Article

Asian Americans' Ethnic Identity Exploration and the Role of Ethnic Community in a Southern City in the United States

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores Asian Americans' ethnic identity concerning their process of exploring their own identity belonging and the impact of an ethnic community in a southern city in the United States. The South has mainly consisted of European Americans and African Americans. However, it has diversified to include an increasing number of Latinx and Asian Americans over the last several decades. Yet, the growing Asian American community remains disparate in its ethnic identity and nationality. Therefore, this study uses the phenomenological method to provide a more in-depth understanding of ethnic identity in an Asian American community within a southern region of the United States. Themes emerging from interviews included the need to bridge two worlds, the desire to be part of a community, and the existence of a two-layer community involving both ethnic and racial identity. This study contributes to a greater understanding of Asian Americans' experiences in and adaptation to the Southern region within the United States. Implications for practice are provided for social workers when working alongside Asian American clients.

Keywords: ethnic identity; Asian American; ethnic community; qualitative study

1. Introduction

In the United States, ethnicity is a social category that differentiates people socially, economically, and behaviorally [1]. It also plays an important role in ethnic minority individuals' life experiences [2]. Identities are linked to social meanings that are related to stereotypical characteristics, norms, and behaviors of social groups [2]. Asian American is a pan-ethnic identification, bringing together subgroups that represent small percentages of the entire United States population [3]. It encompasses a wide range of religious beliefs, social classes, legal statuses, ethnic identifications, and migration histories but increases potential power through bigger numbers [4].

Latinx Americans and Asian Americans have dispersed more and more since 1980 throughout the United States, especially the southern region where the population is majority European American and African American [5]. The Asian Americans are not only immigrants but also individuals born in the United States relocating to the South in large numbers for employment opportunities and lower cost of living [5]. The increase in Asian Americans in the South is noteworthy. For instance, Asian Americans grew 422% in Raleigh, North Carolina, from 9000 in 1990 to 47,000 in 2010 [6].

The southern region of the United States has a strong black-white binary history that includes slavery and other atrocities toward African Americans by European Americans [7]. This binary history has largely influenced a binary division across systems and structures of social relations, institutional access, and social mobility [7]. The presence of Asian Americans may disrupt the existing social structures because Asian Americans look different and may speak languages in addition to English. Being different may also mean Asian Americans desired a sense of community and sought one another out that eventually led to the formation of Asian American communities in the South.

Much of the literature on the demographic shift has centered on Latinx Americans [6]. This study's focus on American Americans in the South will address the gap in the literature identified by scholars [6]. More importantly, how Asian Americans see themselves and what their experiences are in terms of self-identity in the South's strong black-white binary culture is missing in the literature. To address these gaps in the literature, the research question for this study is, how does the Asian American community influence individuals' ethnic identities?

1.1. Literature Review

While there is no consensus on the definition of ethnic identity, this study employs Phinney and Alipuria's definition [8]: "An individual's sense of self as a member of an ethnic group and the attitudes and behaviors associated with that sense" (p. 36). This sense of membership and commonality with others is based on the origins, values, beliefs, and customs of a particular group of people. To operationalize the construct of ethnic identity, this study referred to social identity theory [9], which views group identity as values embedded within a group. It also employs Phinney's [10] two-dimensional measure of ethnic identity, which treats it as a function of ethnic exploration and ethnic affirmation or belonging. Ethnic exploration refers to an individual's study and contemplation of what it means to be a member of an ethnic group while ethnic affirmation or belonging reflects the attachment to one's ethnic group [2,11]. Improved psychological well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance are related to higher levels of ethnic identity exploration and belonging [12,13].

