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Remaking Selves, Repositioning Selves, or Remaking Space: An Examination of Asian American College Students' Processes of "Belonging"

Michelle Samura

The importance of "belonging" for college students has been well documented. According to an extensive body of research on college student development, students are more likely to succeed in college if they feel that they belong at their institution (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Astin, 1975, 1984; Berger, 1997; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Maramba & Museus, 2012; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1994). Students' sense of belonging is closely related to their academic achievement, retention, engagement, satisfaction with student life, mental health, and overall well-being (Astin, 1993; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowman, 2010; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007). Despite the importance of the concept for researchers and practitioners interested in understanding and improving college students' experiences, little is known about how different students experience and understand belonging.

Moreover, even as research indicates that belonging is crucial for students of color, studies that examine how different groups experience belonging remain limited (Kuh et al., 2006; Lee & Davis, 2000; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Peitzak, 2002). Most of the research on belonging of students of color has focused on Black and Latino students (Lee & Davis,

2000). Only a few studies have examined Asian American students' sense of belonging (Hsia, 1988; Lee & Davis, 2000; Museus & Maramba, 2010). Scholars who study Asian American college students have suggested that Asian Americans are awkwardly positioned as separate from other students of color vis-à-vis the model minority stereotype (Hsia, 1988; Lee & Davis, 2000). Furthermore, Asian Americans often are viewed as overrepresented on college campuses, yet they remain underserved by campus support programs and resources and overlooked by researchers. Many Asian Americans have gained access to higher education, but the ways in which they belong on campuses is unclear. Given their positionality, a focus on Asian American students' experiences can provide greater insight into the complexities of college student belonging. In this article, I aim to rethink belonging—what it looks like and how students understand it—by examining how Asian American college students navigate and negotiate the campus. Through an understanding of Asian American students' navigation and negotiation processes, we can gain insight into their processes of belonging.

DEFINITIONS AND FRAMEWORKS OF BELONGING

Scholars have used a number of frameworks to study and explain the concept of belonging for college students. Three of the most widely

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used frameworks for belonging are Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) concept of perceived cohesion, Tinto's (1994) model of integration, and Hurtado and Carter's (1997) concept of sense of belonging. Bollen and Hoyle focused on the concept of perceived cohesion and defined it as encompassing "an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feeling of morale associated with membership in the group" (p. 482). By conceptualizing perceived cohesion as including a sense of belonging, they argued that scholars would be able to apply the concept of cohesion to groups in a variety of contexts, including higher education settings. Bollen and Hoyle's three-item construct ("I feel a sense of belonging to . . ."; "I feel that I am a member of the . . . community"; "I see myself as part of the . . . community") is frequently used to measure college students' sense of belonging at a particular moment in time.

Tinto's (1994) model of integration draws on Durkheim's (1951) theory of social integration and posits that the more that students are integrated within their respective institutions' academic and social structures, the more likely they will thrive in college and persist through graduation. Although Tinto's theory is one of the most cited explanations for college student retention, this perspective has been criticized for placing the responsibility of integration on the student with little attention given to the responsibilities of the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Nora, 2001; Rendon, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999). In other words, according to Tinto's theory, if a student leaves college, it is largely due to his or her inability to become integrated and not to the inadequacies of the institution.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) conceptualized belonging to capture "the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" and considers the interplay between the student and the institution

(p. 327). Their conceptualization of the sense of belonging has been particularly useful for scholars who focus on historically marginalized populations, such as students of color, as integration may have different meanings for different students (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998; Museus & Troung, 2009).

POSSIBILITIES FOR BELONGING

While typical views of students' belonging are useful, many of these conceptions tend to overlook two important factors. First, attention to the fluidity and mutability of belonging is often missing from traditional perspectives of students' sense of belonging. To think of belonging as a static state oversimplifies the concept. A consideration of belonging as a dynamic process would enable scholars to go beyond identification of the various factors that contribute to and the outcomes that result from students' sense of belonging. For the most part, research on belonging does not give attention to such fluidity, as belonging is often measured through large-scale surveys that capture one point in time. One notable exception is Strayhorn's (2012) conceptualization of belonging. In his discussion of one of the core elements of students' sense of belonging, Strayhorn addresses the changing nature of one's sense of belonging and the need to put effort into maintaining one's belonging. However, the model of belonging that he proposes, while insightful, presents contributing factors to and outcomes of students' sense of belonging in a linear fashion. The processual possibilities for belonging, although present in a number of his empirical studies, are not included.

