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**“I Know Who I Am”: Asian American Women Leaders in the Nonprofit Sector
on the Quest Toward Authenticity**

By

Amanda Steepleton

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership

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To the 14 Asian American women leaders who bravely and generously participated in this study – thank you for trusting me with your stories. I hope I have done them justice. Your wisdom and candor are so deeply appreciated. We too rarely see our stories reflected in research and in our organizations. This work is for all of us.

To my advisor, Dr. Sharon Radd, thank you for pushing me to dig deeper and always believing that I would find “the magic.” Your guidance, expertise, and support have been invaluable to the completion of this thesis and helped me achieve a level I never knew I could reach when I began. I am extremely grateful.

Abstract

This study sought to answer the research question, “How do Asian American women navigate others’ stereotypes of their intersectional racialized and gendered identity to lead in the nonprofit sector?” Participants identified stereotypes that they’ve encountered in their own work and leadership – most notably drawing from the model minority stereotype of being quiet, passive, submissive, and hardworking. They also identified these stereotypes as presenting barriers to being seen as leaders in their organizations. These findings affirm what is already well documented in the literature. Unfortunately, little has changed since the model minority stereotype first rose to prominence in the 1960s, even in racially conscious, progressive nonprofit spaces. Participants described using a number of strategies to navigate stereotypes as leaders: enacting stereotypes, conforming to dominant culture, practicing self-regulation, finding your people, focusing on systemic change, redefining leadership, acting authentically, and disengaging. While all participants employed multiple strategies at different times and in varying contexts, they described an overall trajectory of moving away from strategies that helped them simply cope with the stereotypes placed on them and towards strategies that furthered their own self-determination. Ultimately, in the face of powerful messages from multiple directions about who and how they should be, this study finds these 14 Asian American women leaders engaged in an ongoing and liberatory quest towards authenticity.

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Table 1: Interviewee Pseudonym, Age, Nonprofit Role

Table 2: Focus Group Pseudonym, Age, Nonprofit Role

A couple years ago, I was sitting in a meeting at the local human service nonprofit where I work. Two colleagues, our then executive director, and I were viewing a chart of the U.S. population broken down by race. However, there was something very strange to me about these charts. The racial groups included on the chart were White, Black/African American, Native American, and Latino/a/x.¹ A category representing Asian Americans was not included. Worse, the presented percentage of total U.S. population added up to 100 percent. Thus, in a conversation about racial justice, not only were Asian Americans not included – according to these charts, they – WE – I did not exist.²

Beyond the problem of erasing millions of Americans, I noticed the way my executive director, who is White, responded when I questioned her on it. The underlying message I received was both clear and uncharacteristically sharp: My concern was unjustified, and there was no room for further discussion. Was this response merely an example of the now popularized phenomenon White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), or was there something more happening? Was I as an Asian American woman subverting expectations of how I was supposed to behave by speaking out? How could I successfully navigate my executive director's perceptions to make my voice heard in that moment? Ultimately, these are the questions, rooted in this experience and others like it, that inspired my research on Asian American women leaders in the nonprofit sector.

¹ While scholars debate the capitalization of "Black" and, especially, of "White" for racial categories of people, I follow the example of those who capitalize both. Specifically, I capitalize "Black" to denote a shared sense of identity, history, and community. I capitalize "White" to highlight Whiteness as a racialized identity that is neither invisible nor the default category. As an exception, in instances where another work is quoted, I default to that author's preference. See Ewing (2020) and Appiah (2020) for a nuanced discussion on this topic.

² For clarity, throughout the rest of this paper I refer to "Asian Americans" using the third person "they" instead of the first person "we."

Purpose Statement

In the United States, Asian Americans represent both the most diverse and fastest growing racial group in the United States (Yu, 2020). At the same time, the nonprofit sector employs the third largest workforce of any U.S. industry, growing at three times the rate of the for-profit sector (Salamon & Newhouse, 2020). Yet, little research explores how Asian American leaders – particularly Asian American women leaders – navigate stereotypes in the workforce, and no studies specifically explore their experiences within in the nonprofit sector. I begin to address that gap with this qualitative, exploratory study. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Asian American women navigate others’ stereotypes of their intersectional racialized and gendered identity to lead in the nonprofit sector.

Reflexive Statement

As both an Asian American woman leader who has worked in the nonprofit sector for 13 years and the researcher in this study, I realized it was imperative for me to examine my own positionality. First, in many ways, I considered myself an insider – so much so that I included myself as a study participant, a decision which I further explain in the method section of this paper. This insider status helped me build trust with participants and detect nuances that might elude an outsider. However, my personal connection and passion for the subject also created strong expectations and biases. I had to be careful not to assume I understood what participants were saying or that their experiences matched my own. I also needed to examine my expectations and biases to ensure I was not guiding participants, consciously or not, down a path I wanted them to go. For example, as I realized that participants more often referred to race than gender as their most salient identity, I considered whether this was because I unintentionally focused on race during interviews, reflecting my own bias, or because this was the genuine

experience of participants. I then began to explicitly ask about gender if participants did not bring it up.

While I primarily viewed myself as an insider, I also reflected upon ways in which I was an outsider. I was adopted into a White family at a young age and grew up in predominantly White communities. This experience fundamentally differs from that of participants who grew up in families and communities that shared their race and ethnicity. I don't have grandparents or parents for whom I've been afraid during the rise of COVID-related, anti-Asian violence. I can't relate to participants who were raised under the influence of Asian culture. Nor do I share the experiences of participants whose parents immigrated to the United States or who immigrated themselves later in life. Thus, while I may hold much in common with the participants in this study, intersecting identities and individual characteristics belied insider status.

As part of my reflexive practice, I observed my own reactions throughout the research process. I noticed frequently moving back and forth between my positions as researcher, study participant, and Asian American woman. I especially experienced a pressure to achieve that is associated with the model minority stereotype. This induced strong feelings of anxiety, even though I had no reason to doubt my abilities. It would be natural for me to worry about something I care about, but this felt like something more. From my position as a researcher, I could see how this response mirrored findings in study. From my position as an Asian American woman, I could not stop this response even though I understood what was happening. I considered this a living example of the hold that stereotypes can have. I also examined how my position as researcher impacted my participation in this study. I wondered whether my answers to interview questions were influenced by what I learned from the literature and other participants. I also had many moments where another participant's response made me wish I had

said something similar. I documented all these reflections in research memos, which I considered in my final analysis.

Ultimately, my data took me in a direction I hadn't intended to go. When I began my research, I expected to learn how participants overcame stereotypes and managed others' perceptions of them to attain "success" as leaders – how they got the promotion or earned that difficult colleague's respect. While there was certainly some of this in the data, what I found was so much more. As they sought to navigate stereotypes and the oppressive weight of expectation, I found these Asian American women leaders engaged in an ongoing quest towards authenticity. I found them wrestling to untangle their true self from external pressures which have impacted not only their leadership and careers but the entirety of their life's experiences. I found them increasingly maintaining this sense of self in the face of powerful messages from multiple directions about who and how they should be. I found liberation.

Background and Context

In order to establish the necessary context and background for this study, I now define and explicate the following key terms: *stereotypes* (phenomenon), *authenticity* (central theme), *Asian Americans* (population), and the *nonprofit sector* (setting). Additionally, I provide a brief overview of the prevalence and growth of Asian Americans in the United States, as well as summarize the nonprofit sector's significance in the U.S. economy and the current state of diversity within its workforce. Finally, I describe the critical social, cultural, and political backdrop in which this study took place – including the co-existing crises of a global pandemic, police brutality, and gun violence – and which has shaped the lives, work, and leadership of the study participants.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes have been studied extensively in the fields of cognitive and social psychology; however, there exists no commonly agreed upon definition of the term. For the purpose of this study, which seeks to understand how Asian American women leaders navigate said phenomenon, I define *stereotypes* as widely shared beliefs and expectations about the characteristics of a group of people (Gupta et al., 2011). Such characteristics may include personality traits, physical attributes, societal roles, preferences, or specific behaviors (Lee et al., 2007). Importantly, stereotypes may be positive or negative. However, research suggests that even “positive” stereotypes, such as the stereotypes of Asian Americans as hardworking and successful, may have negative meanings or implications (Lee et al., 2007).

While stereotypes help human beings cognitively process large amounts of perceptual information in a complex world, they also have significant consequences (Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005). Notably, research links stereotypes with bias or prejudice, which may then lead to discrimination or violence against a group of people (Lee et al., 2007). Professionally, bias frequently impacts performance reviews and promotion, as well as the likelihood of receiving training and other development opportunities (Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005). For example, Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1993) found that “the performance of black managers was less likely to be attributed to ability and effort and was more likely to be attributed to help from others than the performance of white managers” (p. 273). Further discussion on the stereotypes of Asian American women and their impacts may be found in the literature review.

Authenticity

As indicated in my reflexive statement, authenticity became the central theme of this study. I define this term now, borrowing from Brené Brown (2010), who asserts, “*Authenticity* is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are”

(p. 50). I use this definition, first, because it reflects participants' journeys to discover and live their true selves (embracing), apart from external pressures or expectations (letting go). Second, also like participants, it suggests the search for authenticity is an ongoing process, one that requires "daily practice" and is never complete.

Importantly, I differentiate between *authenticity* and *authentic leadership*, the latter of which is a leadership model with its own corresponding body of literature. This model proposes that leaders behave "authentically" in order to generate trust and create real connections with others, thereby becoming more effective leaders (George, 2007). This study, however, concerns not authentic leadership but rather participants' quests toward authenticity itself. From their position as Asian American women, these leaders reveal that this quest is often neither simple nor clear. Further, within systems of racism, patriarchy, and xenophobia, they may not be rewarded for leading as their authentic selves, as George (2007) – who writes from the position of a formally educated, wealthy, White man – suggests. For these reasons, I do not include scholarship on authentic leadership within the literature review.

Asian Americans

Asian Americans – defined as individuals residing in the United States and "having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, para. 5) – comprise the fastest growing and most diverse racial group in the country (Yu, 2020). Descending from at least 24 different nations, they differ by culture, language, migration history, and economic status (Yu, 2020). While I recognize this diversity, I choose to use the pan-ethnic category of Asian American for two reasons. First, while Asian Americans are not a monolithic group, they are racialized and homogenized within dominant U.S. culture as such (Keum et al., 2018; Liang & Peters-Hawkins,

2017; Li, 2014). Therefore, prevailing stereotypes affect all Asian Americans, regardless of accuracy, particularity, or precision. Second, by focusing on race instead of ethnicity, I “encourage analyses centered on White supremacy, systemic racism, and how these realities shape Asian American lives” (Iftikar & Museus 2018, p. 940). However, as I note in the method section, I also collected data on participant ethnicity to identify any significant variances between sub-groups.

