Americans to speak out against the racial disparities and injustices happening in America, many still struggle to voice concerns within their own community, particularly among elder immigrant family members in intergenerational households.

With the death of George Floyd, the reigniting of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the rapid rise of Asian hate crimes, Asian Americans are pushed to question where their loyalty stands in the fight against racial injustice. As such, this study explores how Asian American intergenerational families perceive their own racial identity when navigating racial injustice conversations following the death of George Floyd and considers how these perceptions might impact the ability to engage in these difficult

conversations on racial injustice. To guide this exploration, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ1:** How does racial triangulation manifest in attempts to communicate about racial injustice in intergenerational Asian American households?

### **Characteristics of Intergenerational Asian American Families**

With the push to assimilate amidst a history of racial discrimination and violence, Asian immigrants have largely survived under the pretense that being silent reduces their chances of being discriminated against (Kim, 2007). However, rates of acculturation and assimilation have led to a tension between the beliefs of Asian immigrants and U.S.-born Asians, where Eastern ideologies are challenged by Western views within a single household.

#### ***Eastern Vs. Western Values and Ideologies***

Foreign-born Asian parents teach their young children to believe in the hierarchy of respect when it comes to their elders, to demonstrate obedience and submissiveness (Kim, 1985). Similarly, Children of U.S.-born Asians are taught at home about their culture of origin and are expected to uphold customary traditions and values (Kim, 1985). This parenting style, often known as the directive style, functions on the belief that families demand children to be docile, polite, honor family, and respect elders without question (Baumrind et al., 2010). Yet, once children enter a U.S. Western-based school system, exposure to mainstream American culture frequently conflicted with what was taught at home, often resulting in challenges to customary beliefs (Ying et al., 1999). U.S.-born Asians have found themselves surrounded by a society that thrives on

individualism and emphasizes self over others, creating a wedge between intergenerational familial values (Kim et al., 2017; Park & Kim, 2008).

This wedge between values learned and taught are often the main source of confusion and miscommunication within Asian American and Asian immigrant families, often resulting in heightened levels of conflict (Lee & Zhou, 2004). Asian immigrants are more inclined to accept a conventional value system that mainly focuses on family status and the inclusivity of family members. Through a collectivist lens, family recognition is based on accomplishments and respect, being humble to elder's wishes, and deferring all decisions to those considered older and wiser (Ying et al., 1999). On the other hand, younger Asian American Western-influenced values are based solely on what they decide for themselves, including education or career choice, marriage, and even family expectations (Anh et al., 2008). The more control and restriction Asian immigrants place upon their offspring to conform to traditional Eastern ideologies, the more likely there will be disconnect and a desire to rebel against those Eastern values.

It is not uncommon to see this pattern among various Asian cultures and across generations. According to Lee and Mjelde-Mossey (2004), cultural diversity is part of the evolution of families going through migration and acculturation. However, these experiences can cause a lack of family interaction and negatively impact family relationships, where familial strife creates an unstable racial identity within the family system (Segrin & Flora, 2019). An unstable racial identity can lead to problems in self-identification, specifically to one's values and ideologies, predominately learned through parental figures. Internal conflict can also be a result of an unstable identity, where a

person has trouble knowing who they are or identifying themselves within a particular group.

### ***Family Communication Patterns***

Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) may be a useful framework for exploring communication pattern within intergenerational households that might commonly facilitate or hinder racial injustice conversations. FCPT suggests that families subscribe to a dominant pattern of communication, based on two dimensions: conformity and conversation orientation (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Previous research on FCPT has linked certain outcomes for family members depending on their degree of conformity and conversation.

*Conformity orientation* reflects the degree to which families expect uniformity based on attitudes, values, and beliefs within the household. In high conformity oriented households, each family member is expected to hold similar, if not the same, attitudes, values, and beliefs to that of their parental or authority figures. Namely, younger generations are assumed to uphold traditions and values passed down to them. On the other hand, families with low conformity orientation encourage independent attitudes, values, and beliefs, where younger generations are empowered to establish their own opinions and viewpoints, even if they differ from that of their parents or authority figures (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

*Conversation orientation* reflects the degree to which families allow for open communication between all members. High conversation orientated families welcome discussion and the sharing of thoughts and feelings towards all topics. Conversely,

families that are considered low in conversation orientation rely on more superficial conversation and may engage in minimal interaction altogether. Within these families, details of private lives and individual choices are not openly shared nor is the opinion on decisions sought out regularly from one another within the household (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

These two dimensions create four family types: Pluralistic, Consensual, Laissez-Faire, and Protective. *Consensual* families are high in conversation and conformity orientation, defining families to encourage younger members to speak their mind, but also expect rules established by authority figures to be followed. *Pluralistic* families are high in conversation but low in conformity orientation. These families are considered close-knit, speak to one another often, and offer all family members equal power in decision making, including children. *Protective* families are high in conformity but low in conversation orientation, thus promoting a strong sense of expectations and rules that are non-negotiable while also having little to no interest in the sharing of feelings or engaging in open communication with other members in the household. *Laissez-Faire* families are low in conformity and low in conversation. This family type is less open with one another and has little to no interest in enforcing rules within the household (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997).

Many Western families support the idea of family equality, where all family members are given a chance to be a key component in decision-making and are encouraged to express opinions and engage in conflict (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Segrin & Flora, 2019). According to FCPT, these families would identify as being both high in

conversation orientation and conformity orientation, reflective of the consensual family type (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). For families that value Eastern ideologies, who for example may base their core values on respect and hierarchy of elders, are likely to give full decision-making power to the person with the most authority (Kim, 2007). This suggests that other family members are not encouraged to speak up regarding controversial topics or challenge the decision-maker. According to FCPT, this family type reflects high conformity and low conversation orientation, or the protective family type.

The examples above highlight the potential communication challenges in intergenerational Asian American households. As cultures begin to clash due to the different rates of acculturation between Foreign-born Asians and their younger U.S. – born children, these cultural clashes of identity may lead to unresolved feelings and resentment if not properly addressed, potentially creating a hostile home environment (Orrego & Rodriguez, 2001). FCPT may help to identify the patterns of communication experienced in intergenerational Asian American households and highlight patterns of communication that facilitate or hinder racial injustice conversations. This study also explores perceived patterns of communication in intergenerational Asian American households and reflections on family identity that are linked to the ability or inability to successfully navigate conversations about racial injustice. To guide this exploration, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ2:** What family communication patterns are evident in the experiences of first- and second-generation Asian American households?

## **Family Communication and Mental Health**

The clash of cultural identities and conflict often present in intergenerational households may result in difficulty discussing certain distressing topics, such as racism and racial injustice (Panelo, 2010). As described earlier, the inability to engage openly about distressing topics is associated with a higher risk of mental decline, particularly in young adult Asian Americans (Chang et al., 2013). Thus, the need for open communication regarding today's racial injustices is likely needed in many intergenerational Asian American households. When the challenge of communicating distressing topics are met with messages of disobedience and disrespect, young Asian Americans may experience a loss of racial and family identity further contributing to poorer mental health outcomes (Chae et al., 2012; Chang et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2005; Ying & Han, 2007).

Many intergenerational Asian households have spent generations learning to assimilate to Western ideologies while also harboring their Eastern traditional values within their families and their Asian communities. These contradicting factors lead many intergenerational Asian family members to believe that mental health is not a real issue, believing that problems, such as depression and anxiety, can be a sign of weakness in a society that does not allow people of color to be weak (Miller et al., 2011). Backed by the need to follow the Model Minority standards in a potentially high conformity and low conversation-oriented households, the perception of mental health on Asian Americans may be perceived as a 'social stigma' to intergenerational family members. Previous research found that when younger Asian Americans present mental health concerns to

family members, responses towards their mental health typically identified religious factors, i.e., prayers or weak souls, familial shame, or the need to deal with it themselves (Miller et al., 2011; Ng, 1997; Kramer et al., 2002).