Racial and ethnic identities are separate concepts [14]. The definition of racial identity is "a sense of group of collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shared a common heritage with a particular racial group" [15], whereas ethnic identity is defined as "having a sense of ethnic pride, involvement in ethnic practices, and cultural commitment to one's racial/ethnic group" [16]. Moreover, the two concepts are often used interchangeably and have similarities. This study set out to explore Asian Americans' process of exploring their identity, belonging, and impact in a southern city in the United States. Therefore, although the current study's principal aim to explore the Asian Americans' ethnic identity development and experiences, if the participants refer to their racial identity, it will be mentioned and discussed. Within the construct of ethnic identity, there is a consensus that research may address self-identification, group membership, cultural values and beliefs, and/or ethnic involvement [17]. The subsections below explore research findings in each of these areas.

1.1.1. Self-Identification

In the self-identification literature, there is an agreement that the development of ethnic identity is a multi-faceted, evolving, diverse, and dynamic, nonlinear process [8]. Phinney and Alipuria [17] describe a process in which children go from not having previously examined their own ethnic identity to commitment based on parental values to a period of independent exploration that leads them to a stable ethnic identity. Influences on ethnic identity include language, peers, context, national identity, parental cultural maintenance, and discrimination [18–20]. Among Latinx youth, one's national identity was a significant moderator in between perceived racial discrimination and ethnic identity commitment. In other words, for those with higher national identity, their ethnic commitment was lower when they experienced racial discrimination [19].

Phinney's review of the literature about the ethnic identity of Asian American adolescents showed they were more likely to have explored their ethnic belonging than peers with European backgrounds [8]. Studies on diverse ethnic samples have shown that ethnic identity is linked to positive outcomes such as mental health, adjustment, and self-esteem [13,21]. Likewise, ethnic identity may shield against negative or stressful experiences [22,23]. Immigrant parents in the United States may employ ethnic identification to keep their children from adopting undesirable "American" behaviors and attitudes that

include selfishness, materialism, and laziness [24]. However, a minority of studies show no relationship between ethnic identity and well-being, a finding they attribute to individuals' multiple identity patterns [25,26]. As well, a sense of American identity links to positive outcomes for diverse U.S. populations [26].

Immigrants go through an adaptation process after the migration that involves discovering their ethnic options in the receiving society and the importance of their ethnic identification to their identity [12,27]. How immigrants categorize themselves reflects their ethnic identity [1]. Phinney and colleagues [17] found that immigrant youth's ethnic identity was predicted by their in-group peer interaction and ethnic language proficiency [20]. Asian Americans may identify according to ethnicity or, in line with their categorization by mainstream America, as well as shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion, according to race. Studies have shown that first-generation Asian Americans prefer national origin labels, while second-generation Asian Americans choose pan-ethnic, American, and hyphenated-American labels [12,28]. In the case of Indian Americans, first-generation immigrants often reinvent their native culture in the host country [26]. In general, Asian Americans tend to align with an Eastern ideal of collectivism with emphasis on the family, obedience to elders, traditional gender roles, and group interdependence that affirms racial or ethnic identity. Those who emphasize ethnic identity point out each subgroup's differences [4,28].

1.1.2. Group Membership and Attitudes toward One's Ethnic Group

Ethnic group membership research focuses on self-concept, self-hatred, and solutions minority members use to improve their social status, including passing as a dominant group member or establishing a bicultural identity [29]. Scholars argue that ethnic identity is a dynamic and interactive aspect of self-concept [16]. According to Markus and Kunda [30], measurements of one's identity or self are related to statements of self that are numerous and can be dynamic, multidimensional, and multi-faceted. Triandis [31] added that the concept of self is based on one's cultural background and made up of three dimensions that vary in importance: (1) private—how individuals see themselves; (2)—what others think of them; and (3) collective—what specific groups think of themselves. Yeh and Huang [32] argue that individuals incorporate all three dimensions of selves in ethnic identification, but in response to the collectivistic nature of Asian cultures, Asian Americans incorporate the public and collective selves more than the private self. A subset of the literature on ethnic identity among ethnic minorities and immigrants focuses on young people [8]. Previous research focused on the implications of ethnic labeling for children's adjustment in terms of academic success [33,34]. More recent literature focuses on how youth label themselves and suggests ethnic labeling may be part of their acculturation process.

