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### NAVIGATING THE RACIALIZED NEOLIBERAL GAZE: ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION PROFESSIONALS IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

Ariana DasGupta

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The University of San Francisco

NAVIGATING THE RACIALIZED NEOLIBERAL GAZE: ASIAN AMERICAN  
WOMEN DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION PROFESSIONALS IN U.S.  
HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Department of International and Multicultural Education

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Ariana A. DasGupta  
San Francisco, CA  
May 2019

**ABSTRACT**

Substantial research has addressed the experience of Asian American students in higher education (Hune, 2002; Ng & Lee, 2007; Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Museus & Chang, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Pak, Maramba, & Hernandez, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015), and a growing body of literature explores the state of Asian American faculty in higher education (Lee, 2002; Li & Beckett, 2005; Lin, Pearce, & Wang, 2009; Yook 2013). Though research examining how Asian American administrators experience higher education is increasing (Suzuki, 2002; Neilson, 2004; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Li-Bugg, 2011; Reeves, 2015), no studies to date have examined how Asian American women who are diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals in higher education experience their roles. This phenomenological study used in-depth interviews to examine how the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals in higher education demonstrate conformity and conflict with neoliberalism. In doing so, this study found agentic possibilities for Asian American women even as they navigate the commodifying nature of what this study terms the “racialized neoliberal gaze.”

## SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents,  
who left their parents,  
so my siblings and I  
could have the luxury  
to take things for granted.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In many ways, the hardest part of the dissertation is writing this page well as I have many to thank, and an ironic lack of words to thank them properly. An entire community holds me up, and has held me up through this process.

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Two Drs. DasGupta precede me, and therefore were doubly at risk of getting dramatic phone calls from me on a daily basis on account of 1) having gone through the process themselves, and 2) for being my parents. There are no words to thank them for their boundless love. This is all for you.

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## **CHAPTER I: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

### **Background of the Researcher**

I recall, when I was around six years old, watching a program about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on our local Public Broadcasting Station with my mother. Sitting on the blue couch on a cold day, curled up near our space heater, my face slowly wrinkled with confusion as I watched the United States of the '50s and '60s come alive on the screen. Finally, when I just could not hold it in any longer, I asked my mother the question that was bubbling inside me.

“Ma, what am I?” She did not quite understand the question at first.

“What do you mean, ‘What am I?’?” I clarified as much as I could using my 6-year old brain.

“I mean... am I Indian or am I American?” I know now that she really had to process the question I asked, but back then, her answer seemed to come pretty quickly.

“Well, Ria, you’re Indian, but you’re also American.”

I apparently shook my head, and said, “No, that’s not true. I’m not American.” She was perplexed.

“Of course you’re American. You were born 14 miles from the White House. You don’t get more American than that.” I shook my head more assuredly.

“No, I know I’m not American.” Now, my mother’s confusion was all over her face.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because you can only be American if you have peach-colored skin.”

My mother is a sociologist and, for more than 25 years of teaching racial identity-formation theory, made full use of the rich material I gave her. I am thankful for the story, too, because it has always helped me to identify the moment at which my personal relationship with race began.

As an Asian American woman diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional, I occupy a racial positionality that continues to perplex me in the same way that it did almost 27 years ago, though I find myself approaching solace amidst the confusion. In the highly racialized environment that is higher education, and in the world of diversity work where that racialized environment is even more intensely felt, it has been fascinating to experience my “in-between” identity in praxis. Coupled with my identity as a woman, my Asian Americanness has been a blessing and a curse – I am too American to be Indian, too Indian to be American. As a first generation, South Asian American woman, I bring a complex awareness of the various layers that make up the social landscape of the United States, but also risk invisibility and derision, since I do not fall in the generally recognized racial binary of Black or White. Yet, this identity also has molded me as chameleonic, giving me the skills to bend and shape as needed, morph to be accepted, and morph to rebel.

My hope for this study was to interrogate this question of belonging by putting it in the context of the professional position I hold today as an Asian American woman in American higher education, playing the critical role of a DEI professional. I interviewed other Asian American women DEI professionals and studied my conversations with them to determine how they have experienced their professional roles and how that has been impacted by their racial and gender identities.

As I suspect might be the case with many others, this dissertation is deeply personal (“research is me-search”). It is an attempt to see if my experience has been singular, to find and understand myself, and to explore the identities of other women like me who find themselves forever negotiating and resolving their “in-betweenness,” always questioning where they belong, if they belong.

The following sections focus on analyzing the findings from my conversations with Asian American woman DEI professionals in order to understand what their positions can reveal about neoliberalism in higher education, a force that continues to create the very inequities our profession is meant to address.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals are administrative officials in higher education who are charged with promoting and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in their colleges and universities through implementation of programs, development of trainings, and advisement of policy. Because the DEI professional is a relatively new position in higher education, comprehensive demographic data on those holding such positions do not yet exist, even while the field grows steadily. The only existing demographic study to date cites that, in the United States, higher education chief diversity officers (CDOs) – in other words, executive level administrative DEI professionals – are 87% people of color and 58% women (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 37). Of the CDOs in this 2007 study, 3% were Asian American (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 37). While this study suggests Asian American DEI professionals are the third most widely represented racial group among CDOs after African Americans and Latinos (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 37), and their representation is growing,

Asian American DEI professionals continue to be overlooked in a growing field of research that attempts to understand the racialized and gendered positionalities of DEI higher education administrators within a predominantly white male professional field.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, current research has not attempted to understand what the racial and gender experiences of Asian American DEI professionals *who are women* reveal about the neoliberal underpinnings of the DEI realm in the context of higher education in the United States.

The complex racial positioning of “Asianness” throughout United States history (Kim, 1999; Suzuki, 1989, 2002; Zia, 2000) may lend itself to the ambiguous position that Asian American DEI professionals occupy both among other DEI professionals and within higher education leadership. The term ‘Asian American’ refers to any person living in the United States who has origins in East Asia, South Asia, or Southeast Asia. Asian Americans have been relegated to an unassimilable status both due to a persistent classification as foreigner on one hand and as unique, model minority on the other (Kim, 1999; Prashad, 2000; Rana, 2011; Xu & Lee, 2013). This creates an uncertain and unstable ground upon which Asian American DEI professionals stand via their racial identities in higher education, all while holding positions in a field that must contend with race and racism as part of its professional purview.

The foundation is even more unstable for Asian American *women* who are DEI professionals due to the compounded injustices to which women of color have been historically subjected (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Nixon, 2013, 2017). DEI

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<sup>1</sup> A 2016 study by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) found that 7% of higher education administrative positions were held by Black professionals, 3% by Latino, 2% by Asian, and 1% as belonging to another race or ethnicity (CUPA-HR, 2016). The remaining 86% of administrators were white (CUPA-HR, 2016).



professionals are charged with creating systems of equity and inclusion around race and gender, among other areas; at the same time, there is a crisis in representation with which Asian American women who occupy the roles must contend. Specifically, while discussions around racial equity are often central to the obligations of their work, the particulars of their own intersectional identities are left largely untouched and un-interrogated within the institutional spaces that they occupy. Without the recognition of this gap between representation and responsibility, Asian American woman DEI professionals can be left unsupported and isolated, left to champion for equity while having few spaces to advocate for themselves. Although their experiences may share important similarities with the other women of color who by and large occupy the field, studies examining the DEI professional role (Greenfield, 2015; Nixon, 2013, 2017; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, 2013, 2014; Wilson, 2013) are still scarce. Moreover, none to date look to understand the particular racial and gender-based experiences of Asian American women occupying these roles in higher education or what these experiences reveal about the neoliberal formations of the DEI paradigm in United States higher education.

### **Background and Need**

Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of DEI professional positions created with the expressed goal of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Even while having a DEI position has rapidly become the norm, as well as a certain marker of legitimacy for an institution of higher education (Berrey, 2015; Warikoo, 2016), critics have argued that the creation of such positions may serve as a way to placate the demands of an increasingly diverse student body (Bell, 1980, 2003)

when the upper ranks of the professoriate and university administration remain overwhelmingly white and male (ACE, 2017; Seltzer, 2017). Others have extended this idea of interest convergence (Bell, 1980) to the realm of neoliberalism by noting the contradictory role of diversity in being espoused both as a desired quality in the global marketplace as well as the solution to addressing the inequities rendered by free market ideology. Further examination of the DEI professional role in higher education, particularly the experiences of an often invisibilized group of Asian American women, can offer an important contribution to the sparse literature.

Although a majority of the growing ranks of higher education chief diversity officers (CDOs) have been and continue to be women of color (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007), few efforts have been attempted to understand the unique positionalities of these professionals – namely senior administrators at colleges and universities – as they navigate an administrative field still dominated by white men (ACE, 2017; CUPA-HR, 2016). Many of these attempts have taken place in doctoral dissertations, most notably in Nixon’s (2013) work looking specifically at the experience of African American women and Latina CDOs. Ahmed’s work (2012) similarly uses an affective lens to bring light to the difficult nature of diversity work, which she describes as a thankless “brick wall,” as it is primarily one occupied by women of color. Apart from these works, many studies, such as Williams and Wade-Golden’s (2007, 2008, 2013) foundational works on the field, are primarily interested in examining the scope and strategies of CDO work, looking to establish standards and best practices for the profession. These studies offer important critical examinations of a new and complex field with an eye towards its development. Yet, they miss important opportunities to shed

light on the overlooked experiences of those who occupy the DEI roles, such as Asian American women. Furthermore, they lack a critical eye towards the neoliberal context in which the DEI field is rooted and situated.

While very little demographic data exist about DEI professionals in higher education, even the limited numbers are revealing. In 2016, 196 diversity officers participated in a study by the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) (Abdul-Alim, 2016). Though the study did not gather demographic data, it did provide an idea as to how many DEI professionals were affiliated with NADOHE during that time. Just a few years later, in 2019, at the national conference of NADOHE, nearly 500 participants were registered. Speaking to the growth of the field, the president of NADOHE proudly noted in his opening remarks for the conference that membership had increased 300% in five years, and that there were 320 new members in 2018, with overall representation from nearly 1,000 institutions and all but three states (Ervin, 2019). The conference often includes a very small number of international attendees, some DEI professionals associated with the corporate sector, and higher education administrators who are interested in diversity work but do not hold a diversity professional role. Nonetheless, the majority of the attendees are DEI professionals in higher education, and the registration lends itself to being a marker for the steady growth of this field.

Williams and Wade-Golden's 2007 study targeted 2,513 DEI professionals across the country, though it ultimately focused on the 110 Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) from the 772 respondents who fit the criteria for the position (p. vii). Each of the targeted DEI professionals represented a unique institution, meaning that in 2007, close to 40% of

the nearly 6,536 colleges and universities in the United States had a DEI professional role (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016c). Yet, the demographic data from the same study only pertain to the CDOs and thus are still incomplete in providing an accurate racial and gender-based reading of the field. Williams and Wade-Golden's oft-cited 2007 study found that of 110 CDOs, 87% were people of color (p. 37). Of this group of 110, 74% were African American, 10% were Latino, 13% were White, and less than 3% were Asian American (p. 37). Of the total number of DEI professionals, 58% were women (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007). Though the demographic data are limited, based on personal observations and commonly-shared understanding within the profession, the demographic data for CDOs can be projected onto the general higher education diversity officer field to reach the conclusion that most DEI professionals are women of color.

Taken as a whole, the identity of these DEI professionals does not mirror the identity of the uppermost leadership of colleges and universities. In 2008, only 16% of senior administrators on college campuses in the U.S. were people of color (Cook, 2012), and a 2016 study (ACE, 2017) reveals that this number remains consistent at the very top, where 83% of college presidents are white. Uniquely, Asian Americans are (under)represented almost equally within the communities of DEI professionals and college presidents, with fewer than 2% of college presidents identifying as Asian American (ACE, 2013). Yet this lack of Asian American representation in the upper echelons of higher education is not widely characterized as a crisis within the DEI profession, nor has it been seen as an area in need of extensive research beyond key works on Asian American representation in higher education (Hune, 1998, 2010, 2011).

Furthermore, little attempt has been made to examine how the current lack of Asian American DEI professionals may be symptomatic of the racial and gendered legacies of higher education in the United States, particularly those attached to the model minority myth, as well as emblematic of racialization and gendered ways of being that are inherent to neoliberal realities.

The historical makeup of higher education further impacts the Asian American DEI professional role. Since its inception in the United States, higher education has been exclusionary in practice, with race serving as a primary reason for exclusion (Karabel, 2006; Wilder, 2014). Both Karabel (2006) and Wilder (2014) note that this exclusion has been sophisticated enough to evolve with changing notions of race, such as when many universities changed their admissions processes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to screen out the rising tide of undesirable European immigrants and blacks who would have had little problem gaining admission based on academic prowess, but lacked what was required to meet White, male, property-holding notions of good and reputable character (Karabel, 2006). Thus, Asian American women DEI professionals must operate within institutions still struggling to alter the staying power of this legacy to which Karabel (2006) and Wilder (2014) speak – White, male domination in the Ivory Tower. The legacy is reaffirmed in the present day composition of higher education leadership (ACE, 2017).

Asian American women DEI professionals must contend with the makeup of the leadership as well as complex racial roles that Asian Americans have occupied with regards to higher education, often serving as a face for diversity on college campuses while also benefiting from the model minority myth that emboldens many Asian Americans to take a stance against initiatives (see *Students for Fair Admissions v.*

*Harvard*, 2018). Ironically, these initiatives, such as affirmative action, are often meant to lift students who face persistent structural barriers to higher education, many of whom have historically been Asian (Chung & Zhang, 2018; Prashad, 2000). In the face of the continued prevalence of male whiteness in university leadership, and the characterization of Asian Americans as self-sufficient, successful, and docile (Kim, 1999), few spaces exist for Asian American women, specifically those who are DEI professionals, to confront their own complex identities as they are implicated within their profession.

An absence of spaces to interrogate and unpack non-White and non-Black racial existence within a racial binary is almost certainly one that is felt by many racial groups. While there is similarity in the experiences of DEI professionals belonging to Asian American, Native American, and Latino communities, the experience of Asian Americans in higher education and beyond is unique given their classification from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards as the “model minority” (Hsu, 2015; Hune, 1998; Shih, 1989; Suzuki, 1989, 2002; Wu, 2014). The purpose of the model minority myth has been to position Asian American as “achievers who have overcome racism through hard work” (Hune, 1998, p. 9), placing them in contention rather than in camaraderie with other races. The end goal of this classification has been “to maintain anti-Black racism and White supremacy,” thus making Asian Americans often complicit in maintaining racial hierarchies (Ancheta, 2000; Kim, 1999; Patel, 2015; Poon, Squire, Byrd, Chan, Manzano, Furr, & Bishundut, 2016; Prashad, 2001).

The model minority myth also leads to the designation of the Asian American community as monolithic, thereby erasing opportunities to appreciate both the diversity within the community, as well as the internal hierarchies that can lead to conflict (Hune,

1998, 2011). This, in turn, leads to the present-day isolation of Asian American DEI professionals in higher education whose complex and diverse in-group identities become lost in an oversimplified racial binary. The isolation of this group is even more deeply felt when the gendered dynamic of the group is taken into account.

The work of Kim (1999) suggests that the racial identity formation of Asian Americans is derived via “triangulation,” whereby Asian identity is juxtaposed against and through the dominant Black/White racial binary. This triangulation-derived racial identity of Asian Americans can affect the ways they engage in racial equity work in higher education and the way they and their work are perceived. Historically-founded notions of Asian Americans as unspecified ‘other non-whites’ (Gotanda, 1985), the model minority (Lee, 2015; Shih, 1989; Suzuki, 1989, 2002), or “unassimilable” foreigners (Kim, 1999, p. 109) offer little space for Asian Americans to turn to constructively examine their identities. This deep-seated, limiting conception of Asian-Americanness impacts the work, positionality, and scope of support for Asian American women DEI professionals. Given the inadequate examination of how these limitations play out within neoliberal higher education—as well as of their impact—this study will challenge this erasure of complexity by highlighting and analyzing the dynamic identities of the study participants within the neoliberal context in which they operate.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals as their work is shaped by its placement in higher education in the United States—a system marked by neoliberalism. In doing so, this study sought to understand what the experiences of these

women reveal about the actions and embodiments of neoliberalism in the realm of DEI work in the context of higher education.

### **Research Question**

A central question guided this qualitative study of Asian American women DEI professionals:

*What do the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals reveal about the relationship between neoliberalism and diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the context of higher education?*

The following questions supported this central question:

- In what ways do neoliberal processes and ideologies manifest in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- How do Asian American women diversity professionals describe their experiences in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- What strategies do Asian American women use to navigate higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### *Neoliberal hegemony*

To examine the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals in higher education, this study used a critical theoretical lens of neoliberal hegemony. While neoliberalism is often understood primarily as an economic model, the rise and ensuing dominance of which is addressed in Chapter 3, this study used as a theoretical frame the understanding that economic neoliberalism is also accompanied and aided by a neoliberal ideology that relegates the ways in which power



moves, takes hold, and is challenged. This ideology hegemonizes and makes normal the market ethos upon which neoliberalism stands by extending its values from the economic realm into every aspect of our sociocultural existence. Therefore, this neoliberal hegemony profoundly impacts higher education and thus was a critical lens through which to view the role of Asian American women DEI professionals and their consent to and contestations of neoliberal power as it manifests via the diversity, equity, and inclusion paradigm in the higher education realm.

Essential to the ascension of neoliberalism is the movement of market ideology – stressing individualism, competition, and profit at all costs – from simply the market alone into all aspects of social being. This ideological buy-in is achieved via what Gramsci refers to as ‘hegemony.’ Gramsci (1971) suggests that capitalism, in this case manifesting in an advanced form as neoliberalism, develops those sensibilities necessary for its reproduction into ‘common sense.’ Here, consent to the modes of being under the neoliberal model is not achieved by force, but rather through sociocultural means of normalization. Referring to common sense, Harvey (2007) says,

common sense is constructed out of long-stranding practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as the ‘good sense’ that can be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day. Common sense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices. Cultural or traditional values...and fears...can be mobilized to mask other realities. (Harvey, 2007, p. 39)

In the United States, cultural values such as freedom, liberty, rugged individualism, and even diversity can therefore be mobilized and commodified towards commercial ends. Harvey (2007) summarizes this phenomenon when he locates the means through which neoliberalism becomes common sense, noting that the channels through which this is accomplished are varied and employ “powerful ideological influences through the corporations, the media, and the numerous institutions that constitute civil society – such as the universities, schools, churches, and professional associations” (Harvey, 2007, p. 40). It is the role of the university in the construction of neoliberal common sense, and in particular the role that diversity in higher education has in aiding that construction, that this study sought to explore.

The theoretical lens of neoliberal hegemony was also employed to examine resistance in the neoliberal realm. Here, Gramscian conceptualizations of agency help build the foundation for understanding how neoliberalism may be contested. Whereas in traditional understandings of capitalism, particularly via Marxism, “human subjects generally ‘disappear’ amidst a theory that leaves no room for moments of self-creation, meditation, and resistance,” (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1994, p. 230), Gramscian theories of resistance enable the location of liberatory spaces for transformation within neoliberal hegemony by recognizing the existence of agency (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1987). In looking to education, Giroux encourages us to name agency in order to “understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint” (Giroux, 1983, p. 108).

The lens of neoliberal hegemony, therefore, presented an opportunity to also name the ways that Asian American women DEI professionals embodied their agentic selves in the face of neoliberalism, thus entering into negotiations of power. Here too, however, it was critical to recognize when the focus on *individual* agency became so pronounced that it had the possibility to seep effortlessly back into the realm of the individualizing, neoliberal project. As Lipman (2011) and others warn, neoliberalism's staying power lies in its ability to convince us that *little* rather than *most* of our sociocultural existence is enmeshed in its grasp (p. 6). It behooved this study, therefore, to employ the lens of neoliberal hegemony to understand the many ways in which we unknowingly idolize the cultures and sensibilities of neoliberalism, and how this idolization can creep into the very spaces that we hold to be resistant, such as that of the Asian American woman higher education diversity professional role. Ultimately, this theoretical framework offered a powerful lens to critically examine the workings of power in a novel location.

### *Racialized neoliberal gaze*

The theoretical framework of neoliberal hegemony illuminated a central finding of this study: the existence of a "racialized neoliberal gaze" that operates in diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education. Taking the reality of the omnipresence of neoliberalism, and adding to it Foucault's (1977) imagery of the disciplining panopticon, the concept of the racialized neoliberal gaze suggests that neoliberalism, far from having only *impact* that can be racial in nature, actually leads to neoliberal subjects performing racialization in particular ways that are critical for the *proliferation* of neoliberal ideology and strategies, as well as sites for contesting them. This concept is explored more in

depth in Chapter 5, but I offer an introduction to this concept here, since it developed out of, and clarified, the theoretical framework for this study.

Though contemporary understandings of neoliberalism may include references to the Foucauldian notion of panopticism (Gane 2012), his early theorizations regarding the panopticon were used to understand the shift in modes of discipline rather than locate neoliberal technologies (Foucault, 1977). In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault offers the reader two illustrations of novel discipline at work. In the first image, Foucault presents a town overrun by the plague where, upon pain of death, townspeople must register their identification information and all their movements and bodily functions. They are registered and labeled (plagued or not yet stricken), constantly guarded, and separated from one another. Foucault (1977) describes this plague stricken town, “traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies” as the most perfectly governed city (p. 198). Here, discipline has moved from the public control over a shackled body to widespread, private hold over a community of individuals who have all normalized extensive documentation and surveillance, and the classification of normal versus abnormal, seemingly for their own security and wellbeing.

The notion of “the panopticon” – the technology that this study is concerned with – shifts the idea of discipline deeper into the individual psyche, moving into Foucault’s understanding of power and subject formation. The second novel form of discipline that Foucault (1977) examines offers theoretical expansion on the architectural musings of Jeremy Bentham, an 18<sup>th</sup> century political philosopher, who offered his panopticon

building as the ideal design for a prison. He envisioned a tall tower with a window that had a view of each individual, isolated prisoner below, yet which not could be seen into by any of the prisoners looking up. Here, with panoptic vision, “everything is in view at once” for the overseer. The observed, on the other hand, are unsure when they are being watched, and are controlled by the thought that they are “visible” but that their own observation is always “unverifiable” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). They thus become disciplined and compliant, controlled by the threat they could, at any point, be under the “gaze [which] is alert everywhere” (Foucault, 1977, p. 195). The panopticon, Foucault’s early attempt to describe an omnipresent gaze, leads to the development of “implicit systems which determine our most familiar behavior without our knowing it” (Foucault, 1971, p. 201). These systems – governing the movement and enactment of power, shaping even the way we think and produce knowledge and interpret reality – are what Foucault refers to as ‘discourse.’ Under the panoptic gaze, humans become governed subjects through recursive, discursive processes that allow for control of the people without forceful intervention because they will have internalized the very discourse that keeps them oppressed.