Family topic avoidance, stigma towards mental health, and the disassociation towards Blacks and Black Americans within an intergenerational household with a similar history of discrimination and violence, are viable factors that can lead young Asian Americans to struggle speaking out about opinions and feelings related to racial injustice, potentially contributing a decline in mental well-being. Based on these points, the following research question is presented:

**RQ3:** What are the mental health experiences of first- and second-generation Asian Americans who attempt conversations about racial injustice with intergenerational family members?

## **Method**

Using the events surrounding George Floyd's death as a case study to explore racial injustice conversations in intergenerational Asian American families, four in-depth interviews were conducted, along with personal reflections by the principal investigator (PI), all of which included accounts from first- and second-generation Asian Americans.

To qualify for eligibility, participants had to be a) between the ages of 18 and 65 years old, b) born in the U.S. as a first or second generation Asian American, c) have an intergenerational household with family members of Asian descent or who have migrated from Asia, and d) someone who had attempted or successfully engaged in a conversation with family members about racial injustice following the death of George Floyd.

## **Sample**

Four in-depth interviews were conducted in addition to reflections from the principal investigator's (PI) own experiences. Among the four interviewees and PI, three participants identified as men and two identified as women. Two participants identified as a Filipino American, one participant as a Hmong American, one participant as a Vietnamese American, and one participant as a Cambodian American. Two participants identified as a first-generation Asian American and three participants identified as a second-generation Asian American, where both first and second-generation Asian Americans were described as those who have parents that are immigrants or who have grandparents that are immigrants. Three participants confirmed initiating the conversations with their intergenerational family members on the topic of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement while two participants stated that their family

members were the first to initiate the conversation. All five participants identified themselves be between the ages 20-30 years of age. Among the five participants, three acknowledged that they lived with Asian intergenerational family members during the time of George Floyd's killing, and two lived away from their families during the death of George Floyd, but kept in contact with their Asian intergenerational family members through text, phone, or frequent visits.

### **Procedures**

Participants were recruited via social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as through snowball sampling. Recruitment materials directed those interested in participating in the study to contact the researcher via email. Once they contacted the researcher, participants were asked to confirm eligibility. If eligible, they were emailed a consent form to complete prior to scheduling the first interview. Once the completed consent forms was received, participants were scheduled for the first of three interviews. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, with the first interview focusing first on demographics, such as age, preferred gender identity, marital status, and occupation. Then, the interview focused on family communication, specifically on the participant's relationships with their family members, whether ideologies between the intergenerational Asian family members were similar or different, how expectations and values were communicated, and if the participants and the family members identified with racial stereotypes. Once the first interview finished, a second interview was scheduled according to the participant's preference.

The second interview focused on racial injustices specifically to George Floyd and the conversations held around it, if the family members has similar or different views on George Floyd's death and the riots that followed, if the participant and their family members communicated about anti-black racism, and if they or their family members were actively participating with the Black Lives Matter movement. Similarly, a third interview was scheduled according to the participant's preference once the second interview finished.

The third interview focused on mental health, specifically the participant's mental well-being during their interactions or conversations with their intergenerational Asian family members about George Floyd and racial injustice. Participants were also asked if they felt any depression and/or anxiety when communicating to their intergenerational family members about racial injustice, if they know anyone with similar dynamics, and if they have any advice or those who are having trouble communicating about racial injustices with their Asian American intergenerational family members. Following the completion of each interview, the audio file was uploaded onto Canvas Studio for transcribing. After the digital transcription was complete, the primary investigator checked the digital transcript against the audio recording to ensure accuracy.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcripts were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring themes across participant interview responses (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To conduct the thematic analysis, first the PI separated each participant interview into respective digital folders. Then, each transcription was numbered based on which interview went first, second, or

third. Each interview transcript was read once to remove all personal information from the transcript (de-identified) to maintain the confidentiality of the participant. The PI also made sure each transcript and recording was labeled and locked with a passcode.

The PI then read through all interviews a second time to become familiar with the data. This process is referred to as the open coding of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the open coding phase of the process, the PI identified numerous concepts and topics consistent across participant responses. The PI noted any recurring topics or important information on a separate document, labeling paragraphs and interview numbers to refer back to once each interview had been reviewed. These topics and any important concepts and information were categorized into possible themes that led to the creation of an initial codebook.

Identified themes were then reviewed with a faculty advisor to confirm theme descriptions and possible opportunities for sub-themes. Sub-themes refer to specifiers, or multiple themes that exist within an overarching theme. Then, the PI reviewed each transcript a third time and applied codes from the codebook to relevant participant excerpts. This process is referred to as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding allows the coder to identify data that exemplifies a respective code, thereby gathering evidence to support themes across participant data. The codebook and the initial codes were shared back and forth with the faculty advisor to identify opportunities to further consolidate themes. The thematic analysis resulted in five overarching themes with 10 specifiers or sub-themes.

## Results

In this section, the five overarching themes and 10 sub-themes are presented (see Table 1). Overarching themes include: 1) Communication about Racial Injustice; 2) Internal Views of Racial Identity; 3) Relationships; 4) Presence of Family Identity; and 5) Mental Health Strategies and Resources. Below, each theme and sub-theme is reviewed in relation to the research question that it directly addresses. Themes are supported with quotes from participant described experiences. To protect participant identity and respect of privacy, each participant is referred to using an assigned pseudonym: Sybil, Jasper, Phillip, and Bruce. The PI's self-exploration is added at the end of each overarching theme presented.

### Research Question 1: Racial Triangulation

The first research question presented two overarching themes with two specifiers, the second research question presented two overarching themes with two specifiers, and the third overarching theme presented one overarching theme and one specifier.

The first research question considered how racial triangulation manifests in Asian American intergenerational households when communicating about racial injustice. Two overarching themes helped to address this research question. The first overarching theme, Communication about Racial Injustice, included two sub-themes: Positive and Negative Experiences. The second overarching theme, Internal Views of Racial Identity, also included two sub-themes: Family Stereotypes and Self-View Stereotypes.

## **Theme 1: Communication about Racial Injustice**

When looking at how racial triangulation can play a role in conversations with intergenerational family members, participants were asked a series of questions regarding their attempts to communicate about racial injustice and their thoughts as well as their family's thoughts towards Blacks and Black Americans. When communicating about racial injustice, participants focused on how these conversations were initiated, strategies they used to navigate these conversations, and what resulted from their efforts. Participant responses pointed to either productive or challenging conversations.

### ***Productive Conversations***

'Productive' here does not necessarily mean that the conversation was easy, but rather the discussion led towards positive results. Productive conversations offered both the participant and the family members a chance to learn, even if they had opposing views. Despite opposing views, a productive conversation demonstrated the possibility of learning, listening, and sympathizing with Blacks and Black Americans. Some examples of productive conversations were changing beliefs or views of family members after discussing current racial injustices or relating the conversation to oneself to feel passion or empathy towards George Floyd and all those affected.

When asked about Sybil's conversations with her mother on this topic, Sybil stated that she really spent the time talking to her mom, "*[explaining] to her what was really going on.*" Sybil mentioned her mom initiated the conversation because of the riots that formed around the world. Throughout her conversation with her mom, Sybil mentioned giving brief history lessons and relayed it to events her mom had seen before within their

Hmong culture. Sybil noted that giving examples and making connections is what helped her through the conversations. Sybil stated:

*“It was kind of giving examples like (...) not all of them are looting around, even if they are, put yourself in their shoes. If someone killed your son, and this isn’t the first time, this has been going on for hundreds of years, and you’re fed up with it, and you can’t get the police or America’s attention, what would you do? Would you do the same thing?”*

After having multiple conversations on the topic, where Sybil offered education and history lessons on why this was happening, her mom showed a sense of understanding. Sybil stated, *“She doesn’t understand the riot part, is the thing. And I told her, I kind of gave her a brief history lesson on it (...) [my mom’s] like, yes, I saw that you know, as a mother, I would be upset, too, if that were my son.”*

Bruce’s conversations with his intergenerational family members paved way for more conversations on the topic, despite having little to no discussion about it before. When asked about the conversations on racial injustice, Bruce mentioned they were more open to listening and learning. Bruce stated, *“[My family and I] never really delved into more about what is the root of systemic racism (...) [but] we definitely have a lot more opportunities for that sort of discussion.”* When asked what his parent’s responses were towards both himself and his brother’s opinions on the topic, Bruce stated, *“their opinion changed [from All Lives Matter to BLM] (...) [my brother] was able to educate my mom about more, so I think with at least my mom, I think her opinions definitely changed.”*

### ***Challenging Conversations***

Similar to Productive Conversations, the word ‘challenging’ does not necessarily imply that conversations brought negative results. Rather participants noted that they

encountered multiple challenges to navigating these conversations or that there was still a distinct disassociation towards Blacks and Black Americans among family members.