Today, Asian Americans total 23 million or seven percent of the nation’s total population (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021b). This number grew by 81 percent between 2000 and 2019 and is expected to rise to 35.8 million – or more than 300 percent over 60 years – by 2060 (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021a). Asian American women comprise five percent of the total population of U.S. women with projections to grow to 9.5 percent by 2060 (Catalyst, 2021). Changes in immigration policy have spurred most of this growth, resulting in not only an increase in the total Asian American population but also an increase in ethnic diversity among Asian Americans (Tran et al., 2019). In the labor force, Asian Americans are overall more highly educated and overrepresented in professional fields, such as engineering, law, and computer science (Sy et al., 2010). Yet, in a phenomenon now known as the *bamboo ceiling* (Hyun, 2005), they are the “least likely among all race/ethnic groups to become executive leaders, especially Asian women” (Yu, 2020, p. 158). In 2020, White women held nearly one-third of total management positions in the United States, while Asian American women held only two percent, half that of Black and Hispanic women (Catalyst, 2021).

Nonprofit Sector

The nonprofit sector in the United States – also known as the independent, third, or charitable sector – is large, complex, and diverse. It encompasses organizations with more than

30 different tax-exempt statuses under the Internal Revenue Service (Worth, 2017). However, for the purpose of this study, I use the term *nonprofit* to refer to the most prevalent and widely recognized among these – the 501(c)3 charitable organization. From the arts, culture, and humanities to education, healthcare, and human services, this consequential sector employs the third largest workforce of any U.S. industry (Salamon & Newhouse, 2020) and continues to grow at a rapid pace. Between 2007 and 2017, it grew at three times the rate of the for-profit sector (Salamon & Newhouse, 2020).

In terms of gender diversity, women are overrepresented in nonprofit organizations compared to their for-profit counterparts. Sixty-five percent of nonprofit employees are women, compared to 44 percent in business and 53 percent in government (Pritchard, 2000). Women are also much more likely to be found in positions of leadership. According to the National Council of Nonprofits (2019), 72 percent of charitable nonprofits in the United States are led by women, compared to the eight percent of women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies (Hinchliffe, 2021). However, there is also another side to this story. As Branson et al. (2013) note, “Nonprofit organizations often pay lower salaries, which discourage men from seeking out those positions” (p. 15). This factor, combined with “an atmosphere of caring and nurturing which is a characteristic more prevalently associated with women” (Branson et al., 2013, p. 15), has led to a “devaluing of the nonprofit sector...[and] the feminization of the nonprofit workforce” (Ofronama, 2019). Notably, women are less likely to hold top leadership positions in large organizations, which offer higher salaries and whose operations more closely resemble that of corporations (Branson et al., 2013).

In regard to racial diversity, the nonprofit sector continues to struggle, despite its social mission and the fact that a majority of nonprofit organizations predominantly serve racialized

communities (Xie & Pang, 2018). For example, racialized individuals comprise 36 percent of the U.S. workforce (Burns et al., 2012) but only 18 percent of nonprofit employees (Schwartz et al., 2014). Of this, Asian Americans comprise only one percent. The racial gap in nonprofit leadership is also well-documented. “The level of racial and ethnic diversity on nonprofit boards lags behind the level of diversity on for profit corporate boards” (Y. Lee, 2019, p. 608). Further, only 10 percent of nonprofit executive directors are people of color (Schwartz et al., 2014), and this lack of representation is significantly greater for women of color (Tinkler et al., 2019). Additionally, while little is known about the number of Asian American women in the nonprofit sector and the roles they fill, a survey of 644 nonprofit foundations found they comprise less than half of one percent of positions on private foundation boards (Youngberg et al., 2001).

Current Events

As I began to collect data and hear from my participants during the summer of 2021, I realized that it was imperative to also situate this study within the social, cultural, and political backdrop of the past year and a half. On January 15, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) confirmed the first case of the novel coronavirus in the United States; by March, the pandemic had swept the nation. Xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiments were on the rise, fueled by a White House that repeatedly and deliberately referred to COVID-19 as the “China virus,” “Wuhan virus,” and “kungflu” (Jun et al., 2021). In 2020, between March 19 and April 1 alone, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council “documented over 1,000 reports from Asian people of coronavirus discrimination and hate crimes” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 556). By June 31, 2021, this number grew to more than 9,000 (Aspegren, 2021).

At the same time, a larger racial reckoning was brewing. Spurred by the pandemic, public discourse began to widely acknowledge the gross disparities in health outcomes that

disproportionately negatively impact racialized communities (Wood, 2020). Then, on May 25, 2020, police murdered George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in Minneapolis – and the pot boiled over (Goyette, 2020). Protests erupted around the world under the banner of “Black Lives Matter.” A bevy of corporate and nonprofit agencies alike issued statements committing to anti-racist practice. Seven months later, on January 6, 2021, a mob of White nationalists stormed the Capitol in an attempt to prevent Congress from confirming President-elect Joe Biden as the next President of the United States (Fisher et al., 2021). Two months after that, on March 16, 2021, a racially and misogynistically-motivated shooter targeted women of Asian descent employed at three spas in Atlanta, Georgia (Sandoval & Keenan, 2021). The shooting left six of these women dead and the Asian American community reeling as they sought to process and respond to this highly visible and lethal attack. (Hereafter, I refer to these events as “the Atlanta shootings.”) This latest event occurred as I began to design this study, and it is in the context of this eighteen-month upheaval and social awakening that this study took place – informing the lives, work, and leadership of my participants.

Literature Review

A burgeoning body of literature on Asian Americans and, to a lesser extent, Asian American women, has emerged in recent years. Specifically, scholars clearly identify and describe common stereotypes of this population, as well as the negative impact of these stereotypes on Asian American women striving to be leaders in the workplace. This literature review summarizes that research. Overall, however, I note that Asian Americans, and Asian American women particularly, remain understudied in the field of leadership, and no studies specifically explore their experiences within the nonprofit sector.

Stereotypes of Asian Americans

Existing research thoroughly investigates stereotypes facing Asian Americans today. These stereotypes, scholars note, are rooted in the racialization or *Asianization* (Museus & Iftikar, 2014) of Asian Americans in the United States. In this section, I provide an overview of three primary racialized stereotypes connected to Asian Americans – that of the model minority, the yellow peril, and the perpetual foreigner.

The model minority. The model minority figure is perhaps the most predominant and prevailing stereotype of Asian Americans in the United States today. As the model minority, Asian Americans are viewed as universally high achieving, having attained educational and economic success by virtue of their own self-discipline and hard work (Gupta et al., 2011; Kiang et al., 2017; Sakamoto et al., 2009). As such, they are valorized as exemplars among minoritized groups of how to achieve the American Dream and ascribed as inherently competent, intelligent, diligent, and industrious. Although they may have once been disadvantaged or subject to racial or ethnic discrimination, this is no longer perceived to be true; rather, Asian Americans are perceived to be doing just as well as, if not better than, White Americans (Kiang et al., 2017)

Advocates of the model minority point to the high educational achievement and relative economic success of Asian Americans. On the whole, Asian Americans “show the highest median household income and highest level of education of all racial groups, even surpassing native-born White Americans” (Zhou & Lee, 2017, p. 7). Roughly 65 percent of Asian Americans ages 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 41 percent of White Americans, 32 percent of Black/African Americans, and 22 percent of Hispanics/Latinos (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Additionally, Asian Americans obtain degrees from elite institutions more often than their peers; they represent more than 20 percent of Ivy League students, while comprising just six percent of the U.S. population (Lee & Zhou, 2016). In the

economic realm, Asians Americans are well represented in high-status, high-income fields, such as STEM and health care (Yu, 2020), and Sakamoto et al. (2009) suggest that they have reached parity with Whites in the labor market.

Despite these apparent markers of success, Asian American scholars have largely rejected the model minority stereotype as both inaccurate and damaging (Gupta et al., 2011; Lee, 2006; Yu, 2020). Overall, these scholars describe how this stereotype ignores the historical context and systemic forces behind Asian American achievement, masks vast disparities within the Asian American community, invisibilizes ongoing experiences of marginalization, overlooks barriers to accessing top positions of leadership, diverts resources from both Asian Americans and other racialized groups, perpetuates the view of Asian Americans as different and other, and ultimately functions as a tool of White supremacy to maintain the racial status quo. Nevertheless, the model minority remains an enduring stereotype applied to Asian Americans today.

The yellow peril. At first glance, the stereotype of Asian Americans as the yellow peril appears contradictory and perhaps antiquated next to that of the model minority. Rather than the “positive” stereotype of being hard working and successful, the yellow peril portrays Asian Americans as conniving, untrustworthy, and mysterious. It evokes existential fears of faceless “yellow hordes” or an “enemy race” threatening to take over America and the [White] American way of life. As an example, Lee et al. (2007) notes one magazine cartoon from the late nineteenth century depicted a Chinese man as “a bloodsucking vampire with slanted eyes, a pigtail, dark skin, and thick lips” (p. 278).

While such blatant portrayals have gratefully fallen out of favor, the yellow peril not only persists today but is also intimately connected to the model minority; in fact, some scholars suggest they are essentially two sides of the same coin (Ramasubramanian, 2011; Lee & Hong,

2020). Lee (2006) notes how “the positive attributes associated with the model minority can be quickly redefined as negative attributes during times of competition” (“The Yellow Peril Foreigner” section). To explain this process, Nguyen et al. (2019) use Group Position Theory, which posits that “animosity occurs when members of a dominant group believe the minority group is threatening valued resources that belong to the dominant group, regardless of actual threat” (p. 565). Thus, while Asian Americans may earn grudging respect as the model minority, they simultaneously engender envy, anger, and resentment when they are perceived to be “excessively and unfairly high in competence” (Lin et al, 2005, p. 35). In other words, the model minority, taken to the extreme, becomes the yellow peril.

The perpetual foreigner. The perpetual foreigner is the third primary stereotype of Asian Americans. As the name suggests, it portrays Asian Americans as forever alien and unfamiliar, unable to assimilate socially and culturally to the American way of life (Kim-ju et al., 2009; Lee & Hong, 2020). While perhaps viewed in a more benign light than the yellow peril, the perpetual foreigner remains an unlikeable figure. This stereotype focuses primarily on the social – or unsocial – attributes of Asian Americans, depicting them as awkward, unpopular, quiet, isolated, inscrutable, and overall lacking in interpersonal skills. Lin et al. (2005) note that this characterization is critical “because it proves the rationale for rejecting or even attacking an outgroup that otherwise plays by the rules of a meritocracy [via the model minority]” (p. 44).

Like the model minority, the perpetual foreigner stereotype fails to hold up under scrutiny. By widely accepted standards – nativity (place of birth), English proficiency, and citizenship – Asian Americans are well acculturated. In other words, they have adapted and taken on traits from dominant U.S. culture. Although a higher percentage of Asian Americans were born outside the United States than any other racial or ethnic group, at least half this population

has obtained U.S. citizenship (Kim-Ju et al., 2009). In terms of English proficiency, the most recent American Community Survey by the Pew Research Center finds that 72 percent of all Asian Americans report speaking only English or speaking English very well (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021b); by the second generation, the vast majority prefers to speak English, with only seven percent fluently bilingual (Portes & Hao, 1998). Yet, like the model minority, assumption of foreignness persists, despite Asian Americans viewing themselves as no less American than White Americans (Cheryan & Monin, 2005).