Foucault’s understanding of the panopticon can be applied as a means to view the omnipresence of the neoliberal paradigm. In his attempt to understand how the modern state moved from control over the body to construction of a controlled, trained, disciplined body, Foucault’s conceptualizations around discourse enable us to see neoliberalism as a process by which human beings, via means not directly related to state control, nonetheless become subjects whose every act and thought enact, serve, and reproduce the neoliberal agenda. When used to view neoliberalism, the notion of

“discourse” thus allows us to see how humans become subjects governed by the ethos of the market through cultural and social forces they themselves mouth and respond to rather than through any visible, brute force. This has important parallels to Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony, which similarly offers a means to understand how the all-commodifying nature of capitalism can become an unquestioned “common sense”—cultural practice taken for granted as it seeps into every realm of human existence. Where panopticism explains the all-seeing nature of neoliberalism, hegemony, when equated to discourse, offers the process through which that gaze is internalized by subjects who themselves embody and enact the project of neoliberalism. Springer (2012), offering a rare conflation of Gramscian and Foucauldian thought, speaks to the concept of neoliberalism as discourse. In doing so, Springer is able to bridge the divide between neoliberalism as a project and the ensuing discursive processes that create subjects who are governed by rationalities of what this study refers to as the racialized neoliberal gaze. Connecting the panoptic gaze to the discursive elements of neoliberalism can in this way lend clarity to the ideological technologies employed by the racialized neoliberal gaze as it relates to the higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion context of this study.

### **Educational Significance**

This study looked at the role of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals to understand what their experiences can reveal about the workings of neoliberalism in higher education. By centering the voices of Asian American DEI professionals, the study aimed to fill a gap in research pertaining to this relatively new professional arena so as to better understand the particular positionality of a portion of the DEI professional community. In addition, this study offered a fresh

perspective to understanding how racial and gendered experiences are implicated in the proliferation of neoliberal ideology in higher education DEI practice.

In examining the DEI professional position with an understanding of its rootedness in neoliberal higher education, this study had the potential to examine how a fledgling higher education administration role relates to larger structures of global capitalism as well as related historical movements of exclusion and liberation. In doing so, there was an opportunity to critically situate the origins, effectiveness, and future of diversity programs in higher education within existing discussions around race, gender, and neoliberalism.

In practical application, this work may inform administrators on how to better reframe DEI professional responsibilities, improve climate for Asian American women DEI professionals on campus, and offer more support to DEI professionals writ large in the context of a profession that, as this study further revealed, is constructed to reproduce rather than contest manifestations of neoliberalism. This, in turn, may improve campus climate by impacting the quality of the professional life and professional outcomes of Asian American women DEI professionals in particular, and for the larger Asian American community on college campuses in general. Furthermore, this study may offer a template to support research on DEI professionals belonging to other identity groups who have not yet been the focus of dedicated study.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Overview**

The following chapter provides a review of the literature that grounds this study. It is organized into three sections. The first section gives an overview of Asian American women in higher education, paying particular attention to their ongoing underrepresentation in the faculty and administration. The second reexamines diversity in higher education, including prior research that looks at its benefits, challenges, and critiques. Finally, the last section looks to existing literature regarding the impact of neoliberalism on higher education.

### **Asian American Women in Higher Education**

While currently no literature exists that specifically examines the experiences of Asian American women who occupy roles as DEI professionals, much can be gleaned through scholarship on Asian Americans in other areas of higher education. The stories of Asian American administrators and faculty have been documented, though neither nearly as much as those of AAPI students. These stories suggest that the experience of Asian American women in higher education is characterized, much like other women of color, by their intersecting racialized and gendered identities (Hune, 2006; Jackson & Harris, 2007; Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009). Research also suggests that the experience of Asian American women in higher education is unique in two important ways. First, in higher education, Asian American women are under-represented among faculty and administration, in direct contrast to Asian American representation in the student body. In addition to this ongoing underrepresentation, Asian American women must also contend with and develop methods to navigate the model minority myth and related gender-based



stereotypes as they manifest in higher education. Accounts of Asian American women in higher education as students, faculty, staff, and administration are critical for understanding the unique experience of Asian American women as DEI professionals.

*Underrepresentation in faculty and administration*

In 2016, 58% of students enrolled in college, ages 18-24, identified as Asian and 21% as Pacific Islander (Department of Commerce, 2017). While the National Center for Education Statistics does not report the breakdown of these populations by gender or note how many of these populations are comprised of *international* Asian and Pacific Islander students (Teranishi, 2010), research by others notes that Asian American women who are U.S.-born earn degrees at higher rates than their male counterparts (Ryu, 2010; Covarrubias & Liou, 2014). However, many note that these rates of educational attainment do not hold true for all of the more than 48 ethnic groups that comprise the Asian American and Pacific Islander community (Teranishi, Nguyen, Choi, Pazich, He, & Uh, 2011; Montez, 1998; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Hune, 2011; Teranishi, Lok & Nguyen, 2013). These scholars stress that there is a need to disaggregate these educational attainment data so as to bring attention to ongoing barriers that Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander women in particular must confront with regards to educational and socioeconomic advancement, as compared to the experiences of East and South Asians whose families may have migrated as professionals with more privileged class backgrounds.

Myths about the unparalleled success of a conglomerate Asian American population, discussed later, erase the unique stories of and challenges faced by some of the ethnic subsets that comprise this population. The conflict between the perception of

the Asian American experience and the true, diverse realities of this multifaceted community also affects the ways in which its members advocate for further academic inclusion. In the most dramatic example in recent years, some Asian Americans, internalizing their elevated status as meritorious minorities, have sought to protest affirmative action in higher education. In suggesting that affirmative action punishes these students' success, such objections have the dual effect of further restricting higher education access to those Asian American students with the greatest need, as well as creating a barrier between the Asian American experience and that of other communities of color (Gerson, 2017; Park & Lui, 2014; Teranishi, 2007, 2017; Wong, 2016). Here, nuanced study of the Asian American community has the ability to reveal how everything from U.S. military involvement abroad to dramatically vacillating immigration policies that opportunistically favor some Asians over others can impact how these communities experience, or do not experience, higher education (Bald, 2013; Lee, 2007; Takaki, 1998; Zia, 2000). Despite underrepresentation of students belonging to particular Asian American ethnic groups, however, Asian American students writ large compose a substantial part of the higher education landscape – a prevalence not mirrored by Asian American women in the realm of faculty, staff, and university administration.

In the professoriate, the number of Asian American women holding faculty positions more than doubled between 1997 and 2007, jumping from 8,846 to 19,450 (Hune, 2011). However, in this time period Asian American women were still outnumbered by Asian American men in all levels of professorship (Ryu, 2010). This pattern has remained constant. In 2016, for example, only 4% of all full time faculty

positions were held by Asian/Pacific Islander women, compared to 6% held by Asian/Pacific Islander men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

At the highest levels of higher education administration, Asian Americans are generally unrepresented. In a field that is 70% male and 83% white, women of color constitute only 5% of all college presidents (American Council on Education, 2017). With only 2% of college presidents identifying as Asian American out of about 1,500, the number of college presidents identifying as Asian American women nationally is likely fewer than 30 (American Council on Education, 2016).

This sparse representation holds true for DEI professionals as well. The only existing demographic study to date cites that higher education chief diversity officers (CDOs), or executive level administrative diversity officers, are 87% people of color and 58% women (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 37). Only 3% of CDOs are Asian American (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 37). Asian American DEI professionals who are women are the third most widely represented racial group among CDOs after African Americans and Latinos (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007, p. 37). Yet, as discussed earlier, they are missing in a growing field of research that attempts to understand the racialized and gendered positionalities of women of color higher education administrators within a professional field that continues to be dominated by white men (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017).

Current data regarding the representation of Asian American women are challenging to locate, and many have argued for increased efforts to gather accurate data about Asian Americans in higher education, paying special attention to the racial and gendered experiences of this diverse group (Hune, 2011; Museus, 2009). While citing the

need to pay attention to the intersectional experience of Asian American women in order to diagnose why they still remain underrepresented in higher education, many scholars specifically encourage attention towards understanding the role that the model minority myth plays in clouding the reality of Asian American women's representation in higher education.

*Model minority myth*

Many scholars have offered diagnoses attempting to understand the shortage of Asian American women faculty, staff, and administration in higher education. Hune (2011) notes that members of this population “[face] biases related to their race and gender, as well as those stemming from anti-immigrant sentiments, accent discrimination, and male-centered Western notions of communication and leadership” (p. 1). In noting how Asian American women must contend with everyday, racialized situations of being cast as the “other,” Hune locates the ways in which “interlocking multiple hierarchies, such as gender, race, and immigrant/citizen work together to maintain Asian American women’s unequal status” (Hune, 2011, p. 310). In particular, she and others highlight the “model minority myth,” which conflates Asians into a monolithic group, set apart from other races because of the perceived high levels of achievement of its members as well as their simultaneous designation as the unassimilable, perpetual foreigner (Gin, 2013; Hune, 1998, 2011; Kim, 1999; Maramba, 2011; Montez, 1998; Museus, 2009; Teranishi, et al., 2009; Suzuki, 1989, 2002). Ultimately, this phenomenon triangulates Asian American identity in relation to the White/Black racial binary (Kim, 1999), preserving White supremacy in the process by presenting other people of color, particularly African Americans, as inferior to Asian Americans (Poon et al., 2016, p. 99). The persistence of

the model minority myth in higher education continues to silence the particular and diverse needs of Asian American women.

Multiple scholars look to understand the repercussions of the model minority myth upon Asian Americans in higher education (Shih, 1988; Suzuki, 2002; Yu, 2006; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). These scholars note that the model minority myth operates in higher education much like it does in larger society. For one, because the myth depends on an oversimplification of the category of Asian American, the many ethnic backgrounds that comprise this identity marker are ignored. A 2013 report by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) looks at the importance of disaggregating the category of Asian American to understand the nuanced experiences of the ethnic groups it comprises, particularly with regards to their higher education experience (Teranishi et al., 2013). The report notes that grouping all Asian Americans together creates a dangerous tendency to gloss over the experiential distinctions of Asian American subgroups, which has the end result of suggesting that all Asian Americans are success stories – driven, productive, and generally wealthy members of society without struggle or need for support. Yet data from the 2010 census reveal that while at least 47% of East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese) and South Asians (Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepali, Pakistani) have at least a bachelor's degree, Southeast Asians (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese) are generally less than half as likely to have the same educational attainment (Teranishi et al., 2013, p. 8). This is mirrored in the household incomes of these groups as well, with the average for some groups falling \$25,000 below the median income for all Asian Americans and the average for others rising \$25,000 above this median (Teranishi et al.,

2013, p. 9). These examples offer just a few numerical depictions of the complexity within the Asian American population that the aggregated, oversimplified nature of the model minority myth can gloss over.

For Asian American students, faculty, and higher education professionals, this aggregation of subgroups also leads to a misguided aggregation of experience. Because of widespread, socially accepted generalities around Asian American success, the model minority myth stereotype creates a cyclical process by which all Asian Americans are considered to have “made it” by virtue of the high socioeconomic status that some achieve (Maramba, 2011). Aggravating this process is the fact that Asian Americans continue to be the highest paid administrators in higher education by race and ethnicity (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017, p. 9). Here, high earnings become a stand-in for representation. This leads to systemic denial of the very real underrepresentation of Asian American women in staff and administration, thus creating the false sense that there is no focused need to research and provide resources towards increasing this population’s representation in higher education (Gin, 2013; Hune, 2010; Maramba, 2011; Montez, 1998). Compounding this dearth is an acute lack of mentorship at the professional level, which plays a role in constricting the pipeline for Asian American women in higher education, particularly when it comes to upper level staff and faculty roles (Gin, 2013; Hune, 2010; Maramba, 2011; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009).

For those Asian American women who do enter faculty and staff ranks, their experiences continue to be colored by gendered stereotypes surrounding the model minority myth. Characterization of Asian American women as the exotic, erotic, subservient “other” casts them in professional settings as docile and ideal for “keeping

the peace and not causing trouble” (Maramba, 2011, p. 351). Because high levels of achievement are expected of this group due to the perceived natural intelligence and success of its members, it goes unacknowledged that Asian American women have historically faced race- and gender-based discrimination based that continues to manifest in higher education (Hune, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Their particular needs are neglected as it is assumed that they do not need support (Hune, 1998; Nakanishi & Yamano, 2014; Osajima, 1995). As a result, lacking mentors and peers who are also Asian American, these women have few places to turn for support, and their experiences, shadowed by the intense pressure to succeed at all costs, are frequently rendered invisible (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Maramba, 2011; Sue et al., 2007; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2002). Yet, ironically, when the Asian American voice is needed, these very same women find themselves called upon as token spokespeople for their entire extended community (Maramba, 2011; Sue, et. al., 2007).

Harkening back to the model minority myth and the compounding effects of aggregating all Asian American ethnic subgroups, Asian Americans are seen as neither needing support nor professional advancement, all the while having to navigate the tokenization of often being the “only one” in administrative ranks. The impact of the particular racialization that Asian American women in higher education face, compounded with their gendered status, can be extended to the experience of Asian American women DEI professionals.

### **Diversity in Higher Education**

Though literature examining the responsibilities of and challenges faced by women of color DEI professionals in higher education is newly emerging (Nixon, 2014),

much has been written about diversity in higher education. While diversity has grown to encompass engaging difference in areas such as gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, nationality, and immigration status, the intentions of diversity programs in their inception, as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement, have largely centered on race. As such, the literature around diversity in higher education still primarily maintains this focus (Baez & Sanchez, 2017). Three primary trends in this literature can be extended to understanding the context in which Asian American women diversity officers operate in higher education. In one area, scholarly work has been devoted to naming the benefits of racial diversity, primarily for student development on college campuses. Other scholarship focuses on the myriad challenges that have arisen from recent legal contestation of affirmative action in higher education, and how such litigation has played a role in the emergence of a race-neutral diversity landscape. Finally, within this environment, a significant amount of recent scholarship critiques the diversity rationale in higher education, pointing in particular to the ways current diversity practices uphold White supremacy and cater to the interests of capitalism. Taken as a whole, these themes reflect the challenging landscape of diversity in higher education that Asian American women DEI professionals must operate in.

If taken simply as the numerical representation of students, faculty, and administrators on campuses belonging to different races and ethnicities, it is evident that diversity on college campuses has seen mixed results.<sup>2</sup> National statistics from 2015 show that while the proportions of Asian Pacific Islander (6.8%) and Hispanic students (17.3%) have increased steadily since 1976, the percentages of American Indian (0.8%)

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<sup>2</sup> In this section, I use the racial and ethnic terminology employed by the researchers of each study, not my own.



and Black students (14.1%) have dropped after peaking in 2010 and 2011 respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b). Despite remaining the majority group, the proportion of White students (57.6%) in higher education has dropped consistently since 1976 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b). In the faculty realm, from 2011-2015, all racial groups saw an increase in numbers of full-time faculty, apart from Native Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a). In 2015, White faculty (575,657) significantly outnumbered all other racial groups combined (160,887) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a). Like faculty, administrators in higher education find diverse representation far from the reality, with 86% of administration in 2016 identifying as White, 7% as Black, 3% as Hispanic/Latino, 2% as Asian, and 1% as unidentifiable (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). If equitable representation is the goal of diversity initiatives in higher education, these statistics demonstrate that the goal remains unachieved in any area of the university. However, while the realization of diversity in higher education may not be demonstrable in numerical terms, few argue against its benefits in the psychosocial development of students.

### *Benefits of diversity*

Proponents of diversity in higher education point to the benefits of meaningful interaction among people of different races, particularly in the student experience. In their pioneering work on diversity in higher education, Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) point to two overarching ways in which students are shaped by diversity-minded initiatives. First, they note that while structural diversity, or demographic representation, is important, it is not enough by itself to guarantee that students will have the “meaningful intergroup interactions that...are important for the reduction of racial

prejudice” (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin., 2002, p. 333). Instead, they note that diversity can positively shape learning outcomes by fostering “disequilibrium” (Cantor, 2004; Gurin et al., 2002; Piaget, 1971, 1975; Tienda, 2013), or the necessary social discomfort young people must experience in order to develop a nuanced social identity capable of navigating new and complex difference (Gurin et al., 2002, p. 334). The psychosocial disequilibrium that intergroup experiences foster provides the “educational rationale” (Gurin et al., 2004, p. 99) for diversity. This rationale suggests that cross-racial, contextualized, dynamic intergroup experiences (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014) in the formative years of college develop students who will be able to navigate and contribute successfully to the social and democratic fabric of the nation (Hurtado, 2001). In this second interrelated area, which Gurin et al. term “democracy outcomes,” diversity in higher education fosters those skills that are required by “citizenship and leadership for a diverse democracy” (Gurin et al., 2004, p. 107). In recent years, the democracy outcomes of diversity have been widely cited in the defense of affirmative action by scholars, lawyers, and both civic and corporate organizations.

### *Challenges to diversity*

In 2003, Sandra Day O’Connor delivered the majority opinion in the Supreme Court’s 5-4 decision to uphold the University of Michigan Law School’s affirmative action admissions policy via the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case. In her remarks, she noted that

The Law School’s claim is further bolstered by numerous expert studies and reports showing that such diversity promotes learning outcomes and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce, for society, and for the legal profession. Major American businesses have made clear that the skills

needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints...Moreover, because universities, and in particular, law schools represent the training ground for a large number of the Nation's leaders...the path to leadership must be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity. (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 18)

O'Connor's remarks, summarizing the beneficial democracy outcomes of diversity in higher education, mirrored those of Justice John Powell, made 25 years earlier during the landmark affirmative action case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978). In his opinion, Powell stated that using race as one of many factors in college admissions was in the national interest since "the nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to the ideas and mores of students as diverse as this Nation" (*Regents of University of California v. Bakke*, 1978, p. 313).

Notably, neither of these opinions suggested that affirmative action, a product of the civil rights movement, be used to mitigate the historical discrimination systematically affecting minorities (Bell, 2007; Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2016). In fact, Powell concluded against the legitimacy of using affirmative action to address societal discrimination when he stated that it was "an amorphous concept of injury that may be ageless in its reach into the past" (*Regents of the University of California v. Allan Bakke*, 1978, p. 307), and that people who are "innocent of any actual discrimination" would be punished by race-conscious policies designed to deliver justice to groups that have been historically marginalized (Selmi, 2002). As many have cited (Bell, 2007; Garces, 2014; Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2016), the *Bakke* decision marked a discursive shift in

the realm of diversity and higher education by centering diversity as being in the interest of, and working towards, factors other than racial justice. This shift was solidified by the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case, and provides the legal basis for many critiques of the diversity rationale as it is employed in higher education.

### *Critiques of the diversity rationale*

Recent literature has suggested that the shift in affirmative action policy as recently highlighted by the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case has had the effect of not only limiting the ability of universities to achieve racial parity, as evidenced by the earlier demographic data, but has also actively stood in the way of universities' efforts to foster the social changes necessary to achieve social equity (Ahmed, 2012; Bell, 2003; Berrey, 2011, 2015; Glasener, Martell, & Possert, 2018; Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2016; Patel, 2015; Jayakumar & Garces, 2015). Scholars (Bell, 2003, Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2016) suggest that the manner in which diversity is now sought does more to uphold White supremacy in higher education and business interests than it does challenge inequality in a way to meaningfully diversify higher education. Primary is the argument made by Bell (2003) that diversity, via affirmative action, converges the progress of minoritized students with White interests primarily by "enabling courts and policy makers to avoid addressing directly the barriers of race and class that adversely affect so many applicants" (Bell, 2003, p. 1622). White students, faculty, and administrators – those who hold lasting institutional power via their whiteness – recognize the competitive advantage that diversity fosters (Berrey, 2011; Leong, 2012; Patel, 2015; Warikoo, 2016).

Litvin (2000, 2006) calls this the ‘business case for diversity’—the value of interacting with others in order to prepare for the global marketplace, which “now serves as the dominant argument in support of race-conscious admissions...developed in response to a corporate world backlash against affirmative action (Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2016). Goldstein Hode and Meisenbach argue that this business case for diversity upholds a discourse of individualism that is central to Whiteness and White supremacy, particularly via the “right to profit” (Okun, 2010). By citing the amicus briefs written in support of affirmative action, and repeated mention of the business case for diversity *even there*, Goldstein Hode and Meisenbach (2016) note that,

the business case for diversity...both obscure[s] and perpetuate[s] Whiteness. By discursively coupling race conscious admissions to market-driven goals, the business case for diversity promotes interest convergence between the minorities who seek access to higher education and the predominantly White gatekeepers who hold the key. (p. 166)

Here, even by those who support affirmative action and sing praises for the advancement of diversity in higher education, Whiteness is reproduced via the commodification of diversification – the benefits White people reap by adding and interacting with people of color. This “interest convergence” (Bell, 1980) encourages White students and White decision-makers in universities to strike a bargain: they will support diversity and affirmative action as long as it continues to provides benefits and the socioeconomic upper-hand to them (Warikoo, 2016).

Incidentally, as Berrey (2011) has suggested, this understanding of diversity depends fundamentally on an altered notion of race, shifting it from a term that is

concerned with the social experiences that groups of people have because of the color of their skin, to a cultural identity that individuals own and can leverage—and that can be leveraged by others. This redefining of race within the diversity discourse aligns with Powell's (1978) urging that affirmative action policy not be used to remedy structural injustice and societal exclusion (Berrey, 2011). Instead, diversity in higher education caters to White students and de-prioritizes the needs of students of color by “[stressing] the instrumental benefits of racial identity and of interpersonal interaction along racial and other lines” rather than “emphasizing the imperative of social justice” (Berrey, 2011, p. 577). Berrey (2011, 2015) and others (Bell, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Jayakumar & Garces, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) have suggested that this framework for diversity, ironically, upholds a race-neutral ideology that attempts to erase the “important social differences exist[ing] between racial groups” by discouraging discussion of race on campuses (Berrey, 2011, p. 591). In the end, these scholars note, this does the work of maintaining White privilege by negating the existence of inequality – a difficult reality in which to strive for racial equity on college campuses.