Some examples of challenging conversations include disagreeing viewpoints that led to insensitive topics. For other participants, they felt an inability to talk about George Floyd due to fear and avoidance, or they had family members speak on their opinions and did not feel comfortable contributing.

When asked questions on the conversations held about racial injustice, specifically George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement, Jasper expressed difficulties finding a compromising point between family members and himself and attributed this experience to the differences in views towards Blacks and Black Americans. When asked how the conversation around George Floyd and racial injustice went, Jasper notes that there is a lot of back and forth and bickering to the point someone had to walk away.

Jasper stated:

*“There’s been a lot of bad conversations and anti-blackness within my own family (...) [When talking about George Floyd’s death and the protests] My parents are trying to talk to me as if I have no idea what’s happening (...) [The conversation just] ends up, in my perspective, some type of [negative] emotions and having to walk away.”*

Phillip's reflections on the conversations on racial injustice held between his family members during George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter Movement that followed focused on the communication. When asked how these conversations went, Phillip stated that even though he had other family members able to speak about racial injustice, his intergenerational family members were not interested due to their experiences and their thoughts on the topic. Phillip stated:

*"I talked to my household specifically [about George Floyd and the protests], but definitely with my sister, brother-in-law, and nephew (...) [Conversation] was sporadic (...) I'm giving them updates like it's a football game. [When talking about racial injustice with my mom], it's very hard. I just think that there's that language barrier, but it's also kind of like 'I don't care' type of idea with [her] (...) I felt that [our relationship] was strained even more, I felt even more disconnected [to my mom]."*

When viewing my own family and the conversations we have had on racial injustices, I found myself in a similar stance with Bruce, where most of the communication is at a surface level, such as talking more about things that happened during our day or what we want to have for dinner. Important or sensitive topics were never addressed properly where we make time to sit and ask about what our thoughts are on mental health or events around racial injustice. Though my sisters and I are vocal with one another and to other family members on our united stance with the Black community, I found myself avoiding questions related to my parents' stance on racial injustice, fearing that their opinions on the topic might differ from mine due to their past comments on Blacks and Black Americans and the stereotypes they held on the Black community before. I would position my experience closer to the negative side of the spectrum simply because these are conversations that my sisters and I are struggling to navigate.

## **Theme 2: Internal Views of Racial Identity**

The theme of internal views of racial identity refers to the stereotypes Asian intergenerational family members hold upon Blacks and Black Americans that lead to why Asians and Asian Americans might not feel part of the community or why they have negative experiences with Blacks and Black Americans. The theme of internal views of racial identity refers to the racial perceptions within families that mainly focused on how

they stereotyped themselves and other cultures based on what they have experienced or what they have been told. Though most stereotypes have a negative connotation, participants have found the stereotypes surrounding their own culture and ethnicity to help shape them or help them grow. Two common themes related to perceptions of racial identity were present across participant responses: Family View of Stereotypes and Self-Views of Stereotypes.

### ***Family View of Stereotypes***

When looking at family stereotypes, most participants noted that their family's views of stereotypes came from what they have heard or what they have experienced.

Participants were explicitly asked how their families identify with stereotypes about Asians and how they identified with stereotypes directly toward Blacks and Black Americans. Participants provided a range of responses including believing stereotypes about other ethnicities and believing that stereotypes do not affect them in any way.

In Bruce's household, stereotypes were not talked about directly, nor did stereotypes related to them affect him or his family. Bruce expressed that while many typical Asian stereotypes ring true, such as their parental figures wanting them to become an engineer, he was indifferent to the situation. Bruce stated, "*I honestly feel like my parents are indifferent to Asian stereotypes (...) If we're watching TV and we saw an Asian stereotype being played out, they wouldn't go and turn off the TV. We'd watch it and, depending on what is being shown, we'd joke about it.*"

Though Bruce's household held indifference towards Asian stereotypes, Jasper's household offered a different view of racial stereotypes towards other cultures. Jasper

mentioned his parents held other cultures and ethnicities accountable to their stereotypes based solely on their own beliefs and experiences, thus causing a negative outlook towards those stereotyped. Jasper also mentioned that stereotypes were often due to classism, a term describing hierarchy based on the status of your income level and/or social status (Langhout et al., 2007), or whether a person is Asian American or Foreign-Asian when looking at their ethnicity. Jasper stated, *"When it comes to anything below upper-class status, [my parents] stereotype you as like, oh my God, that's a bad Filipino, don't be like that."*

Phillip connects the way his family speaks about stereotypes are what generally leads how they perceive George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter Movement. While he has always listened to his intergenerational family members for guidance and support, conversations around racial injustice are hard due to how the older generation view Black Americans in comparison with themselves. Phillip stated:

*"It's hard for my family members to conceptualize racism unless there was a personal experience tied to it because it's hard to think, conceptually, so they can only think on their past experiences (...) We [Asians] didn't help either, because we also classified African-Americans as you know, more dangerous, more intimidating (...) The way we talked about [Blacks] was definitely more as an enemy than, you know, someone in our community."*

### ***Self-Views of Stereotypes***

Similar to family views, the racial stereotypes participants held about themselves helped to understand how they position themselves within the community and in the eyes of other people of color. These self-views were also adopted based on what participants were told through lived experiences. Notably, participants spoke of these self-views of stereotypes as a solidification of what was expected of them. The Model Minority Myth

originates from beliefs and assumptions held towards Asians by Whites that, in time, grew to become expectations held on Asians and Asian Americans. The self-views that participants held on themselves represented how they saw themselves, their family members, and their racial communities through the eyes of Blacks and Whites. When asking questions about family perceptions of racial identity pertaining to stereotypes, participants were asked about their own views towards stereotypes and whether they identified with stereotypes placed upon them regarding their culture or identity.

Participants either embraced stereotypes towards Asians or disagreed with them.

When asked about their views on Asian stereotypes, Phillip expressed that he aligned with the stereotypes towards his cultural community. Phillip stated, "*I would say that my family fits in the ghetto Cambodian stereotype (...) We kind of fit in that Asian stereotype where Cambodians are street smart (...) We were traditional Cambodians living in the ghetto.*"

Sybil stated her views on Asian stereotypes are the opposite, where she did not embrace or agree with the stereotype placed upon her. Sybil mentioned:

*"I don't think all Asians are smart, and I feel people tend to overlook that. They think you pass your classes because you're smart but, no. Like, I studied [hard]. It's not just like, oh, I'm smart, I can pass my classes. People don't take into consideration how much work goes into trying (...) yet it's supposed to be a good stereotype, like, oh, all Asians are smart, but it's actually kind of bad because it assumes for us more than we can (...) and it kind of hurts a lot of Asians too."*

Though my family and I joked about the stereotypes placed upon us, such as the expectations that my sisters and I would become nurses or doctors, we never considered the history behind the typical Filipino stereotype. My parents openly embraced those stereotypes for a long time, believing we have to be good at school or good at math

because we are known as that, and we need to live up to it to fit into the world. Though it has shaped who I am and why I continue to pursue my Master's degree, I try to remember that there is more to me than just the stereotypes that have been placed upon me.

#### Research Question 2: Family Communication Patterns

The second research question looks at whether there are any family communication patterns reflected in the clash between Eastern and Western ideologies common in intergenerational Asian American households, and if that also has an impact on conversations about racial injustice following the death of George Floyd. The first overarching theme, Relationships, includes two sub-themes: Strong and Weak Relationships. The second overarching theme, Presence of Family Identity, also two sub-themes: Stable and Unstable Presence of Family Identity.