Collectively, the perpetual foreigner, model minority, and yellow peril stereotypes can be applied to the Stereotype Content Model proposed by Fiske et al. (2002). This predictive model measures social groups along the dimensions of competence and warmth (i.e., sociability). It theorizes mixed stereotypes of high competence (model minority) and low warmth (perpetual foreigner) for some groups, including Asian Americans, resulting in envious stereotyping as a high-status, competitive out-group (yellow peril). Lin et al. (2005) later validated this model through their Scale of Anti-Asian American Stereotypes and found that “allegedly high competence and allegedly low sociability...[creates] an interlocking system that justifies prejudice” (p. 40).

Stereotypes of Asian American Women

Although research specific to stereotypes of Asian American women remains scant, some scholars have begun to explore this gap. Studies confirm that Asian American women experience the same stereotypes attributed to Asian Americans generally that I have already described (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018; Liang et al., 2018). Additionally, scholars identify stereotypes of Asian American women that are distinct from both White women and Asian American men (Keum et al., 2018). Following, I summarize these stereotypes, which exist at the intersection of

race and gender, through the sexualized and contrasting figures of the geisha and the dragon lady.

The exotic geisha. Unlike Asian American men, who are viewed as effeminate, emasculated, and sexually undesirable, the geisha (also known as the China doll or lotus blossom) stereotype portrays Asian American women as “objects of desire for men, particularly white men” (Azhar et al., 2021, p. 4). They are perceived as “exotic and sexually submissive beings who draw on supposedly foreign ways to please their partners” (Lee & Hong, 2020, p. 167). Thus, the same foreignness that is scorned in the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner becomes fetishized in the geisha stereotype. In their study on racial microaggressions against Asian Americans, Sue et al. (2009) confirmed the existence of the geisha stereotype, identifying “exoticization of Asian women” as a distinct, gendered theme.

Assumptions of submissiveness are seamlessly intertwined with the exoticization of Asian American women. Although Asian American men are viewed as nonaggressive and obedient, Mukkamala and Suyemoto (2018) suggest that “‘submissiveness’ can be specifically gendered in its experience...with assumptions about Asian American women being considered submissive or passive [among] the most salient and frequent experiences reported” (p. 43). Submissiveness includes assumptions about Asian American women not speaking out, not standing up for themselves, and acquiescing with decisions made by others – as well as facing surprise or retaliation if these expectations are not met (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018). Keum et al. (2018), the first to develop an intersectional measure of racial *and* gendered experiences of Asian American women, also confirm that Asian American women are “often expected to perform their femininity by being compliant, quiet, shy, timid, or passive” (p. 573). Thus, as Mukkamala and Suyemoto (2018) aptly surmise, “It appears that apart from their physical

presence, aspects of Asian American women's intellect, voice, and emotions are not considered desirable; they must only be seen and not heard" (p. 44).

Scholars also highlight the "complex interplay of stereotypes" that occurs at the intersection of race and gender (Keum et al., 2018). Li (2014) posits:

Asian American women are caught between two restrictive stereotypes, the sexualized ultra-feminine and the model minority. The model minority traits of passivity and submissiveness are reinforced, intensified, and gendered by the stereotype of Asian American women as obedient, servile, passive, feminine, reserved, humble, and demure. (p. 157)

In another parallel to the model minority, it can be difficult for Asian American women to object to being "positively" stereotyped as desirable. However, while comments such as, "Asian women are so beautiful," are perceived to be compliments, they often have the effect of being derogatory, limiting, or dehumanizing (Sue et al., 2009). Such connections support Lee and Hong's (2020) implication that the geisha stereotype is actually a gendered incarnation of the model minority stereotype.

The devious dragon lady. If Asian American women fail to subscribe to their role as the subservient geisha, they may be viewed negatively instead as a dragon lady. Like the geisha, the dragon lady depicts Asian American women as overtly sexualized but also aggressive, devious, wicked, predatory, controlling, and untrustworthy (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018; Li, 2014). She ruthlessly uses her exotic beauty, strength, and intelligence to "manipulate others to satisfy her own self-interests" (Rosette et al., 2016, p. 440). In this way, Asian American women become a threat, much like the overly competent model minority becomes the yellow peril.

While less attention has been paid to this stereotype in the literature, it remains a significant aspect of the gendered racial stereotypes of Asian American women.

Intersectionality. Together, the stereotypes of the geisha and the dragon lady highlight the “unique invalidations that deny, demean, and silence Asian American women’s self-concept, self-presentation, and self-image” (Keum et al., 2018 p. 581). They also further confirm Crenshaw’s (1989) seminal work on intersectionality, which posits that racism and sexism alone fail to capture experiences of oppression for women of color. Rather, such experiences are “greater than the sum” (p. 140) and cannot be fully understood without embracing “the complexities of compoundedness” (p. 166).

Further, intersectionality provides a response to what Crenshaw (1989) refers to as the single-axis framework of both mainstream feminism and antiracist politics. In other words, women of color scholars have long argued, the mainstream feminist movement largely neglects race and racism, while antiracist models fail to consider gender and sexism. For example, bell hooks (2000) writes,

White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases...Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists. (p. 3)

Urban (2002), in contrast, highlights sexism within the Civil Rights Movement, where Black women contributed equal labor in the streets and behind the scenes compared to their male counterparts but were rarely recognized in formal positions of leadership. Additionally, racial discourse most often fails to include the perspective of Asian Americans, in large part because race in the United States is limited primarily to a Black and White paradigm (Liang et al., 2002).

For all these reasons, an intersectional approach is needed as scholars continue to expand the existing body of literature on Asian American women (Leigh et al., 2020).

Impact of Stereotypes at Work

The stereotypes described above have implications for Asian American women at work, as they strive to be leaders in their organizations. As I demonstrate in this section, these impacts are tangible and clearly documented in the literature. Ultimately, scholars argue, stereotypes have many negative impacts on Asian Americans as a whole and Asian American women in particular – undermining their capacity to be seen as leaders and, as a result, attain formal leadership positions.

Hypo-prototypicality and Asian American leaders. Implicit leadership theories, such as Leader Categorization Theory (Lord, 1985), posit that each person carries a mental image of an ideal or prototypical leader. They then automatically and often unconsciously categorize others as leaders or not, depending on the extent to which those individuals fit or do not fit that ready-made prototype (Sy et al., 2010). In other words, if a person does not possess – or is not *perceived* to possess – the innate characteristics and behaviors expected in a leader, they are less likely to be identified as such. Further, Festekjian et al. (2014) note that the prototypical leader is defined by the dominant group; thus, the prototypical leader in the United States is a White man who demonstrates agentic qualities, such as high sociability, assertiveness, dominance, and self-promotion (Rosette et al., 2008; Zhou & Paul, 2016).

While White men are viewed as prototypical leaders, Asian Americans are not. Research indicates that Asian American men and women are both less likely to be favorably perceived as leaders (Festekjian et al., 2014; Leigh et al., 2020). For example, Burris et al. (2013) found that White study participants perceived Asian American managers in the for-profit sector as “equally

competent, yet less sociable, less transformational, and less authentic” (p. 258) than White managers. In the field of higher education, F. Lee (2019) compared perceived leadership effectiveness between Asian American candidates and White candidates with high technical competence and low sociability skills. Although candidates’ skills were identical, Asian Americans received lower ratings than their White counterparts for ascriptions of “good job” or “should be hired,” suggesting that “racial stereotypes underlie the bamboo ceiling” (F. Lee, 2019, p. 98).

Importantly, in each of these studies, the competence of Asian Americans was not in question; yet, they were still less likely to be perceived as leaders than their White counterparts. To help explain this phenomenon, Festekjian et al. (2014) differentiate between competent and agentic leadership prototypes. While Asian Americans may activate the competent leader prototype, which is consistent with the model minority stereotype, they do not activate the agentic leader prototype that is preferred in a U.S. context. Zhou and Lee (2017) further suggest that the same stereotypes that make Asian Americans hyper-prototypical students and workers – such as diligence, quietude, and passivity – hinder them as they compete for leadership positions in the labor market. Thus, Asian Americans are not perceived as ideal leaders.

Double jeopardy of Asian American women leaders. Although Asian American men and women are both perceived as hypo-prototypical leaders, Asian American women may be more hypo-prototypical (Wong & McCullough, 2021). Like other women of color, Asian American women face a double jeopardy with “dual subordinate identities on race and gender” (Tinkler et al., 2019, p. 2). Additionally, stereotypes of Asian American women as hyperfeminine and submissive present a unique, additional barrier for Asian American women leaders (Rosette et al., 2016; Wong & McCullough, 2021). In the first national survey ever

conducted on leadership and Asian American women, respondents “cited numerous assumptions that are routinely made in the workplace about [Asian American women] and their presumed lack of leadership qualities” (Youngberg et al., 2001, p. 4). In another more recent study, between Asian American men and women, women were more likely to repeatedly refer to negative work experiences, and several women “felt that Asian American men did not face the same challenges they did” (Huang, 2020, p. 11).

Interestingly, research indicates mixed results as to whether Asian American women identify gender or race more often as impacting their work and leadership experience (Huang, 2020; Leigh et al., 2020; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Remedios et al., 2011). This may depend in part on the context of a specific workplace. For example, in a workplace dominated by White women, race may emerge as the more salient identity (Leigh et al., 2020). However, such findings also highlight the intersectionality of race and gender, in that it can be difficult or even impossible to assign experiences of prejudice or discrimination to one identity or the other (Kawahara, 2007). Thus, one Asian American woman might attribute an experience to gender, and another might attribute that same experience to race – when, in fact, it may be a complex interaction of both.

The dominance penalty. While Asian Americans are perceived as lacking the agentic traits of prototypical leaders in U.S. professional contexts, they also cannot overcome this barrier by behaving in a non-stereotypical or agentic manner. In fact, research suggests that Asian Americans who do so incur a dominance penalty, which Tinkler et al. (2019) define as a social and economic backlash for dominant or authoritative behavior. This so-called double bind can be explicated using Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Originally applied to prejudice toward women leaders, Role Congruity Theory asserts that stereotype-conforming and

nonconforming individuals experience one of two types of prejudice – the former receiving a less favorable evaluation of leadership *potential* and the latter receiving a less favorable evaluation of actual leadership *behavior* (Bu & Borgida, 2020). Thus, Asian Americans will have both a harder time achieving a leadership role and, having achieved one, will experience backlash for violating stereotypical expectations – even as the same behavior is perceived favorably when enacted by White men.