Given the evolving landscape for diversity in higher education, how do DEI professionals, such as Asian American women DEI professionals, work towards inclusion and equity – goals that have now become standard parlance for the competitive university – without mention of race? Research has pointed to the challenges of affecting DEI professionals' ability to shape campus climates of inclusion under the new wave of race-neutral ethos sweeping higher education, including the ability to attract and retain diverse staff, administration, and faculty (Gasman, Abiola, & Tavers, 2015; Jones, 2014; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015).

Charged with integration of college campuses (Tienda, 2013), administrators whose jobs require implementing diversity must develop ongoing strategies to recruit, retain, and engage the campus community of color without mention of race, all the while contending with the highly litigious atmosphere in higher education around issues of diversity (Jones, 2014). While much has been written about the challenges of preserving the original, justice-minded goals of diversity and affirmative action, little has been written to understand how diversity officers navigate this new turn, which, in its commodification of identity, is emblematic of neoliberal market ideology at work in higher education.

### **Neoliberalism and Higher Education**

DEI professionals in higher education are charged with acting as “organizational change agent[s] for equity, diversity, and inclusion” (Worthington, Stanley, & Lewis, 2014, p. 227). Yet, recent affirmative action litigation has limited their ability to expand representation across higher education among students, faculty, and administrators, as well as within curriculum (Jones, 2014). Though these affirmative action cases have, up until now, noted the benefits of diversity initiatives in the university, many scholars have noted that this commendation of diversity centralizes its marketable benefits rather than its ability to address inequity (Baez & Sanchez, 2017; Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2016). These scholars highlight that this phenomenon is emblematic of neoliberalism, or the marketization of all aspects of human activity, as it manifests in higher education. Literature (Baez & Sanchez, 2017; Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2016) related to neoliberalism and higher education addresses the ways in which the university is implicated in the larger neoliberal project; the effects of this implication on students,

faculty, and university administration; and the societal impact of neoliberalism's seizure of higher education. Given myriad understandings of neoliberalism, an overview of its origins and ideological underpinnings follows.

*An overview of neoliberalism*

Harvey (2007) traces the start of the neoliberal project to an unexpected location: Chile, 1973, in the wake of its violent overthrow of democratically-elected Salvador Allende and the repression of the popular social movements that backed him. The coup, led by Augusto Pinochet, garnered support from the business elite of Chile, who felt threatened by Allende's socialist agenda. Their effort to seize the reins of power was backed by the United States, with the Central Intelligence Agency, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and a slew of corporations lending military, financial, and political might. Pinochet formed an economic team that, espousing the free market economic system teachings of Milton Friedman (in fact, many were educated at the University of Chicago, where Friedman taught until 1977), oversaw the ensuing privatization of public assets, deregulation, and lowering of protectionist trade barriers to encourage foreign investment (Harvey, 2007, p. 8). As Harvey notes, the resulting high economic growth rates were short-lived and the instability caused by dramatic growth eventually led to a debt crisis in the early 1980s affecting much of Latin America (Harvey, 2007, p. 9). This, however, did not discourage the neoliberal turn in the 1980s in both Britain and the United States, where Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, respectively, applied the lessons from Chile to oversee "a much more pragmatic and less ideologically driven application of neoliberal policies in the years that followed" (Harvey, 2007, p. 9).



The ultimate goal of the neoliberal project is to free capital from the restrictions placed on it by what Harvey (2007) calls ‘embedded liberalism’—“a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes [restrain] but in other instances [lead] the way in economic and industrial strategy” (p. 11). Embedded liberalism, based in the economic model of John Maynard Keynes, therefore relies upon state intervention and regulation. In order to understand how neoliberalism responds to Keynesian economics, the etymology of the term ‘neoliberal’ is critical. Rooting itself in the ideology of European liberalism, neoliberalism extends the liberal commitment of individual freedom to the market, which translates into “the rights of private property, individual liberties, and entrepreneurial freedoms,” thus challenging embedded liberalism (Harvey, 2007, p. 21). That “individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking, and it has long dominated the US stance towards the rest of the world” (Harvey, 2007, p. 7). The ideological foundations of neoliberalism, therefore, are geared towards radical individualism, as highlighted by Thatcher in 1987 when she famously stated, “[There’s] no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families” (Keay, 1987, p. 29). Neoliberal ideology attempts to center and normalize this individualism so as to encourage ways of being that allow for the free movement of capital. Harvey quotes Thatcher in her summation of this sentiment in a 1981 interview with *Sunday Times*: “Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul” (Butt, 1981). Neoliberalism is indeed characterized by economic functions. Yet, many have argued that its true power comes from its ideological insertion into and ensuing normalization within the social sphere.

*Ideological underpinnings of neoliberalism*

Harvey (2007) compares neoliberalization as it was achieved in Chile to that of the Britain and the United States. Whereas the neoliberal project in Chile was quickly achieved with the coercive aid of violence and repression, in the U.S. and U.K. the shift to neoliberalism had to be slower, due to what some might call the restrictions inherent in having to implement it through democratic means (Harvey, 2007, p. 39). In the situation of these democracies, the neoliberal turn required an ideological buy-in by the masses.

As Baez and Sanchez (2017) and Harvey (2007) have argued, certain functions of the state certainly become sidelined in neoliberalism, but in reality, the role of the state shifts to accommodate the socio-cultural needs of capital. Baez and Sanchez (2017) summarize Lemke's (2001) work as he builds upon Foucault's understandings of modernity in saying,

U.S. neoliberalism actually extends economic rationality beyond the traditional economic sphere into the social sphere, thus eviscerating historical liberal distinctions between the market and the state, the economic and the social, the private and the public, and the individual and the collective. Economic rationality becomes an all encompassing logic for understanding, evaluating, and governing social life. (Baez & Sanchez, 2017, p. 42)

It thus becomes evident that neoliberal evangelization hinges on the movement of market ideology from solely the market into all aspects of social being (Baez & Sanchez, 2017; Brown, 2015). Here, the university is no exception.

*The neoliberal university*

Brown (2015) traces the transformation of higher education in the United States in the twentieth century. Noting the “ghastly episodes and wrong turns” of the times, she nevertheless points to the early century through the 1960s as an era that “promised not merely literacy, but liberal arts to the masses,” bringing an unprecedented number of “descendents of workers, immigrants, and slaves” into a society that had thus far relegated them to the margins (Brown, 2015, p. 118). Though universities were not free from criticism and usurpation by corporate forces during this time (Donoghue, 2008), the mere extension of a liberal arts degree from the elite class to the (still predominantly White, male) masses was “nothing short of a radical democratic event” (Brown, 2015, p. 185). The fall in the 1980s of the Keynesian market system, the prior ascent of which had paralleled this democratization of higher education, made room for an economic system with the tenets of individualism, marketization, and privatization to slowly encroach upon all aspects of social and cultural life, including the university (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Marginson (1998) locates the ways in which universities have centralized a market ethos through the creation of a new set of managerial roles and functions. These administrative roles, including presidents, provosts, and chancellors, are less concerned with academic rigor than they are geared towards fundraising, attracting corporate sponsorship, and developing the “formulae, incentives, targets and plans” to guide the business goals of the university (Marginson, 1998, pp. 7-8). Part of the role of these managers too is to attract those students to the university who are most able to contribute to the financial viability of the university by paying full tuition (Slaughter & Rhoades,

2004). Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) suggest that “when public colleges and universities operate under a knowledge/education regime informed by academic capitalism, they begin to see students as revenue sources and products” (p. 74).

Many have documented the ways in which universities reveal their neoliberal underpinnings when it comes to the experiences of students, faculty, and administration. For students, critical thought has been replaced with rote learning, memorization, and learning for the sake of job acquisition rather than citizenship formation. As Giroux (2014) notes, “pedagogies that unsettle common sense, make power accountable, and connect classroom knowledge to larger civic issues have become dangerous at all levels of schooling” (p. 6). Students are encouraged to acquire the skills necessary to be successful leaders in the global marketplace (Baez & Sanchez, 2017). Here, students learn for job-readiness and “learn quickly that their fate is solely a matter of individual responsibility...that increasingly reduces social relations to social combat” (Giroux, 2014, p. 14). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) summarize the student experience well:

Colleges and universities compete vigorously to market their institutions to high-ability students able to assume high debt loads. Student consumers choose (frequently private) colleges and universities that they calculate are likely to bring a return on educational investment...Once students have enrolled, their status shifts from consumers to captive markets...When students graduate, college and universities present them as...a contribution to the new economy. (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 2)

To stand out in the cutthroat job market, students are required to do more and more while in college – take on multiple majors, study abroad, be student leaders, do community

service, work – all while taking on more debt than ever in U.S. history<sup>3</sup> (Office of the United States Department of Education, 2018). Throughout the higher education process, students are seen and treated as consumers who are being further-trained to participate in and contribute to the global marketplace.

The changing role of faculty also contributes to a growing environment of competition and anti-intellectualism in higher education (Donoghue, 2008; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). The once respected position of the faculty member as one dedicated to free thinking, critical, public-minded intellectualism has given way to “the downsizing of faculty, the militarization of research, and the revamping of the curriculum to fit the needs of the market” (Giroux, 2010, p. 185). An American Association of University Professors 2017 study showed that non-tenure track positions now account for over 70% of all faculty positions in the U.S. (American Association of University Professors, 2017). While the number of tenured positions has shrunk, the faculty positions that do exist are more and more beholden to corporate interests outside of the university (Giroux 2002). Noting the amount of corporate money and control that is now characteristic of higher education, Giroux (2002) notes that, “as universities become increasingly strapped for money, corporations are more than willing to provide the needed resources, but the costs are troubling and come with strings attached” (p. 433). The linkage between faculty research and corporate financing of universities also creates a threat to those areas of study that do not generate profit – disciplines in the humanities “concern[ed] with social issues that will be either eliminated or technicized because their role in the market will be judged as ornamental” rather than productive (Giroux, 2002, p. 434). Forced to succumb to the pressures of competition, faculty are likely to lower their classroom standards and

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<sup>3</sup> In the second quarter of 2018, student debt totaled an all time high of \$1.4 trillion.

shift their research (Gutman, 2000) so as to keep pace with “a new type of approach to academia which, with the addition of a particular funding model, conflicts with and interferes with traditional notions of professional academic autonomy and freedom” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 326). Faculty positions in higher education have given way to an increasingly larger administrative arm, where a new managerialism has taken on the role of supporting and growing the entrepreneurial aspects of the university.

Scholars such as Brown (2015), Giroux (2010, 2014) and Olssen and Peters (2005) have acknowledged that higher education’s new domination by market priorities not only “contradicts the culture and democratic value of higher education, but also makes a mockery of the very meaning and mission of the university” (Giroux, 2010, p. 186). Some note in particular that this de-prioritization of critical thought poses a challenge to developing “the higher human faculties for thoughtful civic engagement” (Brown, 2015, p. 189), and that this de-intellectualization of higher education actually limits the ability of students to recognize injustice as higher education itself becomes less interested in addressing social problems (Giroux, 2010). In placing more value on individual agency and self promotion over collectivism, the unilateralism of neoliberal activism undermines forms of political solidarity by “[substituting] emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating *solutions* to political problems” (Brown, 2006, p. 16).

This de-intellectualization of the social justice realm is an intrinsic part of the neoliberal structure, the reproduction of which is dependent on the uncritical and mindless participation of self-concerned citizens in the capitalist project. Understanding this evolution of the ideological framework for activism is essential to appreciating the

role of diversity officers in higher education. The transformation from the grounding in structuralist, transnational modes particularly used towards a collectivist anti-colonial project, to a rootedness in the “ideology of individual agency as the solution to social ills” (Mohanty, 2013, pg. 974), reveals itself dramatically in the neoliberal university. This phenomenon is aided by diversity programs that, as noted in the previous section, are handcuffed by the trends set by affirmative action legislation to attempt to increase recruitment and retention of marginalized communities without addressing the root causes of their marginalization (Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2017).

While defenders of diversity practice and affirmative action in higher education espouse the benefits that interaction with difference provides to a democratic society as well as to students’ marketability, the neoliberalization of higher education and the ensuing reduction of identity, particularly race, to “yet another quantifiable unit of economic measure” (Baez & Sanchez, 2017, p. 49) are precisely that which prevent diversity initiatives, and DEI professionals, from truly affecting social change on college campuses.

### **Summary**

This section provided an overview of existing literature that grounds this study of Asian American women who occupy DEI roles in higher education. Facing under-representation that is directly in contrast the to representation of Asian American students, Asian American women face the racialized legacies of the model minority myth, compounded by gendered stereotypes that have the ability to impact their roles as DEI professionals. This under-explored experience is situated in a higher education arena where diversity has a growing significance, and plays a role in fulfilling what some have

called the business case for diversity. While diversity can be the means to a profitable end on college campuses, as the business case suggests, it simultaneously can play a role in upholding White supremacist and patriarchal structures. Taken as a whole, diversity serves an important function in neoliberal proliferation in higher education that the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals in higher education can elucidate.

The next chapter introduces the methodology of this study. Using phenomenological methods, this study explored the lens that the role of Asian American women DEI professionals offers in further understanding how neoliberalism functions within the higher education DEI paradigm.



## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to fill a gap in research by examining both the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals as well as what these experiences reveal about the neoliberal makeup of DEI work in the context of higher education. The following section lays forth the research design, an introduction to the participants, and the processes of data collection and analysis for this study.

In addressing Kuntz's (2015) assertion that research methodology too has become an extension of the neoliberal project via its "logics of extraction" (Kuntz, 2015, p. 12), this study ultimately understood the importance of a dedication to the Foucauldian concept of "parrhesia," or radical truth-telling. However, because this intention did not guide the methodological design of this study at its outset, Chapter 5 discusses how this study came to understand the importance of parrhesiastic practice in research, particularly that research which attempts to create a paradigm shift by challenging the ideologies and manifestations of neoliberalism as they emerge in higher education.

### Research Question

As stated in Chapter I, the following central question guided this phenomenological study:

*What do the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals reveal about the relationship between neoliberalism and diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the context of higher education?*

The following questions supported this central question:

- In what ways do neoliberal processes and ideologies manifest in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- How do Asian American women diversity professionals describe their experiences in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- What strategies do Asian American women use to navigate higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

### **Background of the Researcher**

I begin this dissertation with my background as the researcher. By foregrounding my identity as a South Asian American woman diversity, equity, and inclusion professional in higher education, I wish to show that I have a true stake in the study that is to follow. The findings of this research have real implications for the way power is and can be negotiated via my existence as a South Asian woman who is a DEI professional. The implications of this research affect how I perceive and complete the functions of my role, how I am perceived in that role, and how I navigate the racial and gendered complexities that manifest in my life and impact the lens I use to translate my personal and professional existence. In Chapter 5, I explain how a consciousness of my positionality led to a methodological awareness regarding what must be at stake for the researcher in order for a study to be truly impactful in challenging neoliberal ideologies and practice.

My professional role and personal identity as a South Asian American woman who is a diversity, equity, and inclusion professional in the context of higher education also allows for an important insider perspective in this research. Being able to have personal proximity to topics and issues related to this study allowed me to establish—and

in some cases deepen—a relationship with the study participants, with whom I have a shared identity and a shared professional experience.

### **Research Design**

Bhattacharya (2017) offers that academic rigor in qualitative research can be achieved through “an alignment of epistemology, theoretical frameworks, methodology, and methods, data analysis, and representation” as well as by “acknowledging and documenting the iterative nature of qualitative research” (p. 23). The epistemological and theoretical frameworks, offered in Chapter 2 of this study, are here extended to the outlining of this study’s methodology, methods, and data analysis. This extension can lend itself to demonstrating the rigor of this research, especially when meaningfully aligned with the theoretical grounding of this study.

Phenomenological methodology examines the perspective of several individuals experiencing a phenomenon. This ultimately derives meaning via developing analysis of a “composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). This methodology is undertaken with the awareness that “meaning does not just appear, emerge, or rise, but that through symbolic apparatus of culture...meaning is mediated” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 100). Phenomenology’s philosophical perspective, developed as a response to the positivist traditions of modernity that aimed to fit experiences into preconceived structures of knowing, centers the knowledge and experience of individuals as they engage society and systems (Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004). As a result, phenomenology requires what Edmund Husserl termed “*epoche*,” or the suspension of prior judgment on the part of the researcher prior to there being grounds upon which to develop these understandings

(Creswell, 2007, pp. 58-59). Epoche allows for onto-epistemological space for participants' view of a phenomenon. As phenomenological methods dictate, this study gave priority to seeking out the lived realities of individuals through their own cultured narratives, and only after that, examined these experiences through the theoretical lens of neoliberal hegemony that this study employs.

This study used a semi-structured interview method with eight participants over four months to explore the research questions. In making space for the interview participants to be able to shape the course of the discussion, the semi-structured interview allowed for critical attention to challenging the traditional power dynamics between the researcher and the research participant. In using the semi-structured interview method, I began interviews with a set of open, guiding questions that had the opportunity to shift organically as the discussion with participants developed. These questions aimed to understand the background and history of the participants, leading up to and within their diversity, equity, and inclusion professional role, with a focused attention to the racial and gendered dynamics that they experienced. (The interview guide is available as Appendix A.)

I chose the method of semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by phenomenological methodology because of its adaptive qualities, which allowed me to be responsive to each participant's recounting of their experience as DEI professionals in the context of higher education. This, in part, is why it was a useful method for studying the DEI professional role in higher education, since the field itself is novel and constantly in flux. For this study focusing on Asian American women DEI professionals, this method offers a core of understanding and dedication to centering the lives and stories of

communities whose experiences have been historically de-centered in efforts to understand the DEI role in higher education.

### **Participants**

Using purposeful sampling, I interviewed eight participants between October 2018 and January 2019 whose rich experiences provided the complexity and depth this study required. All participants, at the time of the interviews, were geographically situated on the West Coast of the United States. Participants in this study were diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals in institutes of higher education who self-identify as Asian American and as women. The term Asian American refers to any person living in the United States who has origins in East Asia, South Asia, or Southeast Asia. Some participants in this study also chose to identify more specifically depending on the origins of their families (i.e. Korean American, South Asian American, Taiwanese American, etc.) as well as mixed race (White and Asian American). The participants themselves embodied the diversity within the Asian American identity, providing important richness to this study.

I interviewed participants who self-selected as professionals in the higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion field, and had or had recently held professional titles including Chief Diversity Officer, Title IX Coordinator, Assistant Vice President, Deputy Associate Vice Provost, Associate Vice President, Assistant Director, and Program Manager. The findings of the study do not identify the participants by their titles in order to preserve their anonymity.

In March 2018, at the national conference for the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), I conducted a preliminary

recruitment of participants for this study, anticipating that this method of recruitment could bring regional diversity to the makeup of the participants. At a conference of more than 500 attendees, I was able to identify about ten Asians, three of whom were men. I spoke to five of the women, all of whom showed interest in participating in my study. These women represented public and private universities that were situated in California, Washington, and New Jersey. Given the small population of Asian American DEI professionals in higher education, this study depended on snowball sampling, and some of the attendees at NADOHE were also able to recommend other Asian American women who they felt would take interest in this study, and who they said they would help me contact. Via NADOHE and my own professional network through a local chapter of NADOHE, I was able to recruit more Asian American women participants for this study.

What some may see as limitations of this study are in reality risks (Kuntz & Pickup, 2016) the study took on, both to the participants and the researcher. Participants from this study were recruited from a small population of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals in higher education. In 2007, according to Williams and Wade-Golden (2007), only 3% of CDOs out of a nationwide population of 110 were Asian Americans. Even in ten years, that number may not have grown significantly. For this reason, even a small group of Asian American women DEI professional was hard to locate, with the added challenge of there being few professional networks for this group. This meant there was additional risk of these women's identities being revealed unless I took the precaution of adding layers of anonymity to their stories. I took care not to mention specific ethnic identity markers of the participants, their titles, or the institutions with which they have been affiliated – either as students or as

professionals. There was much that I could not include from their narratives – that may have clarified and added depth to this study – because of the chance that the identities of the participants may be revealed. The risk inherent to this study was that it set forth to see what the experiences of the small group of participants revealed about the inner workings of neoliberal power as it manifests in the DEI profession in higher education, posing a threat to formations of this profession and therefore a threat to those of us who work within it.

Having comparable professional experiences with the participants as well as considerable identity-based similarities meant that my own role as an Asian American woman DEI professional is brought into critical focus with this study, potentially revealing strategies that I use myself to navigate the challenges of my profession. In many ways, I myself was a participant in this study, as I compared and contrasted my own experiences with participants in interviews, and whose reflections often confirmed and allowed me to reflect on my positionality. The risk I take on as the researcher stems from the fact that in sharing the stories of my participants, much of my own story – challenges, strategies, and emotion – is laid bare. Their composite story (Solórzano & Yosso; Cook, 2013) surfaces my own, without the same level of anonymity to protect me that my participants benefit from.

This study embodied risk via the courage of the participants who participated, with the understanding “that those of us who are in the field of education must necessarily recognize that our very critique might irrevocably disrupt our own positions” (Kuntz & Pickup, 2016, p. 173), but that this disruption is necessary since one cannot

“reimagine a new vision for education and social justice and, at the same time, maintain the status quo of institutional assignment and practice” (Kuntz & Pickup, 2016, p. 174).

### **Data Collection**

My application to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects was completed on May 9, 2018, and approved on May 15, 2018. (The IRBPHS approval letter is available as Appendix A.) Data were gathered for this study by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants between October 2018 and January 2019. My initial contact with participants was via email. Though I knew five of the eight participants prior to this study, I sent the same general outreach email to all eight participants. (The outreach template is available as Appendix B.) In these initial conversations, I informed each potential participant of the background, purpose, and objectives of this study, and their critical role in it. In these initial outreach messages, I also included the consent form, soliciting their knowing consent to participate in this study. (The consent form is available as Appendix C.) After receiving the consent form from each participant, I communicated with them via email to establish a date for an initial interview. The table below shows where and when each interview was held. Participants had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for themselves or have one chosen for them. I chose pseudonyms for half of the participants.