One of the theories of ethnic identity formation is acculturation—the psychological and behavioral changes that come from adopting cultural elements of the host culture while maintaining much of the culture of origin [35–37]. According to Berry and Padilla [38], immigrants in a host society tend to rely on one of the four strategies for acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration, or marginalization. Berry [38] views that integration is the healthiest form of acculturation when immigrants are integrated into the larger society while keeping the ethnic group involvement. On the other hand, marginalization happens when immigrants do not have close contact with traditional cultural groups or are involved with the larger society. Therefore, marginalization is considered the least ideal form of acculturation strategy.

The recent movement to measure acculturation using a multi-linear measurement that includes measuring acculturation along various domains of social functioning has been taking place. The multi-linear measure also extends the bilinear measure to include acculturation measurements that reflect different cultures. Empirical findings show that acculturation is common among immigrants to the United States [38,39]. Studies of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrant youth in the United States show English fluency is a

critical factor in facilitating acculturation [40,41]. Younger family members tend to adapt faster than older members, leading to intergenerational conflicts [42].

1.1.3. Cultural Values

According to Phinney, ethnic identity involves exploring and committing to the cultural values and orientation of one's ethnic group [10]. Members of ethnic groups often share cultural values, traditions, heritage, and group affiliation. Culture holds an important place in the development of ideal individuals through a system of values, beliefs, and ideas and the socialization practices necessary to achieve that goal. Internalization of cultural values is a natural result of identity formation [43,44]. These cultural values are essential because the immigrant and minority status of many Asian Americans creates the need for family members to support one another [45].

While Asian Americans are a heterogeneous group, many subgroups share cultural characteristics such as collectivism, familialism, patriarchy, and filial piety. Confucianism has been influential across the continent and is evident in their family-orientated practices in which individuals' goals, interests, and welfare are secondary to that of their families' [46]. The emphasis on collectivism creates interdependence in social relationships, which contrasts with Western ideals that emphasize independence. This social weaving of relationships is especially exemplified in filial piety, emphasizing male authority and respect for the elderly. Due to the emphasis on "saving face," defined as one's prestige in the social field, Asians go to great lengths to avoid negatively stigmatizing labels.

1.1.4. Ethnic Involvement

Offering support to others of the same ethnic group contributes to a sense of group solidarity and is a part of ethnic involvement [47]. Thus, ethnic involvement strengthens ethnic identity. Menzies, Filion, Brenner, and Elgie [48] found that ethnic involvement is strengthened by an ethnic group's experience of societal prejudice and discrimination. Simultaneously, ethnic involvement can enhance social and human capital that facilitates incorporation into the host country. Involvement includes social, cultural, political, and economic aspects. Socially, members gather to interact and to connect with one another as a way to form friendships. Culturally, members often organize and share their native culture with one another as well as with outside groups. Politically, members focus on increasing the group's influence through voter registrations, getting out the vote, and/or voting for specific candidates. Economically, members become small entrepreneurs to provide needed services and/or products to other members of the group.

Ethnic involvement relies on a willingness to serve and work with one's community. Thus, research on what drives such willingness is relevant to this discussion. Individuals with altruistic motives in caring for others have been found to be more likely involved in community leadership activities [46]. It was noted that interactions with well-informed individuals increase community members' civic engagement [49]. In samples of high school and college students, motivation to participate in community service was connected to identity development [50,51]. Individuals who participate in service have a stronger sense of community and network than those who do not [52]. On the other hand, Phinney and Ong [44] stated that ethnic behaviors are not always correlated with one's ethnic identity because immigrants may be involved in ethnic behaviors as a part of their acculturation but may not necessarily be associated with their ethnic identity.