Research supports the claim that Asian Americans experience backlash for dominant behavior. Berdahl and Min (2012) were the first to examine stereotypes of East Asians along the dimensions of competence, warmth, *and* dominance, rather than just competence and warmth as proposed by the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002). They found that “people dislike a dominant East Asian coworker compared to a nondominant East Asian or a dominant or a nondominant White coworker” (p. 141). Additionally, they found that East Asians who are dominant are racially harassed more at work. Importantly, dominant members of other racialized groups did not experience the same risk of harassment, suggesting that the prescriptive stereotype of non-dominance is specific to Asian Americans. More recently, Bu and Borgida (2020) further expanded the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) to include dimensions of submissiveness and self-centeredness. Specifically, they found that a multi-racial group of participants expected Asian Americans to exhibit higher measures of competence and submissiveness and lower measures of warmth and self-centeredness than White Americans.

Just as Asian American women may be more hypo-prototypical leaders than their male counterparts, they may also experience a greater dominance penalty due to layered expectations of submissiveness as Asian Americans and women generally and as Asian American women specifically (i.e., the geisha). Liang and Peters-Hawkins (2017) describe a precarious tightrope

that Asian American women leaders must walk between agentic behavior and communal practices. They note that study participants are often criticized for not being agentic enough yet told they do not behave like “real” Asian American women or are deemed “manipulative” or “overly driven” when they are highly agentic (i.e., the dragon lady; p. 57). It is a seemingly impossible circumstance to manage successfully.

Race-occupation fit. Stereotypes of Asian Americans can also prescribe the occupations or fields where they are likely to achieve professional success. According to the Lack of Fit Model (Heilman, 1983), if the requirements of a job and the identity stereotypes of an individual are perceived as incongruent, then the individual may experience discrimination in hiring, evaluation, and promotion. This perceived lack of fit produces “decreased performance expectations, increased expectations of failure, and decreased expectations of success” (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 579). Therefore, given the stereotypes of Asian Americans (i.e., high competence and low warmth), they may be pigeonholed into stereotypically technical fields and deemed unfit for those requiring high sociability (Lai & Babcock, 2012; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017).

Research confirms assumptions about lack of fit for Asian Americans. Lai and Babcock (2012) found that evaluators were less likely to hire and promote Asian American candidates than White candidates into a position involving social skills (public relations specialist), as opposed to technical skills (IT analyst). Further, they confirmed that Asian Americans’ perceived lack of social skills fully explained the evaluator’s decisions. In another study, Sy et al. (2010) examined leadership perceptions of Asian Americans in engineering (high technical competence) versus sales (high sociability). They found that in the sales position, “Asian Americans were consistently seen as less competent than [White] Americans on the technical aspects of the job”

(p. 914). Thus, even technical competence – a trait typically ascribed to Asian Americans – can be undermined when there is a perceived lack of race-occupation fit.

Liang et al. (2018) and Liang and Peters-Hawkins (2017) further confirm expectations of race-occupation fit in their studies on Asian American women leaders in public schools. Each of the women in these studies entered administration through specialist roles that met stereotypical expectations, such as educational technology or Asian-English dual language programs. Notably, most of the women were born in the United States and spoke only English; yet, bilingual education was an assumed role for them. Thus, the idea of “fitness” was additionally used to propagate the perpetual foreigner stereotype, which “the dominant group uses to describe and prescribe what Asian Americans are and can be” (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 53).

Expectations of race-occupation fit carry particular implications for Asian American women in the nonprofit sector. In such a highly social field, they are more likely to be deemed unfit and may struggle to achieve professional success. Additionally, Lai and Babcock (2012) found that White women – who are “more likely than men to be attuned to the social skills of others and show a greater priority than men for detecting social skills in others” (p. 313) – were less likely than White men to hire and promote Asian Americans due to a perceived lack of social skills. This finding suggests that the predominance of women in the nonprofit workforce may further exacerbate the effect of race-occupation fit.

Intrapersonal Perceptions. The studies previously discussed refer to interpersonal leadership perceptions (an individual’s impression of others), but stereotypes also impact intrapersonal perceptions (impressions of oneself). For example, Asian American women are less likely to self-identify as leaders (Leigh et al., 2020) and may express surprise or shock when others view them as such (Youngberg et al., 2001), in part because they do not see others like

them in positions of leadership and do not relate to common definitions of leadership within dominant U.S. culture (Garma Balón, 2005). Further, Festekjian et al. (2014) found that Asian Americans had both lower intrapersonal leadership perceptions and lower leadership aspirations than White Americans, suggesting a connection between perception and motivation. Ultimately, research indicates that Asian Americans internalize widespread beliefs about inferior leadership ability, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Because Asian American women are less likely to view themselves as leaders, paths to leadership are most often unplanned and delayed. Rather than intentionally seek out such positions, they respond to encouragement from someone else or accept – sometimes reluctantly – positions that are given or thrust upon them (Festekjian et al., 2014; Kawahara, 2007). Research indicates that Asian American women also obtain leadership positions later in life. Nguyen (2020) found that the length of time between graduate education and a formal leadership role spanned an average of 20 years. Similarly, Liang et al. (2018) found that Asian American women attained their first formal positions as public school administrators in their forties or later.

Summary

In summary, the literature clearly demonstrates that Asian American women face a variety of stereotypes in U.S. culture, including racial stereotypes of the model minority, perpetual foreigner, and yellow peril and gendered racial stereotypes of the geisha and dragon lady. These stereotypes present barriers for Asian American women in several ways, as they seek and take on leadership roles at work. First, Asian American women are perceived as hypo-prototypical leaders due to a lack of agentic qualities yet incur a dominance penalty for dominant behavior. They are also pigeonholed into occupations where there is a perceived race-occupation fit, a finding which may have negative impacts on Asian American women in the nonprofit

sector. Lastly, Asian American women are not immune to stereotypes and are less likely to view *themselves* as leaders.

While stereotypes of Asian American women and the resulting professional impact are well documented, little is known about strategies Asian American women employ to *navigate* these stereotypes and emerge as leaders. Further, to my knowledge, no published studies specifically explore the experience of Asian American women in the nonprofit sector. It is within this gap that I situate this study, seeking to answer my research question: How do Asian American women navigate others' stereotypes of their intersectional racialized and gendered identity to lead in the nonprofit sector?

Theoretical Framework

In order to answer this question, I turned to the sociological field of symbolic interactionism to identify a theory that would enhance my analysis of the data I collected. There, I found sociologist Erving Goffman's (1963) work on *stigma*, which he defines as an attribute that disqualifies an individual from full social acceptance. In other words, those in possession of a stigma are perceived as different or outside the norm and thereby less desirable. Importantly, while there are many types of stigma, this study focuses on the stigmatization of race and gender. Further, in a country steeped in a dominant culture of White supremacy and patriarchy, I query how Asian American women leaders navigate the stereotypes associated with their stigmatized identity.

Goffman (1963) offers one possible answer with *covering*, a term he first coined in his seminal work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*:

It is a fact that persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma (in many cases because it is known about or immediately apparent) may nonetheless make a great effort

to keep the stigma from looming large...This process will be referred to as *covering*. (p. 102)

In other words, Goffman (1963) asserts that an individual possessing a stigmatized or marginalized identity downplays or mutes that identity to fit into the dominant culture. Forty years later, legal scholar Kenji Yoshino (2006) expanded on Goffman's (1963) work to create his theory of covering, which I selected as the theoretical framework for this study.

Covering

According to Yoshino (2006), who highlights his positionality as a gay Asian American man, covering is a form of assimilation. It differs from two other forms of assimilation – conversion and passing. With conversion, an individual experiences a demand to reject or destroy a stigmatized identity and take on a dominant one. As an example, Yoshino (2006) highlights his initial desire to become straight, as well as the long history of lobotomies, electroshock treatment, and psychoanalytic therapy intended to “cure” individuals of their gayness. Passing, in contrast, occurs when a person accepts and maintains a stigmatized identity of which others remain unaware. For instance, under the former U.S. military policy, “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” gay service members were asked to pass rather than convert; exclusion came not from being gay (as was the case prior to 1993) but from coming out as gay (Yoshino, 2006). Notably, passing relies on the invisibility of the stigmatized identity. Covering then differs from both conversion and passing in that the underlying identity remains intact (unlike conversion) and is known to others (unlike passing). Individuals who cover do not deny or hide their stigmatized identity. Rather, they mute the aspects of identity that mark them as different. Covering is about doing, not being. An individual can *be* openly gay or Black or disabled; they just cannot *act* gay

or Black or disabled. In this way, “outsiders are included, but only if [they] behave like insiders – that is, only if [they] cover” (Yoshino, 2006, p. 22).

Covering is the most widely used form of assimilation today for two reasons. First, it is a strategy that anyone can use. In fact, Yoshino (2006) argues that *everyone* has covered at some time in their life because everyone has experienced being outside the mainstream. For example, individuals may cover their depression, obesity, alcoholism, shyness, or any other trait deemed unacceptable in dominant culture. Conversion and passing, however, are options generally not available to many “traditional civil rights groups, such as racial minorities or women” (Yoshino, 2006, p. 21), due to the visibility and widely accepted immutability of identities such as race and gender. The second reason covering functions as the most common form of assimilation today pertains to the decreasing popularity of demands for conversion and passing (Yoshino, 2006). As evidence, both the American Psychiatric Association and American Psychological Association now denounce gay conversion therapy, and 23 states have instituted legal bans on the practice (Wilson, 2021). Similarly, the U.S. military repealed its “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in 2011. Yet, Yoshino (2006) notes, many gay individuals continue to face censure for flaunting behavior, such as holding hands in public or dressing in gender-nonconforming ways. Thus, while the court of public opinion has swayed against demands for conversion or passing, the demand to cover remains both morally acceptable and ubiquitous.

Four Axes of Covering

Using his identity as a gay man as an example, Yoshino (2006) proposes four primary axes or dimensions along which people cover an identity: “*Appearance* concerns how an individual physically presents herself to the world. *Affiliation* concerns her cultural identifications. *Activism* concerns how much she politicizes her identity. *Association* concerns

her choice of fellow travelers – lovers, friends, colleagues” (p. 79). As such, a gay man may cover by dressing conservatively in dark colors (appearance), watching football with the boys every Friday night (affiliation), choosing not to lobby for equal protections at the legislature (activism), and avoiding the only other out gay man at work (affiliation).

The act of covering, however, is not always so straightforward. The same behavior might classify as covering along one or more axes but not others. For example, same sex marriage would be considered covering along the axis of affiliation, as the institution of marriage has historically been associated with straight culture, but flaunting along the axes of appearance, activism, and association (Yoshino, 2006). Similarly, the same behavior may classify as covering in one instance or passing in another, “depending on the literacy of the audience” (Yoshino, 2006, p. 92). For instance, a gay man would be passing at work, if colleagues did not know he was gay, but covering with family members who did. Finally, the decision to cover or flaunt is not absolute or final; most individuals cover in some ways in certain contexts at different times and flaunt in others.

Reverse Covering

Yoshino (2006) also introduces the concept of *reverse covering* or *flaunting*, which he defines as “demands that individuals act according to the stereotypes associated with their group” (p. 23). He concedes that marginal progress towards a more inclusive society may make it appear as though groups that were once asked to cover are now being compelled to flaunt. For instance, the popularity of Pride parades and television shows like *Queer Eye* may seem to encourage reverse covering for members of the LGBT+ community. Importantly, however, Yoshino (2006) clarifies that selective appropriation of minoritized cultures by dominant culture should not be mistaken for general acceptance.