*Table 1.* Interview calendar and interview locations

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Interview 1</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Interview 2</b>	<b>Location</b>
Alice	10/15/18	In person – her home	11/3/18	In person – NADOHE chapter meeting with Hyun-Ju
Hyun-Ju	10/27/18 (lost interview)	In person – café	11/3/18	In person – NADOHE chapter meeting with Alice
Patricia	11/9/18	In person – her office	—	—
Saanvi	11/15/18	Zoom	—	—
Leigh	12/5/18	Zoom	—	—
Francis	12/9/18	In person – her office	11/18/18	Zoom
Gloria	12/10/18	In person – her office	—	—
Harriet	1/20/19	Zoom	—	—

For participants who were within 50 miles of where I live and able to meet in person, I traveled to either the participant's place of work, home, or a cafe so that the interviews could be done in person. For these interviews, I used both an Olympus digital voice recorder (WS600S) and recording software on my personal cell phone to record interviews. For all other interviews, I used Zoom software to conduct interviews over the

internet; for these, I used Zoom's recording capability to document the interview for transcription, with secondary recording on the Olympus digital voice recorder. I kept a journal to memo in, which I used to make notes about aspects of the interviews that struck me, since doing so allowed me to "explore hunches, ideas, and thoughts and then [take] them apart, always searching for the broader explanations at work in the process" (Creswell, 2015, p. 441). I used this same journal to keep notes throughout the research process to document observations that informed the interviews.

I found some important differences between those interviews done in person, and those done online. Save the interview with Harriet, it just so happened that the interviews I conducted online were with those participants with whom I did not have an already established professional relationship via NADOHE. While I would have thought that the doing these interviews online would have made it more difficult to establish trust and comfort, these interviews ultimately allowed for a level of frankness that I think occurred precisely because they were not done face-to-face. Furthermore, with these participants, I was perhaps more inquisitive because I did not have any prior knowledge of their personal histories, a fact that most likely kept me from taking any information for granted. With those participants I already knew, my familiarity with them may have served as an ironic impediment to capturing the depth of their stories.

Since three of the participants are current members of the local NADOHE chapter and one is a former member, I had hoped to conduct a focus group after one of our chapter meetings. However, only Alice and Hyun-Ju were able to attend. Unfortunately, my first interview with Hyun-Ju was lost because of equipment malfunction, and

although I reconstructed the interview from my notes, the interview with her and Alice after the NADOHE chapter meeting became the primary interview content for Hyun-Ju.

Interviews ranged in length from 60 to 120 minutes with most between 80 and 90 minutes. I began each interview thanking participants for their time and conversing about how they were. Since I had already established relationships with them, I then provided a general review of my research question, the purpose of my study, and the goals of the interview. This took us into the first questions of the conversation, which were purposefully broad (Moustakas, 1994) and had to do with how each participant entered into the DEI profession and their experiences growing up. Depending on the trajectory of the dialogue based on this initial overview, I then asked questions about participants' identities as Asian American women, their professional roles on their campuses, and their thoughts about the field in general. Not all questions were used, and others were added as needed to keep a natural conversation flowing. (The interview guide is available as Appendix D.)

I used 3Play Media's service to transcribe one interview. After finding the transcribed document difficult to read because of a lack of ability to add line numbers to downloaded transcripts, I switched to using Rev.com to transcribe the rest of the interviews. Using a transcription service allowed me to save valuable time that I instead used to review, edit, and gain familiarity with the transcripts. I edited the transcripts in either the 3Play Media or Rev.com interface for accuracy by listening to the interviews while reviewing the transcripts. As the transcriptions were done by different transcribers through Rev.com, the level of accuracy ranged considerably. This process of reviewing and editing the transcripts provided an opportunity for familiarity and understanding of

participants' stories that could be further developed via reliving and revisiting interviews post transcription. Participants had the opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews for accuracy, as well as review their Participant Profile, which appears in Chapter 4. These were sent to participants via email with the transcripts and profiles attached as Microsoft Word documents that could be edited by the participants themselves and then sent back to me. Five out of the eight participants made edits and additions to their participant profiles. Alice and Saanvi had no changes to make, and Patricia did not have time to review the transcript of our conversation or her profile.

As Creswell (2013) recommends storing interview material in two areas, all interview transcripts were stored on a password protected data storage cloud and backed up on a password protected hard drive. I maintained the anonymous identity of all the participants by initially naming them as participants 1-8, and then ascribing pseudonyms on all documents and files once the pseudonyms were established. Apart from the participants reviewing the transcripts of their own interviews, only I accessed these files during the course of the research study. The signed consent forms and audio files will be destroyed in five years, though the anonymized transcripts will be kept indefinitely.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used inductive analysis to treat the data as a foundation from which to build and grow understanding and meaning. In locating meaning via the data rather than prescribing meaning, inductive analysis within the phenomenological research frame “assumes that the researcher is not starting the data analysis with any kind of preestablished testable hypothesis about the data” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). As such,

several stages of analysis were required to locate patterns and establish meaning from these patterns.

Outsourcing the transcription of the interviews to Rev.com granted me valuable time for coding. I hand coded the eight transcripts, opting not to use any coding software. To start this process, I engaged in “pre-coding” (Layder, 1998), taking the opportunity to highlight and take note of poignant and illustrative quotes in the transcripts from participants that could be used later in the study to identify “codeable moments” (Boyatzis, 1998) that could eventually highlight findings, assertions, and generalizations regarding phenomena. For first cycle coding, I used a combination of in vivo coding to give weight to participants’ own language and phrasing to describe their experiences (Saldaña, 2016) as well as descriptive coding to succinctly summarize key points from the quote with nouns (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102).

For initial coding, I used an Excel spreadsheet to create a sheet (using separate tabs) for each participant. As Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005, pp. 270-3) recommend, I created three columns in each sheet. In the first column of each sheet, I put the line number from the transcript, and next to that, the raw data (the actual quote) that stood out as something potentially impactful, important, or telling. I then used the next row to assign one to three preliminary codes to each of these quotations using language from the quote itself, as in vivo coding dictates, or descriptive coding to briefly capture the main points from the quote. The third column, for final codes, was left blank at the outset with the intention that deeper engagement with the data would help to clarify the final codes for this column. I then sorted the list of preliminary codes to see how many total codes emerged. This process ultimately yielded 160 unique codes for the 182 quotes in total

that I had taken note of from all eight participants. (A list of the initial unique codes is available as Appendix E.) I then grouped these codes together – into “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61) – by their similarity in a phenomenon they were describing, a common theme, or similar assertion (Saldaña, 2016, p. 10).

Through this process, I was able to organize the 160 unique codes under 25 subcategories representing the codes for the final column of the coding spreadsheet. (The organizing of the unique codes under subcategories is available as Appendix F.) I then placed these 25 subcategories into groups by shared meaning, leading to six initial categories of emergent themes. (The grouping of the subcategories into categories is available as Appendix G.) Figure 2 below, illustrated by Saldaña (2016, p. 14), is the initial “codes to theory” process I used, though I added secondary engagement with the data, described in the following section. Saldaña’s imagery is relevant to this study up to the third column, where subcategories and categories were developed. After that step, I instead chose to reengage with the original data that I had reconfigured into narrative form, a process I will discuss next.

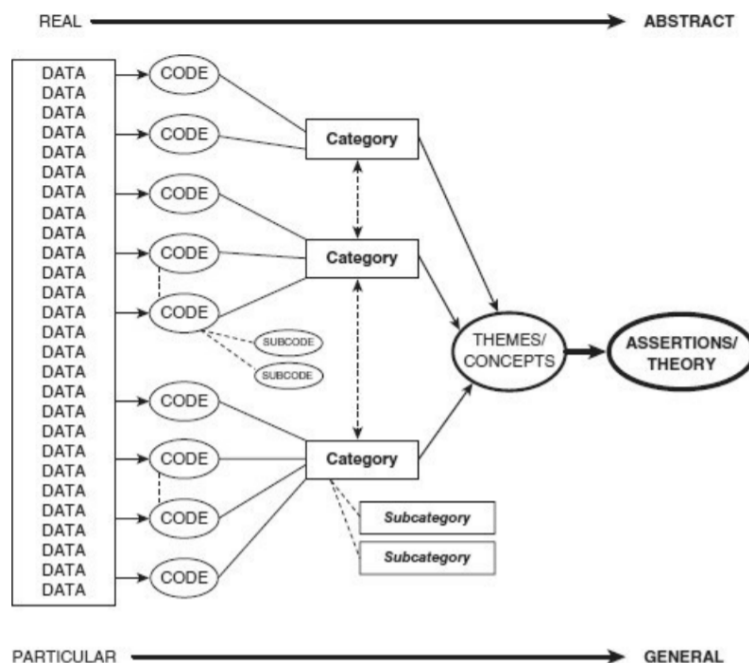


Figure 1. A codes to theory model. Retrieved Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 14.

Demonstrative of the iterative process of inductive analysis, I went back to the original transcripts of my conversations with each participant and wrote a profile for each participant, using the participant's own words to describe their experiences. This allowed me to arrange the data in narrative form. For each participant, I used a similar biographical form, starting chronologically from their youth and ending with the latest experiences in their professional career. Through the process of 'member-checking,' (Bhattacharya, 2017), I then shared these focused biographies with each participant, giving them one to three weeks to review these profiles along with the transcript of our conversation and make edits and additions as needed. In this way, these profiles were co-written, incorporating important thoughts and experiences that the participants may have not been able to share in our initial conversations. This collaborative element attempted to create spaces of agency for participants so as to have their experiences represented and interpreted with their input and consent. Kuntz (2015) suggests that this type of

participatory method moves qualitative analysis away from the “logics of extraction” that are inherent to positivist research methodology.

At this point, I took the initial 25 subcategories nested under six categories of meaning and began to shape the stories of the participants into “textural description,” describing the participants’ actual experiences, and “structural description,” describing the context that shaped these experiences (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). This step, aided by awareness of the categories of meaning that already existed, created an important narrative that allowed for initial understanding of the findings of this study. After the profiles were checked by each participant, I went through each again and analyzed them by using the 25 initial subcategories within the six larger categories to confirm that the participants’ experiences either could be grouped under these initial categories, or necessitated creation of new categories and codes. Saldaña (2016) reminds us that coding can occur more than once and that second, third, or even fourth attempts at coding can “occur with a more attuned perspective using first cycle methods” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 11). This secondary layer of initial coding helped to add depth and nuance to the first round of coding, allowing for themes to emerge. Figure 2 illustrates how I expanded Saldaña’s code-theory method by added a second point of engagement with the data, in narrative form, which was then coded for themes using the initial categories that emerged from the first engagement with the data.



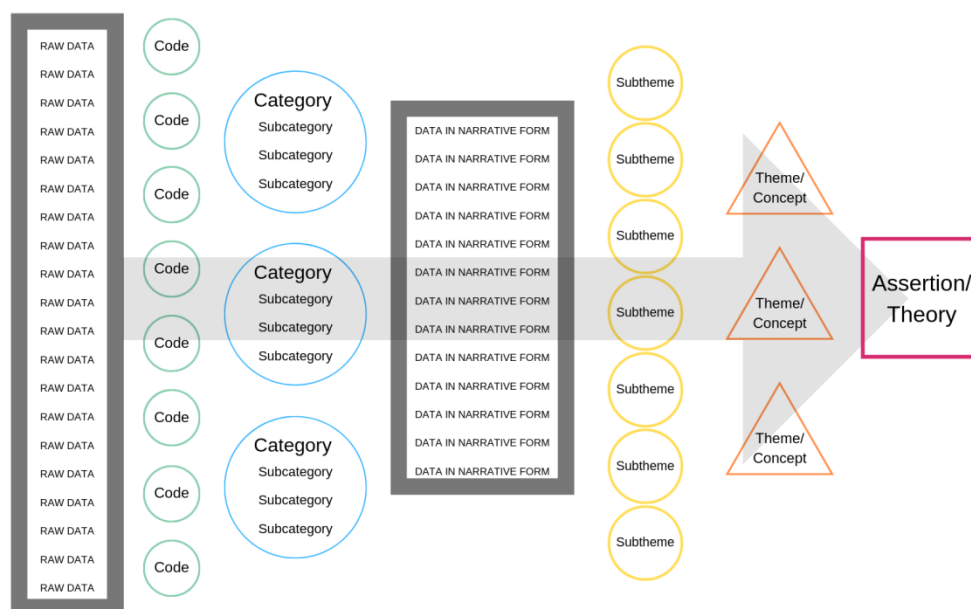


Figure 2. A codes to theory model with secondary data analysis.

This process resulted in 28 “aggregated themes” (Creswell, 2015, p. 247). These themes expanded upon, clarified, and condensed the original 25 categories by describing experiences or phenomena that emerged from the interviews. I listed these 28 themes, and using an element of structural coding called a “code frequency report” (Namey, 2008), made a note of how many participants’ experiences were represented under them. (The themes and frequency report are available as Appendix H.) Sorting the categories by how many participants shared similar sentiments or experiences allowed me to visually represent how poignant each theme was via convergences in experience, as well as see where there was telling divergence. As Namey (2008) notes, “a code frequency report can help identify which themes, ideas, or domains were common and which rarely occurred” (p. 143). Some phenomena, highlighted by the categories, were only experienced by one person, others by at most six. I took this into account when presenting the “essence” of the research findings, or the common experiences of the

participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 62) in Chapter 4. Grouping together the 28 larger categories also revealed important patterns, which I understood and named as three meta-themes that allowed me to make assertions from the data.

The phenomenological nature of this study's methodology allowed for rich findings to emerge which are organized as themes in the following chapter. These themes ground the analysis presented in Chapter 5 that allow for a critical examination of neoliberalism as it is embodied through higher education DEI programs understood through the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

### Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals in the context of neoliberal higher education DEI programs in the United States. In doing so, this study sought to understand what the experiences of these women reveal about the actions and embodiments of neoliberalism in the realm of higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work.

A central question guided this qualitative study of Asian American women diversity professionals:

*What do the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals reveal about the relationship between neoliberalism and diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the context of higher education?*

The following questions supported this central question:

- In what ways do neoliberal processes and ideologies manifest in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- How do Asian American women diversity professionals describe their experiences in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- What strategies do Asian American women use to navigate higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

The following section first introduces the participants of this study. Then I present findings that address the research questions above based on key themes.

### **Asian American Women Racial Identity Formation: Participant Profiles**

The following profiles introduce the participants of this study and highlight the diversity of experience within the group in terms of socialization around race and, to a lesser extent, gender. Participants spoke about various elements that impacted the formation of their racial identities as Asian American women. Many, in reflecting on their youth, had a mixed sense of belonging because of their racial identity, often feeling a sense of not fitting in. A few participants felt it was important to speak about how they developed sensibilities towards social justice as young people. For some, their racial identities became especially salient during their college years. All had varying trajectories into the diversity, equity, and inclusion field of higher education. Participants had the opportunity to review longer profiles, which were then edited to create the profiles below.

#### *Alice*

Alice, a second generation mixed race Filipina, grew up in Northern California. She confronted challenges navigating her mixed race identity. Despite the advantages she received because of her father's perceived whiteness, Alice still felt like she was, as a Filipina, part of the "browner of all the Asian groups." When people said that Asians were doing well, she knew that did not apply to her and other Filipinos, but rather to the Chinese and Japanese who lived in her neighborhood at that time.

In her teens, Alice realized that she was treated unfairly by her father because of his sense that she was "born wrong" because she was not born a boy. She takes note of this realization as the genesis of her gender awareness, and where her ability to navigate the different ways in which gender manifests across cultures – what she describes as "code switching" – is rooted. She brings this nuanced awareness of gender to her

diversity, equity, and inclusion work, where she often finds herself calling out her male colleagues for conforming to patriarchal gender roles.

After attending a few different undergraduate institutions, Alice received her bachelor's degree from a state university in Northern California before going on to get her doctorate at a public university near the central coast of California. She taught at a state university in the Midwest before returning to a Northern California university to teach, and also work as a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional. Alice held a DEI role in senior administration before her position at that university was eliminated. Since then, she has served as a DEI consultant and recently re-entered higher education in another DEI role.

### *Hyun-Ju*

Hyun-Ju was born in Korea and grew up in the Pacific Northwest after immigrating there as a child. Growing up, she was bullied at every school she attended and witnessed her family members being bullied, too. She fought back, and was proud to see her father fight back as well. These experiences taught her that she was responsible for defending herself against racial violence and discrimination, and that people in power were not going to intervene to protect her or prevent this violence from occurring. In high school, she came into racial awareness by reading essays by Malcolm X and other Black activists. Coincidentally, years before, her father had also read Malcolm X when living on the East Coast as an attempt to understand the experience of the Black community and racial dynamics in the United States.

Attending a small, private liberal arts college in the Midwest, Hyun-Ju had an awareness that she was admitted to boost the predominantly White university's diversity

numbers. While enrolled, she found that there were few focused resources to help her succeed as an Asian American first generation college student. After graduating, she stayed in the Midwest to pursue master's and doctoral degrees in anthropology, spending some time in southern Africa conducting research. Having started retention work at her graduate institution, Hyun-Ju then began working officially in the DEI field, joining the multicultural affairs office of a private research university in the Northeast. She next held a senior level DEI position at a private liberal arts college in the South, before moving to the West Coast to work in a state university's system-wide DEI office.

### *Patricia*

Patricia grew up in Northern California, the daughter of Chinese immigrant parents. Patricia credited her social justice awareness to her parents, who she felt were different from their other Chinese American friends in Northern California. In particular, both were union members and had interest in and awareness of civil rights issues. Patricia remembers, for example, her father helping members of the Black Panther Party by hiding them in his store's walk-in freezer during a police raid. After participating in social justice activism in high school, she became an Upward Bound counselor at the public research university she attended as an undergraduate student in Northern California, a job that opened her eyes to the intersections of race and class. Because of the large numbers of refugees from Southeast Asia at that time, Patricia, having primarily grown up around Chinese Americans, became aware of the diversity in the Asian American community.

For Patricia, the first university she attended was a racist, hostile place for Asian Americans. As the population of Asian Americans increased in the student body, tensions

rose, and a wave of anti-Asian hate crimes took place in and around the university.

Patricia felt deeply that she did not belong there, and after 3 years, she dropped out. She left with the sense that, “Higher ed is really not for people like me. It's for people like these privileged people who have no moral value.” After dropping out, Patricia worked for a community based education organization as a bilingual counselor, work that she found meaningful and that shaped her career trajectory into the diversity, equity, and inclusion field.

After working for 9 years, she enrolled in a public university in Northern California. At this university, she was encouraged by her professors and mentors to not only pursue a master’s degree, but also to apply for doctoral programs. She received a full scholarship to a state university in the Southwest for a dual master’s/PhD program. Her academic experience in cross cultural communications led to her first diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) job at the institution where she was doing her graduate work and teaching. After directing a national conference for a year and a half, she came to hold a senior level DEI role at a state university on the West Coast.

### *Saanvi*

Saanvi grew up in the Midwest to immigrant parents from India. Saanvi credited her globalist, social justice awareness to her parents, specifically her father. Growing up in the Midwest, Saanvi’s earliest political memories were sitting around the kitchen table with her South Asian immigrant parents, talking about topics like the Sandinistas and Contras in Nicaragua. Her socialization as a radical Marxist feminist was cultivated by her father, a Marxist professor whose emphasis on critically connecting global events to local issues in the United States became part of Saanvi’s mode of being.

She attended a private research university in the region for her undergraduate degree before moving to a state school for her master's degree. Saanvi prioritized coalition building with other communities of color, primarily other Asian Americans. At her undergraduate institution, a private research university in the Midwest, she was a student activist and organized with other Asian Americans to fight for the creation of Asian American studies. Saanvi recalled that, unlike herself, her South Asian classmates were sparsely involved, owing to their sense that Asian American studies did not apply to them.

After moving to the West Coast to begin her first role in the DEI field, she pursued a doctoral degree in higher education administration. She served in a DEI role in senior administration before being hired to work in a DEI center dedicated to equity. For almost 2 decades, she has also served as a DEI consultant.

### *Leigh*

Leigh was born in Taiwan, moved to the United States at age 5, and grew up in Virginia to a Taiwanese mother and White American father. Although Leigh felt like she did not belong fully to any racial or ethnic community, she did have the opportunity to develop cultural rootedness. The city where she grew up was mostly White, with about 20% African American and Black families and a small Asian community, primarily of Filipino and Vietnamese families. Leigh attended a Chinese school every Saturday. Her mother was determined that she not lose the connection to her Taiwanese heritage, so Leigh had a firm grounding in her cultural roots. Her mother taught Leigh to not unnecessarily call attention to her race, though she did not get the sense from her mother that assimilation was the ultimate goal. Growing up, Leigh felt a sense of racial



bifurcation, made more pronounced by her experience of having an Asian community to which she felt cultural affinity but that did not interact with, and indeed was not even known to, the Black and White community where she spent the rest of the week. In middle school, she had other Asian American friends with whom she could process this sense of being neither here nor there, “[talking] through [the] challenges of navigating, wanting to be respectful of our parents, and also needing to live our lives in some different ways.” They could not wait to attend college, where they believed they would be able to realize this dream.

She attended a state university on the East Coast and worked there before moving to the West Coast for a DEI position focused on students. Her various roles in student-centered DEI work have taken her back and forth between the coasts a number of times. Before transitioning into a DEI role for a national academic organization, her last position was on the East Coast, serving in a DEI position in senior administration.

### *Francis*

Francis grew up in Northern California, the grandchild of Japanese immigrants. Francis’s upbringing was shaped by a strong sense of politicism. Her identity was molded by her mother, who was very political and outspoken and who instilled in Francis a strong sense of social justice. She traced this politicism in her mother to her family’s internment during World War II as second generation Japanese Americans. Francis felt that neither she nor her mother conformed to the stereotype of Asian American women as quiet and submissive. Throughout high school, Francis found herself to be more radical than even her peers in an already liberal community for discussing things like the civil rights of the LGBTQ community. When attending a private liberal arts college in the

Midwest, she asked herself what the best way was to facilitate social change, and upon graduating, decided it was through education. After receiving guidance on what area of education could be most oriented towards social justice, Francis chose to attend a master's program in New England focusing on community based education.

After finishing her master's program, Francis spent some time in South America practicing community based education, adding to the experience she had already gained in Asia some years before with this type of educational practice. Returning to the East Coast, she worked in the human rights field before transitioning into higher education DEI roles that involved equity work and Title IX.

### *Gloria*

Gloria grew up in Northern California to parents who had emigrated from South Asia. She recalled that growing up, her parents instilled being South Asian as her primary identity, stressing the importance of carrying on her South Asian culture and “not [being] like those other people outside,” meaning White Americans. Yet, her parents did not teach her a South Asian language out of fear that she would have an accent. She attributes this double standard to their desire to both keep her from being too American, but also to avoid enduring the same struggles they did as immigrants.