The second aspect that often is missing from studies on belonging is the role of students themselves in their processes of belonging. Much of the research focuses on institutional

practices and interventions as well as available resources and support (Kuh et al., 2006; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). However, the agency of students, that is, how students navigate, negotiate, contest, and understand their processes of belonging, is given less attention. Thus, research that approaches belonging as a process in which students are actively and continuously engaged is needed.

The present study provides an examination of what happens when college students interact with physical and social dimensions of campus space. More specifically, I examine what happens when Asian American students' social identities, particularly their racial identities and their racialized expectations, interact with aspects of campus space. Campus space, in the context of this study, is conceptualized as physical, built environments, such as classrooms, buildings, walkways, and various levels and types of social relationships and interactions, such as student organizations and classes (Samura, in press). In this study, I examine the fit and lack of fit between Asian American students and campus space and explore the ways in which these students make sense of and respond to these experiences, with an emphasis on students' agency in these processes.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study was framed by a Blumerian understanding of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism was used to examine how interactions among people, as well as interactions among people and spaces, create, recreate, maintain, and change realities. In this perspective, meanings and identities are simultaneously created and recreated at both individual and collective levels. I used a symbolic interactionist perspective to examine the meanings of race and space that were created through Asian American college students' interactions with and within campus

spaces. A symbolic interactionist approach also emphasizes the reflexive and self-reflexive capacity of students as well as students' agency in race-making processes.

Additionally, I drew upon critical spatial perspectives (Delaney, 2002; Knowles, 2003; Lipsitz, 2007; Massey, 1994) to consider how students' interactions with various campus spaces have the potential to reveal issues of power and inequality on individual and structural levels and in material and intangible forms. A spatial lens locates larger racial meanings and ideologies in concrete, lived experiences and even in material forms, such as buildings or student groups. Through a spatial lens, researchers can examine the types of interactions that occur as well as where they occur. The places in which students' racial identities increase or decrease in salience, and the reasons for the fluctuations in salience, can be examined in depth.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a case study methodology to address the following research question: How do Asian American students navigate through physical and social spaces of higher education? Case study methodology offers an inductive, iterative, theory-building approach that is especially useful in the early stages of research on a topic and emphasizes the development of measures and constructs (de Vaus, 2005; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1989). A single case study design enabled me to examine interactions among race, space, and students' belonging and to explore how students' processes of negotiation and navigation at West University (a pseudonym) inform understandings of belonging.

Setting and Participants

Data collection took place during the 2007–2008 academic year at West University, a

large public research institution on the West Coast of the United States. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to find participants who were undergraduate students and who self-identified as “Asian” or “Asian American.” I recruited participants through making verbal announcements in classes, posting flyers around campus, and disseminating announcements to campus organizations via organizations’ listservs and Facebook pages. Snowball sampling allowed for further recruitment of participants. Students were able to choose whether they would participate as an interviewee, photo journaler, or both. A total of 36 students participated in this study—17 interviewees, 18 photo journalers, and 1 participant who did both an interview and photo journal.

Of the pool of student participants, 69.4% were female and 30.6% were male. The majority of the sample (75%) were students in their third or fourth year of college. Although specific income data were not collected, almost all of the students self-identified their families as either “middle class” or “upper middle class.” Of the participants, 67.6% were born in the United States, and English was the primary language for 77.8%. The majority of the student participants self-identified as first generation, i.e., born in a country other than the US. or second generation, that is born in the US with at least one parent who was born in another country. Ten of the 36 participants identified as first generation (27.8%), one identified as 1.5 generation— born outside the US but immigrated to the US at a young age (2.8%), and 17 identified as second generation (47.2%). Approximately 28% of the participants self-identified as mixed-race or mixed-ethnicity, and 16 of the 36 participants (44.4%) self-identified as Chinese or part-Chinese. The participant pool also included 7 students who self-identified as Japanese (19.4%), 7 who self-identified as Vietnamese

(19.4%), 6 who self-identified as Filipino (16.7%), 2 each (5.6%) who self-identified as Cambodian and Korean, and 1 each (2.8%) who self-identified as Taiwanese, Laotian, Thai, and Guamanian.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted a total of 18 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 1.5 hours, using an interview guide that was divided into four topical sections. The first section concerned how students spent their time in college and how they related to various spaces of West University. The second section focused on students’ academic engagement and development. The third section covered their civic engagement and development, including involvement in campus organizations, political affiliations, and religious preferences. The final section focused on students’ personal development.