In actuality, Yoshino (2006) posits, individuals rarely face pressure from the dominant culture to reverse cover. Rather, such demands come from within the minoritized community. He notes one exception: In what is also known as the double bind, women in a professional context often face demands from the dominant male culture to simultaneously cover and reverse cover. They are expected to be “‘masculine’ enough to be respected as workers and ‘feminine’ enough to be respected as women” (p. 145).

From Covering to Authenticity

Ultimately, Yoshino’s (2006) argument is not one *against* covering but rather *for* authenticity, which is achieved through autonomy. Importantly, he does not offer a “fixed conception of what authenticity might be” (p.190); this will differ for each person. To return to the previous example, just because a gay man watches football does not automatically mean he is covering; he may genuinely enjoy football. What matters is not the behavior itself but the freedom to choose how one wants to be, without coercion or constraint. Only then does one access their true self, that “feeling of being switched on, of being alive” (p. 186). This search for authenticity, Yoshino (2006) concludes, is a universal human impulse and “the most important work we can do” (p. 184). It is also the work, I posit, that frames this study and illuminates the experiences of the 14 Asian American women who participated in it.

Method

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question, “How do Asian American women navigate others’ stereotypes of their intersectional racialized and gendered identity to lead in the nonprofit sector?” This question guided every aspect of my study’s research design. In this section, I detail the major components of my research method, including the overall

research design, participant selection, participant confidentiality, research participants, data analysis, validity, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

I took a qualitative approach to my research. This approach best suited my research question for several reasons, as outlined in Creswell and Creswell (2021). First and most importantly, it allowed me to center the voices of participants. In studying the experiences of Asian American women, I was studying the experiences of a marginalized and often silenced group. As such, it was important to me to report the complexity and depth of participants' experiences in their own words. Second, a qualitative research design allowed me to address my research question in an open-ended and exploratory way. Because Asian American women are understudied in the existing body of literature on race, gender, and leadership (as noted in my literature review), I did not have "traditional instruments, measures, or variables" (Creswell & Creswell, 2021, p. 7) upon which to rely. Finally, a qualitative approach allowed me to position myself in the study by reflecting on my own biases and experiences. As an Asian American woman leader in the nonprofit sector myself, such reflexivity was an especially important aspect for me to include in my research.

Interviews. I carried out this study in two phases, the first of which involved conducting semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. This data collection method allowed me to "go deep" (Creswell & Creswell, 2021, p. 7) with a small number of people, providing the kind of "rich, in-depth qualitative data" (O'Leary, 2017, p. 240) I hoped to collect. As Rubin and Rubin (2012) further elaborate, such interviews allow researchers to "explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own" (p. 3). Given that experiences of stigmatization and marginalization can be both personal

and private, one-to-one interviews also provided greater opportunity to build trust and allowed me to obtain information that participants might not otherwise share in a group setting. Finally, the semi-structured interview offered flexibility to collect the data I intended through my prepared questions (see Appendix A), as well as interesting and unexpected data that emerged through responsive follow-up questions and probes.

Drawing from social justice researcher Theoharis (2007), I also incorporated autoethnography into my research by including myself as a participant in this stage of data collection. Like Theoharis (2007), I believe that combining my own personal experiences with those of other participants increased the authenticity of my research and provided a “deeper and broader understanding of the issues and strategies discussed” (p. 225). Further, my participation allowed me to increase my reflexivity and supplied a constructive outlet to directly surface my own perspective, making it less likely to show up indirectly or unconsciously in my analysis and findings. However, also like Theoharis (2007), I did not wish to privilege my experience over that of any other participant, as I am only one voice of many. For this reason, I assigned myself a pseudonym, masked my identity along with the rest of the participants, and do not otherwise speak to my personal experience throughout the rest of this paper. Another student completing her thesis in the Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership program at St. Catherine University conducted my interview. She used the same interview protocols that I used with the other participants, ensuring consistency between the interviews.

This study initially included a total of nine interviews, including eight interviews I conducted and the interview of me that I had a classmate conduct. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted via Zoom. Questions addressed participants’ experiences as both Asian American women and as leaders in the nonprofit sector. All interviews were audio

recorded and transcribed. Technological difficulty resulted in half of one interview not being recorded. This participant agreed to redo the second part of her interview, which we did. Another participant requested to withdraw from the study two months after her interview. I attempted to understand her rationale and offer options to maintain her participation but did not receive a response and subsequently deleted the entirety of her data from the study, leaving me with a total of eight interviews.

Focus group. In phase two of this study, I conducted a focus group. This data collection method allowed me to hear from a greater number of participants than I would have doing one-to-one interviews alone, as well as gain further insight into themes I uncovered through the interviews. Additionally, a “group possesses the capacity to become more than the sum of its parts, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone don’t possess” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 24). Thus, the collaborative nature of a group conversation – especially one involving participants who share a marginalized identity – drew out data that may not have otherwise emerged in a one-to-one interview, as participants supported each other and expanded upon each other’s ideas. Finally, by gathering data from both one-to-one interviews and a focus group, I was able to “look for corroboration to improve the overall robustness and credibility” (O’Leary, 2017, p. 169) of this study.

The focus group lasted 90 minutes with five participants attending. It was conducted via Zoom. Participants who completed an interview were not included as part of the focus group. I developed the questions (see Appendix B) for the focus group after an initial analysis of the interview data, which allowed me to explore new questions that arose and illuminate themes requiring further detail, explanation, or data. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed.

One participant who planned to attend the focus group was unable to be there at the last minute. Initially, I had been considering her for a one-to-one interview and sent her a list of sample interview questions. Without my asking, after missing the focus group, she sent me her consent form and written responses to these questions. Because her responses were relevant and provided additional insight for this study, and because she had voluntarily and without prompting submitted both her responses and her consent form, I decided to include these responses as part of my data set.

Demographic survey. In addition to either an interview or the focus group, participants completed a demographic survey (Appendix C). This survey was administered via Google form in the week prior to the interview or focus group. It consisted of ten questions: (1) age; (2) ethnicity; (3) highest formal level of education completed; (4) geographic region of workplace; (5) workplace environment (urban/rural/suburban); (6) years of experience in the nonprofit sector; (7) years of leadership experience in the nonprofit sector; (8) type of nonprofit; (9) size of nonprofit by budget; and (10) role in nonprofit. Questions were multiple choice, except for the type of nonprofit and role in nonprofit, which were short answer.

I collected this demographic information to see whether differences or similarities emerged among participants based on each characteristic. However, the demographic survey was completely voluntary. Although choosing not to complete the survey would not negatively impact their participation in the study, I did ask that they mark “prefer not to answer” for any question they did not wish to answer. All participants chose to answer every question. Overall, I did not find significant differences in my findings between participants based on demographic data, except that participants who worked in organizations whose missions were rooted in

systemic change were more likely to identify focusing on systemic change as a personal strategy for navigating stereotypes.

Participant Selection

Criteria. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) identifying as an Asian American woman; (2) having at least five years of experience working in a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization in the United States; (3) self-identifying as a leader in the nonprofit sector; (4) affirming interest in talking about the way they are perceived as Asian American women leaders; and (5) providing a brief example of a stereotype they have experienced as an Asian American woman at their organization.

My rationale for each of these criteria was distinct and purposeful. First, for the purposes of this study, I defined *Asian American* as individuals living in the United States and having origins in any of the original peoples of East Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. My reasons for this can be found in the context and background section of this paper.

Second, I decided to require at least five years of experience because it may take time for individuals to develop strategies for navigating others' perceptions of them in a professional context. Five years ensured a minimum depth of experience to draw upon. Participants were not, however, required to be currently employed at a nonprofit organization.

Third, I chose to have participants self-identify as a leader, rather than require a formal position of leadership, because I wanted a more inclusive sample population. As noted in the literature review, Asian American women are largely underrepresented in formal leadership roles. By making this a requirement, I would have closed this study to individuals who could provide valuable insight into my research question. I wished to learn from the experiences of

both Asian American women leaders who have “made it” and those who see themselves as leaders but have struggled to obtain formal positions of leadership.

Fourth and fifth, I asked participants to affirm interest in this topic and to provide an example, knowing that not all Asian American women may perceive gender or race as influencing factors in how others perceive them; this was not the sample population I sought to study. In order to understand how Asian American women leaders *navigate* racialized and gendered stereotypes, I needed participants who had already self-identified their experiences of said phenomenon.

Recruitment. Recruitment also consisted of two phases, in which I used volunteer and snowball sampling strategies (O’Leary, 2017). First, I recruited for one-to-one interviews via my personal Facebook page and, with permission, a private Facebook group for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) nonprofit professionals, of which I am a member. I was able to obtain enough participants through these means and did not need to continue recruiting elsewhere.

Interested individuals first completed a short screening survey (Appendix D) via Google form to determine study eligibility, using the criteria described above. Twenty individuals completed the screening survey, 15 of whom were determined to be eligible for the study. Of those who did not qualify, four stated that they did not have five years of experience in the nonprofit sector, and one stated that she did not see herself as a leader. I emailed eligible individuals with information about the study, a consent form, and sample interview questions. I chose to email sample questions in advance to give individuals an idea of the type of information they would be asked to share and to provide an opportunity for advance reflection. Of the 15 people I emailed, six did not respond. The other nine became the study participants, minus the

one who later withdrew from the study. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to forward the study information on to anyone they thought might be interested. All but one participant received a \$20 gift card in appreciation for their time. The participant who did not receive a gift card asked me to donate \$20 to a local Asian organization instead, which I did.

I then began recruiting for the focus group. I again posted on Facebook on my personal page and in the group for BIPOC nonprofit professionals, as well as a group for Asian professionals. When this did not generate much response, I emailed my personal networks and posted on my personal LinkedIn page. Unexpectedly, when I posted the screening survey on LinkedIn, it generated more than 1,000 responses, nearly all of which were spam. I downloaded the responses in a spreadsheet and did my best to sort the real responses from the fake. I eliminated responses that were ineligible, included names which are generally gendered as male, had been submitted multiple times, contained unusual characters, or had an otherwise “spam-like” response to the short answer question. Ultimately, I contacted ten individuals, six of whom became my focus group participants (including the participant who could not attend at the last minute and submitted written responses instead). All participants received a \$20 gift card in appreciation for their time.

Participant Confidentiality and Data Security

To ensure participant confidentiality, I used Zoom, which requires a password protected account to access. I used a password protected and secure network and asked participants to do the same. During the focus group and in the focus group consent form, I asked participants to maintain confidentiality regarding information shared in the group, while also noting that confidentiality could not be guaranteed. After collection, I de-identified all data and assigned a pseudonym to each participant. I stored the key and signed consent forms in an encrypted cloud

storage system and password protected folder. I stored audio recordings, transcripts, survey data, and my research memos separately from the key and consent forms but also in an encrypted cloud storage system and password protected folder. I stored all paper files in a locked container. I also ensured that the data analysis software and transcription services I used had sufficient data protection and privacy policies. The data was only accessible to myself and my research advisor. By December 2022, I will destroy all original reports and identifying information that could be linked back to participants.