In summation, ethnic identity is a fluid, multidimensional, and highly complex phenomenon [53] that involves various factors such as immigration, peer groups, parents' ethnic involvement, discrimination, and more. While the findings from this study are similar to other studies' findings, what was unique about this study is that it was based on an Asian American community in the South. Given the recent increase in the Asian American population in many localities in the South, the experiences of the participants in this study offer a unique contribution to the literature.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of immigrant ethnic identity through interviews with members of a Southern Asian American community. The study followed a phenomenological method [54] in order to describe respondents' experiences. For the study, foreign-born Asian immigrants, whether or not they have naturalized in the United States, are defined as first-generation Asian Americans, and their U.S.-born children are defined as second-generation Asian Americans. The study centered on the research question: How does the Asian American community influence individuals' ethnic identities? The study was approved by a university review board (IRB).

2.1. Context

Similar to many other cities in the South, the Asian American population in which this study took place started to rise in the 1980s, has increased every decade since, and is projected to continue to rise. Despite the increase of Asian Americans, the city's population continues to be over 90% European American and African American. In addition to the rise in Asian Americans, the city is also seeing a rapid increase of Latinx Americans, like other southern cities in the United States. Much of the rise in the Asian American and Latinx American populations in the South is due to employment [55], refugee resettlement [56], and to join families [57]. The majority of the Asian American population in the city under study lives in the suburbs.

2.2. Sampling

Given the heterogeneity of the Asian American population, diverse subgroup representation was sought [58]. Based on O'Connor's [59] estimate that a sample of 25 to 30 participants provides saturation, 35 participants were recruited and interviewed as a purposive sample with the goal of maximum variation along with subgroup representation. Prior to the start of the study, the lead researcher spent time in the Asian American community. This allowed the researcher to observe and identify the leaders in the community who can serve as gatekeepers for this study. Gatekeepers who were trusted by the community were used during the recruitment process. Gatekeepers used a script approved by the IRB to recruit potential participants from their networks. Participants represent 16 subgroups: Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, Pakistani, Singaporean, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Vietnamese. The gender breakdown was 18 female and 17 male. Participants worked in white-collar professions (23), blue-collar industries (4), retired (5), and did not work (3). All participants were first-generation, with the exception of two who are second-generation.

2.3. Data Collection

Prior to the start of each interview, all questions about the study and the research process were answered. The consent form was then reviewed, and written consent was obtained. Participants did not receive any incentives for being part of the study, only that the study would make a contribution to the existing knowledge on the topic. Semi-structured interview guides were developed and contained questions related to the role of ethnic identity in an Asian American community. Examples of questions include, "Why did you get involved with your ethnic community?" and "How does your ethnicity influence your involvement with your ethnic community?" The lead researcher conducted all the interviews in English, and they lasted about an hour and a half. Interview data were collected as field notes during face-to-face interviews. According to Punch, field notes are an "in the moment" accounting of the events, interactions, thoughts, and feelings of those participating in the interviews as they occur in context [60]. Field notes have been used in anthropology and other disciplines that use ethnomethodological methods [58]. Spradley argues interviews recorded as field notes can be organized as precise accountings that can serve for further analysis [61]. The interview field notes were immediately lengthened as extended field notes following each interview. This process involved completing sentences,

including full thoughts, and addressing gaps that were expressed by the participants but were not noted during the interview. This process allowed for the data to be more fully captured while it is fresh in the researcher's memory.

2.4. Data Analysis

Constant comparison was used to code the interview data by the lead researcher. Creswell [62] provided guidance and ATLAS.ti, a qualitative software package, which was used to manage the data and analytic process. The first step in data analysis was breaking down all the interviews into units. Next, the units of data were compared for similarities and differences. The comparison of the units was used to develop categories through linking and the identification of emerging categories. Categories were then related to their subcategories and to each other, and the relationships were tested against the data.