Photo journals were kept by 19 students for a minimum of one week. Photo journalers were asked to: “Take pictures of things, people, and places that have meaning and significance to you. Create photographs that help develop a portrait of you and of your everyday life.” I also asked students to review the images that they captured and to jot down notes in a notebook that I provided. In addition to the general guidelines, I also gave students a shooting script (Suchar, 1997) with six clusters of questions, eight questions in total. A shooting script is a list of topics or questions that can be examined through photographs. Students’ shooting script questions were taken directly from my interview guide. Representative questions included: “Where do you spend the most time?” “Where, when, and with whom do you feel the most comfortable?” and “What aspects of your identity seem to matter the most at West University?” Students answered the shooting script questions through photographs and took

notes on these images to provide a context for and further insight into what they captured and meanings of their images.

The process of photo journaling enabled students to incorporate more of their contexts into their answers. Further, as opposed to a one-time interview, students had more time to answer questions and were able to use a variety of tools to create and represent their responses. I was interested in seeing how photographic images could provide insight that differs from spoken words. Combined, the interviews and photo journals helped me to develop a clearer picture of the campus landscape—the nature of the physical space as well as the various types of social interactions that take place in these spaces—and how Asian American students navigate through and negotiate within these spaces.

Interview data were analyzed using an open-ended, ad hoc coding technique (Kvale, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition to providing a way for me to report and describe what interviewees shared, this form of analysis enabled me to analyze students' interactions and the meaning created in and through the interactions. Photographs and related photo journalers' notes also were coded, and thematic and content analyses were used to analyze the photo journals (Collier & Collier, 1986; Suchar, 1997). Data from the interviews, photographs, and photo journalers' notes were triangulated to determine which code categories and themes were most pervasive. The most pervasive code categories and themes serve as the basis of the topics discussed in this article.

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of this study was time. Had I followed students throughout their college careers, I would be able to speak in greater detail about the processes of belonging

in which they engaged. In particular, the process of remaking space was difficult to capture within a short period of time. Another limitation of this study was the methodology. The decision to incorporate visual methods, particularly student-created photo journals, was fueled by my desire to (a) capture process, i.e., students' lives in motion, as opposed to capturing one moment in time, as did my interviews; and (b) emphasize students' perspectives, that is enable students to present themselves and their lives as they wanted. However, these two strengths of photo journals also can be weaknesses. For example, although students had the freedom to take pictures whenever and of whatever they wanted, the nature of photography can be restrictive. Because photos capture a particular moment in time, a picture taken by a student of a space may reflect different meanings depending on *when* it was taken. One of the photo journalers shared with me how he discovered that he could not take pictures at just any moment. He expressed concern about how the images he captured would be understood by potential viewers, and did not want pictures to be "taken the wrong way." The student realized, through the photo journaling process, how meanings and experiences of space, even within the same physical space, are fluid and dynamic.

The student's concerns and insights served to highlight important aspects of campus space. Campus spaces can embody contradictions. In one moment, a student can experience and even use a picture to portray a particular campus space as comfortable. However, at a different time of the day or even if different people pass through or occupy that same space, the meaning of the space, and, subsequently, the meaning that the student intended to communicate through the image, can be completely different.

I also ran the risk of photo journalers, as well as interviewees, presenting themselves

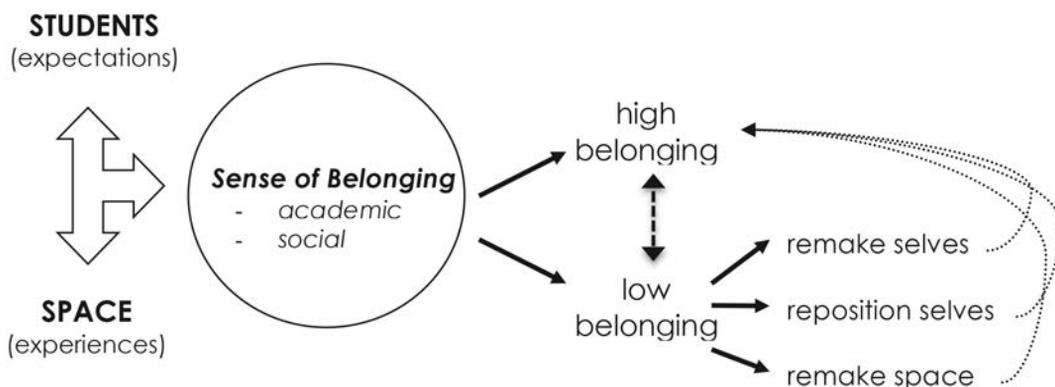


FIGURE 1. Processes of Belonging

only in socially desirable ways. This was a risk that I was willing to take to empower students to portray their own lives, their experiences, and their perspectives. In fact, a number of students were willing to share difficult aspects of themselves, such as low self-esteem, or difficulties with body image, through both the photo journals and the interviews.