#### **Theme 3: Relationships**

The theme captures how the participant's relationships with their intergenerational family members affected the ability to openly communicate about important family topics and decisions such as racial injustice. To better understand the familial context in Asian American intergenerational families, participants were first asked to describe their relationships with intergenerational family members. Participants identified familial relationships as weak or strong. A weak relationship suggested there was little to no connection between the participant and their intergenerational family members. Strong relationships reflected comfort in talking with family members or feeling confident enough to confide in them about emotions or their stance on racial injustice.

### ***Weak Relationships***

A weak relationship, which is typically made in communication, reflected having a hard time conversing about important topics, such as racial injustice, or led the participants and/or family members to feel unable to talk about it. A lack of interaction with parents and grandparents because of work or other priorities also contributed to a perceived weak relationship with intergenerational family members. If a conversation related to racial injustice did occur among family members with weak relationships, it would often result in arguments and hostility.

Sybil stated that the relationship with her parents was a civil one, where conversations mainly focused on asking how they were doing or catching up on superficial events (e.g. birthday greetings or how things are at home). Between her parents, Sybil spoke more to her mother than her father due to her father not being home as often. When asked how often she spoke to her father, Sybil said, "*I [just] got the first text message from him in, like, two years.*" Although Sybil communicates more with her mother, most of their conversations were mainly through text or phone calls. Sybil stated, "*Sometimes my mom would call, but it's mostly through text. And I don't...well, my dad doesn't really answer his phone.*" Sybil mentioned she did not have a lot of conversations or spoke to her parents a lot about her private life, thus resulting in low conversation orientation within the household.

Jasper identified his relationship with his family members as similar to Sybil's. Jasper stated, "*I would go to my parents for guidance, financial support, not necessarily emotional support or matters that are very, like, sensitive.*" When asked about typical conversations

held between himself and his family members, Jasper identified verbal communication as typically surface level and did not focus on any sensitive topics. When asked to describe this, Jasper said, “*You know at the dinner table or [in] passing, we have conversations daily, especially when it comes to how’s school, how’s work, and things like that. So it’s not uncomfortable (...) it’s somewhat formal in a sense where it’s mainly business and about our public life.*” Jasper mentioned having a hard time communicating about feelings and important decisions between his and his brother’s private lives with his parents, but they were expected to follow rules within the household without room for debate. This resulted in low conversation orientation and high conformity orientation.

Phillip stated that even though he has a good relationship with his family members, especially within his own generation, Phillip's relationship with past generations, identified as intergenerational family members such as parents and extended family (aunts, uncles, grandparents), is not as strong. Phillip stated they have a good rapport with their brothers and sisters and the best form of communication among them was in-person. When asked if their relationship allowed for open discussions, Phillip confirmed they can have open discussions and that “*in person is best for communication.*” With his mom, conversations seemed hostile previously and, conversing about current racial events and the importance of it, strained the relationship with his mom even more. “*I feel more disconnected (...) our priorities in this moment, we’re [just] in a different place.*”

Sybil, Jasper, and Phillip stated having different reactions towards conversations with their intergenerational family members, specifically when the difficult topics were brought up between them. These reactions and the state of their relationships with their

intergenerational family members affected how they were able to discuss current racial injustices, especially in households that were less supportive of independent opinions and more demanding of submission.

### ***Strong Relationships***

Strong relationships, which was also made in communication, were described as a supportive structure that led to members feeling open discuss important issues or confiding in family members about sensitive topics. Having a strong relationship helped create an open space for Asian Americans to communicate with their intergenerational family members, specifically current racial injustices. When a strong relationship is present within Asian American intergenerational households, participants felt more willing to share their opinions despite if they had different views.

Similarly, Bruce stated he has a good relationship with his family members at home. Though Bruce stated that there is a close bond with his parents, Bruce noted that he communicates with his mother most about sensitive topics rather than his father due to language barriers, but it does not mean he is unable to converse with his father regularly. Bruce stated, "*With my father, for example, sometimes when I say something in English towards him, he'll interpret it differently (...) It can come across as disrespectful or insulting.*" For their mother, Bruce stated, "*With my mother, I can easily communicate with her whenever it comes [to] feelings and emotions.*"

In viewing my own relationship with family members, specifically my parents, there is a strong relationship reflected in my ability to talk about important and sensitive topics. Though it is hard for both my family and me to converse on important matters in person

due to my siblings and me living in different cities, we try our best to understand one another to the best of our abilities. My parents were never taught to open up or talk about their feelings, much less care to have important conversations such as about racial injustice, which resulted in my sisters and I feeling hesitant to open up to them on important topics, fearing the possibility of being denied the chance for open communication.

#### **Theme 4: Presence of Family Identity**

The next theme looks at cultural values and ideologies held by intergenerational family members, if it affects the participant's own identity within the family, and whether that was a factor in the participant's ability to communicate about racial injustice. When looking at family dynamics and structure within the Asian American households, how a participant identified themselves in the context of the family identity became a reflection of how conversations surrounding racial injustice were initiated. Participant responses noted two types of family identities, those that were stable and those that were unstable.

##### ***Stable Presence of Family Identity***

A stable family identity, which is made in communication with one another, focused on a participant's commitment to family structure, obligations, and expectations (Epp & Price, 2008). These commitments are generally found as common identifiers of Asian American households that predominately emphasize beliefs held in Eastern ideologies. A stable presence of family identity does not refer to whether a participant is deeply committed to the family routine but rather the unwavering support of the familial household. A stable presence of family identity also encompassed expectations set upon

family members based on gender identity role, whether these factors helped positively shape participant's adult life, and whether there was an ability to grow and adapt into other identities.

Within Bruce's family, Bruce identified himself as one who follows the expectations of his family. Bruce stated that even though there were preconceived beliefs and expectations given to him by his parents, it is what guided him to where he is currently. Bruce mentioned, "*I would be lying if I said that [my parents] didn't influence where I am today (...) I always feel that there are some expectations that I need to uphold, and I always feel I keep in the back of my head as I progress through life [as an engineer].*" Having a strong relationship and a stable presence of family identity helped Bruce feel open and willing to speak about racial injustices with his intergenerational family members. Though his family was not used to speaking past surface-level communication prior to George Floyd's death, having a strong relationship and a stable presence helped Bruce have that ability to speak up without fear of being turned away.

Like Bruce, Phillip's expectations within his intergenerational Asian household were explicit and seen as an influence on independence and growth. As a Cambodian American, Phillip stated that while his family members had high expectations of him, there was room for growth in becoming his own person once he was of age. Phillip stated, "*They're really strict until you're of age. And then once you're of age, you know, they're kind of there for you, but they don't make decisions, and they're not as involved.*" Phillip noted that even though his past generations expected a lot from him, his siblings,

and cousins, these set expectations and values are still something they all cherish in their adult lives stating, "*It's still something that I value to this day.*"

Bruce and Phillip's statements reflect family communication patterns that are high in conformity and high in conversation orientation. Both come from a household where Eastern ideologies are enforced, while the relationships with family members and their presence of family identity allows them to feel open and able to communicate with intergenerational family members about important topics, specifically racial injustice and feelings of allyship with the Black Community.

### ***Unstable Presence of Family Identity***

An unstable family identity, also made in communication with one another, reflected a participant's perception of coercion to accept the family identity and accompanying expectations. As opposed to stable family identity, an unstable family identity focused on a participant's negative view towards their family expectations and obligations. These negative perceptions were described as families downplaying other family members and their opinions, constant comparisons between other family members, or parental figures who used power for control over conversations.