2.5. Rigor

To minimize researchers' bias, four strategies to assure rigor of the research process were used, these strategies were prior ethnography, prolonged engagement, clarifying researcher bias through memoing, and member checking. All four were feasible and consistent with the study method. Prior ethnography [61] consisted of the lead researcher attending community events, participating in community organizations, and getting to know community members before the start of the study. Because of prior ethnography, the lead researcher came to know some of the participants by the time they participated in the study. As recommended by Padgett, the researcher continued involvement with community activities during the study for prolonged engagement [63]. Clarifying researcher bias, which started prior to the interviews and continued through the final writing of the research products, allowed the researcher to outline their biases and assumptions [62]. When necessary, memos were added to help the researcher clarify the difference between preexisting biases and what was found in the data. The researcher also used memos for reflections during the data collection process. Lastly, member checking is "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" [64] (p. 314). Member checking involves allowing participants to review the analysis of data and offer feedback.

3. Results

Overall, this study explored how ethnic identity influences Asian American community members' roles and lives in a Southern city in the United States. The themes identified through data analysis are: (1) bridging two worlds, (2) being part of a community, and (3) navigating a two-layer community. The subsections below examine each of these themes.

3.1. Bridging Two Worlds

Participants have settled in the area for a variety of reasons, but the most common is their own or their spouse's employment. The majority of the participants (22) had lived elsewhere in the United States prior to moving to the South, but a few had come directly from their native country or refugee camp to their current residence. Those who had resided elsewhere in the United States noted that they had lived near a larger number of individuals who share their racial and/or ethnic background. For example, one participant said: "I lived in the North before coming here. It's very different. I don't often see people who are also [subgroup]. It took me some time to get used to it". In general, all participants stated in one way or another that living in the South left them no choice but to be immersed in the mainstream.

All participants felt that living in the South made them strongly feel like a minority, and 25 whom had been voluntary immigrants were first-generation immigrants who had been a member of the ethnic majority in their native countries. Those who came to the United States as refugees (10) had been victims of ethnic cleansing in their native countries and, thus, already had a heightened awareness of their ethnicity. They had lived in refugee

camps with other individuals of the same ethnicity for many years before migrating. However, both voluntary immigrants and refugees shared that they had identified with their ethnic subgroup, not their race, before coming to the United States. As a participant noted, "I never thought about being Asian [before coming to America]. But here, I must say that I am on every form I fill out".

Being a minority translated into participants seeing themselves as different from "Americans". Participants (24) felt others saw them this way as well and described experiences of discrimination as a result of their ethnic and racial identity. The participants had experienced overt racism, such as being told to "go back to your country" or people refusing to work with them because of their race as well as described being taken advantage of because people assumed they did not understand English well or know how things are done. One participant provided this example:

> *My apartment owner wanted to raise the rent. I did not want to stay because he raised it by too much. So, I say I will move out. He told me I cannot get my security money back but nothing in the apartment was damaged. He said I pay more rent or I leave with no security money. I talked to other people and they say I should get my security money back.*

Participants (22) who had lived in other cities in the United States prior to settling in the area had not been involved with the Asian American community in those places. They did not attribute their lack of involvement to a failure to identify with the race or ethnicity, and they knew opportunities for involvement had existed. They were busy with school or jobs and anxious to establish themselves in the United States. As a participant explained, "I wanted to make friends, but I needed to do well in school and find a job. There were people from my country, but I studied".

3.2. Being Part of a Community

Overall, all participants felt that being part of a community was important to them and that it contributed to how they identify themselves. Cultural influences and the desire to be around others who are from similar backgrounds and could share an unspoken understanding of their cultural beliefs, values, and experiences had led them to become involved in their community within the South. As a participant explained it, "[W]e are all from the same country. We speak the same language and eat the same food. We understand each other".

First-generation participants (33) said that within their daily lives, they miss being around people who are like them, so being part of the Asian American community made them feel more connected to who they are and where they are from. They also expressed concerns that without the community, future generations will be too "American". They felt their children would benefit from their own community involvement, but some struggled to get their children involved. One participant stated: "[M]y kids have their own lives and own friends. When they were young, it was easier to get them to go the events and things. Now they're older, so it's harder".