Research Participants

Ultimately, eight Asian American women completed a one-to-one interview, and six participated in the focus group. I include the participant who submitted written responses as part of the focus group because that was how she intended to participate. Her written responses also represent a similar amount of data as that of focus group participants. The participants ranged in age with 50 percent between the ages of 35 and 44. The two youngest participants were between the ages of 25 and 34 and the oldest participant between the ages of 55 and 65. Of the 14 participants, two identified their ethnicity as Chinese, four as Filipino, four as Indian, three as Korean, and two as Vietnamese. This totals fifteen because one participant identified as both Chinese and Filipino. All the participants have obtained a bachelor's degree, with nearly three-quarters having also earned a master's degree (71%). They resided and worked across the United States with the highest concentrations in the Midwest (43%) and West (29%). All but one participant worked in an urban environment, with the remaining participant working in a suburban environment. Additionally, interview participants self-disclosed their immigration status: half were born in the United States to immigrant parents, two immigrated to the United States at a young age, one immigrated to the United States as an adult, and one moved back and

forth between the United States and her family's country of origin. One participant self-disclosed as queer; no other participants specified their sexual orientation.

Professionally, participants represented a range of experience across the nonprofit sector. They worked in social services, arts, civic engagement, organizing, advocacy, education, youth development, and philanthropy in organizations that varied in size with annual budgets between \$500,000 and \$5 million dollars. Participants held between 5 and 20+ years of experience, with 50 percent reporting between 5 and 11 years. Years of leadership experience were similarly diverse. Three participants reported less than three years of nonprofit leadership experience, while one reported more than fifteen years. The largest segment of participants (36%) reported between 4 and 6 years of leadership experience. Titles varied with five participants self-identifying executive level experience, four director level, three manager level, and two not in a formal leadership position. Notably, all three at the manager level specified that they did not have direct reports. Participants worked in fund development, communications, human resource, and program services, with the most participants (43%) working in fund development (or in fund development prior to an executive role). Out of 14 participants, three also self-identified having corporate experience. For ease of reference, basic information about interview participants is included in Table 1. Information about focus group participants is included in Table 2.

Table 1

Interviewee Pseudonym, Age, Nonprofit Role

Pseudonym	Age	Current Nonprofit Role
Emily	35-44	Communications
Isabelle	35-44	Development
Hemal	35-44	Consultant

Hitha	25-34	Organizer
Le	45-54	Programs
Lisa	25-34	Development
Mia	35-44	Communications
Nitara	45-54	Executive, Consultant

Table 2

Focus Group Pseudonym, Age, Nonprofit Role

Pseudonym	Age	Current Nonprofit Role
Aanya	45-54	Programs
Anne	55-65	Development
Cai	35-44	Human Resource
Chloe	35-44	Development
Eve	45-54	Executive
Sofia	35-44	Programs

Data Analysis

I conducted my data analysis in three stages. First, I engaged in memo writing throughout the data collection process. I took abbreviated notes during interviews, highlighting key words and points to follow up on later. Immediately following the interview, I reviewed my notes and wrote a more detailed analytic memo summarizing my thoughts and questions, memorable stories or critical incidents, surprises, interesting phrasing, and strong or consistent themes. I also transcribed the interview audio recording via a computer automated transcription service. Upon

receiving the transcription, I listened to the entire interview, reviewed the transcript for accuracy, made corrections as needed, and added any additional notes as they occurred to me.

Inductive analysis. After completing all interviews, I reviewed my memos and began initial coding. At this point, my analysis was primarily inductive, as I looked to see what would emerge from the data. First, I read through each transcript, writing notes in the margins and highlighting possible codes. From this initial review, I created the questions for the focus group. Then, I used conventional open coding to conduct a line-by-line examination of each interview transcript in Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis program. I also assigned demographic properties to each data source, which allowed me to search for patterns among participants based on common or diverse characteristics. I repeated these processes with the focus group, though I used a human transcription service for this, given the increased complexity of a group transcription.

My initial analysis generated more than 150 different codes, which I then consolidated and reduced to around 40 codes. At this point, I realized that in breaking the data apart, I was losing the overall narrative arc of each participant. As Maxwell (2013) notes, this is a significant limitation of fragmenting data. Using my codes as a guide, I returned to each raw data source and sketched out an overall narrative arc for each participant. I also used mapping to discover how the codes worked together as a whole (O'Leary, 2017). Specifically, I wrote my remaining codes on post-it notes and physically moved, grouped, and ordered them until meaningful patterns and connections emerged. Through these processes, I identified the themes and sub-themes of my findings.

Deductive analysis. From there, my analysis became primarily deductive. I created a matrix with a column for each theme, reviewed the data from each code, and reassigned it to the appropriate theme. I also created a second matrix, showing which participants had data points in

which themes. In this way, I could easily identify any outliers. Ultimately, my analysis revealed three key findings, with eleven different sub-themes, which I describe in detail in the findings section of this paper.

I note now that after completing my analysis, I made two changes to my original research question. First, I initially intended to investigate how Asian American women leaders navigate stereotypes *and* perceptions. Perceptions involve one individual's judgment of another individual's behavior, while stereotypes constitute a special form of perception – one in which the perception is “based not on the stimulus target's behavior, but on the collective consensus about category membership” (Lee et al., 2001, p. 186). Through my analysis, I realized that participants were nearly exclusively describing not merely perceptions but deeply entrenched, decades-old, racial and gender stereotypes. Therefore, I removed the word *perceptions* to focus only on stereotypes. Second, I originally asked how Asian American women leaders navigate stereotypes to lead *effectively* because effective leadership – which White-Newman (1998) describes as the ability to make a difference or get things done – has functioned as a central theme throughout my graduate program. However, I found that my data did not speak to effective leadership specifically and therefore removed the word *effective* from my research question. These changes resulted in my final research question as presented in this paper: How do Asian American women navigate others' stereotypes of their intersectional racialized and gendered identity to lead in the nonprofit sector?

Validity

I used five techniques to increase the validity or credibility of this study, as explicated by Creswell and Creswell (2021). First, as already mentioned, I practiced reflexivity to manage my own positionality, subjectivities, biases, and beliefs. I kept memos on my thoughts, reactions,

and expectations throughout the research process; incorporated autoethnography into my research by including myself as a participant; and included a reflexive statement in this paper. Second, I engaged in member checking to ensure accurate interpretation of data by confirmed understanding of what a participant was saying in the moment. When necessary, I followed up with clarifying questions by email. I also used the focus group as an opportunity to check and gain a more nuanced understanding of my interview findings. Third, I looked for and reported contradictions or disconfirming evidence within my data set and in the existing literature. Fourth I used triangulation by using different sources to establish the themes of this study, including 14 different participants and two data collection methods. Finally, I provided an external audit for this study through the review of an experienced research advisor.

Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical concerns of this study included risk to participants, confidentiality, consent, and the involvement of participants from a marginalized group (O’Leary, 2017). While this study posed minimal risk to participants, I recognized the possibility that they may become upset or uncomfortable if personal and probing questions stirred up negative emotions or memories. To mitigate this risk, I informed participants that they could take a break, decline to answer, go off camera, or stop their participation at any time without negative consequence. There was also a risk of negative consequences if anything participants said about an organization or colleague were to get back to that organization or colleague. The likelihood of this occurring increased in a group setting. Further, using a virtual meeting platform created a slight risk of security breach. To mitigate these risks, I took steps to ensure participant confidentiality and data security, as previously described.

To ensure informed consent, I emailed the consent form to participants after confirming their eligibility for the study. I asked them to read through the form, which included information about risks and confidentiality, to decide whether they still wished to participate. I also clearly stated that participation was completely voluntary; this was especially important to mitigate any potential conflict of interest, as I recruited in part through my personal networks. When I met with participants, I orally reviewed the consent form with them, checking for understanding and allowing time for questions. I informed them that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, until October 1, 2021, with no negative consequence. Participants then electronically signed the consent form and emailed it to me before beginning the interview or focus group. If participants were unable to electronically sign at the time, they sent me an email stating that they received and understood the information in the consent form and consented to participate in the study.

Lastly, I was acutely aware of ethical considerations inherent to working with a marginalized population. As Parson (2019) maintains, such research traditionally benefits the academic researcher, while participants and their communities gain very little in return. Worse, when researchers fail to examine their own positionality and biases, they risk inadvertently “reproducing existing power/knowledge frameworks that marginalize underrepresented groups...implicitly reconstituting the very dynamics one hoped to document and interrupt” (Parson, 2019, p. 16). Importantly, my status as an insider who shared a marginalized identity with participants did not relieve me of this ethical burden. While I am an Asian American woman, I differed from participants in important ways, as I noted in my reflexivity statement. I also maintained a privileged outsider status as a researcher with decision making power (Parson, 2019). To manage this power and maintain the authentic voices of participants, I practiced

researcher reflexivity and engaged in member checking – practices which also helped increase the credibility of this study, as previously indicated. Additionally, I shared the results of this study with participants in hopes that this might provide further benefit to them.

Findings

Through my analysis, I found three clear themes that helped me explain how Asian American women leaders navigate stereotypes in the nonprofit sector. These themes included constraining conditions, strategies for coping, and strategies for self-determination. Additionally, sub-themes emerged within each main theme. Following, I identify, define, and support each theme and its corresponding sub-themes, through the words and experiences of the 14 Asian American women leaders who participated in this study.

Constraining Conditions

In the context of this study, the term constraining conditions refers to external perceptions or pressures that limit and define the participants of this study. This theme included three sub-themes. First, participants identified stereotypes of Asian American women prevalent in dominant U.S. culture. Second, participants detailed ways in which values and norms from within their own cultural groups often reinforced stereotypes. Third, participants described how the first two sub-themes resulted in them struggling to be perceived as a leader. Each of these sub-themes represent constraining conditions that participants needed to navigate, as subsequently described here.

Identifying stereotypes. Participants universally identified and spoke at length about stereotypes they've encountered in their own work and leadership – including that they are quiet and submissive, hardworking and high achieving, and foreign and inscrutable. These findings affirm what is already known and well documented, as described in the literature review.

Notably, little has changed since the model minority stereotype first rose to prominence in the 1960s, even in racially conscious, progressive nonprofit spaces.

Of particular interest, while all participants recognized the significance of their identity as Asian American *women*, they more often referred to race or ethnicity as their most salient identity. This may be because the model minority stereotype applies to Asian American men as well as Asian American women. Participants also described the nonprofit sector as predominantly comprising White women, which may further explain why most participants attributed stereotypes at work to race and not gender. Significantly, one interviewee and one focus group participant, both of whom had worked for male-dominated Asian-led organizations, also experienced expectations of being quiet and submissive but attributed this to gender.