In Sybil's family, most of the expectations were focused on gender identity roles within the family, which caused a lot of tension and problems with family hierarchy and the need for independence. Sybil stated that women in the family are expected to cook and clean and cannot hold other responsibilities besides taking care of the family. Sybil stated,

*"In the Hmong family, I guess like, it's just things you're expected to do. Don't ask questions; you just do it. It's like, that's your job. That's your duty as a girl, as a daughter, (...) once you're past that stage, then you're supposed to get married and become like that housewife type of thing."*

Among other examples, Sybil noted that for most Asian cultures, specifically Hmong, gender identity biases within families were set and have often caused many problems within her generation. Sybil mentioned, *"I think that's (...) in a lot of Asian cultures. Like, you literally get a divorce, and they look down on you like you're worthless. Or like, it's your fault for the divorce."* When asked about her own perceptions of these expectations, Sybil responded, *"You can't escape it. You're just expected to be there like everyone expects you."*

Jasper's unstable presence of family identity was grounded in the power dynamics between parent and child. Jasper stated that while many family expectations were taught at a young age, debating these topics is unheard of. Jasper explained:

*"My parents, you know obviously they're going to have this mindset like, you're young, you don't know anything about politics, I'm way older than you. (...) That power dynamic between the patriarch and the child (...) I don't think anyone has ever questioned that kind of authority in [my] family dynamics."*

When considering whether these expectations affect his growth and identity, Jasper mentioned the backlash in creating an identity that his parents have not approved. Jasper stated:

*"I was going to go into computer engineering (...) It took me about a year and a half to two to explore like, okay, what is my passion? When I found out or when I realized my purpose in life was to be an educator (...) my cousins were being doctors or becoming doctors, others were also going into the engineering field, and so, obviously, I felt like the black sheep of the family."*

Jasper also mentioned his brother facing the same backlash when speaking to their parents about a different major outside the expected career paths and how that reaction from their parents removed Jasper and his brother from the expected family identity.

Both Sybil and Jasper point to certain expectations to uphold the family identity, particularly gender roles and educational career paths. When both went up against what was expected, the initial responses from intergenerational family members made both participants feel less connected to their household. Although both participants grew up being raised with Eastern ideologies, Sybil and Jasper's defiance was in direct opposition of the dominant family communication pattern. Due to this sudden disconnection in upholding the family identity and their Eastern ideologies, Sybil and Jasper felt more inclined to speak out about racial injustice conversations with their intergenerational family members without fear or hesitation of disrespect towards them.

For Sybil, traditional Eastern ideologies was not practiced among herself and her sisters when it came to respect and submission. Sybil stated she and her siblings went against tradition as Hmong women and decided to focus on themselves and their careers, stating, *"I think my family just kind of accepted that we're not gonna follow through with the traditions of like, getting married young, having kids, being a housewife,"* and that she felt she could speak up towards her family members due to her change of familial identity and does not believe in the idea that *"just because you're older, you're right."* Similarly, Jasper also came to realize the different ideologies he and his parents held that led him to not being afraid to speak up. Jasper stated that even though he has been taught

as a child to be mindful of his parents, he realized the change as a full-grown adult and let go of that ideal submission to the hierarchy. Jasper stated:

*“[My parents are] not going to change, right? I’ve come to the conclusion like, [my parents] are old. [They’re] gonna keep thinking this way (...) nothing I’m gonna say is going to change your ideas and values (...) so now I’m really more vocal and not afraid to be unapologetic and stand up for what I believe in.”*

Though my family has often provided the same guidelines and expectations that many of the participants expressed, my family supports shared expectations and allows room for growth, which is seen as having high conversation and conformity orientation. Oftentimes, my family compared my siblings and me to our cousins and talked about how we should aim to be nurses, doctors, engineers, or any career that is highly valued, but they have learned to allow my siblings and me a chance to explore what benefitted us. After learning the hard way, of fighting against what she was taught when she was younger, and what we have taught her now, my mother agreed with giving room for growth, stating that as long as we graduate and make good money, there is room for compromise.

### Research Question 3: Mental Health

The third research question considered whether there are any mental health implications following any attempts to converse to Asian intergenerational family members on racial injustice. One overarching theme, Mental Health Strategies and Resources, encompasses two sub-themes: Mental Health Status and Strategies and Resources.

## **Theme 5: Mental Health Strategies and Resources**

The last set of interview questions focused on the participant's ability to have conversations with family members on racial injustice, specifically the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the potential effects of these attempts on their mental health. This theme captures participant's perceived mental health in relation to having conversations about racial injustice with their family members and the strategies and resources participants identified to help cope with their attempts to discuss racial injustice.

### ***Topics on Mental Health***

Each participant was asked questions specific to their mental health status, both prior to and after attempts to discuss racial injustices with intergenerational family members. Two out of the 5 participants responded that they have experienced symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. The two participants who did identify symptoms of depression and/or anxiety were questioned further as to how the conversations about racial injustice may have contributed to their mental well-being. Both participants admitted that none of their symptoms were affected by the conversations on racial injustice with their family members, such as Phillip stating, "*Maybe under the circumstances (...) [I have] just like general anxiety (...) but [my mental health] hasn't been affected by [racial injustice] conversations.*"

### ***Strategies and Resources for Communication***

When navigating through their experiences on conversations of racial injustice with intergenerational family members, the participants expressed ways they have found

success in coping with these conversations. Participants noted that these strategies and resources did not necessarily make it possible to start the conversation but facilitated the conversation once it was a progress.

When asked about utilizing resources to communicate about racial justice and cope with current racial injustices, Bruce expressed that though there were many resources out there, he did not feel the need to use them. However, Bruce felt that reaching out for resources is a good way to have a conversational outlet and help anyone who has trouble with mental health, especially related to distressing topics such as racial injustice. Bruce stated, *“If you can’t find it [support] within your household, seek out other sources. It’s better to discuss than to keep it bottled inside. It’s definitely therapeutic when you’re able to let it out and talk with others. And utilize any resources that you can find if it’s there.”*

Similar to Bruce, Phillip also advocates to reach out to any resources, especially when it comes to mental health in the Asian community. Phillip expressed that it is one thing to deal with distressing topics, such as the death of George Floyd, but the pandemic can also play a huge effect on one’s mental health alongside those hard conversations. Phillip stated:

*“I can’t stress enough how there are other things going on during this time, too, and how important it is to go outside and kind of disconnect from the media (...) And making sure that if anything were to happen, you have your social groups to fall back on, to kind of process what may have happened when you talk with your family (...) You know, anything that you could do to practice self-care would be really helpful as you prepare and navigate these crucial conversations.”*

Jasper expressed the ability to practice self-care, but also the importance of checking one’s positionality within the conversation. Positionality is described as referring to one’s

position in relation to the context of the topic, such as how one identifies themselves within society, one's bias, and their basic understanding of the world (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Jasper mentioned that even though these conversations can be tough to have, especially for those who have never engaged in racial injustice conversations, it is easier to be direct and to the point than to be indirect. Jasper stated:

*“Always reflect on your own positionality, your own power, your own relationship to the matter. Before we check others, I think it’s also important that we need to check ourselves and check who we are (...) Always having to reflect and question myself is [also] key. I would suggest that’s the first thing anyone would want to do before having the conversation (...) Because having conversations that you never had with your parents, especially around race, is very difficult.”*

Though conversations with my parents were hard to have, especially when I was not used to having these difficult conversations before with them, it was easier having my sisters to help back me up and having friends who I was able to decompress with. My parents have always struggled between their Eastern ideologies (e.g., believing the parents are always right, there's a familial hierarchy, parent-child relationships are based on power) and adapting to Western ideologies (children having equal and open opportunities for debates, allowing for more room for growth and independence), so trying to learn from their children while also hold strong to their own opinions was very hard for all of us. Even so, I believe that the best way to navigate is to actively listen, despite the difference in opinions. It's a practice of understanding where my parents come from and listening to them not just to respond but listening to understand what they are trying to say. It is not an easy conversation, nor is it a one-time conversation, but an ongoing one that takes time and patience from both ends.