Gloria recalled that college was a time when her identity as Asian American women came into sharp focus. Gloria remained in the Northern California region to obtain her bachelor's degree at a private Catholic university before moving to Asia for a year, a place where her identity as an American became apparent to her for the first time. In Asia, surrounded by other Asians, she was referred to as American, an identity that she did not previously identify with. When she moved to New England to complete a

master's degree, she was struck by how her identity as a woman of color became salient in juxtaposition to her surroundings, which were dominated by White men. It was here that Gloria felt diversity coming into play, and when she was accepted into a doctoral program at a public research university in California, she was relieved to return to a place where "diversity made sense to [her]" and where she could extend her scholarly work in media studies to advocate for minoritized populations that had been marginalized "by dominant academic trends, by society, by norms." At the same time, her doctoral program was a moment for Gloria to realize that she had been incredibly unsupported herself as a student, a realization that led her to shift from academia into multicultural student affairs in the fifth year of her six year program.

In her final years in her doctoral program, she interned as a graduate student in a multicultural center, eventually becoming a student affairs professional with a DEI focus. She returned to her undergraduate institution to a mid-level administration role in a multicultural center. Gloria recognized that, like other student affairs professionals, she wanted to enter the field because of a desire to provide resources that she did not have or that she was not aware she had, primarily when it came to creating spaces for Asian American students to develop consciousness around their own identities.

### *Harriet*

The granddaughter of Japanese immigrants, Harriet grew up in the Central Valley of California. Harriet found that although her hometown in the Central Valley of California had a sizeable Japanese population, she did not feel a sense of belonging with that or any other racial or ethnic group in her youth.

It was not until she was an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley that Harriet truly felt that she not only became better acquainted with her Asian identity, but that “all of [her] social, [her] living, everything was about being in the Asian American community.” This sense of community was “life-changing” for her. However, despite the role that the Asian American community had played in founding the first college of ethnic studies at UC Berkeley less than ten years before, her experience as an Asian American student within the Asian American community was markedly more social than political.

After completing her bachelor’s degree at a public university in California, Harriet started her career in student affairs at a state university in Northern California, earning a master’s degree in counseling psychology while working. Despite not feeling “adequate,” Harriet pursued a doctoral degree. After completing an EdD in higher education, and working as the director of student services at a private university in Northern California, she began her tenure doing equal employment and affirmative action work at a newly formed public university on the central coast of California, thus beginning her role as a DEI professional in higher education. The equal employment role brought Harriet to another California university for eight years, following which she returned to the central coast university, first in an academic affairs role and then in a DEI role for five more years. Harriet finished out her higher education career as the chief of staff to a college president. She made the decision to retire at the end of 2018 citing a feeling that she did not have the space to be successful in her chief of staff role.

These profiles offer the participants’ early experiences with race and gender as well as an overview of their formative moments related to social justice awareness and

activism. The profiles work to ground their later experiences as diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals in higher education in the neoliberal moment. The section below organizes findings from these experiences into key thematic areas.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study are organized into eight sections that answer this study's research question by addressing its secondary components.

*What do the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals reveal about the relationship between neoliberalism and diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the context of higher education?*

The following questions supported this central question:

- In what ways do neoliberal processes and ideologies manifest in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- How do Asian American women diversity professionals describe their experiences in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- What strategies do Asian American women use to navigate higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

The Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals of this study found that their experience in higher education is colored by the model minority myth as it impacts the racialization of Asian American women. Specifically, they felt that they were often brought into the DEI realm to maintain the status quo. They felt that this reality, and their particular ways of being racialized, affected their relationships with their colleagues of color.

Perhaps counterintuitively, participants also felt that they are able to have agency in their work precisely because of the non-interventionist quality the model minority myth associates with their identities, although their effectiveness in navigating this agency may be less powerful than they imagine.

The following section expands upon the summaries provided above and takes note of key themes that respond to the central question of this study: *What do the experiences of Asian American women diversity professionals reveal about the relationship of neoliberalism and diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the context of higher education?*

### **Theme #1: Different Entry Points into the DEI Field with a Common Lack of Standards and Guidelines**

As the participant profiles presented above reveal, each participant had a unique entry point into the diversity, equity, and inclusion field of higher education; however, they had in common a notable lack of training specific to the role but important personal preparation. When asked about the trajectory that led to becoming a higher education diversity professional, no participant stated that it was her goal to enter the DEI field. Since most of the participants in the study had already entered into their higher education careers in the 1990s before the DEI role was widespread in higher education, it follows that they would not have had the DEI role as a professional goal. Five participants began in academic roles that, in research areas dedicated to anthropological conceptions of race, intercultural communication and intergroup relations, multicultural psychology, and community-based education, lent themselves well to transitioning into a diversity career. The other three started in either student affairs roles or higher education administration

roles that also had the capability to become DEI roles. However, no participants received specific academic or professional training for the DEI field, the likes of which are becoming more standardized in graduate programs focused on diversity, equity and inclusion but are by no means the training ground for most DEI professionals.

Participants said nothing about having any guidelines to follow to successfully execute their duties once they took on DEI roles. Since standards for the profession were not published until 2014 (NADOHE, 2014), it follows that no codified theories, practices, or processes would have existed to assist the first waves of diversity professionals in higher education, which included most of the participants. The preparedness that they did bring in from their academic and alternate higher education experience was accompanied, for some, by personal preparedness. When asked about their upbringing and trajectory into DEI work, more than half of the participants mentioned a background in social justice, human rights, or community organizing, suggesting that they had a set of skills from personal formation they felt would be useful for the field. Once in the field, they had various understandings of what the purpose of DEI is in higher education, owing to a larger lack of consensus around the purpose of DEI and DEI roles on campus.

## **Theme #2: Conflict between the Stated Purpose of DEI Work in Higher Education and Reality**

Each participant was asked to provide her take on her chosen professional field of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. In order to be able to situate the findings of this study, this section establishes what participants felt is the role and purpose of diversity, equity, inclusion in higher education. Their notions of the work

reveal that there is a tension between what DEI work is ideally meant to accomplish and what it is actually structured to be able to accomplish.

Participants in the study shared that they had a wide range of responsibilities characterized by a shared and equally robust experience of feeling that they were not positioned to meaningfully impact their institutions. For example, participants expressed that their duties ranged from developing systems to increase access for marginalized community members, to addressing the inadequacy of existing systems to address feelings and experiences of exclusion, all the way to symbolically (by existing) and actively (by responding) protecting the university from bad press. These varied responsibilities were accompanied with, as most participants noted, inadequate resources and institutional support.

When asked what she felt was the purpose of DEI work in higher education, Harriet pointed to the dual purpose the field serves while noting that diversity work is set up to be “a zero sum game.” She identified that, at the same time the field is meant to “advance issues of equity and inclusion,” it also serves as cover for the very lack of advancement in those areas, as evidenced by the proliferation of DEI professional positions in higher education since the Charleston massacre of nine African American churchgoers by Dylann Roof and the election of Donald Trump. Nevertheless, there is an ongoing lack of institutional support and resources for these positions. Given this, Harriet stressed that because they are unlikely to be able to transform the institutions for which they work, DEI professionals need to feel good about “the individuals we have touched” since the necessary cultural change happens through these personal connections. She borrows from Frank Wu (2013), a legal scholar, who equates diversity with democracy,



two sacred ideals that are equally messy in people's visions of what they entail and how they can be achieved. Owing to the difficulty of the profession, Harriet characterized DEI work as noble, "the work of angels," and work that necessitates having consciousness, but around which there is little consensus of what success looks like.

Francis echoed this sentiment in saying that she felt the role of the DEI field in higher education was to make education more accessible to students and a welcoming environment more available for employees. This becomes difficult to accomplish, she stressed, when leadership does not acknowledge the critical role that DEI work plays in helping universities fulfill their mission, often manifesting in a dearth of support and resources.

When asked why she believed DEI positions exist in higher education, Patricia said she thought they existed because the structures and policies in place on college campuses are inadequate. She went on to clarify that the structures that exist are not set up to deal with the more persistent forms of inequity, but rather are designed to tackle the "really heinous things," for which they are still "barely adequate." Patricia sees her role as one that works and coordinates with all aspects of the university community to address "the daily things that contribute to climate, to experience." However, she still does not feel as though the DEI realm is the answer, and she believes that higher education has not yet "come up with the right structures to deal with these cultural issues" that are at the root of exclusion and inequity. However, bias has the power to creep in, she noted, if we "don't use the power we have." The system, she suggested, which is older and whiter, "makes it really hard for things to happen, in terms of true radicalization."

Ultimately, Patricia recognized that most DEI professionals are brought on to protect universities from bad press, from “not wanting to be that university that shows up on CNN,” something Alice also noted. In many roles, DEI professionals fall into response traps, where the ability to do proactive, educational work gets overcome by the need to respond quickly to all the issues on campus. These limiting conceptions of the DEI role, suggested Patricia, make it difficult to do “liberatory work,” especially in a higher education structure that has “traditional [and] hierarchical systems of reward, and discipline.” This was a powerful and at the time same time unsettling finding of this study, with major implications for this field.

Participants also took note of how their roles – and diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education generally – were impacted by neoliberal practices, and a neoliberal ethos though few mentioned neoliberalism by name.

### **Theme #3: Neoliberal Ethos Dominates the Foundation of DEI Work in U.S. Higher Education**

When participants spoke further about what they felt the purpose of DEI work in higher education was, as informed by their experiences in the field, their reflections highlighted the ways in which neoliberal ideologies are replicated in the higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion realm. Many noted a contradiction between the purported purpose of DEI work and the reality of how it looks in practice. Some suggested that DEI fulfills a financial need for the university and spoke about their role in the marketization of their profession. When reflecting on the culture of DEI in higher education, many participants pointed to the way in which an ethos of individualism shapes their work,

manifesting in the privileging of some identities over others in being seen as fit for diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

*Diversity, equity, and inclusion is marketized*

The neoliberal ethos is replicated in higher education via the marketization and financialization of many aspects of the diversity, equity, and inclusion paradigm. Alice made a distinction between the covert and overt agendas of DEI in higher education. She emphasized that while the overt agenda is usually encapsulated in the institution's mission statement, the covert agenda is to "bring in more money but not really change the power structure." Alice recalled some of the ways that she was asked to measure the quality of her work, using key performance indicators and dashboards, after her university transitioned to becoming a for profit institution. Despite her ability to provide these, her position was eliminated, a reflection to her that diversity was no longer a priority to the university. She stressed that it was important for her to make the work meaningful for herself even when the institution, the "corporate beast," did not find her work to be valuable.

Like Alice, Francis also spoke about how DEI is used as a tool to help universities foot their bills. Francis recognized that in order for an institution to survive financially, it has to be inclusive and prioritize diversity and equity, particularly when a "critical mass" of diversity is reached. She gave the example that "You can't keep running away from it when 75% of your students are students of color, for example. Or you have a sizable LGBTQ population, or you have a sizable undocumented population on your campus... if they can't adjust to that then the students aren't going to go to school there and then they're going to, frankly, go out of business." If DEI professionals are under-supported

and under-resourced towards the end of retaining these diverse students, said Francis, “people aren't going to want to work there, and people aren't going to want to go to school there.” In the end, DEI is supported as a means to the end for an institution’s bottom line, echoing the “resources and reputation” theme reported by Alexander Astin (2016), but this time applied specifically to the diversity context.

Some participants reflected on their own roles in propping up this corporatized system. Leigh recalled that not only did the university create a culture of haves and have nots – about sixty percent of the students paid full tuition, while the remaining received significant financial aid – but also that even the minoritized students expressed a strong sense of entitlement. This was a culture that she felt complicit in re-creating as a DEI professional. She sees universities as tuition-driven, where decisions are rarely made without considering the financial impact. She felt conflicted about her own role in supporting this paradigm, but recognized that universities could not ignore a critical mass of compositional diversity, a long term goal that she thought was important to achieve.

*Neoliberal individualism manifests in the leveraging of certain identities*

Participants’ experiences demonstrated how a neoliberal culture emerges within DEI work, showing up through hyper-individualism and related ahistoricism, as well as the valuation of some identities as ideal for DEI work over others. Saanvi mentioned some limitations of the DEI paradigm as she sees it manifest in higher education spheres. She noted, for example, her observation that there has been a reductionism in social justice, multicultural, and diversity work that has led to a hardening around certain binaries. This is intensified by a “radical individualism,” which, in the social justice realm translates to the shutting down of some people, who experience real

marginalization, as being “problematic” and “not woke.” Furthermore, this individualism means that Saanvi often sees that people are not grounded in real communities, but rather “grounded and rooted only in theoretical ideas and Tumblr posts.” She sees these all as symptoms of late stage capitalism and White supremacy, meta narratives in which we are all complicit, and which “put us all at risk.”

Saanvi stressed that DEI work, if not done well, has the capacity to promote neoliberal,<sup>4</sup> individualist values over community-based values. This is more so the case when DEI work is not grounded in history and people’s individual identities get leveraged by neoliberal institutions. On the national DEI scene, Saanvi often finds herself as one of a few Asians caught in an ongoing Black/White narrative that, she notes, dominates the DEI field. Particularly problematic to her is how individual identity can be often used – in a profession where discussions about identity and identity formation are central – as a stand-in for professional preparedness. For example, she finds that, adding to the pressure of their positions, some higher education professionals are positioned as having the right set of skills to do DEI work simply because of their racial identity, disregarding the specific skills and knowledge base that any DEI professional needs for their position. This has the end result, she suggested, of setting unrealistic expectations for some of her colleagues, who are primarily Black, who are hired with an unfair expectation placed upon them that they will excel because of their racial identities, and who are offered none of the support structures that DEI professional need to succeed. In reflecting on this phenomenon, Saanvi observed that because her Asian American racial identity is not seen as typical for DEI work, there are fewer assumptions made about how she will enact her DEI work in contrast to her Black and even Latina colleagues.

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<sup>4</sup> Saanvi and Leigh, unlike the other participants, actually used the term ‘neoliberalism.’

Ultimately, she noted how the positioning individual identities in these vulnerable ways is yet another hallmark of White supremacist, neoliberal institutions which has the unfortunate result of affecting the entry points of different DEI professional based on their racial identities, and their potential for success. Furthermore, as I highlight in Chapter 5, this phenomenon has the end result of often forcing DEI professionals – as well as all campus members engaged in the neoliberal DEI paradigm – to artificially embody caricaturized versions of themselves as they hunker down into specific identities. A later theme shows how DEI professionals, like those in this study, still find important ways to build coalition and resist stereotype reification with their colleagues of color.

Leigh connected the phenomenon of not being the right race for the job to the neoliberal higher education enterprise, which forced her to try and understand what the real purposes of diversity and inclusion work are in that sphere. This was especially the case when she directed a cultural center at a private liberal arts college in New York, an experience that left her feeling as though she “wasn’t the right person because of [her] race,” leading to sentiments of anger and bitterness. When asked, identity-wise, who activists are generally thought to be, Harriet answered that African Americans are generally who we think of when we think of activists. Incidentally, her answer was the same when asked who is considered to be the most ideal diversity practitioner in higher education. She pointed out that, generally speaking, White people are afraid of African Americans, and that they find African American women more formidable than African American men. Although the stereotypes about African Americans are, according to Harriet, deeper in people’s minds and more negative, stereotypes about Asian Americans do also follow them into spaces. Harriet’s testimony highlights the complex ways in

which stereotypes play out when it comes to the DEI role. For example, African American women are seen both as a threat, and as the ideal diversity practitioner in Harriet's opinion. While this may seem contradictory, in fact the complexity in fact is revelatory of how control is applied over the DEI position depending on the identity of the person who occupies the role, a phenomenon I explore in my analysis in Chapter 5.

Francis reflected on what it is like to be an Asian American woman doing work in the DEI field. In one of her early positions in a non-higher education institution, she recalled feeling that she had been hired because, as an Asian American woman, she ticked off two diverse identity markers for an organization that was all White.

Adding to the already limited ideas of what DEI work is, a lack of resources for that work, and the neoliberalization of the field, Asian American women's work in the DEI realm of higher education is further impacted by their unique experiences of gendered racialization via the model minority myth.

#### **Theme #4: Invisibilization Occurs via the Model Minority Myth**

Participants described how they experienced the higher education DEI realm as Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals, specifically mentioning how their identities and experiences were implicated in the model minority myth. Some spoke about their attempts to grapple with being racially triangulated in the Black and White racial binary, while others spoke about the effects, on their lives and in the lives of others, of the aggregation of Asian experience. Some noted how the model minority myth renders Asian Americans less able to form communities of resistance with other people of color. These experiences illustrated a sense of invisibilization that Asian American women DEI professionals feel as a result of the model minority myth at play in

their professional roles. Invisibilization occurs for Asian American women DEI professionals through the ongoing racial isolation they experience via racial binarization and “triple marginalization,” the assumption that Asian Americans do not have race-based needs, and a lack of personal and larger societal awareness about the unique elements of Asian American racialization. Taken together, these can be roadblocks to building community both within the Asian American community and with other people of color.

*Invisibilization occurs through racial binarization and “triple marginalization”*

Participants recognized that invisibilization occurs as the nuanced facets of the Asian American community become lost in the homogenizing scope of the racial binary. Gloria spoke about the challenges of doing DEI work as an Asian American since “in the United States it's Black and White. Literally Black and White.” She questioned where the Asian American community fits given this binary conception of race, especially since the Asian American community itself is so diverse, a fact masked by the all-encompassing nature of the model minority myth. Within the enveloping nature of the model minority myth, noted Gloria, the layers of marginalization within the Asian American community become invisible, a phenomenon she referred to as “triple marginalization.” She used the example of Bangladeshi and Nepali Americans, whose experiences not only become subsumed under the South Asian identity where the Indian American experience is most recognized, but yet again become subsumed under the larger Asian American identity, which generally is used to refer to East Asians rather than South and Southeast Asians. Saanvi pointed out how the grouping of all South Asians together, which she referred to



as the “perils of panethnicity,” renders invisible the specificity of experience of South Asian subgroups.

*An assumption of no race-based needs*

Compounding the impact of the racial binary, which erases the dynamism of Asian American communities under its subsuming nature, Asian American voices are drowned out by communities of color that are more traditionally thought of as having race-based needs. Gloria recognized that due to the complex nature of the Asian American experience, the needs of the community can be made invisible, particularly when other communities of color that hold marginalization are larger and more vocal. This can lead to challenges navigating how one’s own race is implicated in DEI work, which can be heavily focused on race. In her early career in multicultural student affairs, Leigh found herself in spaces where it was evident that people’s conception was that “race was a black-white binary,” and being Asian did not fit in. This meant that in most situations, she would not “lead with her race,” knowing that when others were speaking about people of color, they often were really referring only to African Americans and perhaps to Latinx people – another source of invisibility for Asian Americans.

*A lack of personal and societal awareness*

A lack of advocacy for Asian American communities often follows when their multifaceted nature is overlooked, which sometimes stems from the internalization of the model minority myth by these communities themselves. Patricia’s time working for a community-based education organization as a bilingual counselor made her realize that there was a lack of advocacy for the Asian American community, aggravated by a lack of comprehensive data. She saw that “there was this sense of not understanding that Asian

Americans actually had needs that were totally not being addressed by anybody.” In a similar vein, Gloria felt that Asian Americans are particularly underserved because they often “miss out on a lot of opportunity to become aware, to become a fully recognized person, and understand how they fit into this world,” noting how difficult it can be to self-advocate when one has a lack of community knowledge and historical self-awareness. In her own experience, Saanvi faced hesitation from her other South Asian peers with regards to being in community with other Asian Americans. All Asian Americans, South Asians included, have a lack of awareness, she suggested, of how South Asians have experienced all the challenges that the larger Asian American community has faced – being forever foreigner, the model minority myth, facing laws of exclusion, experiencing hate crimes, challenges around citizenship and property, being seen as un-American, and being excluded – and also of how this lack of awareness makes coalition building difficult. Nearly all participants agreed that without understanding of personal history as it relates to the Asian American experience, and without this historical grounding also existing outside Asian American communities, it is an arduous task to overcome ongoing Asian American invisibilization via the model minority myth. Furthermore, they agreed that solidarity building within the Asian American community writ large and other communities of color is made difficult without historical introspection that allows for the discovery of what Saanvi called “connective tissue.” Disconnected from their own community histories, isolated from other Asians and other people of color, and lost within a binary that glosses over their unique experiences of racialization, Asian American women DEI professionals in this study took note of how

they were positioned via their invisibilization to maintain the status quo in their DEI roles rather than “rock the boat.”

### **Theme #5: Hired to Maintain the Status Quo**

Participants reflected on some of the reasons they felt they had been hired to do DEI work as well as the expectations around how they would show up doing this work in higher education based on their combined racial and gender identities. They had a shared sense that as Asian American women, they had a role in maintaining their institutions’ often low DEI standards and were often brought in to maintain the status quo.

As an Asian American woman, Alice asked herself to what extent she was brought in to DEI work to “maintain the status quo.” She felt that in aiding the covert agenda of universities, Asian Americans are “hired with the expectation that [they] won’t shake up the power hierarchy.” Even when Asian Americans have a sensibility to work against this expectation, Alice did not want to underestimate “how much we are getting wrong,” especially given that even DEI work has been co-opted, in her opinion, by White supremacy. Essentially, she said, Asian American women DEI professionals may only be working to enable “people [to] feel a greater sense of belonging within White supremacy.” Francis felt that she was seen as someone who was expected to not speak her mind. This was a sentiment that Patricia echoed in saying that she often felt she was seen to be a neutral body that would not take sides, especially in racial matters—a view of herself that she found very strange.

Participants stated that the awareness of being brought in to maintain, rather than shake, the systems of power at their institutions was coupled with an understanding that as Asian American women, their socialization as Asian Americans may have ill-prepared

them with the awareness that impactful DEI professionals can have. Hyun-Ju stated that she arrives at DEI work with the awareness that, as an Asian American woman, her bar for diversity may “still be too low.” Knowing this, and also knowing that the institution may have brought her in with precisely these low expectations in mind, Hyun-Ju said that Asian Americans have a choice: “Do we want to stay and keep this cushiony position? Or do we want to rock the boat and always have our resume ready to leave?” Even when choosing to rock the boat, Hyun-Ju noted that it was easy for Asian Americans’ personal lives to not necessarily match the radicalism of their professional lives. She suggested it is reality that Asian Americans do not call each other out in the same way as other races with a longer history with having an accountability culture. Perhaps due in part to this lack of community-based accountability and the awareness that Asian American women may be brought in to maintain the low DEI standards of an institution, Asian American women face suspicion from their women of color colleagues – colleagues to whose racialized and gendered caricatures Asian American women are often compared.