Quiet and submissive. More than any other stereotype, participants identified expectations, explicit or implicit, of Asian American women being quiet and passive or submissive. Seven out of eight interviewees explicitly used some combination of the words *quiet*, *passive*, *submissive*, or *compliant*. The remaining interviewee described the perception that Asian American women “don’t have loud voices” and “won’t cause a ruckus...will keep the status quo.” Other similar phrases included “yielded to authority,” “follow the rules,” “won’t challenge,” “not going to speak up,” “won’t talk back,” “not call shit out,” “not disruptive,” “not rock the boat,” and “not involved in politics or advocacy or activism.”

Most often, participants ascertained these stereotypes based on what happened when others perceived them as *not* behaving in the prescribed manner. Le recalled being told by her supervisor and executive director, “I wish you could just sometimes not share what you’re thinking all the time and just sit and listen.” Many participants struggled with being perceived as “aggressive,” “overbearing,” “demanding,” “cold,” or “antagonistic.” Isabelle noted the extremes

between being “very quiet, demure” or “the tiger mom, the dragon lady.” Hemal observed the way in which she was treated differently from other racialized colleagues:

I think the thing that probably I most butted up against when I was in those [leadership] roles was this idea that I was like aggressive or loud or like very opinionated, as though I could not be those things as an Asian American woman. Whereas, I had colleagues – Black colleagues, Latinx colleagues – who could be those things. They may have been called names or things like that, but like the expectation [towards me] was like, “Oh well, you won’t be very forceful in your language, or you won’t really say things.” It was almost like being assertive was very surprising to people in some ways.

Some participants expressed confusion or surprise when faced with such perceptions.

Nitara recounted losing funding for her organization when she was perceived as “too forceful” and “bossy” during a collaborative project. She, however, thought her requests were just part of the work:

I said, “Do they realize that I don’t have a team?” Like I am my team. So if I was saying, “Would you mind doing that spreadsheet?” it’s because they had done it before, and I didn’t have anybody else to do it. I thought we were partners, and so when you’re in a partnership, you figure out who can do it best and most efficiently.

Similarly, Le stated, “I thought I was trying to help in the candid conversation, but I think they viewed it as me trying to just cause trouble. And so I think I was labeled a troublemaker from the beginning.” She was later fired from this job and was unemployed at the time of the interview. She surmised, “The funny thing is I demonstrated that I can have a voice, but then I got fired for it.”

Sometimes, negative reactions from colleagues caused participants to question or doubt themselves. After a conflict with a colleague who viewed her as “antagonistic” for asking questions, Mia added:

There’s this question that pops up: What could I have done differently? But that’s a lot of pressure. Like it puts the responsibility all on me and assumes there was something I could have done when the reality is maybe it’s not about me at all...but that’s not where my brain goes. My brain goes to, what’s wrong with me?

Meanwhile, Aanya reflected on the emotional stress that a mismatch between her own self-perception and the perception of others creates:

As I’ve had more management opportunities and more of a leadership role...Sometimes on occasions when I’ve been assertive, it has been regarded as aggressive because they weren’t expecting it, and that’s been heartbreaking for me...and I think it’s something I’m trying to work out and figure out what I’m doing wrong there.

While most participants described expectations to be quiet or passive coming from colleagues, not all did. Isabelle easily identified stereotypes of Asian American women. However, she encountered this most often with external partners, such as donors, and indicated she did not feel that she experienced them within her own office: “Mine was almost always external. You know, my office is very socially progressive and social justice oriented. So, you know, I never felt, personally I never felt that from my, like my direct colleagues.”

Hardworking and high achieving. Many participants identified a secondary stereotype of being high achieving “worker bees.” Chloe noted how expectations to be hardworking, quiet, and submissive are all connected to the model minority stereotype. “I believe the model minority myth is so pervasive. You are expected to show up and perform at a pace of excellence, however,

still be subservient and amenable to your other counterparts, especially White colleagues.” She experienced this in her own career, as she was “always asked to take on more tasks because I was told I would be compliant.”

Hemal associated this perception with unrealistic work expectations. She recalled her boss emailing her a week after a major surgery, asking when she would be back – after she’d already told him it would be a four-week recovery. She also described carrying the weight of an entire organization without any support from her board:

The board was essentially not engaged...After the board hired me [as CEO], they just sort of checked out. And so I was like having to fundraise on my own, having to rebuild an organization from the ground up because the infrastructure had been shot to hell. You know, vendors hadn’t been paid. Grants hadn’t been closed out appropriately. Like all kinds of stuff was going on with that organization, and it just sort of felt like everything rested on my shoulders.

Foreign and inscrutable. Lastly, some participants identified a stereotype or perception of being foreign and inscrutable. In the focus group, Aanya shared her experience working at a museum:

I will walk through the exhibit spaces at the museum and talk to visitors...And the first question they’ll ask is, “Where are you from?” I can never be from [here], even though I’ve lived here for 18 years, and I’ve been in the States for...since I was a college student, and I’m 54 years old.

Others in the focus group quickly chimed in. Eve asked, “I’m curious how many of us are tired of answering, ‘Where are you from?’” The entire group broke into smiles and laughs, while Cai responded, “Just hearing that, my body just reacts.”

For some participants, perceptions of foreignness extended to being emotionally foreign or inscrutable. Sofia recalled with frustration an executive director who sometimes referred to her as unreadable. Hemal similarly stated,

The other thing was like I don't know how to show emotion. And I was like anyone who knows me, I was in drama and theater and debate. Do you really think I don't show emotion, or is this the expectation that you have? And I was like...do you actually know me, or is this like an idea of me that you're reflecting?

Overlaying culture with stereotypes. Participants described values and norms within Asian culture and nonprofit culture, which often reinforced the prevailing stereotypes found in dominant U.S. culture. These cultural influences, together with stereotypes, sent overlaying messages from multiple directions prescribing who and how Asian American women should be.

Asian culture. Participants identified shared cultural traits across several Asian sub-cultures, including expectations to “put your head down,” “do your work,” “not rock the boat,” “suppress emotion,” and “express gratitude for what you do have.” Several participants spoke about the strong influence their parents played in instilling these traits. Nitara, whose parents immigrated to the United States from India, explained:

Put your head down, do your work. Don't cause a ruckus, don't raise too many red flags, don't speak up – that was very much my parents lived that...And for me, even now, like when I told [my mom] that I'm going to go to my board or go to a client and say [something]. And she said, “Why? You don't want to lose your job,” you know? It comes from just being part of a family where you don't want to rock the boat. You should express gratitude for what you do have...[My parents] sacrificed a lot of things, but they

didn't want to see us sacrifice or lose out or miss out because of something that didn't like go with the flow, you know.

Emily, whose parents immigrated to the United States from the Philippines, reflected on the ways her cultural upbringing shows up at work. She described struggling to stand out for promotion because “you're not supposed to like brag about yourself or kind of be showy about your accomplishments.” She also connected the value of hard work to other cultural norms, such as suppressing emotions or not asking for help – which has sometimes made delivering negative feedback or disciplining colleagues difficult:

There is this notion of like you do suppress a lot of emotions and do you try kind of like not even process but just push them aside and just get back to work...I don't wanna be mad at people for not doing their job or just this idea of like, well, I'll just take care of it myself... You know, you just kind of silently suffer and take care of everything on your own.

Rather than Asian culture generally, some participants focused explicitly on Asian *immigrant* culture. Hemal shared:

I think definitely like my identity as an Asian, and then particularly as both the child of immigrants [from India to Hong Kong] and an immigrant to the United States, also had a huge part in that, right. I don't have the same networks a lot of my colleagues did. I moved to the United States as an adult. I didn't have family here. So everything I had to do, I had to build on my own. And so when you sort of think about it like that, like you work hard. You put your head down. You don't complain about shit. You just kind of keep moving. And that was very much like a part of what I had internalized, growing up with my parents as immigrants in Hong Kong, because that's what they did. And so it was

sort of like, okay, well you move to a new country and that's what you do, right? And working hard is the pathway to success.

Respect or deference to authority, which may be perceived in dominant U.S. culture as submissiveness, emerged as another cultural value. Emily shared another example from her work experience:

My old job, I would disagree with my boss, but I would ultimately just say like, “Okay, I’ll take care of it.” Like I would just kind of be like yes or let it go. And he hated that. That was like the ironic part is he actually wanted me to argue with him more. And it just, I felt like that's disrespectful. You're my boss. I just kind of do what you want me to do and then carry on...Ultimately, I would just go along with it and not really speak up.

Le, who was born in Vietnam and grew up in the United States, also described interactions imbued with cultural expectations of respect for authority. However, as the only interviewee who worked at an Asian-led organization, the situation was reversed. Unlike Emily, Le struggled when her executive director felt that she was not demonstrating enough deference for both his organizational position and his status as an older Asian man, relative to her status as a younger Asian woman. She asserted “the empowered voice, the Asian female voice, of raising your voice as a female” was “not welcome” at that organization. She shared numerous examples of conflict with her executive director, until, as previously noted, she was ultimately fired.

Anne, the only other participant who named experience at an Asian-led organization, offered a similar analysis. She explained:

I was expected by the board to be a good Chinese daughter. So good Chinese daughters don't argue back. We don't use our voice. We don't question...I've had to kind of navigate that in a way where I just said, “I will no longer work for any Asian nonprofit.”...unless

there were a job out there where a board was very enlightened and supported their ED or CEO. It's very difficult as women leaders to get that.

Nonprofit culture. Unexpectedly, participants described nonprofit culture in ways that paralleled descriptions of both Asian culture and stereotypes of Asian American women. This included an expectation of being overworked and underpaid – with pride. Emily assessed:

There is this notion of you work for a very low salary. You have absolutely no resources, and that's just how it is. Like you just work your ass off, and you don't complain about it. You're just thankful that you get to work in a field that you love. So I do feel like there's this like, I don't know, this mentality that I wish that the nonprofit sector did not have. I think people should be demanding living wages. I think people should have a better work life balance and that there shouldn't be this notion of, you know, being a workaholic and wearing that as a badge of honor.

Several participants described an expectation to achieve results without sufficient resources, such as staffing or technology, to do the job. More than half of interviewees identified being asked to perform duties beyond their job description. Le, who held the title Director of Program Services, listed fund development, marketing, operations, and human resources as additional duties she was given but for which she was not compensated. She reflected:

I feel like there was an expectation related to being in a nonprofit. We're expected to take on more duties. Whereas the corporate sector, if it didn't fall within your job description, it didn't apply... You weren't asked to do the work. In nonprofit, I feel like we're asked to do way more.

Noting the irony of working at an organization that talked about economic justice for workers and labor rights, Hemal similarly surmised:

There's an expectation that because you care about the work, because you care about the cause, you're going to be underpaid and work really hard and do three jobs instead of the one that you should be doing as a worker. And I certainly have that experience.