## Discussion

Conversations about racial injustice held between Asian Americans and their intergenerational Asian family members are scarce. With the death of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of xenophobia towards Asian Americans, activism within Asian communities and households has started to increase. These events point to the need to engage in difficult conversations surrounding racial injustice and suggest the need for greater understanding of how to successfully navigate them, particularly in family environments where it is unheard of to question authority and go against the beliefs of the family identity. This study examined four in-depth interviews and the PI's self-exploration on how Asian Americans navigate conversations about racial injustice, specifically following the death of George Floyd, with intergenerational family members. Results revealed five overarching themes: a) Conversations about Racial Injustice, b) Internal Views of Racial Stereotypes, c) Relationships, b) Presence of Family Identity, and e) Mental Health Strategies and Resources. Among those themes, ten sub-themes helped identify nuances in participant experiences. Results convey how racial injustice conversations within intergenerational Asian American households are impacted by the Model Minority Myth and extension by racial triangulation, the communication patterns that impact these interactions, and the considerations pertaining to these conversations on mental health. Findings are considered below as well as the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

## **Racial Triangulation and Racial Injustice Conversations**

The first research question aimed to explore manifestations of racial triangulation in attempts to communicate about racial injustice within Asian American intergenerational households. Two themes were identified in regards to racial injustice conversations and broader perceptions of identity of both the participant and their family members.

Successful navigation of racial injustice conversations reflected positive conversational experiences, specifically forming a chance to learn from one another rather than believing one can be right or wrong. One participant noted the time they took to consider their parent's perspective and to connect to their parent's experiences in order to successfully navigate the topic of racial injustice. These strategies are reflective of dialogic communication, or communication between individuals who are actively engaged in both listening and understanding the other's opinions with unbiased views (Spano, 2021). Ultimately, when family members are able to have difficult conversations on racism and racial injustice and are open to learning, it has the potential to lead to positive conversational experiences that allow for easier navigation and more productive outcomes, regardless of existing prejudices. These communication behaviors challenge traditional Eastern beliefs that likely enable avoidance of racial injustice conversations in Asian intergenerational households. Adaptation and growth are core concepts for positive experiences and the challenges lie in whether a person is able to hold their ground but also allow themselves to be open to the other (Spano, 2021; Zediker & Stewart, 2012). Though dialogic communication can be seen as the overarching goal for successful navigation, it does not mean that would be a welcome approach in intergenerational

Asian families, especially in households where submission and hierarchy are reflected in conversations. Based on the study findings, individuals may benefit from approaching conversations by connecting current events with Asian American racial history, as Sybil had done with her mom during her conversation about George Floyd. When family members are able to accept and make connections to current events, such as being open-minded with reasoning and understanding, intergenerational family members may be able to have positive and productive conversations about racial injustice.

Results also show there have been more challenging than productive conversations among participants trying to communicate with their intergenerational Asian American family members on racial injustice. Some challenging conversations included arguments and hostility with family members during these conversations about racial injustice.

Arguments and hostility with intergenerational family members meant that intergenerational family members were set in their ways and their beliefs which potentially contributed to a lack of sympathy towards the experiences of Black Americans or refused to side with people of color because of what it might suggest about their affiliation with White people. Other challenging conversations were associated with language barriers, where words got lost in translation or participants had difficulty finding the proper word or response to their family members. These challenging conversations helped understand the discrepancy in the views and thoughts between the participants and their intergenerational family members and added complexity to the difficulty of navigating through important topics successfully.

The internal views of racial identity focused on the perceptions of racial stereotypes and how those perceptions affect the Asian community and their family members' views towards Blacks and Black Americans. Racial stereotypes, which are commonly used both for and against Asians and Asian Americans, appeared to play a significant role in the difficulties households have discussing racial injustice (Chou & Choi, 2013).

The disassociation between Asians and Blacks is expressed by the positive position placed upon Asians and Asian Americans and the negative perceptions put upon other people of color (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). When family members or participants embraced the racial stereotypes put upon them and the negative stereotypes directed towards Blacks and Black Americans it allowed for the continuation of separation between Asian and Blacks. This 'us' versus 'them' mentality supports a core problem in engaging in these difficult conversations, that if it is not about us, then we do not care. While most participants offered an allyship towards Black Americans and the Black Lives Matter, their intergenerational family members were more hesitant and offered reasons for why becoming an advocate has never pertained to them, such as the belief of racial stereotypes. This finding is another demonstration of support towards the continued existence of the Model Minority Myth and the validation of Racial Triangulation Theory. These prejudices and racial discriminations between Asians and Blacks continue to add to the growing separation between the two.

Some participants did not view stereotypes favorable. Participants offered that, while stereotypes were taught and expected of them when they were younger, they viewed stereotypes as something negative towards both their community and their families.

Phillip, who identified as a Cambodian American, often saw these racial stereotypes against Black Americans to be taught as stories, enforcing the disconnection between Asians and Blacks and Black Americans. Sybil, a Hmong American noted that there is a racial hierarchy even with Asian communities, pointing to internal or root racism that has broader implications on individual identity and racism towards other people of color. The reported experiences in attempts to discuss racial injustices and the views towards stereotypes suggest that it plays a role in the experiences of communicating and possibly causing inability to navigate successful conversations on racial injustice. When Asian American family members are perpetuating the Model Minority Myth and racial stereotypes held both on themselves and on Blacks and Black Americans, the outcome points to Asians disassociating themselves, without empathy for those struggling for racial equality. These practices seem to encourage the belief that Asians are considered “superior” to Black Americans and reflect an unwillingness to ally with Black Americans, even going as far as to believe they are deserving of racial injustice. Based on the study findings, racial triangulation and the associated Model Minority Myth help to explain why first and second-generation Asian Americans experience difficulty when navigating racial injustice conversations.

### **Family Communication Patterns and Racial Injustice**

The second research question aimed to understand what family communication patterns are evident in intergenerational Asian American households and how these patterns might impact conversations around racial injustice. To determine factors that contribute to successful navigations of these interactions, it was important to get a sense

of the familial background of participants, which shed light on the antecedents that might facilitate or hinder these conversations. Two themes were identified in regard to familial characteristics and subsequent navigation of racial injustice conversations. Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) was applied to allow for better understanding of communication patterns within families, however, in the context of Asian American intergenerational households, the theory's assumptions appear to be challenged in the results.

For participants, relationships that were weak reflected a distancing between themselves and their older family members. This is reflective of high conformity and low conversation, where family members felt conversations were not needed. When conversations did occur, most were usually at surface-level, which meant the discussions about racial injustice were not something the participants nor their intergenerational family members would engage in on a daily basis. Conversations about racial injustice, specifically the death of George Floyd and the protests, was often met with hesitation to speak up and speak out or participants felt unable to fully explain their opinions in fear of judgement or anger from their intergenerational family members.

Strong relationships appeared to foster open discussion, reflective of a high conversation orientation, and the exact opposite of responses from participants that identified weak relationships with family members. Results showed those who hold strong relationships with their intergenerational family members also experienced positive responses when discussing about racial injustice. Intergenerational family members were open to listening, willing to learn, and offered clarification with history

lessons or debriefs on what was happening in relation to current events. The results expressed the importance of having strong familial bonds, and how that often led to easier discussions on various topics beyond the superficial ones, which ultimately fostered conversations on racial injustice and following the death of George Floyd.

It is also worth noting that most participants mentioned a stronger relationship with mother's when compared to fathers, and those who spoke to their fathers about racial injustice were often met with feelings of authority and submission. In Eastern ideologies, men have been known to be the decision maker of the family and believed that their opinions were first and foremost in the familial hierarchy (Kashima et al., 1995). Women, on the other hand, were known to be the caretakers for the family, often seen as the point person towards children's physical, emotional, and mental development (Kashima et al., 1995). Therefore, the fact that participants identified stronger relationships with mothers is not surprising and consistent with findings of previous research.

Though first and second-generation Asian Americans and their elders often both acknowledged that communication is key for important discussions and valued strong relationships, many intergenerational families did not believe it was necessary to teach their children to be part of these important discussions, namely about racial injustice. This points to a practice of low conversation orientation and high conformity orientation, or the protective family type. A protective family type is common among households that subscribe to more collectivist values (Huang, 2010). Conformity orientation has often been acknowledged as a familial expectation for many Asian American households but is typically in contrast to the more individualistic communication behaviors (e.g., openness,

asking questions) that younger generations are taught in the U.S. school systems (Giles et al, 2003). Thus, there appears to be a substantial push against the idea of a dominant communication pattern within intergenerational households.