#### **Theme #6: Compared to and Seen as Suspect by Colleagues of Color**

Owing to preconceptions that Asian American women are socialized in ways that aid the maintenance of the status quo in the DEI realm of higher education, other colleagues of color, restricted by their own set of racial and gendered stereotypes, are affected by and react to the unique gendered racialization of Asian American women. The Asian American women DEI professionals in this study felt able to engage in certain types of behavior in their work because of stereotypes and uncertainty that surrounded their gendered Asian American identity, especially when compared to other colleagues of

color, though they often faced suspicion from their women of color counterparts because of those very same stereotyped identities.

*They felt a comparison to other women of color*

Most of the participants mentioned how, as Asian American women, they were compared to other women of color in their DEI roles. Often this comparison is founded in racial and gendered stereotypes of both Asian American and other women of color. Leigh observed that, while her Black and Latina colleagues are surrounded by a dangerous stigma of being angry and emotional, she can show up into spaces where people, primarily White, think “she’s like us.” Patricia expanded on this when she reflected on experiences she had as a DEI professional in which her Asian identity came into sharp focus. As part of a national academic organization focused on women’s leadership, she noted that she was able to draw attention to the group’s lackluster efforts to “multiculturalize” in a meaningful way, something that she and her non-Asian women of color colleagues felt she was able to do because her Asian identity gave her the ability not to be seen as a “angry woman of color.” Alice believed that she could say and do certain things that her Black and Latina colleagues never could, such as confronting White privilege head on. As an Asian American woman, she could raise deeply political issues in a way that did not “come across as having a chip on [her] shoulder if [she was] a black woman,” and was not viewed as conflictual. She knew that her work on White privilege would confuse and intimidate, but that, at the same time, no one would know what to do about it given her identity—one not known for bringing attention to White privilege. For example, she felt that, as a result of her identity, she could suggest the creation of a social justice curriculum before any of her Black woman colleagues could.

Hyun-Ju felt that, as an Asian, she could “get away with more” than a Black counterpart could, but only for about three times as long. The timestamp for expiration, she stated, “really depends on White people’s fear of Blacks,” since Asian Americans are just “different racialized bodies.” She recounted one colleague’s theory that White women’s nominal respect stems from being envious of Asian women, who are “more educated” and “are the standard of exotic beauty,” whereas White men become “kind of mesmerized about what to do with this exoticized embodiment of diversity in their midst.” Comparatively, pointing to the different methods of racialization, Black women get characterized as “boss ladies” no matter “how together, attractive, overqualified” they may be.

Saanvi suggested that because of her identity as a South Asian woman, people often do not know what to expect of her in DEI spaces, as they are not accustomed to seeing South Asians doing DEI work. She noted there may be existing stereotypes that East Asian women are “quiet or more submissive,” Black women “angry,” or Latina women “fiery,” but when it comes to South Asian women, “they are not sure what to expect.” Notably, she observed that, given what little people do know about South Asians, “they expect us to be complicit with White supremacy.” This suspicion from other people of color—that South Asian Americans are likely co-conspirators in White supremacy—can be directed to all Asian Americans, though it is not a suspicion beyond recourse.

*They faced suspicion from colleagues of color*

Participants noted the ways in which they observed, felt, and responded to being treated as suspect in their work by other people of color, an offshoot of the sentiment that

they were hired to maintain the status quo. When it came to working with other people of color, Francis shared that until she had working relationships with people, she often sensed suspicion toward her as an Asian American. She has encountered the most resistance from African American colleagues, who she felt held an understandable mistrust of her “because of the history in our country” until they recognized her commitment to and history of doing DEI work. Despite her intention to be a communicative partner to colleagues, Leigh observed that she must compete against the sense that because she is attempting to change the system by working in and through it, she is a White apologist. Like other women of color in DEI roles such as hers, she has felt pressure to show up more radically and “not apologize for the institution,” which more often than not is led by White men. This becomes difficult, she noted, when part of the job is to communicate university decisions that DEI professionals like her may or may not agree with. This is made more difficult by Leigh’s identity, being an Asian American woman, who is often not considered to be “a legitimate doer of the work” due to her race.

Some noted that they were regarded with suspicion because of the historic use of Asian Americans as racial wedges between Whites and Blacks. When asked where she felt the mistrust around the Asian American identity stems from, Hyun-Ju said the Asian American community deserves to be mistrusted. Historically used as the “middleman majority,” she stated, Asian Americans have been used as a buffer population, and the “racial hierarchy and culture of Western capitalism has depended on that buffer zone to protect the whites from the indigenous population that they're exploiting.” Reflecting on her identity as a Korean American specifically, Alice suggested that there may be suspicion around her Asianness specifically because of the perception of Koreans as

“scary Asian Americans” who are dragon ladies who “go so hard every time.” This perception is made more rigid by geopolitical stereotyping with regards to North Korea, she noted. Thankfully, this shaky sense of mistrust is not always permanent.

Hyun-Ju pointed out that “once it's very clear to them that we are on the side of racial equity . . . then they just treat you like family,” stressing how hard a test it is to pass. Essentially, this test sometimes boils down to the question of whether Asian Americans, as Hyun-Ju noted, are going to “go for the white team or are we going for the black team?” Alice felt as though there was suspicion around her identity as an Asian American woman, primarily from senior Black women. She, like Hyun-Ju, felt that this suspicion was justified, since they had no proof of her consciousness, “nothing to go on,” until Alice challenged the institution on social justice issues and White privilege. When asked where she felt the mistrust around the Asian American identity stems from, Alice said that Asian Americans have been exploited as “part of a larger capitalist system of exploitation and hierarchy.” While Asian Americans have been used as a “wedge group” to do things like disrupt labor negotiations, Alice recognized that they are also one of the first groups to get discarded in a struggle, to “go under the bus.” She attributed this to the lack of general sociohistorical understanding of the Asian American community and similar dearth of knowledge of the “political, progressive, and radical leadership of Asian-Americans.” For this reason, Alice felt that there was no reason for anyone to have “a sense of the role that Asian-Americans could play other than the model minority myth.”

In addition to feeling this mistrust from colleagues of color, an incredible amount of pressure also followed some of the participants into situations where, as Harriet



described it, they were “carrying the responsibility for all people of color on campus,” some of whom may not have even considered them as advocates. Harriet recalled that resistance often does not come from the places we think it will come from, but rather from “within,” from communities of color, who she felt also sometimes took advantage of her Asian American woman identity. Leigh and others described this as feeling as though one had no allies in the room – a lonely and further-isolating experience that adds to feelings of invisibilization.

In order to contend with invisibilization and the implications of being seen by colleagues of color as having been brought on to maintain the status quo, Asian American women adopt navigation techniques that may strategically conform to stereotypes.

#### **Theme #7: Navigate Stereotypes with Culturally Informed Practice**

Though they felt conflicted about the effectiveness of some of the measures they took, participants spoke of the various techniques they employed to navigate the racial and gendered stereotypes placed upon them as they took on DEI work in higher education. Some remarked on how some of these navigation techniques either played into or resisted existing stereotypes of Asian American women, and how some of these strategies were culturally informed.

Some participants described how they negotiated their ways of being in their work, particularly when these ways of being aligned with stereotypes about Asian American women. Harriet believed that, owing in part to the stereotypes that Asian American women are unassertive, silent, and overly compromising, she often asked herself if she was “activist enough” to “[do] the “work in the right way.” She felt as though there is some truth to these stereotypes about Asian American women, and that it

took her a long time to feel okay about adopting her “gentler” method of working to change attitudes, beliefs, and values through education and business models rather than “[coming] on too strong” in an “activist kind of way,” a manner she said is most often associated with African Americans. Nevertheless, taking on stereotypical qualities associated with Asian American women—which afforded her a seat at the table with primarily White colleagues—also left Harriet struggling to be heard and taken seriously. Harriet labeled this the double-edged nature of the stereotypes surrounding Asian American women.

In quite the opposite way, to combat preconceptions that South Asians are complicit with White supremacy, Saanvi noted how she makes it a point to speak openly and forcefully about her identity as a South Asian woman of color, because she does not “want to receive the invisibility of being Asian-American [who doesn’t] fit into a Black/White paradigm.” Similarly, Leigh felt a deep responsibility to not squander the access that she has precisely because of her Asian American, model minority identity. As a result, she sees that it is her role, in some ways, to counteract the habit of diligently observing prior to speaking so that she does not lose access to valuable space and time, thus not giving into the stereotype of being “the quiet Asian in the corner.” Not taking her airtime for granted, Leigh shared how she also shows up well-prepared, having thought through strategic connections and alliances to push work forward. She makes it a point to be communicative and clear with colleagues who may not have the same access to information as her, and who may not trust others in significant decision-making roles.

In order to combat not being heard, Harriet, like Leigh, said that she spends a lot of time thinking about what she is going to say, how she is going to say it, what her

boundaries are, and how to get her message across to where it needs to go. This demands that she go into meetings confidently and in a strong way, resisting any apologetic tone that may compromise her position, though she still maintained that this was not an “activist” way of operating. She recognized that this is a skill most women have to learn, but that it was particularly important for her line of work, where she needed to “know how to relate to a white male who couldn't give a shit about this kind of work” without compromising who she was. However, she held a fear that through this compromise, she was becoming blind to the poor treatment she received from her colleagues in senior administration.

Leigh spoke about how her identity feeds into the strategies she uses to confront the conflicting feelings she has about her work. Alluding to the composite strategy that resulted from her upbringing, she pointed out that no matter what people may assume about her when they look at her, she brings a pragmatic confidence, a blend of her parents’ personalities, which allows her to negotiate the “emotional labor of doing this work in predominantly white, neoliberal institutions.” She enters into a space with an assumption that the system is not necessarily going to work for her and acutely feels that she is never doing enough. Harkening back to not being raised to be an activist, Leigh’s pragmatism also reveals itself in her viewing her role as moving through and working in an institution to create change rather than “wrestling power away,” which she associated with a more revolutionary method, comparable to Harriet’s “activist” method.

Alice alluded to the challenges of DEI work, where change is slow to happen and progressive changes often do not stick. When we are operating in system that is so reluctant to change, and “the minute we rest, it reverts back,” Alice felt as though the best

we could do was to “keep doing . . . training and capacity building and imbuing transformation within . . . inserting structures that will be difficult to change after we go.” She also stressed that mentoring in a way that “pulled back the curtains” and allowed mentees to see how power systems operated at her institution was another important tactic. This way of sharing power with transparency, Alice suggested, was informed by her Asian American identity and cultural prioritization of the collective, and was directly in contrast to individualistic, White ways of being.

Participants felt the need to mitigate existing stereotypes of Asian American women, with some stressing how they took on elements of those stereotypes and others mentioning their active efforts to combat the gendered and racial qualities of those stereotypes. Ambivalence surrounds these stereotypes, complicated by the fact that Asian American women may find power in taking on and using to their professional advantage some facets of the stereotypes associated with Asian American women as they work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion realm.

### **Theme #8: Embody the Role of a Secret Agent**

Though the stereotypes faced by Asian American women who are diversity professionals in higher education can be limiting, the nature of these stereotypes can open the door for certain forms of agency. Participants in this study described how they could seize opportunities created by racial and gendered aspects of stereotypes associated with the model minority myth, though they still recognized limitations of this tactic of being a secret agent.

When asked how she thinks she is expected to behave as an Asian American woman doing DEI work in higher education, Gloria explained how she takes advantage

of the racial and gender stereotypes that relate to her identity. Because she is expected to be passive, she will “play into the stereotype a little bit” and use the space the assumption provides to observe her surroundings until she knows it is a safe space to speak up.

Similarly, stereotypes around Harriet’s identity as an Asian American woman allowed her to approach people, particularly White people, with “their defenses down” when a problem needed to be resolved.

Francis often felt as though assumptions were made about her because of her Asian American woman identity. In one situation, when she tactfully called a White man out for being racist, and he in turn got mad at her for calling him out, she sensed a double standard racially, where as an Asian American woman, she was not permitted speak out to address his racism. She felt that if she had been a Black woman, she would have been able to confront him without his feeling as though he had a right to talk back and demean her. Because “White people don’t expect Asian Americans to get mad about these issues,” Francis felt that her tendency to be outspoken and her feeling that she has “a right to be just as angry about this as anybody else” catch many people off guard, confusing them.

#### *Opportunity to build multiracial coalitions*

Francis and others spoke the possibilities for multiracial coalition building that are created when she and her colleagues of color take note of, and work around racial and gendered stereotypes together. She mentioned how she often uses her tendency to catch people off guard and her privileged ability to be outspoken for her “sisters of color” who are “just so tired of having to raise the same issue over and over again.” Equating herself with being a Trojan horse, Francis explained how she is able to use the incorrect

assumptions made about her because she is an Asian American woman to her advantage. She said that she can go into “stealth mode” and that when they “don't expect us to speak up . . . it's kind of fun to take advantage of that and then you kind of almost stick it to somebody.” Francis emotionally stressed that this type of strategy is critical to being able to support other women of color and building the necessary bridges between communities to feel impactful in the work.

Hyun-Ju also reflected on how her identity as an Asian American woman was useful to her colleagues of color. Reporting to and having associates who were both African American men, she recalled how these colleagues would have her speak for them to men since with her, “they [were] not going to see what’s coming.” Harriet felt that when Asian American women are not afraid of the stereotypes that people have of them, that “part of our secret weapon is that we are able to penetrate and to do things and to be heard in ways that others can't... It's coming from a sense of power.”

Nevertheless, Alice feared that even when she felt she was being effective in using her identity to the benefit of her work, perhaps she was not as productive as she thought she was. She noted that though she recognized that her identity as an Asian American woman could be used as a “secret weapon” in DEI work, the idea is maybe more powerful than it really is in practice. For example, she will never know if she “[fell] back on privilege” and used her Asian American “wedgehood” towards negative ends. She reflected on her feeling that sometimes she felt as though she were preemptively intellectualizing a DEI struggle because she felt she might otherwise find herself on emotionally unstable ground. However, she also connected this skill of navigation to her Asian American woman identity, which led her to intuitively approach the work with this

skill. Sometimes that was all there was to fall back on since, Alice stressed, “none of us . . . were trained to do this.” The work becomes harder since Asian Americans, according to Alice, are unlikely to ask for help or seek out mentors.

Gloria felt that her racial and gendered identity was a source of pain as well as a source of power. While she recalled the ways in which her identity had left her feeling isolated and unsupported, she also stated that, “of all the women of color, [Asian American women] have the most access, the most privilege – whether it be stereotyped minority myth privilege or real privilege – to access the system and understand the system and then fuck it up from the inside.” Part of where her privilege comes from is that her parents were able to provide a level of basic needs. For example, because she did not have to get a job to make ends meet in high school or college, it “freed up time for me to figure out how the college system works, how the high school system works, how to get the test,” and understand how the system worked—a skill that, if put to use in higher education, “can fuck up the system” or can be used to “manipulate the system to work for the students that need it.” Gloria expressed that because she and others like her “have a little bit more access,” she felt that she had the responsibility to “leverage it as much as possible.” She also observed that she had culturally informed skills that could be further leveraged to meet the needs of her DEI role. She, like Leigh mentioned that her upbringing taught her the important skill of keeping her head down and navigating relationships in order to understand who she could tell her “deepest, darkest secrets to,” all stemming from a place of staying safe and “keeping face.” In the end, her cultural upbringing offered a skill set to mitigate those very stereotypes that placed limitations on her as a DEI professional.

Asian American women who occupy DEI roles can use the racial and gender stereotypes associated with being Asian American women to their advantage when engaging DEI work in higher education. The ability to seize these stereotypes can be detrimental to the relationship between Asian American women and their colleagues of color, but can also provide important opportunities for coalition-building and strategy. Though this tactic may be not be widely understood, the implications of its adoption are far-reaching for the field of DEI work in higher education, particularly when viewed in the context of neoliberalism because of its opportunistic use of racial and gendered identities for its own proliferation.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings of this study, based on interviews with the eight participants, revealed that the effects of the model minority myth are not only relevant, but play a large role in shaping the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals in higher education. While experiencing the reality of invisibilization to which the model minority myth can lend itself, Asian American women are also considered to be neutral bodies in the DEI realm. They are beneficial to the university leadership that understands the power that racial and gender minority can hold for DEI work, but who desire the non-interventionist stereotype that follows Asian American women. Commensurate with the idea of being a racial wedge, Asian Americans are also treated as suspect by their colleagues of color, especially as they are actively compared to Black women, who more often occupy DEI roles and are seen as more ideal for the position. Caught in the middle of the Black/White binary, the experiences of these Asian American DEI professionals also highlight the ways in which the neoliberal ethos has colored the DEI paradigm in



higher education. Ultimately, the participants of this study found that, as Asian American women who are impacted by the stereotypes associated with the model minority myth, they are able to take advantage of these stereotypes in practice to show up as Trojan horses in DEI work – unexpected agents who are able to challenge preconceived notions around their proximity to and allegiance to whiteness as it is used a neoliberal tool. The next chapter analyzes these findings and offers implications for the results of this study.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Substantial research exists on the experience of Asian American students in higher education (Hune, 2002; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Museus & Chang, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Pak, Maramba, & Hernandez, 2014; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Canlas, 2017), and a growing body of literature explores the state of Asian American faculty in higher education (Lee, 2002; Li & Beckett, 2005; Lin, Pearce, Wang, 2009; Yook 2013). Though research examining how Asian American administrators experience higher education is increasing (Suzuki, 2002; Neilson, 2004; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009; Kobayashi, 2009; Li-Bugg, 2011; Reeves, 2015), no studies to date have examined how Asian American women who are diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals in higher education experience their roles. Furthermore, none have investigated the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals as their work is impacted by neoliberalism as it manifests in higher education.

To attempt to understand these experiences, the following central question guided this phenomenological study:

*What do the experiences of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals reveal about the relationship between neoliberalism and diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the context of higher education?*

The following questions supported this central question:

- In what ways do neoliberal processes and ideologies manifest in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

- How do Asian American women diversity professionals describe their experiences in higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?
- What strategies do Asian American women use to navigate higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

Attempting to address this gap in the literature, this study surfaced generalizations that lead to the central thesis of this study. The experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals in higher education reveal how marketization of DEI work in higher education is an example of interest convergence (Bell, 1980). Given this neoliberal ethos, the positioning of Asian American women as a means to maintain institutional status quo unveils a racial commodification that takes places in the DEI realm of higher education via what this study terms the “racialized neoliberal gaze.” Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Asian American women have the ability to nonetheless agentively navigate this neoliberal gaze, therefore posing a threat to the neoliberal takeover of DEI in higher education. But to what extent? This chapter examines several other generalizations from this study that shed further light on its thesis, followed by implications of this study based on this thesis.

### **Neoliberal Marketization of DEI as Interest Convergence**

Participants underscored the more commonly understood ways in which neoliberal market strategies are replicated in higher education. Their observations validated existing research (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Giroux, 2002, 2010, 2014; Baez & Sanchez, 2017), which highlights these marketization strategies and sheds light on how these processes extend into the DEI realm. Some spoke about having to complete key performance indicators and measure progress through

dashboards, and others noted that a key function of their position was to protect their institutions from negative press that might impact their enrollment numbers. That these participants found it difficult to “make a decision without thinking about the dollars inherent in it” further highlights the business case for diversity (Litvin, 2000, 2006; Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2017), which holds that diversity, “when effectively managed, can lead to a more productive workforce, a broader, happier customer base, and a competitive advantage in the marketplace” (Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2017, p. 164). In short, DEI is good for the bottom line of a university.

Participants in this study agreed that DEI is an instrument of what Derrick Bell (1980) calls “interest convergence,” a key tenet of critical race theory. Institutions use diversity for their own financial gain even as they assert that the benefit is really to marginalized groups that have historically been denied opportunity in higher education, and even as those groups may only make modest gains as a result of these diversity initiatives. Though their original purpose of remedying racial injustice was undone by the 1977 Regents of the *University of California v. Bakke* decision, DEI programs in higher education still purport to be designed for “inclusive excellence” (Worthington, Stanley, & Lewis, 2014). For institutional leaders, DEI is incorporated as a way for institutions to exhibit their reputation and legitimacy (Berrey, 2015, Warikoo, 2016). Few institutions would dare say that they do not stand for diversity, equity, and inclusion and these ideals have transformed into recruitment mechanisms – as tempting to students of color as to White students – that help to pad the institution’s bottom line. Thus, institutions can espouse the ideals of DEI, and stand to gain much from doing so, without fundamentally addressing or altering the stratifying systems and structures that necessitate DEI in the

first place (Bell, 2003). Seeing DEI as a function of interest convergence can help us to understand how a paradigm that is created towards making universities more accessible can be seized instead towards capitalist ends, using marginalized identities as a tool in the process. Seeing DEI with an understanding of interest convergence also sheds light on how the marginalized identities of DEI professionals, including the Asian American women in the study, become useful to an institution's use of DEI to maintain the status quo rather than manifest equity.

### **Not If They Are Racially Commodified, but How**

The racial and gender identity of DEI officers has considerable implications for the ways in which women of color DEI professionals execute the functions of their role. It has been suggested that racial minorities have been leveraged in higher education since the business case for diversity was made as a “corporate world backlash against affirmative action” (Goldstein Hode & Meisenbach, 2017, p. 164). As the participants in this study further demonstrated via their own experiences, DEI professionals, who are primarily people of color and majority women (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013), must contend with the centrality of race and gender in their highly tokenized roles (Turner, Gonzales, & Wong (Lau), 2011, p. 9), even as “[the] culture of higher education demands a degree of conformity with dominant racial and gender ideologies that underpin educational systems in the United States” (Nixon, 2017, p. 303). In these roles, though all women of color are racialized and gendered, the process falls upon their bodies in very different ways. Stereotypes of Black women as “angry” and Latina women as “fiery” create a preconceived notion of behavior that constricts the ways in which they can navigate the DEI field (Nixon, 2017). They may have to perform an unnatural level of

amicability to the extent that their effectiveness, and that of their initiatives, is diluted. This can affect how these women of color are seen by colleagues – especially others of color – who may see them as selling out (Nixon, 2017). On the other hand, the mixed stereotypes around Asian American women’s racial and gender identities – they are at once docile and the exotic unknown – can be similarly stifling. Asian American women in this study felt a need to actively resist the idea that they were quiet and passive, performing in a way that would challenge assumptions – primarily from colleagues of color – that they were indeed just hired to toe the institutional line. However, participants in this study were aware that the stereotype-driven limitations that stood in their way were far less reified than those impacting their Latina and – to a greater extent – Black women colleagues. This means that the ways in which racial commodification (Leong, 2012) impacts women of color also vary, as the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals in this study suggested.