However, second-generation participants (2) in the study were involved in the Asian American community and spoke about the importance of continuing their parents' traditions within the United States. These participants had been raised by immigrant parents who were involved in the community. As one participant said, "I didn't know anything else. My parents were part of the community, and all my friends were part of the community so of course I was going to be part of the community when I grew up".

Being a part of the Asian American community meant taking advantage of opportunities to maintain connections with other members. Participants (27) pointed out that their city did not have a geographic concentration of Asian Americans, which made it hard to feel like a part of an ethnic or racial community. Community events may be held in geographically diverse areas, which made it difficult to initiate and attend. Members of Asian American communities gathered at parties, celebrations, events, festivals, and holidays. Nonetheless, participants (22) felt that when they did attend, they gained a sense

of belonging and reduced isolation from gatherings. Community gatherings were not limited to socializing but also acted as a way to network and provide support for one another. Those who had been in the area for a while felt a particular responsibility to help newcomers, especially with useful knowledge and connections. Most connections involved Asian American networks, but sometimes it included government or nonprofit services.

3.3. Navigating a Two-Layered Community

For the most part, all participants identified with two communities: their ethnic community and the Asian American community. The ethnic community tended to be more social, allowing individuals to have a deeper level of connection and involvement. Those who had lived in the South for a while described ethnic communities as building organically and automatically; driven by a desire to spend time with others who were similar to them. For example, a participant stated, "It was very natural for [my ethnic community]. When there were fewer numbers [in our city], we found each other in places like malls. I would see another person like me, and we would start talking about where we came from and get together". Many participants (26) did not have extended family living nearby, and they considered relationships within their ethnic group as a substitute for such ties. Another participant described the tightness of these bonds as follows: "When you come to know one person, you know the whole community" because "everyone knows everyone else".

The fact that each of the ethnic subgroups were small helped to create a sense of belongingness and mutual support. As one participant said, "We are small in numbers. We get together and have parties are each other's houses. We are emergency contacts for each other. We know each other's kids, and we are there for each other". Refugee subgroups were an exception to the rule that the city did not have Asian American neighborhoods. Participants described this as a deliberate choice in order to develop a sense of community and provided support for one another. One participant noted, "[W]e live close so we can help. Not everyone has a job or a car. When I go anywhere, I ask if anyone also wants to go. When I go to buy food, I always take people with me".

Several participants (14) felt more distant from the Asian American community but considered it important. The Asian American community came together more periodically and formally. Participants described a range of events and initiatives organized according to race. One was the organization of cultural events to celebrate and reinforce their heritage. Planning cultural education events took effort and resources that many subgroups did not have, but as a group, they were able to assemble more resources. The race-based community had also assembled in times of natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods in various Asian countries. As one participant said, "I had to do something because they could've been my family". Another set of organized initiatives involved politics, such as voter registration drives, campaigning for local candidates, or responding to hate crimes and discrimination against members of the Asian American community.

4. Discussion

The current study explored Asian Americans' experiences of ethnic identity development and involvement with ethnic communities in a Southern city in the United States. The findings indicate that participants' experiences were consistent with the previous literature and the focus on Asian Americans in the South contributes to the existing literature.

4.1. Discussions on Current Study's Findings

First, participants who have experiences of living in the northern states and those who migrated directly from an Asian country described living in a place with few Asian Americans as very different from their past experience. Those who came directly to the Southern city in the United States from Asia said they had never thought of themselves as "Asian" until they were identified as a minority, which created a stronger sense of pan-Asian identity. Stangor, Lynch, Duan, and Glas [65] state that individuals can identify

with a minimum of two social identities at once. The concept of "dual identity" explains how people can identify with their race, ethnicity, and gender group at the same time. In the case of Asian Americans, their racial and ethnic identities may co-exist in the host society. A recent study found that if Asian Americans strengthen their ethnic identity, it did not reduce their pan-ethnic identity as Asian Americans [3]. This finding is consistent in that the individuals can identify with multiple social identities at once. This pan-Asian identification may contribute to participants' involvement in the ethnic groups. It may also contribute to feeling different from others, particularly from African and European Americans, which may contribute to participants' experience of discrimination.