The need for a stable presence in one's family identity was also crucial to engaging in important discussions with family members. When a stable presence of family identity is formed for a first or second-generation Asian American, the commitment to family rituals is present and fosters a strong understanding of their place within the family hierarchy (Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997). Though a stable presence can offer feelings of openness in discussions held within the family, familial identity within Asian intergenerational households often leads towards the submission and respect towards their elders' wishes. The perception of how one sees themselves within the family causes the rift in whether there is a stable or unstable presence. Those who saw the ideologies and values taught to them by family members as a core problem often led to arguments and hostility, ultimately forcing them to disassociate with what they were once taught and adopt different values from their Asian family members. Ultimately, this can lead to difficulties in having important conversations with said family members.

An unstable presence of family identity, however, does not always correlate to inabilities of having difficult conversations on racial injustice. Participants noted that being removed from the family identity allowed them to feel more inclined to speaking out about racial injustice conversations, because they were no longer invested in submitting to the hierarchical order in which Asian family members with Eastern ideologies observe towards open discussions and the differences from the Western

ideologies taught while growing up in America. An unstable presence may encourage those willing to challenge the status quo to dive into uncomfortable conversations that could ultimately lead to more active discussions about racial injustices and potentially encourage more advocacy for other family members during these distressing times. Ultimately, the unstable presence can forge a new identity that expresses empathy and advocacy for Blacks and Black Americans.

Each of these themes expressed the importance in creating an open dialogue to discuss racial injustices but also in understanding the expected Eastern ideologies in the Asian American household. Family Communication Patterns Theory research typically identifies high conversation and conformity orientation households as the most rewarding in terms of developmental outcomes, specifically among individualistic households. Though Asian intergenerational family members expected to discourage their children from discussing racial injustice, results suggest that these family members were actually more vocal about their beliefs with the first and second-generation participants, even offering to listen to their reasoning regardless of whether they agreed. While this might suggest that the cohesive family unit allows for open communication, it also seems contrary to the standards of Eastern values. Among the various factors that might explain the reason for this finding, it is possible that these intergenerational families are less attached to Eastern ideologies when compared to other intergenerational families. Regardless, findings are in contrast to much of the research on family communication patterns among collectivistic cultures.

Though the presence of family identity is important within all families, difficult conversations, and open communication on important topics, such as racial injustice, can only be successful with mutual understanding from across intergenerational family members, and the need for first and second Asian Americans to speak up for what they believe in, even if it means going against the more traditional, Eastern familial views and expectations. For many Asian intergenerational households with strong traditional Eastern ideologies and expectations, this may prove challenging. However, results from the study suggest that relating back to the history of racial discrimination and against Asians and connecting that to current events towards Blacks and Black Americans foster understanding between family members. Similarly, results show that those who defy family identity expectations and communication practices should consider their ability to confront and remove themselves from those interactions when they might become too hostile.

### **Racial Injustice Conversations and Mental Health**

The third research question focused on the mental health experiences for first and second-generation Asian Americans attempting to communicate about racial injustice concerns with intergenerational family members. One theme emerged from the results to mental health strategies and resources, which involved two sub-themes pertaining to mental health status and specific strategies or resources utilized to maintain positive mental health when navigating distressing topics.

Unexpectedly, there were no mental health implications identified in regard to the ability or inability to address racial injustice conversations, but the participants did offer

solutions that may be helpful for others who might struggle with these conversations and with mental health. Though the results did not indicate any link between attempts to discuss racial injustice and mental health, the views of mental health within the Asian community did not go unnoticed or discredited. Mental health within Asian communities is often overlooked due to the notion that poor mental health or mental well-being is considered a stigma in Asian American intergenerational families (Ng, 1997). Intergenerational family members often view concerns related to mental health as a burden or a threat towards a stable family (Lin & Cheung, 1999). Participants who stated they have anxiety and/or depression mentioned not speaking about it to family members due to discomfort and uncertainty of family responses. Sybil, who mentioned having anxiety and/or depression prior to George Floyd's death, offered that she was more aware of her mental health when going into the conversations about racial injustice. Similarly, Phillip mentioned having general anxiety, but also mentioned being fully aware of the health concerns if conversations became too overwhelming, such as if the conversation was becoming mentally draining or causing him to feel more anxious than relieved. Though both were fully aware of their symptoms, it did not hinder their chances at having conversations about racial injustice with intergenerational family members. However, they were more cautious of what they were saying and understanding when they needed to take a mental break.

Asian Americans who have adopted a Western ideology towards mental health, that encourages speaking up about mental health and attempts to destigmatize mental illness, are more inclined to speak up about their conditions, if there are any, and vocalize the

need for the larger Asian community to do the same, especially amidst distressing events (Ho, 2020; Leroy, 2017). This is consistent with participant experiences. Participants identified the importance of utilizing outside resources, such as social media blogs or taking a break from distressing conversations by meditating, to cope with mental health and effectively navigate difficult conversations without sacrificing familial identity and mental well-being.

### **Practical Implications**

Results from this study presents several practical implications. The themes expressed within the study afford a better understanding of what goes into having difficult conversations around racial injustice, specifically within intergenerational Asian American households. Family communication and familial identity plays an important role when considering these challenging conversations and fully understanding one's position within these roles can help guide where and how to begin them. The study also highlights the importance of locating and utilizing resources to receive support and facilitate coping, such as social media blogs on how to maintain positive mental health or destressing with friends after having difficult discussions about racial injustice. Though the study focuses on difficult conversations around the death of George Floyd, however, it can also be used as a start for ongoing conversations on various difficult topics. Further, the study points to the need for intra- and interpersonal skills in order to have these difficult conversations with intergenerational family members. In the pursuit of skill building, this research could lead to possible facilitations or workshops to help guide those struggling to navigate difficult conversations or offer opportunities for advocacy

through collaborations with others through organized social media outlets. Also, the study adds to the diversity in Communication Studies research, namely representation of minority experiences, studied by an Asian American. Finally, this study calls attention to a timely topic, during a period where movements against racial injustices is at an all-time high and more and more young Asian Americans are becoming active members in the fight against racial injustice.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While there are many strengths to this research, the study has some limitations. One limitation is that most participants were identified through snowball sampling, such that participants knew one another or had comparable backgrounds. Another limitation is the underrepresentation due to the small sample size. The study only expresses five participant experiences, thus is not an accurate representation of all Asian American experiences and is therefore not generalizable. Similarly, due to the eligibility requirements of engaging in a conversation related to racial injustice, participants may have fallen within certain family communication patterns. For example, participants may not subscribe to the laissez-faire family type simply because that would be counter to the goals of this research. Further, the study does not address those who have wanted to engage in conversations about racial injustice with their intergenerational Asian American family members but were unable to because of their role within the family, such as being unable to speak up against their elders due to disrespect and disapproval. This limitation neglects the experiences of those with the inability to navigate successful conversations and possibly address what many Asian Americans are feeling when they

are unable to communicate, especially during the time where the need for conversations in Asian intergenerational households are needed. Lastly, this study focuses on the relationships within intergenerational Asian family households and the scope of the study framing is based on White and Black-American perceptions toward foreign and U.S.-born Asians. Therefore, it does not include conversations among other people of color, such as difficult conversations related to racial injustice within Native-Americans or Latinx households.

Moving forward, a future direction of this work is to take the study one step further and interview the participant's family members, addressing their experiences in comparison to their children, to learn about continued efforts to engage in racial injustice conversations. The study can also be further explored with more interviews to better represent Asian American experiences when communicating about racial injustices. Extensions of this work should further explore Racial Triangulation Theory and Family Communication Patterns Theory, particularly in understanding dominant patterns of communication that are representative of intergenerational families.

## **Conclusion**

The overall study explored racial injustice conversations, specifically focused on conversations following the death of George Floyd, in Asian American intergenerational households. Through the lenses of the Model Minority Myth, Racial Triangulation Theory, and Family Communication Patterns Theory, the study considered challenges related to racial injustice conversations based on Asian American historical oppression, communication conflict due to the clashing of Eastern and Western ideologies, and implication of mental health and well-being. Based on the accounts of four first and second-generation Asian Americans as well as the PI's own self-reflections, five overarching themes were found. Findings point to evidence of a continued Model Minority Myth as well as the present-day racial tensions that Asian Americans face related to identification with both majority and minority groups. Results also identified communication patterns and approaches that can enhance navigation of racial injustice conversations while challenging theoretical assumptions of family communication theory. Finally, participants provided potential strategies and resources to support mental well-being when attempting to navigate racial injustice conversations with intergenerational family members. This research contributes to both theory and practice and provides a strong platform for future studies focused on racial injustice conversations and intergenerational Asian American families.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Question Guide

#### Pre-Interview: QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

Interviewer: First, I would like to ask you some qualifying questions to confirm your eligibility.