FINDINGS

Several notable themes emerged from the interview and photo journal data that reveal how students experience various campus spaces differently and how they understand what it means for their Asian American bodies to be in those spaces. Interviews and pictures taken by student photo journalers highlighted possible reasons for students' varying levels of belonging. For many students in this study, being Asian American in this space raised questions of fit and, in many cases, a lack of fit. In certain moments, Asian American students felt as though they belonged. In other moments they felt different, judged, or out of place. This fluctuation of students'

sense of belonging was particularly evident in two realms: social and academic. Moreover, participants' discussions and depictions of their belonging in these two realms reveal that belonging socially and belonging academically required ongoing efforts. For these students, belonging was not a state of being to attain; rather, it was a *process* that involved remaking themselves, repositioning themselves, or remaking space to increase belonging.

Figure 1 illustrates the processes by which students experienced, understood, and responded to varying levels of belonging within the academic and social realms. Students' sense of belonging was affected by the interactions between students and space. Students experience a sense of belonging on a continuum from low to high.

When students experienced a lower or decreased sense of belonging, they often engaged in one of three processes: remake themselves, reposition themselves, or remake space. These three processes emerged from an examination of each participant's "story." In other words, when looking for patterns in the interview data and in students' responses

to shooting script questions (which, as noted, were some of the same questions asked in the interviews), I considered not only what happened at certain moments but also what led up to an event or to a realization as well as what subsequently transpired.

Examining students' belonging or sense of belonging as a process enabled me to identify the three trajectories. I should first note that the three trajectories are not always distinct and that there may be some overlap among processes. The primary purpose of identifying different trajectories is to provide a framework through which we might better understand students' efforts to belong.

First, the process of remaking themselves involved renegotiating their expectations and aspirations so as to better fit into the space. In other words, they remade themselves to increase their belonging. Second, some students chose to reposition themselves. The process of repositioning involved physically moving to another space or reorienting how they view themselves in light of their contexts. In either case, the intention was, once again, to better fit into the space to increase their sense of belonging. Finally, remaking space—refashioning physical or social arrangements to make the space fit the student—was a third option. Students seemed to engage in remaking space less often, however, than remaking themselves or repositioning themselves.

In the following sections, I discuss in greater depth these three patterns of students' efforts to belong academically and socially. I also provide specific examples of moments when students experienced low belonging, along with an analysis of the examples to highlight how students interpreted their lack of fit or low belonging. Finally, I discuss how students subsequently remade themselves, repositioned themselves, or remade space to increase their sense of belonging.

Remaking Selves: Academically

Many of the students in this study entered college with particular ideas about their choice of major and the type of career path that they would like to pursue. As they took classes, however, reality settled in, and some students were forced to adjust their expectations and aspirations. Students frequently found that their first choice of major did not work out because they did not do as well in those classes as they (and their parents) had anticipated. At the same time, these students experienced a significant decrease in their parents' direct involvement. Almost all of the participants indicated that, prior to college, their parents were the most significant influence on their lives. Parents' desires and expectations frequently dictated what these students did or did not do. Upon entering college, however, students gained new freedoms, and they indicated that their parents' involvement in their lives significantly decreased. However, even as students began to make choices for themselves, their parents' expectations remained. Parents' implicit expectations were often unspoken and less direct, yet proved to be just as influential as their explicit expectations. Thus, when students discovered that they would not be able to pursue the major or career upon which they (and, often, their parents) had decided, they were forced to remake their expectations. At the same time, this remaking process still very much involved students' consideration of parents' desires, and one of the biggest areas of negotiation for students was their choice of major and future occupation.

At times, students were shocked that they did not do as well as they expected and did not know how to make sense of things. Some students had a difficult time dealing with the fact that they were not able to get the same grades as they did before college. It is

important to note that unexpected academic difficulties are a common occurrence among incoming students, not just Asian Americans, and that its occurrence is not necessarily a racial phenomenon. However, Asian American students must contend with the racial stereotype of being high academic achievers. Assumptions by faculty, peers, family, and society about students' Asian American-ness as somehow equated with automatic academic success results in certain expectations with which students must negotiate. (For further discussion of the emergent version of Asian American-ness, see Samura, 2011.)