Second, findings with respect to Asian Americans' experiences of discrimination also align with past research. For example, Ong and colleagues found that 78% of Asian Americans reported experiencing some form of discrimination in the preceding two weeks [44], and Nadal found that Asian Americans perceived that they were being second-class citizens [66]. The understanding that discrimination tends to contribute to ethnic involvement supports the notion that greater discrimination is connected to greater involvement [48]. Discrimination and ethnic involvement can lead to ethnic solidarity, but it can also increase isolation and decrease adaptation to the host country.

Next, being isolated causes the feeling of being different, and shared experiences among ethnic minorities contributed to a desire for community. Being part of the Asian American community also encouraged participants to preserve connections to their native cultures. At the same time, the Asian American community reinforces members' identification with their ethnicity and race. The sense of a community with people from similar cultures also aligns with the ethnic identity literature related to self-identification, group membership, attitudes toward one's ethnic group, ethnic involvement, and cultural values and beliefs [8].

The importance of social networks and their role in providing support for members has been explored in the literature [67]. Empirical studies have examined how immigrant network groups improve quality of life [68]. Those who connect members in need to varying services are often recognized as leaders, both formally and informally. These leaders can help promote support within the community. For instance, a study of Southeast Asian refugees found that emotional and social support from individuals of the same ethnicity moderate depressive symptoms and enhance a sense of identity and belongingness [69]. Furthermore, the development of such communities may also reinforce the notion that Asians traditionally rely on the extended family because, without the family, participants formed relationships with others that have a similar background.

In addition, participants in the given study also discussed the effort it takes to be a part of the community due to a lack of other individuals who share similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the geographical dispersion of members. While ethnic enclaves where immigrants of the same background live and function have been found to be helpful in immigrants' adaptation [70], the enclaves can also seclude and segregate immigrants from the rest of the United States. Many ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns can fully function on their own without immigrants leaving the neighborhood. The extent to which immigrants interact with other individuals in mainstream society can impact their racial and ethnic identity within the United States. Lack of ethnic enclaves forces immigrants to interact and be a part of the mainstream culture, which may contribute to faster incorporation into American society. Therefore, the lack of ethnic enclaves among the participants possibly increases their chance of isolation and incorporation. This finding is relevant to Berry's [71] concept of acculturation strategies. Since integration (i.e., being involved in both the mainstream culture and maintaining the ethnic culture) is considered the most positive acculturation strategy, the participants in the study could be well-integrated depending on their level of interaction with both cultures.

Lastly, this study found that ethnically based gatherings were more spontaneous, and racially based gatherings were more likely to be organized for a particular purpose. Thus, it adds nuance to Lee and Yoo's suggestion that Asian Americans may place a greater

emphasis on ethnic identity than racial identity [4]. Studies have shown that networks of only in-group members are more cohesive and function more efficiently [9]. When there are threats to the group, it forces the development of stronger social ties [49]. Overall, being a part of the community allowed for a collective voice and the ability to share resources.

4.2. Implications

The current study has several implications for social work practitioners who work with Asian American populations, especially in small cities without Asian American enclaves. First, participants from the current study, consistent with the previous literature, indicated that being involved in the ethnic community had important meaning and a positive role in strengthening their Asian American ethnic identity. This suggests that social workers should encourage their Asian American clients to be involved with their communities. There were different outcomes among the varying immigrant generational status. In general, first-generation Asian Americans preferred their ethnic identity from the native country, whereas second-generation individuals tended to relate more to their identity as an Asian American. Therefore, it is suggested that social workers respond to these differences by practicing cultural humility [70]. In other words, social workers can stay open-minded and engage in the clients' exploration of ethnic identity. This process will support clients' empowered self-exploration, including ethnic identity exploration.