The experience of the participants in this study demonstrated that, even as DEI professionals of color experience racial commodification, they are commodified in different ways, and to different ends. Nonetheless, all are commodified in a higher education landscape in which DEI fulfills a profit-driven business role. This difference of experience – largely dictated by sociohistorically shaped racial and gender stereotypes – suggests that the model minority myth not only shapes how Asian American women are able to do DEI work, but also may be the reason why many Asian Americans are hired to do diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the first place. Half of the participants felt that they were hired by their institutions as DEI professionals to “maintain the status quo.” They suggested that because of their identities as Asian American women, they were seen

as people who would not, as Alice said, “shake up the power hierarchy.” Patricia felt part of the appeal of Asian American women in the DEI role is that they are seen as neutral, apolitical bodies who can be expected not to choose sides, especially in racially charged circumstances. As Asian American women are hired to “keep peace and not cause trouble,” (Hune, 2006, p. 351), they also, as racialized women, are a “twofer” for their institutions, as Francis put it, checking off two diversity boxes for being Asian and for being women.

Here, the legacy of being used as a racial wedge follows Asian American women into their DEI work, chaining them to a legacy of being strategically ineffectual and ambivalent in terms of race matters via the racially triangulating status of the model minority (Kim, 1999). This is in stark contrast to Black women, who are seen to have more of a clearly “raced experience” than racially ambiguous Asian Americans, and who are thus leveraged to demonstrate the commitment to racial equity and general DEI legitimacy of the higher education institutions to which they are hired. Nevertheless, the ultimate role of these women of color is the same. A university can reap social and economic profit from its DEI performance while the burden of fulfilling the lofty goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion – which students, staff, and faculty do expect fulfilled – far more often than not falls squarely on the shoulders of women of color. Nancy Leong (2012) defines this manner of deriving social and economic benefit from the racial identity of a person as “racial capitalism,” a process in which she directly ties capitalism to the proliferation of whiteness: “In a society preoccupied with diversity, nonwhiteness is a valued commodity. And where that society is founded on capitalism, it is unsurprising that the commodity of nonwhiteness is exploited for its market value”

(Leong, 2012, p. 2154). Leong's work is paramount to examining DEI in higher education, with its commodification of racial identity. It can be extended to bring attention to the central thesis of this study, which goes beyond Leong's analysis of the overlay of race and capital to understand how agentive possibilities can be uncovered even as racial commodification has become a function of neoliberal higher education.

### **The Racialized Neoliberal Gaze**

Neoliberalism has proven racial impact and effects, but it also causes us to be racialized beings in different ways, to different ends. We are limited by it, in certain ways, but can also use the centrality of race to our advantage, as the case of Asian American women DEI professionals shows. The "racialized neoliberal gaze" takes Foucault's notion of panopticism (1977) and extends it to the realm of the DEI paradigm in higher education. It contends that as non-White racial identities draw focus and are made into commodities via the marketizing gaze of the neoliberal machine, some are gazed upon with a more focused lens than others. As a result, some non-White racial identities are able to escape the subjecting eye of the neoliberal gaze, thus entering interstitial spaces of resistance to the neoliberal paradigm, even if only fleetingly. This section offers an overview of Foucault's understanding of the panopticon, including its relevance to neoliberalism, ultimately adding its theoretical clarity to this study's understanding of the racialized neoliberal gaze as applied to the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals in higher education.

It is important to note at the outset that this concept of the racialized neoliberal gaze is not an attempt to further understand the racial impact of neoliberalism as an economic process. Many researchers (Lipman, 1998, 2013; Giroux & Giroux, 2003,



2004; Hamer & Lang, 2015; Au, 2016; Au & Ferrare, 2016) have examined the processes of neoliberal marketization – as a form of late capitalism – to see what the effects of those policies are on communities of color, and how these communities navigate their racial impact. Their contributions are critical to pinpointing the ways in which capitalism stratifies racially, and how education can be a site for the social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1977) of those factors that contribute to the endless cycle of racial inequity characteristic of capitalism in the United States. These researchers are concerned with the processes of neoliberalization – deregulation, privatization, and competition – how they manifest in schooling, and what their effects are, racial and otherwise. The concept of the racialized neoliberal gaze, on the other hand, offers that the manner in which people are subjectified under neoliberalism – made into subjects – is racial in nature. We become limited by this gaze to perform our racial ways of being in certain ways, though space exists for us to use this very performativity in resistant ways. In Chapter 2, I offered an explanation of the racialized neoliberal gaze as a theoretical concept, and here expand its relevance to the work of Asian American women DEI professionals in higher education in this section.

The racialized neoliberal gaze looks upon, and commodifies, the experiences of DEI professionals in higher education. However, this commodification, as demonstrated in the previous section, happens in different ways, leading to different agentive abilities for Asian American women when compared in particular to Black women, who are more likely to occupy DEI roles in higher education (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2007; Jaschik, 2008). Racial and gender stereotypes about Black women, which the racialized neoliberal gaze inexorably employs, suggest that their natural persona is activist, angry, inherently

critical of whiteness, and therefore inherently resistant. By contrast, the model minority stereotype precludes Asian American women from these more negative and active traits, rather classifying them as docile, complacent, and subservient to whiteness. The racialized neoliberal gaze, as a disciplining gaze, will choose to focus on those subjects that pose a more visible threat to its hegemonizing power. It follows then that given the stereotypes attached to Black women, the neoliberal gaze will spend far more energy looking upon them and attempting to hold in check the inherent, critical agency they are seen to have. Conversely, the gaze simply scans over Asian American women – not even “legitimate doers of the work” – and sees no risk in their supposed non-threatening existence. The racializing quality of the neoliberal gaze therefore looks upon these differently positioned subjects with predispositions about the qualities of agency they may take on and how that agency may manifest – and chooses its focus accordingly.

Here, agency refers to the Gramscian notion by which people are able to contest domination and move within hegemony, a necessary force for resistance (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1994). However, Asian American women, by virtue of the model minority myth, do not require the disciplining stare of the neoliberal panopticon, as the gaze finds no real threat to its existence dwelling in the neutered, obedient existence of Asian American women. Ironically, this dismissal paves the way for agentic possibility for Asian American women DEI professionals.

Asian American women DEI professionals can therefore seize the agentic opportunity gained by averting the racializing neoliberal gaze by showing up, as many participants described, as secret agents and Trojan horses in DEI work. For participants in this study, this agency was derived from and shaped by attention to community oriented

and culturally informed practice, which centered the importance of lifting the veil on the operations of power and calling attention to manifestations of whiteness. These participants were predisposed to have an activist mindset with critique of whiteness that they brought into their work. Their actions can be deliberative and thoughtful, and often involve taking the time to build meaningful alliances with colleagues of color, inherently shaking the foundations of the model minority myth and deeply challenging the neoliberal cult of individualism. Yet, the Asian American women DEI professionals in this study understood that this resistance is often fleeting, and its lasting effects on the neoliberal project therefore remain uncertain. Taken together, the variegated applications of the neoliberal gaze dictate that none of these DEI professionals will truly be able to challenge the basic foundations of the neoliberal project *as it is enacted* through higher education via marketization, individualization, and racial commodification. Their experiences speak to the constant ebb and flow of power that both maintains neoliberal hegemony and simultaneously undermines it, seemingly without end, under the omnipresent neoliberal gaze. Yet, space for remaking exists.

### **Contributions to the Field**

The contributions of this study to the field can be categorized theoretically, ontologically, and methodologically. First, this study offers a new theoretical framework – the racialized neoliberal gaze – which can be applied to higher education and beyond to understand how neoliberalism subjects us to certain racialized ways of being that both conform to and can be used to contest neoliberalism. This study also locates a unique, related ontology that has implications for how the role of the DEI professional is viewed, as well as for the DEI profession as a whole. This ontology locates agentive possibilities

for DEI professionals vis-à-vis the racialized neoliberal gaze. Third, this study suggests that DEI professionals are strategically situated to apply Kuntz's (2012) methodological intervention to usher in a new paradigm for DEI professionals in higher education. Taken together these three interrelated implications of the study work towards a paradigmatic shift, inspired by Ruti (2006) and Tanaka (2018) that calls us to engage in mutual remaking with methods of storytelling that engender imaginative new possibilities past limiting neoliberal ideologies.

*New theory: The racialized neoliberal gaze*

This study of Asian American women diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals in higher education brought understanding of the global paradigm of neoliberalism to an aspect of higher education that is affected by neoliberal ways of knowing and neoliberal ways of being. Previously, the field of DEI in higher education has not been largely understood to be shaped by neoliberal discourse, a fact that has left the field under-critiqued. Critique of the diversity rationale does exist, as this study notes, but even these critiques do not extend to understanding how the identities of DEI professionals in higher education are used by and can also be used against neoliberalism.

This study has implications for theory and practice, both of which encourage a larger paradigm shift in the DEI realm of higher education. In order to apply the necessary critical analysis to this field, this study employed the concept of the racialized neoliberal gaze – a composite theory that makes important connections among theories offered by Gramsci (1971), Foucault (1977), Bell (1980), and Leong (2012). Often, these theories do not “speak to one another,” particularly when it comes to diagnosing and critiquing aspects of higher education. Yet, a composite lens shaped by these theories

offers higher education generally, and the DEI field in higher education more specifically, a way to understand how spaces can be impacted by the legacies of race, racism, and White supremacy and also be affected, in important interconnected ways, by the discursive elements of neoliberalism. Instead, research on the DEI realm is heavily focused on race, racism, and race relations – and their associated victimologies – without an eye towards how this myopic view, in ignoring the ways in which neoliberalism discursively enters into the DEI arena via race, allows for the reproduction of those very elements that DEI professionals are working to mitigate. This study suggests that to truly understand the complex dynamics of the DEI field in higher education – and make lasting change – a complex lens and agency are both necessary to combine a critical view of race with a critical examination of power as they are implicated in the neoliberal project.

Viewed with a complex, composite theoretical lens, this study is also able to call into question the basic existence and purpose of the DEI profession and DEI programs in higher education. It suggests that the DEI paradigm, when compromised by the logic of neoliberalism, plays the underreported role of upholding, rather than challenging, the very structures that further inequity. This study further confirms the suspicion already expressed by many that the inherently critical and justice-minded mission that the DEI field in higher education originally intended was irrevocably damaged by the *Bakke* decision and ensuing capitalization on its diversity rationale. It has become more and more difficult to reverse the effects of this decision given the normalizing of the business case for diversity and the existential threat posed by ongoing legal challenges to affirmative action, which Asian Americans have played a prominent role in bringing to court.

Another major implication of this study is its ability to further demonstrate that, in being used as little more than an “opiate for the masses,” DEI in higher education, in its current form, does little to change the systems that generate inequity in the first place, and instead places the burden of addressing the effects of this deep-seated inequity primarily on women of color whose most applicable qualification for addressing inequities may be the inequity they have experienced themselves. This is a racial capitalization on injustice that leads to the burnout felt by many DEI professionals in a field where the average position is only occupied for three years (Jaschik, 2011). The experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals helps to shed further light on the unwinnable nature of the DEI field, particularly if viewed with a critical lens to unmask the workings of the larger neoliberal moment in this particular realm. Yet, to get rid of DEI initiatives and the professional role is not what this study suggests, since doing so would “remove a potential tool – flawed but not entirely useless – for addressing lingering social inequality” (Leong, 2012, p. 2221). Instead, this study recommends that we view the agentic possibilities that are created vis-à-vis the racialized neoliberal gaze precisely as they manifest in the DEI realm.

*Ontological: Agency in the face of the racialized neoliberal gaze*

Asian American women DEI professionals, who have some type of formative awareness of social justice, can be resistant, undercover, agentic beings in the neoliberalized higher education DEI arena. This study, which is the first to make this claim, locates both a restriction via racialized neoliberal panopticism as well as power and resistant agency in the ways of being that these women are able to bring into a professional arena that has not considered them as agentic beings and may bring them

on specifically for this reason. The findings of this study should be extended to learn how other identities might also be implicated under the neoliberal gaze as they move through DEI realm in higher education. Which identities, racial or otherwise, are similarly not brought under the lingering focus of the neoliberal gaze, and what agentive opportunities are thus created? This question creates space for further research that can offer comparisons to examine if, how, and why the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals are unique in neoliberal higher education. Further research should employ the composite theoretical framework that this study centers in order to understand the experiences of other DEI professionals in the context of neoliberal higher education.

The findings of this study also have implications for the experiences of Asian Americans in higher education that build upon many studies imploring the use of a more appropriately nuanced lens to view the lives of Asian Americans. Far from being a racial group that has unquestionably and overarchingly “made it” in the United States, the Asian American community is one made of experiences that must be disaggregated and addressed accordingly, distanced from the oversimplifying and essentializing hold of the model minority myth.

Doing this allows Asian Americans the space to comprehend their own histories in the United States, histories that have been erased by the homogenizing dominion of the model minority myth single story. In the context of higher education, Asian Americans can perhaps have the space to then better articulate their needs in higher education, which may meaningfully align with the experiences and needs of other communities, thus paving the way for coalition building that the effects of the model minority myth often otherwise preclude.

While the ability of Asian American women to skirt the commodifying gaze of the neoliberal machine – as it takes hold in higher education DEI – can in turn challenge the effects of this gaze, few participants in this study felt as though their impact could meaningfully alter the larger workings of DEI in higher education, which set everyone, including the institution itself, up for failure by focusing on the intangible and amorphous goal of diversity rather than seeking redress for past injustices as they manifest in higher education. At the same time, we learn from this study that space exists to evoke lasting change, and that a new paradigm is required to bring this truly transformative change into being – one that can affect the DEI profession in higher education and reach well beyond. This necessitates a methodological shift that centers truth-telling with paradigmatic shift as an end goal.

*Methodological: Parrhesiastic truth telling*

This study uncovered the need for research that aims to be counter-neoliberal and is grounded in methodological practice that addresses Kuntz's (2015) assertion that research methodology, too, has become an extension of the neoliberal project via its "logics of extraction" (Kuntz, 2015, p. 12). To that end, this study recommends the methodological design dedicated to the Foucauldian concept of "parrhesia," radical truth-telling, as a means to both contest the consumption-minded qualities that qualitative research can take on in this neoliberal moment, as well as answer the call for a transformative paradigm like the one the present study suggests. Kuntz (2015) reminds us that methodology grounded in parrhesia has the capability to disrupt the neoliberalization of even methodological practice, countering "collective activist practices [that] draw all too well from the globalized, neoliberal values they seek to critique or otherwise disrupt"



(p. 28). Parrhesiastic practice, according to Foucault (2011), entails three interrelated elements: 1) citizenship; 2) responsibility; 3) and risk.

Kuntz (2015) notes that a methodologist can only engage in parrhesiastic truth-telling if she is a recognized member of a community, i.e., a citizen. This does not mean, necessarily, that the methodologist holds position or status in the particular area, or that the membership she holds is in the field in which she is conducting research. Rather, it means that the methodologist holds a position that gives her understanding of the very social relations that she attempts to disrupt through her work and “the opportunity to engage in truth-telling back to the very institution that grants us visibility” (Kuntz & Pickup, 2016, p. 173). Taking this study as an example, my citizenship originated from both my positionality as a diversity, equity, and inclusion professional in the higher education context and my identity as a South Asian woman. Both of these places of belonging – DEI in the context of higher education and the Asian American community – also grant me the space to speak back to them, to critique them, and to take positive action as a means to ultimately “disrupt the otherwise smooth power formations” inherent to these places (Kuntz & Pickup, 2016, p. 173). Similarly situated too were the participants in this study, with whom I shared these two sources of citizenship. However, citizenship, as a methodological requirement for parrhesiastic practice, must be accompanied by responsibility.

In the Foucauldian tradition, a citizen – made, shaped, and granted power by her very belonging to a community – has a responsibility by nature of her situatedness as a citizen to “truth-tell to the multitude of institutions, practices, and identities through which power manifests” (Kuntz, 2015, p. 117). Here again, the theoretical framework of

this study took hold in its understanding of the hegemonic situatedness of power – at once everywhere, rather than focused in one place. A citizen methodologist must therefore take to heart this understanding of power when situating critique. This study centered that idea and understood that the aim of this research was not to look at and “fix” diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of higher education for Asian American women. I understood, because of my situatedness, I had a responsibility to examine and share what the experiences of these women reveal about how power manifests in our context, and what that can mean for transforming our work. In unmasking the workings of power, this examination took on an element of risk.

Kuntz (2015) contends that the researcher who takes on the responsibility of parrhesiastic truth-telling does so with the knowledge that risk is inherent to this onto-epistemological process. From her position as a citizen who speaks back to those very institutions that grant, shape, and form her citizenship, the parrhesiastic researcher “risks the very relations through which [she] is known” (p. 117). Nevertheless, this study provided an example of embodied risk via the courage of its participants, who participated with the understanding “that those of us who are in the field of education must necessarily recognize that our very critique might irrevocably disrupt our own positions” (Kuntz & Pickup, 2016, p. 173), but that this disruption is necessary since one cannot “reimagine a new vision for education and social justice and, at the same time, maintain the status quo of institutional assignment and practice” (Kuntz & Pickup, 2016, p. 174). Ultimately, centering the parrhesiastic elements of citizenship, responsibility, and risk can provide a study with the capability to disrupt the status quo of neoliberal hegemony as it manifests, in the case of this study, in the DEI profession in the higher

education context. A study should do so with the desire to use critique as a means to “pry open the door to possibility” (Tanaka, 2019)—the possibility, that is, of a paradigmatic shift that counters neoliberal ideologies in practice. In the following section, I provide thoughts on the relevance of this study beyond the theoretical, ontological, and methodological implications above. Ultimately, this study provides these reflections so as to highlight the need to move towards a paradigm shift that will allow us to truly grapple with existential questions regarding the nature of DEI work in higher education.

### **Reflections beyond the Study**

The implications of this study suggest a profound need to raise existential questions regarding the diversity, equity, and inclusion profession so as to understand the paradigm shift that is required to alter it. Taking into account the role of the DEI professional, who is placed squarely in the tug and pull of racialized neoliberal dynamics, this study ultimately begs the questions: What is the role of a DEI professional in higher education? What is the purpose of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education in the United States? This study answers these questions by demonstrating how, far from being empowered in their roles, DEI professionals are instead limited by both a lack of resources as well as a limited scope of being, both of which impede the ability of DEI in higher education to impact inequity. Answering these questions can help to understand the relevance of this study beyond the experiences of Asian American women DEI professionals.

In examining the lives of Asian American women DEI professionals, this study further proved that neoliberalism consists both of economic processes with racial effects that maintain capitalism as the dominant economic model of the global marketplace, as

well as ideological technologies that entrap us within certain forms of racial and gender performativity as a means to maintain White supremacist patriarchy. These interrelated aspects of neoliberalism, which connect the proliferation of capitalism with the proliferation of White supremacist patriarchy, cannot be separated in analysis of DEI in higher education, or of any socio-cultural phenomenon that occurs in the United States. Capitalism, White supremacy, and patriarchy operate in such devious tandem that one often works to suggest the nonexistence of the others so as to distract those movements that attempt to challenge them. DEI in higher education presents a perfect case study to see how this distraction functions. It is imperative to name neoliberalism and White supremacist patriarchy as having shared goals, and to not lose sight that they always operate together. This is extremely difficult, since even what we deem to be resistant can get caught in the neoliberal web; indeed, further research should be done to examine how resistance, and ideologies of resistance, can become shaped by neoliberal ideology. Yet, the structure of higher education limits the scope of DEI professionals themselves to study how their roles may be transformed into places of resistance.

The structure of higher education does not recognize people in diversity, equity, and inclusion professional roles to be creators of knowledge. Though this study locates agentive possibilities for DEI professionals, it does so with the understanding that agency can be limited without productive, creative space for transformative thought. It follows that, to the neoliberal status quo, it could be very threatening for these roles to be given contemplative space since they are naturally situated to be critical of those forces that proliferate inequity at their institutions. A further threat is that these roles can recognize the institutions themselves to often be purveyors of injustice given their situatedness in

the neoliberal model. Given that knowledge production is relegated to only specific areas of higher education, DEI professionals may not always receive the academic training needed to engender the theoretically grounded critique of higher education considered legitimate in academia. Rarely are DEI professionals encouraged to conduct research in their field, though they are perfectly placed to understand the nuances of their field. This, in turn, can create a hierarchy of knowledge and praxis, whereby the work of DEI professionals is deemed less rigorous because of the lack of space for traditionally defined academic rigor in the role. Nevertheless, because of their institutional positionality, which by nature necessitates profound community connection, DEI professionals know the people who make up the institution, their stories, and often their struggles. The occupational necessity to connect to other humans means that DEI professionals are well-positioned to both critique on behalf of the common good, as well as imagine new possibilities for the welfare of this common good. The knowledge and meaning that DEI professionals create can therefore be inherently paradigm-shifting. Ruti (2006) reminds us that this contemplative space allows us to imagine “ways in which human beings relate to the work in active rather than passive ways – *as creators of meaning* rather than as helpless dupes of disciplinary power” (p. xv). The inherent creative, imaginative, and community-centered knowledge creation that the DEI profession involves should be cultivated, and room made for a new understanding of what is considered legitimate and rigorous in academia.

This study could easily lead to a simple recommendation that DEI professionals should be provided with more support and resources so that their jobs are less difficult and seem less thankless and unwinnable. While this is absolutely the case in the short

term, the nature of DEI work – as it is shaped and molded by neoliberal realities – is that it exists primarily to give the illusion that change is possible, that diversity is attainable, and that equity is achievable—if only the necessary will and resources exist. However, these are impossible goals as long as inequity remains an absolute reality of capitalism and therefore a foundational aspect of neoliberalism. Therefore, this study instead suggests that the DEI realm in higher education always be approached with the understanding that many of the participants of this study had already internalized: that change, under the neoliberal gaze, happens in small places in which deep human connection is the goal, and that love and mutual care are the tools through which this goal is achieved. This requires new ways of knowing and being that can usher in a paradigm shift to impact diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education.