For the students in this study, these meanings of Asian American racial identity made academic difficulties and failures even more difficult to comprehend, let alone to justify to others. For example, Katie (all names are pseudonyms) experienced confusion as a result of a disconnection between her former ways of thinking and her experiences upon entering college. She explained how, even after being at West University for over 3 years, she did not feel that she belonged:

[Being at West University] these past 3 years has altered what I thought I knew about the world and today's society. I went to a high school where the majority was Asian or White. I came here; the White kids were all of a sudden smarter than me, and I felt like a fish out of water.

Katie's previous understanding of her capacity for academic success was challenged. She was forced to confront her assumptions about her intellectual capabilities being connected to her Asian American racial identity. In this situation, Katie's former paradigms were no longer able to explain her current realities. As a result of such a disconnection between students' expectations and experiences, which often led to a decreased sense of belonging, students remade their expectations or, in a sense, remade themselves.

One way that students remade themselves was by choosing new majors and career paths. This allowed them to increase their academic sense of belonging because they were more able to succeed in their new fields. Higher grades were one way that students experienced a better fit within academic space. Choosing another major and remaking their career path were not simple processes. In addition to exercising their newfound freedoms, students also had to take into consideration not only what they wanted but also what their parents wanted. John is an example of someone who was still caught in the middle.

John entered West University as a pre-biology major. With a 4.0 grade point average in high school, he thought his chosen major would be easy. However, John could not keep up with the work. As he explained the need to change his major, John shared how he also discovered that he was not passionate about that field. He also speculated: "In my community, back at home, there's tons of doctors, lawyers, and I'm pretty sure that [for] not all of them, [their chosen career] was their passion . . . [but] just a means to an end."

As he considered the new major and career that he wanted to assume, John found himself in multiple negotiations with himself. He stated, "If I do something like photo journalism or archaeology or social work, they're [my parents are] going to be like: 'What the hell? That doesn't bring in income.'" He then explained:

John: I've gone from not even questioning what I'm studying, not even questioning what my parents have told me to do, because, like, I was raised to respect them and not really question them, to being more like, how can I do something that I want to do but at the same time make my parents be proud of it? And try to fit the two. Because I do something that I really really just want to do . . .

Interviewer: What would that be?

John: Probably archaeology. Probably going around the world and digging up stuff. I mean, if I do something like that, and my parents are not happy, then it wouldn't be what I want to do. Because I wouldn't be happy, either. Because I would feel guilty.

In the end, John chose to pursue a major in Asian American studies and a minor in exercise and health science as a path toward becoming a physical therapist. He explained that he wanted to combine Western and Eastern approaches to physical care. For John, becoming a physical therapist was the best compromise, given his parents' desire for him to have a stable and lucrative career, his own interests in Asian and Asian American perspectives, and his desire to do something that he enjoys. John concluded his discussion of these choices by commenting on how his parents had sacrificed a lot for him and that he wanted to show them respect by his career choices. This pattern of negotiation and reinvention of aspirations was exhibited by a number of the participants. It provided a way for students to better fit, or belong, into West University's academic space while managing parents' influences and asserting their desires.

Remaking Selves: Socially

A number of students discussed how they wanted to improve their social skills during college. They spoke of wanting to socialize more, talk more, and improve their public speaking skills. These desires often had to do with developing their self-confidence and increasing their self-esteem. The reality for many of these students, however, is that fitting into the social scene at West University was not always as easy as they had hoped. Some of the reasons for their social misalignment were discussed above. In particular, the ways that students experienced their Asian American bodies in diverse spaces and even White spaces

often left them feeling as though they did not belong. In some instances, students attributed their misalignment to their racial identity or some combination of social identities. More often, it left students wondering what aspects of themselves were inhibiting their ability to belong socially.

Several students took it upon themselves to change so as to better fit in ways that were meaningful to them. Bianca was one of these students. She would be the first to say that she would not normally "mesh in" with people. However, after going through her first two years at West University not being able to speak in class or comfortably talk with other people, Bianca was determined to improve her public speaking skills. Bianca intentionally put herself in situations that would force her to improve these skills. She joined the local chapter of Toastmasters, the Model United Nations, and West University's Debate Society. Bianca explained, "I just wanted to be somebody who could speak up. I didn't want to always be like this person who was scared to talk in a room full of people or scared to bring something up in class." After a year of participating in West University's Debate Society, Bianca assumed the role of the society's president.