When working with newly arrived immigrant clients, social workers may support their adjustment by exploring and facilitating the clients' sense of belonging with their ethnic group, the pan-Asian community, as well as the overall community. For instance, it was found that Asian immigrants exhibited higher depression, which can be worsened by language barriers and social isolation [72]. If immigrant clients express social isolation, social workers can support their integration process into the host society by exploring both options: involvement in ethnic groups and mainstream communities. Social workers can brainstorm and seek various opportunities for the clients to be integrated, such as religious organizations, cultural events, or volunteering opportunities, which may increase their social capital [73]. In addition, due to responsibilities from their daily lives (i.e., work, study, taking care of family), participants described difficulty getting involved in an ethnic community. Social workers should be thoughtful of this barrier and brainstorm accessible ways and events for the client can get involved with their ethnic community and the mainstream culture.

The dominance of the European American and African American population being over 90% in many of the cities in the southern region of the United States has important multicultural implications. The black-white binary system is historic and powerful in that it dictates social mobility, social relations, and institutional access [7]. Asian Americans and Latinx Americans who look different and speak languages other than English are disrupting this black-white binary and may be forcing some localities in the South to reconsider their traditional cultural, racial, linguistic, political, social, and economic landscapes [5]. The transition to a non-binary society with the rapid increase of Asian Americans and Latinx Americans may instill fear and uncertainty among individuals who are accustomed to the black-white binary [5].

In terms of multicultural implications for research, the current study unveiled the role of the geographical region in immigrants' ethnic identity development and involvement with their ethnic communities. Depending on the region's racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, a given ethnic group may or may not feel welcomed based on regions' differences in racial composition, political views, cultures, values, and attitude towards newcomers [74,75]. Future studies can delve further into exploring the phenomenon and examine the ethnic minority individuals' experiences in different parts of the United States. Given the heterogeneity of the Asian American population, studies need to examine ethnic groups separately. Comparing experiences of different ethnic groups would also contribute to the existing literature. Future studies can also gain more in-depth insights by conducting mixed methods and quantitative studies. For instance, differences between refugees and

voluntary migrants can be explored as well as further comparisons between first- and second-generation immigrants. Lastly, future studies can include important demographic variables into consideration as it relates to ethnic identity such as age and length of time in the South.

5. Conclusions

The current study has a few limitations, most of which derive from its purpose of gaining an understanding of Asian Americans' experiences in a Southern city. First, purposive sampling was used to gain maximum representation of different ethnic subgroups. However, differences in experiences by other factors such as age and gender were not explored. The experiences of acculturation, ethnic identity, and the importance of ethnic community may be different depending on the age, gender, and age of migration. For instance, Mui and Kang [76] found that the Asian immigrant elders were significantly more depressed than their counterparts and were more depressed if their children's perceived cultural gap was bigger. Second, since it was a cross-sectional data collection, there is no longitudinal information about if and how the participants' experiences of ethnic exploration and involvement in their ethnic community evolves over a certain time period. Third, data collection consisted of field notes and relied on the lead researchers' memory to expand on the notes after the interviews. Fourth, given the use of gatekeepers in recruitment and the lead researcher spending time in the community prior to the study, there may be bias in who agreed to participate. Lastly, while not the intent of this study, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Future studies might address these limitations.

Nonetheless, the current study makes a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on Asian Americans' ethnic exploration and the role of the ethnic community. Although the study was conducted in one city within the southeast region of the United States, it may be relevant to Asian American populations in other communities, especially those that lack ethnic enclaves. Furthermore, much of the existing literature that focuses on newcomers in the southern region of the United States is based on Latinx Americans [6]. The focus of this study on Asian Americans adds to the knowledge base about this population and their experiences in the South.

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