To this end, this study recommends that we move beyond those questions that seek to make the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals simply more effective. Rather, DEI professionals – Asian American and otherwise – should ask the question that necessitates a paradigmatic shift: “How shall I live?” (Ruti, 2006). Mari Ruti’s (2006) existential question encourages a move from critique alone to a remaking that is founded on critique, is imaginative, and can “put our respective dreams into effect” (Tanaka, 2018, p. 170). As professionals guided by nebulous standards and goals, DEI professionals are, in the end, well-situated to engage in the creative re-imagining that the neoliberal gaze aims to quash via its paralyzing stare. The situatedness of Asian American women DEI professionals reminds us that space does exist for us to still create a “special kind of relationship” with those structures – which this study recognizes as neoliberal in essence – and “forge agency within constraint” (Ruti, 2006, p. 66). Our

hands are not fully tied, and in under-recognized and under-researched ways, DEI professionals already engage in these agentive ways of being, primarily by engaging in a “mutual immanence” through which we “[come] into being as a subject and agent by helping others to also become expressive subjects and agents” (Tanaka, 2018, p. 89). In this way, diversity, equity, and inclusion in the higher education realm has the capability to lift us out of the subjecting hold of neoliberalism by centering stories and storytelling, methods already considered to be an important part of DEI work that take us beyond the cycle of critique into imaginative spaces of remaking.

Story and storytelling – told between two people, in community, through art, passed through culture and tradition – is inherently resistant to the commodifying gaze of neoliberalism. In being inherently communal rather than individualistic and ego-driven, storytelling also roots us temporally, placing us within human lineage rather than in historical isolation. Diversity, equity, and inclusion work in higher education, in order to be able to create the loving world – which so many of us are in the field with the hopes of ushering in – must center stories and storytelling to truly be able to stand in resistance to the commodifying gaze of neoliberalism. Storytelling towards mutual immanence is both difficult and impactful for the same reasons – its impact is not quantifiable, and therefore immeasurable by neoliberal standards of progress. Thus, storytelling towards mutual immanence also escapes the neoliberal eye.

After the neoliberal subject has been deconstructed and destroyed via subjection and critique, stories have the ability to re-form. What becomes important is the ability of these stories to form us as humans, not designed by our status as victims vanquished by neoliberalism, but rather as “agential subjects” (Ruti, 2006) who are ever in formation,

emotionally rich, and shaped by—and who shape through—compassion. Reformation characterized by compassion-driven agency is what neoliberalism never intended to give us the space to embody, and therefore is a hopeful threat to it.



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## APPENDIX A: IRBPHS APPROVAL LETTER

To: Ariana DasGupta

From: Terence Patterson, IRB Chair

Subject: Protocol #1017

Date: 05/15/2018

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your research (IRB Protocol **#1017**) with the project title **ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN DIVERSITY OFFICERS IN NEOLIBERAL HIGHER EDUCATION** has been approved by the IRB Chair under the rules for expedited review on **05/15/2018**.

Any modifications, adverse reactions or complications must be reported using a modification application to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS via email at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu). Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP  
Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human  
Subjects  
University of San Francisco  
[irbphs@usfca.edu](mailto:irbphs@usfca.edu)  
[USF IRBPHS Website](#)

## APPENDIX B: SAMPLE OUTREACH EMAIL

Dear [Name of Participant],

I hope you are having a wonderful weekend and have been well. [Insert personalized greeting.]

I am finally reaching out to formally invite you to participate in my dissertation study, tentatively entitled, *Asian American Women Diversity Professionals and Neoliberal Higher Education*. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Asian American women diversity professionals in higher education across the United States. In doing so, the study seeks to understand what these experiences reveal about the higher education diversity professional role as well as neoliberal higher education.

As a South Asian American woman, my (relatively short) time as a diversity professional in higher education has been such a fascinating one, and I am eager to learn from other Asian American women about their experiences navigating this arena given their particular identities.

I have attached the consent form for the study to this email. If you are able to participate, please send the signed form back to me. I'll then work with you to find the best time for me to (best case scenario) travel to your for our discussion! If that's not possible, I hope we can use Zoom to chat.

Let me know if you have any questions. I can't tell you how excited I am to sit down with you to hear your story! Thank you!

Warm wishes,  
Ria

## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

### *Asian American Women Diversity Professionals and Neoliberal Higher Education*

A Dissertation Study by Ariana (Ria) DasGupta

#### **Consent to Participate**

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study entitled *Asian American Women Diversity Professionals and Neoliberal Higher Education* conducted by Ariana (Ria) DasGupta, a graduate student in the Department of International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales, a professor in the Department of Organization and Leadership at the University of San Francisco.

#### **About the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Asian American women diversity professionals in higher education across the United States. In doing so, the study seeks to understand what these experiences reveal about the higher education diversity professional role as well as neoliberal higher education.

#### **Study Procedures**

During this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview, and follow up conversations with Ariana (Ria) DasGupta. She will schedule time with you for either an in-person interview or an interview over Skype or Zoom. She may contact you for follow up questions, and even a follow up interview. Your responses will be audio recorded for research purposes only and your name will not be attached to any documents. You will have an opportunity to review the transcript from any interviews for accuracy.

#### **Duration and Location of the Study**

Your participation in this study will involve about 2 hours for an initial interview and 1 hour for follow up questions (not consecutive), and 1 hour for transcript review. The interview will take place between October 2018 and March 2019. Follow up questions, and transcript review will take place during this time frame. The interview will take place either over Skype or Zoom, or a location within or close to your university.

#### **Potential Risks and Discomforts**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts from participation in this research. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

#### **Benefits**

Although you will receive no direct benefit from your participation, by being part of this study, you will be contributing to expanding research pertaining to the experience of Asian American women diversity professionals in higher education specifically and Asian American women leaders in higher education generally.



**Privacy/Confidentiality**

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. You will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym both for yourself and your university during our first conversation. In the event that you are unable or do not desire to do so, I will choose a pseudonym for you. All interview records, transcriptions, and research documents will be kept on a personal, password-protected computer, a password-protected file cloud, and a password-protected hard drive. Research documents include a master list with participants' names and code linking participants to data. Only I will have the password for these three storage systems.

**Audio Recordings**

Audio recordings will be necessary in order to accurately transcribe interviews, and conduct coding for themes. Recordings, transcripts, and coding documents will be stored on a personal, password-protected computer, a password-protected file cloud, and a password-protected hard drive. Only I will have the password for these three storage systems. These files will be archived after transcription.

**Compensation/Payment for Participation**

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

**Offer to Answer Questions**

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Ariana (Ria) DasGupta at (415) 422-2828 or [aadasgupta@usfca.edu](mailto:aadasgupta@usfca.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu).

**Consent**

I have read the above information. Any questions I have asked have been answered. I agree to participate in this research project and I will receive a copy of this consent form.

---

*Participant's Signature*

---

*Date*

---

*Participant's Name (Printed)*

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **To Begin Each Interview**

I wanted to first thank you for taking time out of your hectic schedule to have this conversation with me. I am eager and excited to learn more about you and your work, and I am hoping that this can be more of a dialogue than a question and answer session.

My study is looking at Asian American women DEI professionals in higher education, such as you and me, with the hopes of understanding what our experiences can highlight about how neoliberalism plays out in higher education. I think to answer that large question, it is really important to answer the first part of the question, which is:  
*What has been your experience as an Asian American women diversity officer in higher education?*

### **Questions to Start Off**

- How have you been?
- How has your semester been?
- How has this week been at work?

### **Questions Related to Background**

- Can you describe your trajectory in DEI work?

### **Questions Related to Race, Gender, and the Position**

- What role does race play in the scope of your work?
- How is your influence as a diversity officer impacted by your identity?
- How does your identity within the diversity officer position affect relationships with:
  - Other Asian Americans?

- Other women?
- Other diversity officers?
- Other women of color?
- Other people of color?

### **Questions Related to Understanding the Field**

- What does diversity mean to you?
- In your opinion, what is the role of positions like ours and our offices in higher education?
- How is higher education affected by the presence of diversity officers like us (Asian American women)?
- How do you think the Asian American woman's experience as a diversity officer impacts or can impact the profession, and higher education?
- How do you think neoliberal ideologies affect our roles?
- Do you think DEI is set up to accomplish its goals? Why or why not?

### **Questions: Other**

- Is there anything else you would like to add about your role and identity as an Asian American woman diversity officer?
- Is there anything you would like to generally add?
- Do you have any questions for me?

### APPENDIX E: FIRST ROUND CODES

1	ability to be undercover
2	ability to choose how we leverage our identities or not
3	ability to choose level of advocacy
4	ability to choose proximity to either blackness or whiteness
5	ability to stay under the radar
6	admiration of strategy of black women colleagues
7	affirmative action
8	always an ally, rarely allied with
9	Americans as code for White people
10	anti-Asian sentiment
11	anti-Blackness in Asian community
12	collective process as anti-white
13	Asian American community as underserved
14	Asian American history
15	Asian identity as related to fear of blackness
16	Asian identity used to maintain white supremacy
17	Asian privilege
18	Asians not seen as legitimate in DEI work
19	Asians not seen as legitimate in DEI work
20	Asians within Black and White binary
21	awareness of diversity in Asian community
22	being in a place to see white people's contributions
23	being raised by immigrants
24	being raised by Marxists
25	being seen as a White apologist
26	being treated as suspect
27	Black as code for diverse
28	building trust
29	coalition building
30	color capital
31	coming back to CA where diversity made more sense to her
32	communication
33	comparison to Black women
34	comparison to other women of color
35	contest and consent to neoliberal paradigm

36	contradictory nature of DEI work
37	corporate university
38	crass discussions
39	critical mass to push diversity framework
40	cross cultural coalition building
41	cultural and political capital
42	culturally informed
43	culturally informed leadership
44	cyclical nature of being underserved
45	DEI in higher education
46	DEI work as Asians
47	desire for Whiteness
48	development of identity consciousness
49	development of racial consciousness
50	different ways of racializing Black and Asian women
51	diversity in Asian American experience
52	diversity interventions co-opted by whiteness
53	diversity used opportunistically
54	diversity work as combating White supremacy
55	double standard of first generation Asian American experience: be American but don't be too American
56	emotional labor
57	expectations of Asian American woman
58	global awareness
59	having space to question neoliberal enterprise
60	hired to maintain status quo
61	historicity
62	illusion of pluralism
63	immigrant parent lessons on how to navigate identity
64	important time to critique DEI work
65	imposter syndrome
66	individualism
67	individualism as a tool of White supremacy and capitalism
68	institutions as white
69	internalized racism
70	international Asian student racialization in US
71	intersectionality

72	juggling privilege and subordination
73	justice capital
74	lack of Asian Americans in DEI spaces
75	lack of historicity as tool of White supremacy and capitalism
76	lack of institutional support to support Asian American community
77	lack of racial consciousness in Asian Americans
78	lessons from immigrant parents
79	leveraged because of experience not identity
80	leveraging identity for work
81	leveraging privilege to navigate and change system
82	leveraging stereotype
83	liminality
84	looking to older Black colleagues for real story
85	luxury of having only certain aspects of identity show up (not only race)
86	maintaining culture
87	model minority myth
88	moral capital
89	nature of DEI work
90	navigating
91	navigating racial dynamics
92	need to prove self to people of color colleagues
93	neither here nor there
94	neoliberal activism
95	neoliberal DEI
96	neoliberal diversity
97	neoliberal diversity work
98	neoliberal higher education
99	neoliberal need for women of color
100	neoliberal paradigm
101	neoliberal university
102	neoliberalism
103	neoliberalism and white supremacy as inherently interconnected
104	no nuanced understanding of Asian identity
105	no nuanced understanding of Asian identity (even among Asians)
106	not allowed to talk about unions
107	not ask for help
108	not conforming to Asian American woman stereotypes

109	passing the test with colleagues of color
110	people of color coalition building
111	perils of pan-ethnicity
112	personal as political for Asians
113	placement in the racial hierarchy is not passive
114	placing value in communal learning
115	positional power
116	power
117	pressure from people of color not to apologize for white institution
118	privilege
119	privilege from perceived whiteness
120	providing support to Asian students that wasn't provided to me
121	proximity to whiteness
122	race as entry point to DEI
123	racial bifurcation
124	racial capital
125	racial wedge
126	racially ambiguous
127	resistance to neoliberal thinking
128	resisting stereotypes
129	responsibility to not squander access
130	secret weapon
131	seen as neutral bodies
132	self-hating behavior
133	shared Asian American experience
134	social justice upbringing
135	South Asian stereotypes
136	strategy
137	strategy of keeping head down
138	strategy with Black colleagues
139	suspicion around identity
140	transactional allyship
141	transparency
142	transparent about power
143	trauma capital
144	treadmill to whiteness
145	triple marginalization of some Asian Americans

146	trust
147	understanding of privilege
148	understanding power and systems
149	uniqueness of Korean identity
150	uniqueness of racial experience in CA
151	uniqueness of South Asian experience
152	Vygotsky scaffolding
153	want to highlight marginalized voices through work
154	ways to resist neoliberal paradigm
155	what is true effectiveness of Asian positionality
156	White supremacy
157	White women need for people of color around
158	working with Asian American students
159	working with White women
160	working with White women's identity



## APPENDIX F: CODES GROUPED UNDER SUBCATEGORIES

### **Manifestations of Neoliberalism in Higher Education**

neoliberal paradigm  
 contest and consent to neoliberal paradigm  
 corporate university  
 not allowed to talk about unions  
 crass discussions  
 illusion of pluralism  
 Individualism  
 neoliberal activism  
 neoliberal DEI  
 neoliberal diversity  
 neoliberal diversity work  
 neoliberal higher education  
 neoliberal university  
 neoliberal need for WOC  
 White women need for POC around

### **Tools of Neoliberalism in Relation to Diversity Work**

neoliberalism and white supremacy as inherently interconnected  
 individualism as a tool of white supremacy and capitalism  
 lack of historicity as tool of white supremacy and capitalism  
 diversity interventions co-opted by whiteness  
 diversity used opportunistically  
 Black as code for diverse

### **Anti-Neoliberal Tools**

global awareness  
 Historicity  
 resistance to neoliberal thinking  
 resisting stereotypes  
 understanding power and systems  
 ways to resist neoliberal paradigm

### **Nature of DEI in Higher Education**

contradictory nature of DEI work  
 critical mass to push diversity framework  
 DEI in higher education  
 important time to critique DEI work  
 institutions as white  
 nature of DEI work  
 race as entry point to DEI  
 diversity work as combating white supremacy

### **Identity-Based Capital**

cultural and political capital  
 positional power  
 justice capital  
 moral capital  
 color capital  
 racial capital  
 trauma capital

### **Asian Experience of Race and Identity**

no nuanced understanding of Asian identity (even among Asians)  
 no nuanced understanding of Asian identity  
 perils of panethnicity  
 Asian American history  
 awareness of diversity in Asian community  
 diversity in Asian American experience  
 shared Asian American experience  
 development of identity consciousness  
 development of racial consciousness  
 lack of racial consciousness in Asian Americans  
 affirmative action

### **Asian Marginalization**

anti-Asian sentiment  
 imposter syndrome  
 model minority myth  
 internalized racism  
 self-hating behavior  
 triple marginalization of some Asian Americans  
 placement in the racial hierarchy is not passive  
 Americans as code for White people

### **Asian Proximity to Whiteness**

Asian identity used to maintain white supremacy  
 proximity to whiteness  
 “treadmill to whiteness”  
 desire for whiteness  
 anti-Blackness in Asian community  
 Asian identity as related to fear of blackness

### **Asian Racial Liminality**

Asians within Black and White binary  
 being in a place to see white people's contributions  
 being seen as a white apologist  
 being treated as suspect  
 juggling privilege and subordination  
 racial bifurcation

neither here nor there  
 Liminality  
 racial wedge  
 racially ambiguous  
 suspicion around identity  
 international Asian student racialization in US  
 always an ally, rarely allied with

### **Asian Women Identity**

different ways of racializing black and Asian women  
 expectations of Asian American woman  
 intersectionality  
 not conforming to AAW stereotypes  
 personal as political for Asians

### **Asians Americans as Underserved**

Asian American community as underserved  
 Asian Americans not seen as needing support  
 cyclical nature of being underserved because of lack of awareness around identity  
 lack of institutional support to support Asian American community

### **Asian Privilege**

Asian privilege  
 privilege  
 privilege from perceived whiteness  
 understanding of privilege

### **Asians Undercover**

ability to be undercover  
 ability to stay under the radar  
 secret weapon  
 luxury of having only certain aspects of identity show up (not only race)

### **Asian Ability to Choose**

ability to choose how we leverage our identities or not  
 ability to choose level of advocacy  
 ability to choose proximity to either blackness or whiteness  
 comparison to black women  
 comparison to other WOC  
 having space to question neoliberal enterprise

### **Leveraging Privileged Identity**

leveraging identity for work  
 leveraging privilege to navigate and change system

### **Leveraging Asian American Stereotypes**

leveraging stereotype  
 playing into stereotype  
 what is true effectiveness of Asian positionality

### **Culturally Informed Strategy**

being raised by immigrants  
 double standard of first generation Asian American experience: be American but don't be too American  
 immigrant parent lessons on how to navigate identity  
 lessons from immigrant parents  
 maintaining culture  
 not ask for help  
 strategy of keeping head down  
 collective process as anti-white

### **Strategy with White Women**

transactional allyship  
 Working with white women  
 working with (and understanding) white women's identity

### **Strategy with POC**

looking to older black colleagues for real story  
 strategy with black colleagues  
 coalition building  
 people of color coalition building  
 cross cultural coalition building

### **Not the Right Race for DEI Work**

need to prove self to POC colleagues  
 passing the test with colleagues of color  
 Asians not seen as legitimate in DEI work  
 pressure from POC not to apologize for white institution  
 Power

### **DEI Work as Asians**

DEI work as Asians  
 lack of Asian Americans in DEI spaces  
 hired to maintain status quo  
 leveraged because of experience not identity  
 seen as neutral bodies  
 want to highlight marginalized voices through work  
 providing support to Asian students that wasn't provided to me

### **Strategy with WOC**

admiration of strategy of black women colleagues  
 emotional labor

**Navigation Techniques**

navigating racial dynamics

building trust

Trust

Communication

culturally informed

culturally informed leadership

placing value in communal learning

responsibility to not squander access

Transparency

transparent about power

Vygotsky scaffolding

**Uniqueness of Racial Experience in CA**

coming back to CA where diversity made more sense to her

uniqueness of racial experience in CA

**Upbringing**

being raised by Marxists

social justice upbringing

## **APPENDIX G: SUBCATEGORIES GROUPED UNDER CATEGORIES**

### **Manifestations of Neoliberalism in Higher Education\***

Tools of Neoliberalism in Relation to Diversity Work

Anti-Neoliberal Tools

### **Nature of DEI in Higher Education\***

Identity-Based Capital

### **Asian Experience of Race and Identity\***

Asian Marginalization

Asian Proximity to Whiteness

Asian Racial Liminality

Asian Women Identity

Asians Americans as Underserved

### **Asian Privilege\***

Asians Undercover

Asian Ability to Choose

Leveraging Privileged Identity

Leveraging Asian American Stereotypes

### **Strategy**

Culturally Informed Strategy

Strategy with White Women

Strategy with POC

Not the Right Race for DEI Work

DEI Work as Asians

Strategy with WOC

Navigation Techniques

Upbringing

### **Uniqueness of Racial Experience in CA\***

\*denotes a subcategory that has taken on the title of the category

## APPENDIX H: THEMES WITH CODE FREQUENCY

Participant	N	Theme
8	1	they said there truth to stereotype that AAW are not assertive, and this is useful, and a culturally informed navigation technique
8	1	they spent considerable time preparing before entering spaces, doing their homework because they couldn't depend on just their identities
8	1	DEI work is often cover for lack of advancement, but where some gains can be made through individual connection
5	1	there was a feeling that they were neither here nor there
4	1	idea that South Asians are both of Asian American identity and not of it
8	1	identity is always there, and even more so in DEI work
8, 7	2	participants connected to their Asian identity more so in college where identity came into sharp focus
8,3	2	they felt they were inadequate for graduate programs and encouraged by mentors
8, 5	2	there is an idea that activists are traditionally thought to be Black, not AA, pressure to show up as activists in DEI work
8, 7	2	the stereotypes around AAW identity are strategic but also challenging
8, 5	2	a lot of resistance in DEI work comes from other communities of color, seemingly no allies in the work
7, 6	2	they felt a responsibility not to squander their access, and used access specifically to speak for other WOC, and countered cultural tendencies
7, 5	2	they were taught not to draw attention to their race/themselves, not lead with race, but also not assimilate
8, 5	2	not raised to be an activist, but a pragmatist who moves through the institution, but felt pressure to be more radical to be taken seriously as an AAW
5, 4	2	they felt they were complicit in the neoliberal higher education enterprise as DEI professionals
6,5	2	DEI work as important to achieve a critical diversity mass
5, 4	2	DEI and multiculturalism work as ahistorical, radical individualism hardened around binaries and symptomatic of White supremacy and capitalism
4, 2	2	expectation that South Asians will be complicit in White supremacy, and South Asian willingness to do so
7, 4, 2	3	AAAs are under-supported because of the MMM, lack of knowledge of AA history and nuance, thought not to have needs, which also limits their ability to be in solidarity with other POC
8, 5, 4	3	positioning of Black identity as ideal for DEI work simply because of Black identity, White supremacist and neoliberal

6, 4, 1	3	systems of inequity revert back quickly, and culturally informed transparency and power sharing is a strategy, education is a strategy, joy is a strategy, self care is a strategy, historicity and coalition building are strategies, revealing how power works
7, 5, 4, 3	4	there is a triple marginalization of Asian Americans who get invisibilized in Black/White binary, perils of aggregate
6, 5, 2, 1	4	there is warranted suspicion around the AAW identity until a test is passed determining whether you're on team Black or White, proximity to whiteness
6, 3, 2, 1	4	idea that AAW are hired to maintain the status quo, and not shake up power, seen as neutral
7, 3, 2, 1	4	AAW are needed by White women as teachers, bodies, strength, reluctant allies, transactional
6, 4, 3, 2, 1	5	there is a comparison of AAW to Black and Latina women, ability to speak up without being thought of as angry or fiery
8, 6, 5, 3, 1	5	DEI is a tool for universities to survive financially, covert and overt agendas, be protected from bad press, zero sum game, neoliberal
8, 7, 6, 4, 2, 1	6	the AAW identity is a secret weapon, a Trojan horse, which takes advantage of stereotypes, but is also a double edged sword