Although Bianca did not explicitly connect her initial difficulty of speaking in class with her Asian American racial identity, the transition between a discussion of how she dealt with her public speaking skills and her explanation of why she choose to attend West University indicated that racial identification was on her mind. Bianca explained how race explicitly played into her decision of where to attend college. She chose not to attend a college with a large Asian and Asian American student population because she did not want to become or be associated with stereotypical Asian students. At West University, Bianca felt that she would not be lumped together with other Asian students and would have

more freedom to be different. Bianca chose a non-stereotypical Asian major, comparative literature. Moreover, her decision to counter what can be viewed as a stereotypical view of Asian American females— quiet, docile, passive—by remaking herself through the debate society further distinguished her from the stereotype that she tried to avoid. Bianca's choices, and the reasons that she gave for them, suggest that she was highly aware of how she positioned and presented herself in relation to stereotypical Asian American students and was cognizant of how others viewed her as an Asian American female.

In Bianca's navigating the salience of her racial identity, she also contested and changed gendered expectations. As a leader in the debate society, Bianca found that the most effective way to garner the attention and respect of her mostly White male peers was to be, in her words, "bitchy." By this, Bianca meant that she had to take on a strong-willed, highly vocal, and extremely driven demeanor, the stereotypical "bitch," to get others to listen to her and to take her seriously. Granted, not every student had the desire or the will to go to the extremes that Bianca did to reinvent herself. However, for Bianca, remaking a part of herself in these ways enabled her to attain a better fit between herself and the social aspects of West University.

Other students remade themselves in different ways. As discussed earlier, Asian American bodies in campus space, especially the bodies of Asian American women, frequently did not align with normative standards of physical appearance. A number of the students chose to change their physical appearance by obsessively exercising to better adhere to the normative body type at West University. Others lightened their hair color. Some students even wore contact lenses tinted in a lighter or different color than their naturally dark eye color. All these efforts were

done with the intention of increasing their sense of belonging socially.

Repositioning Selves: Academically

Another way that students responded to a lack of academic fit was by repositioning themselves. As Tiffany reflected on her four years at West University, she shared how academics had been her biggest struggle, that academic life at West University was not what she expected, especially because she was used to high school, where things were easy and the teachers knew her name. Seemingly embarrassed, Tiffany commented:

I've never seen my report so, like, hitting all the letters of the alphabet. Before, I was usually used to seeing at least one or two letters. Coming to college, what a shock, seeing more than just two different letters.

The way that Tiffany chose to make sense of the fact that she did not belong academically was to frame her situation in terms of breaking stereotypes.

Part of the reason why I chose to be a soc[iology] and an Asian Am major is to break out of that stereotype, like, you know, because I'm Asian doesn't mean I'm going to be a doctor or an engineer, you know, and I feel like a lot of students have that experience. And talking to a lot of my friends, they felt the same way.

By viewing herself as someone who was breaking an Asian American racial stereotype, that is, by not choosing a stereotypical Asian field, such as biology or engineering, Tiffany was able to make better sense of her academic struggles. Instead of conceding that she was unsuccessful in certain fields, Tiffany repositioned and presented herself as someone who consciously chose to be a part of something other than a stereotypical Asian American field of study. In this way, she remedied her academic misalignment by intentionally breaking Asian American

stereotypes, which subsequently contributed to an increase in her academic sense of belonging.

Repositioning Selves: Socially

Students in this study chose a variety of ways to reposition themselves socially. Some of them chose to embrace and emphasize their Asian American-ness and joined groups and organizations that were based on shared racial or ethnic identification. The frequency of images and discussions of race- and ethnicity-based groups and organizations indicated that these inter- and intra-racial affiliations were extremely important to the Asian American students in this study. Photo journalers took numerous pictures of ethnic campus club meetings, Asian American sorority events, and informal social settings with groups of mostly Asian-looking friends. Similarly, interviewees discussed their involvement in numerous Asian American and Asian ethnic clubs, organizations, and political movements. When students did not feel like they belonged socially at West University, they sought out places and people with whom they thought they could better fit. Many developed strategic affiliations in and through Asian American clubs and organizations. In other words, they repositioned themselves to be a part of Asian or Asian American spaces.

Students who chose to be a part of the Asian American Greek system took care to express the importance of those spaces to them. They explained how their “brothers” or “sisters” were the people with whom they lived and spent most of their time. Their Asian American fraternity and sorority experiences essentially defined much of their college life. In these race- or ethnicity-based groups, or Asian American spaces, these students found a great sense of belonging. Alternatively, other students repositioned themselves with more racially diverse or even majority White groups and organizations in an effort to increase their

sense of belonging to the majority group. In these instances, students chose to de-emphasize their Asian American-ness. By more closely aligning themselves with the activities and appearance of the majority group or joining explicitly racially diverse organizations, some students were able to feel as though their racial identities did not matter or that they mattered less. This enabled students to remove, or at least put aside, their racial identities so as to increase their fit socially.