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. This study focuses on the communication within Asian American households on the event of George Floyd's death. To confirm your eligibility, do you identify as an Asian American?
3. Do you live with any family members who are Asian immigrants?
  1. If yes, who are they and what is their relationship to you?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.

#### Interview 1: DEMOGRAPHICS

**Interviewer:** First, I'd like to ask you a few demographic questions. You are welcome to say 'pass' if you feel uncomfortable responding to any of the questions.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your occupation?
4. What is your marital status?

#### Interview 1: FAMILY BACKGROUND

**Interviewer:** Thank you for that information. Next, I'm going to ask you questions about your family background to get to know your relationship with your family members. Please respond to the best of your ability.

5. How would you describe your relationship with your Asian family members?
  - a. What would best describe how you communicate with them?
6. Do you feel you are able to participate in open discussions with your family?
  - a. If so, how?
7. What are some general family house rules or regulations set by your family members?
  - a. Are you able to take part in discussing/be open for decision-making on these rules or regulations?
8. Do you believe your family members have high demands and expectations of you?
  - a. Can you give an example of these demands and expectations?
9. Are you able to participate and debate these expectations and demands with them? If not, why do you think that is?

**Interviewer:** Traditional Eastern ideologies focus on the interdependence and the status of family cohesion, submission and respect towards elders. While not all Asian households subscribe to Eastern ideologies, research suggests there are a set of generalized beliefs among Asian families that stem from these Eastern traditions.

10. Based on this notion, can you describe if there are some of the Eastern values and ideologies that are important to the family members who raised you (e.g., [the importance to family hierarchy, respect to elders, the need to obey rules because your parental figure says so, etc.]?)
  - a. How were these values communicated to you as you were growing up?
11. Are your own beliefs and values similar or different to your family's and why?
12. How does your family identify with Asian stereotypes? Some examples can be "Asians are good at math", "No Asian gets an F", "Filipinos have to be nurses", "Chinese people eat dog", or any labels created for ethnicity based on physicality or cultural beliefs.
13. Are any of these stereotypes openly embraced and/or rejected by any of your family members?

#### Interview 2: COMMUNICATION ABOUT RACIAL INJUSTICE/GEORGE FLOYD

**Interviewer:** Now, I will ask you about racial injustices following the death of George Floyd. Racial injustice refers to discrimination within the justice system and within institutions towards marginalized groups based solely on the concept of race.

14. Walk me through a conversation you have had about the death of George Floyd.
15. How did you approach speaking about this topic with your family?
16. How did your family discuss racial injustices prior to the death of George Floyd?
17. If discussed, who initiates conversations about racial injustices? If not discussed, please explain why.
18. How does your ability to discuss current racial events affect your relationship with your parents and/or your family members?
19. How are these views similar or different to how you view the mistreatment of other racialized groups?
20. What are your current thoughts on the issues behind George Floyd's death?
21. Have you and your family discussed anti-Black racism?
  - a. If so, how? If not, why not?
22. How do your family members feel about the current racial injustices following George Floyd's death?
  - a. Is this something you and your family members have communicated about?

**Interview:** I want to ask you a few questions about activism in the fight against racial justice in America and your communication about these topics within your family.

23. Are you or your family members active in the fight against racial injustices in America? For example, are you participating in protests, speaking against racism, or signing petitions?

- a. If you and/or your family are not, can you explain why?
- 24. If you are active in the fight against racial injustice, are you able to talk about your participation with your family members?
- 25. Do you feel your participation plays a role in your conversations with your family members about racial injustice?

### Interview 3: MENTAL WELL-BEING

**Interviewer:** For this last part, I want to focus on your mental health when communicating with your family members about racial injustice, specifically following George Floyd's death.

- 26. If you feel comfortable enough to share, what is your current mental health status?
- 27. Have you ever felt symptoms of depression and/or anxiety?
  - a. Were these symptoms felt prior to the death of George Floyd?
  - b. If yes, how long have you experienced them?
- 28. How do you feel the ability, or inability, to communicate to your family members about the current racial injustices impacts your mental health?
- 29. Do you know of any other Asian families who are having similar experiences with the inability to communicate with family members about current racial injustices?
- 30. Have you utilized any resources to assist with navigating these conversations with your family members regarding racial injustice?
  - a. If not, have you utilized any coping mechanisms following the attempts to engage in these conversations?
- 31. What advice might you give to anyone who is having trouble communicating about racial injustices or dealing with different stances on racial injustices within their Asian American intergenerational household?

## Appendix 2

**Table 1.** Communication and Racial Identities in Intergenerational Asian American Families

Theme	Sub-Theme	Example Quote
Communication about Racial Injustice	Productive Conversations	<p>“I gave [my mom] a brief breakdown (...) and she like, if that was my son, I would be sad to see all that stuff.” (Sybil)</p> <p>“[Talking to family members] made me feel a lot closer (...) they didn’t agree with me all the time, [but] it didn’t affect our relationship in that way.” (Phillip)</p>
	Challenging Conversations	<p>“[My family] was like, George Floyd wasn’t a good person (...) so there has been a lot of really bad conversations and anti-blackness within my own family.” (Jasper)</p> <p>“[My mom] ran into a lot of racial injustices as well, so I think for them a lot of their opinion is that there is some sort of hierarchy when it comes to race [and] Whites are definitely put at the top of the list.” (Bruce)</p>
	Internal Views of Racial Identity	Family Views of Stereotypes

“The way my parents react, I can use my dad for example (...) he tends to brush off a lot of stereotypes [but] he tends to stereotype a lot of people.” (Bruce)

Self-Views of Stereotypes

“Growing up, a lot of people would think I’m Chinese or something, so they’re like, oh, you eat dog.” (Sybil)

“We aren’t the traditional Asian where we’re bad at driving, we’re good at math, we’re going to excel in college. Unfortunately, we didn’t have those kinds of opportunities and those chances.” (Phillip)

Relationships	Weak Relationships	“It’s somewhat formal in a sense where it’s mainly business and mainly about our public life.” (Jasper)
		“I don’t really talk to my grandparents.” (Phillip)
	Strong Relationships	“I say we’re close and interact in an intimate way...no animosity with each other.” (Bruce)
		“With my generation, there’s good rapport. And there is a good relationship.” (Phillip)
Presence of Family Identity	Stable Presence of Family Identity	“Pretty traditional. Keep your shoes at the front. Do all your homework, you

		<p>know, don't disrespect your elders." (Phillip)</p> <p>"I have to always be respectful to my parents. That's one of the rules they established for us." (Bruce)</p> <p>"But it's kind of like, I guess, a Hmong thing because, you know, we're being compared to our other cousins too." (Sybil)</p> <p>"I pay for your food, I pay for all of this, and so you better respect me and listen to me (...) you cannot disobey me." (Jasper)</p>
Mental Health Strategies and Resources	Topics on Mental Health	<p>"No, no I can't say that I have [felt symptoms of depression and/or anxiety]. And if I did, by the medical definition, then I would imagine it would be very mild." (Bruce)</p> <p>"I tend to not sub-diagnose like that. And this is where I'm like, I don't want to call it depression. I don't want to call it anxiety. Unless, you know, it was someone who knows, has a degree, in that sense" (Jasper)</p>
	Strategies and Resources for Communication	<p>"It's good to make sure you disconnect [from the media] and go for a walk and get some fresh air." (Phillip)</p>

“Showing vulnerability is a strength in and of itself (...) if there’s aren’t going well, or if you’re not feeling well, it’s not wrong to say it’s not going well. Seek help before it’s too late.” (Bruce)

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