Remaking Space: Academically

When students found that they could not succeed in their initial choice of major or if they discovered that a particular field of study was not as interesting as they assumed it would be, they made necessary adjustments, some of which were less than ideal for students’ parents. For example, instead of further negotiating parents’ expectations with their own aspirations, several students created a divide between “home” and “school.” They found a way to separate and manage what happened at school and what took place at home. In many ways, their mindset became: “What happens at West University, stays at West University.” With a general decrease in direct parental involvement, some students further limited communication with their parents, particularly around the topic of academics. By not sharing details of their academic lives, such as the grades they were earning, with their parents, students could navigate the academic realm in ways that made sense to them and that helped them feel as though they fit better.

Reduced communication between students and their parents did not mean that the students had completely abandoned their parents’ expectations. Instead parents’ expectations often continued to influence students’ subsequent choices. As noted, the unspoken and implicit expectations had just as

powerful an effect on students as did parents' explicit expectations. Even when students claimed that they ignored their parents as a way of negotiating differences between parents' expectations and their own desires, their decisions were still heavily guided by what they understood their parents' desires to be. For example, Bianca stated that the most effective way to handle breaches between what she wanted and what her parents' wanted was to ignore them. She attempted to create a clear divide between school, which included her social and academic realms, and home. However, when I asked about her choice of major and career plans, Bianca explained how comparative literature and plans to attend law school were what she understood to be a reasonable compromise between what her parents wanted for her and what she wanted to do. Bianca's situation was similar to other students' attempts to ignore their parents or to separate school space from home space. In fact, the separation of school and home became coping mechanisms to help alleviate direct tension between students and their parents. This often resulted in the internalization of the tensions by students who attempted to work through misalignments and dilemmas by themselves.

Remaking Space: Socially

Remaking space has the potential to be a good option for students who experience a low sense of belonging socially. Historically, physical and social spaces, such as Asian American fraternities and sororities, Asian culture-themed residence halls, Asian resource centers, and even Asian American Studies, have been the result of students collectively remaking space (Chan, 1991; Espiritu, 1992). When Asian American students have found that existing student programming and services do not meet their specific needs, they have sought out ways to gain institutional support and resources

to address these needs. Groups of Asian American students, faculty, or staff may form, and official entities, such as Asian resource centers, then can be established. By changing social and even physical campus space, Asian American students can reshape the institutional landscape. Given that processes of remaking space often require prolonged, collective action so that normative practices and existent structures are rearranged, it was difficult to tell whether the students who experienced a low sense of belonging socially engaged in remaking space. Had I conducted a longitudinal study I might have been able to see how participants engaged in remaking space over time.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Contributions to Research on Belonging

As revealed in this study, the misalignment of expectations and experiences of Asian American students resulted in a decreased sense of belonging. In response, students attempted to make sense of the misalignments or lack of fit. In some cases, students' paradigms were linked to their views of what it means to be Asian American in higher education, but their frameworks were insufficient for making sense of misalignments. As a result of the disconnections between expectations and experiences, students were compelled to remake themselves, reposition themselves, or even remake space.

This study offers a number of contributions to research on belonging and to research on college student development in general. In particular, the findings from this study inform and extend existing research on belonging theoretically, by expanding conceptualizations of belonging and re-conceptualizing belonging as an interactional process, and methodologically, by demonstrating the effectiveness of using visual methods, such as photography.

Theoretical Contributions

When students' understandings of belonging are taken into consideration, researchers can gain further insight into how belonging is developed and experienced. Additionally, researchers can better understand how students find and create belonging in unexpected spaces. This study showed that participants were able to discover a sense of belonging but only at certain times and among certain people. Asian American students' involvement in ethnic- or race-specific student organizations offered a means by which individual students could engage not only in individual repositioning but also collective repositioning along political, social, and personal lines. These spaces also explain why students may have felt like they belonged. The spaces in which students found or increased belonging, for example, in racial or ethnic niches, however, may be overlooked by scholars because students' close affiliations with students of the same race or ethnicity may not be seen as belonging at a campus in the traditional sense.

The reasons for student segregation along racial lines are still widely debated (Villalpando, 2003). What is interesting to note, however, is how some scholars view student segregation as a way to belong as "self-segregation," even though studies have shown that many students in multiracial educational settings still tend to prefer and develop close associations with same-race peers (Inkelas, 2004; Tatum, 1999; Villalpando, 2003). In the context of this study, a number of the participants indicated that they belonged socially, not because they were integrated into the dominant culture, although that may be the case for some students, but because they found and created their own social spaces based on shared ethnic or racial identification.

In addition to extending the concept of belonging to include unconventional ways of

thinking about what it entails, the findings from this study suggest that belonging is more than a state of being. Students do not merely acquire belonging, nor do they reach a state of belonging. Rather, belonging is an ongoing process. Moreover, examining students' sense of belonging through a symbolic interactionist perspective reveals how students' interactions with one another and with various campus spaces affect their perceptions of belonging. Students often act in ways that address their current sense of belonging and to change or maintain their belonging. Students in this study repositioned themselves, remade themselves, or remade space as a way to increase their belonging. Essentially, these patterns illustrate how belonging is an interactional process.

Methodological Contributions

Closely related to the reconceptualization of belonging as an interactional process are the methodological contributions of this study. Most research on students' belonging tends to utilize large-scale survey data. While this approach enables researchers and practitioners to gain a broad view of students' sense of belonging, students' understandings of their belonging and reasons for their level of belonging are less clear. As Maramba and Museus (2011) have argued, using mixed or multiple methods may help researchers more effectively address the complexities of students' belonging. In this study, the use of multiple qualitative methods, such as interviews and photo journals, helped to uncover some of the meanings, perceptions, and processes of belonging that survey data may overlook. In particular, the use of student-created photo journals offered a nuanced view of the variety of factors that play into students' sense of belonging, types of decisions students' made, and outcomes that resulted from their decisions.

Visual methods, such as photography, are particularly useful to emphasize participants'

perspectives. Moreover, given the widely available technologies, such as cell phone cameras, that enable students to easily take pictures, methods such as participant-created photo journals offer a valuable means by which students can share their perspectives. Student-produced photographs also enable participants to engage in what might normally be off-limits or taboo images and topics (Heath & Cleaver, 2004). Although photographs cannot provide the *whole* picture, they do provide insight and points of access into bigger issues and questions (Knowles, 2006).

In this study, students' photographs also helped to provide insight and access into the worlds of Asian American college students. The photo journals enabled students to portray themselves, their experiences, and their perspectives. They were able to engage in a type of self-representation and self-definition.

Implications for Programs and Practice in Higher Education

First, it is important to note that students' processes of remaking and repositioning themselves and remaking space were attempts to achieve a better fit in campus space at West University. To better support students as they engage in processes of belonging, it would be useful for colleges to offer readily available, tailored advising programs. This may involve a combination of personal counseling, career advising, or mentoring. A peer-mentoring program also may provide a way for students to more effectively navigate campus spaces and college life in general.

Notably, due to common assumptions about Asian American students' always being academically successful, campus administrators, faculty, and staff appear to rarely consider the lack of fit that may exist between Asian American students and academic spaces. Asian American students' academic achievement should not be assumed. Programmatic and

faculty supports, such as academic advising, should be offered to all students early and often. This would offer students opportunities to question or reconfirm their choice of major and readjust their academic plans as needed.

Finally, institutional support of race- and ethnic-specific organizations is needed because these spaces may enable students to develop belonging, even if such organizations are traditionally viewed as spaces that impede inclusion and belonging with the larger campus community. It is also important that faculty, staff, and administrators be cautious about making assumptions in regard to students' inherent similarities. For example, staff should not assume that a student automatically belongs among peers of the same race, such as in a race-based organization. Belonging in such a space still requires effort.

Implications for Future Research

More research that explicitly examines students' belonging as an interactional process is needed. The model of processes of belonging (Figure 1) offers a starting point for further research. In particular, it would be useful to examine whether the three trajectories are, in fact, the most useful way of viewing processes of belonging. As noted, this study was not able to fully capture how students remake space, and, as such, future studies should examine how students remake space, either socially or academically. These investigations should employ mixed or multiple methods to better address the complexities of the processes of belonging. Further, while large-scale survey data remain the norm for measuring student belonging, it should be used in conjunction with other methods, such as focus groups, observations, and even student-created photographs, to more effectively uncover the what, why, and how of students' belonging.

In addition, notions of belonging and students' sense of belonging should be further

refined. Future studies should examine what belonging looks like and means for a variety of student demographics. More research also can be conducted on students' understandings of belonging. Research could investigate exactly to what or to whom students indicate that they belong. Finally, future research should examine various campus spaces as a means to determine which spaces are more conducive to the development of student belonging than others.

This type of research would enable key decision makers to make more informed decisions about projects and programs that

are related to student belonging. By rethinking belonging—what it looks like, where it occurs, and how it happens—researchers and practitioners would be able to more effectively develop campus spaces that facilitate student belonging and success. Understanding belonging as an interactional process is a step in the right direction.

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