Struggling to be seen as a leader. All participants identified struggles to be perceived as a leader, which they attributed to a perceived lack of congruency between themselves and who or what a leader looks like in dominant U.S. culture. Additionally, participants described the effects of this struggle, which included obstacles to promotion into senior or executive roles and lack of recognition from others once they obtained those roles. Participants also frequently described struggles with confidence or self-doubt, making it difficult for them to even see themselves as leaders.

Incongruency. Participants identified a lack of congruency between perceptions of themselves and of “good” leaders in the United States or at their organizations. They explicitly stated that leaders are “Western,” “White,” and “male,” with a leadership style described as “aggressive,” “confident,” “loud,” “top down,” and “command and control” – characteristics directly at odds with stereotypes of Asian American women.

Hemal recalled being told by a colleague that she had “no leadership qualities whatsoever.” She also described an interaction where she gave a senior director feedback on their work in an area where she held expertise; the senior director told her they needed to check with the other, older and White, vice president before making the change:

So it was really kind of like, do any of you take me seriously as a leader in this space?

And that was really hard to be able to live with that, particularly in a space that was supposed to be explicitly feminist as well, where we talked about the fact that women leaders were often devalued for their work and skill sets. So let's just say, I got the

message very quickly, right, that leaders don't look like me. Leaders don't have my background. Leaders don't have my identity.

When asked whether Asian American women are perceived as leaders, Isabelle elaborated:

I think they're not, especially if you're, you tend to be more quiet and introverted. I think it's hard. I feel like the American leadership characteristics are very, it's very Western, I guess, for lack of a better word. It's very like, you're outgoing. You're loud. I mean, loud as in you project. You have a presence. You're confident...really modeled after like a White male CEO, right?...And I think if you're not that and you have a different style, I think people just assume, oh, you don't have leadership qualities, right? Because people naturally gravitate towards the outgoing and the charismatic leaders...I think as an Asian American woman, you're running against that.

Nitara added that nonprofit leaders are required to be good fundraisers, something that she felt put her at a disadvantage:

Right now, I feel like a good leader is someone that brings in money to the organization and has a network. And I'll be honest, as a woman of color, not all of us have those things. They're not the first things I lead with...If someone wanted me to bring my powerful connections and my network and my net worth, I don't got that. But nonprofits often, that's what they're recruiting for.

Participants also identified physical characteristics, such as being short or being perceived as young, as another point of incongruity. Emily explained:

There's a couple of things, I think, that work against me as an Asian American woman. One is I look young. I'm actually older than some of the people who are on the senior leadership team. But people don't know how old I am...just like the physical appearance,

has not helped. I'm also very short. You know, I think all those things, just there is something about executive presence that there is a physical kind of idea that people have.

Promotion. For many participants, the struggle to be perceived as a leader manifested through difficulties obtaining executive or senior leadership roles. At the time of her interview, Lisa had just learned that she did not get the director position of her department:

I actually applied for this director role back in October, was one of three finalists. I didn't get the role. And when they offered me the manager position instead...I learned that they didn't hire anybody. So they chose no one over me to be in the director role, which meant the past six months or five months I've been in the organization, despite my title being manager, I have done interim director duties.

So when I was, I didn't ask to apply for the director role. I was invited by our ED to apply again, but then I still didn't get it. I was really confused. Am I not part of the leadership plan or trajectory of this organization? If I'm not ready now, will you give me the mentorship or leadership that I need? Obviously not, because I didn't get it. As of last week, someone else was hired.

Other participants described seeing White colleagues advance faster and further than them. When Mia thought about who has moved up in her organization, she reflected, "time and time again, I would say it's been White women." She further explained how this was especially frustrating, given the conversations about racial equity and justice happening at her organization:

So I'm like, you have a person of color in your office who has been there for 10 years, and you're saying let's make this other [White woman] who has no development experience the director of development? And that was really upsetting to me. It wasn't

even necessarily that I wanted the role. If someone were to ask me today, I would say no, I don't want that role, but it just like it made me feel completely unseen.

Interns and assistants. Some participants identified struggles with being perceived as a leader once they made it to a senior leadership role. They recalled instances where they'd been mistaken as an "intern" or "executive assistant" or presumed to not hold the leadership position that they did. This occurred most often in settings with donors or where they were interacting with the public. Eve shared:

When I first got there as an ED, I remember going to outreach events, and I remember distinctly going to one... We were tabling so that we could try to recruit more board members, and two of my board members, who were White, volunteered to be there with me...but there were a lot of times when they were like, "Oh well, you need to talk to her. She's the ED." And I don't know, I feel like at this outreach piece, there was just an assumption that I was an assistant or something, or just a volunteer or whatever, because I'm not tall and I'm not White.

Self-doubt. Participants struggled to not only get others to see them as leaders but also to see *themselves* as leaders. Hitha, Eve, and Isabelle each explicitly referred to "imposter syndrome," while others identified "self-doubt" or feeling "not good enough" or that they "don't belong." Isabelle reflected, "I honestly don't think I could call myself [a leader] a couple of years ago, regardless of title. I just like, I didn't see myself that way. I didn't think anybody saw me that way." Nitara added:

In this organization I'm leading locally with an almost all White board, who has decades more experience than I do, I sometimes start down this path of using my voice and my

experience, and then I physically feel myself backing up in self-doubt because I see the way someone looks at me or looks at another person around the table.

Summary. Overall, the participants in this study identified a variety of stereotypes and cultural norms, which undermined their ability to be perceived as a leader. Specifically, they faced stereotypes from the dominant U.S. culture of being quiet and submissive, hardworking and high achieving, and foreign and inscrutable. Often, the values and norms within Asian culture and nonprofit culture reinforced these stereotypes. Because stereotypes of Asian American women were incongruent with perceptions of leaders in dominant U.S. culture, participants struggled to be seen as leaders in their organizations. These struggles frequently manifested as obstacles to promotion into senior or executive roles, lack of recognition from others once they obtained those roles, and self-doubt about their own leadership abilities. Ultimately, this finding features the constraining conditions that limited and defined who and how participants should be.

Strategies for Coping

The participants in this study identified several strategies for coping with the constraining conditions described in the previous finding. First, they fulfilled others' expectations and avoided backlash by enacting stereotypes of submissiveness, quietness, hard work, and achievement. Second, they attempted to appear less foreign and more "like a leader" by conforming to dominant U.S. culture. Third, rather than attempting to influence others' perceptions of them, participants regulated their own internal responses to those perceptions. Finally, participants relied on other people, including those who would offer emotional support and those who would act in career-supporting roles. Notably, while these strategies were each effective at different times in different ways, they all involved working *within* the bounds of dominant U.S. culture.

Enacting stereotypes. One strategy for navigating stereotypes was to actively lean into them. Specifically, participants fulfilled expectations to be quiet and submissive, as well as hardworking and high achieving.

Quiet and submissive. Several participants described enacting the stereotype of quietness or submissiveness, identifying multiple reasons for this. Emily referred to a work relationship where she would “just kind of execute stuff and not really question it. Not really kind of try to fight whatever she wants to do, like let’s just take care of it. And it’s easier that way.”

Nitara, meanwhile, sought to avoid specific consequences, such as losing funding or a job:

The reason I didn't say something was because I was afraid. They were a funder, or they were an elected official, and I didn't want to – here we go again that phrase – rock the boat. I didn't want to put the organization I was representing in jeopardy of losing that partnership, that support, or that funding.

...During COVID, my husband dropped to part-time salary...So I didn't rock the boat too much. Like when those elected officials, when I was in those rooms, I just went off screen, and I left, and I dealt with it because I wasn't in a position to not have that job. And so I couldn't risk my role.

Isabelle viewed not “rocking the boat” as a “survival” strategy in White dominant spaces, where she felt like she stuck out:

You just want to survive. You just want to make it to the next day, even though internally it didn’t feel good. Like when something like microaggression happens or a straight up racist thing happens, like you’re angry and you’re mad and then you’re like...I just got to

get my work done. I'm just going to put this fake smile on my face, write that nice email back, and just move on, you know.

...I think what I did the most is just being very quiet. I think not drawing attention to myself was a way of coping. And it's like, I wanted to be as invisible as possible in all these environments. Like if they can't see me, they won't like bother me, or they won't do things to me. It's like I just want to blend in, even though I know physically I won't blend in, but I just want to blend into the background.

Mia wondered how much of her behavior came from her and how much was conforming to how others expected her to be:

I try not to be too forceful or directive...And if there's something I'm disagreeing with or feel like there's some conflict around, I'll always try to start and end on a positive note. I'll use exclamation points to show friendliness or enthusiasm. All of that takes up a lot of mental space and energy. It can maybe take me half an hour to write an email and say things just right, instead of just saying it in five minutes and maybe not caring so much. It can be exhausting caring so much about what people think...And now when I'm thinking about stereotypes and identity, I'm like huh, is this because this is just the way I am, or is this because I'm reacting, consciously or not, to how others expect me to be?

Hardworking and high achieving. Five out of eight interviewees described feeling intense pressure to excel. They expressed a need to “do more, be educated more,” “work really hard,” “be so good they can’t deny you,” “be competent and capable,” and “show you why I’m supposed to be here.” Nitara expounded, “I would be the last one to leave the office. I would bring work home with me. I felt like I was passionate about it, but I also had to prove myself.”

Mia further referred to an “achiever mentality,” as well as an inability to “fail or to like show vulnerability, or what might be perceived as weakness.”

Hemal attributed much of her professional success to “living really hard into the model minority myth and just working my butt off.” She stated:

So people knew they could drop things on my lap because it would get done, right. I wouldn't complain about it, or I'd be like, “I need your help,” and no one will help. And then I would get on anyway. So, you know, it was almost kind of like reinforcing this idea, like oh, Hemal's a hard worker, right? She'll do it. And I think a lot of that was rooted in the fact that I was Asian.

While Hemal recognized the ways in which her behavior reinforced stereotypes about Asian American women, she didn't think she was “connecting the dots” as fully when she was younger. She noticed there was even “some pride” in being the “get shit done kind of person... Throw anything at me, and I can do it.” Additionally, she felt pressure as the only Asian American – often the only racialized person – in a room:

Some of it was also because I was the only in a lot of those spaces. I felt like I couldn't let people down, right. I was the one. I think I was actually, perhaps the first, either the first or second Asian American vice president, and so that was also something I was really cognizant [about].

Conforming to dominant culture. Another strategy participants utilized to navigate stereotypes was to conform or assimilate into dominant U.S. culture. This included general assimilation, as well as specific attempts to meet the dominant culture's expectations of leaders through credentialing and by changing their appearance.

Assimilation. Isabelle, Emily, Mia, and Hemal all identified navigating predominantly White spaces for most of their life. Emily reflected on assimilating into White dominant culture from an early age and the impact it has had on her career and identity:

There is like a lot of internalized kind of Whiteness or assimilation that has happened without me being aware of it, and I think a lot of that really came to light in this past year, particularly with George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, just that kind of for me was a realization that I know nothing about diversity, equity, and inclusion, despite being a person of color. It also made me think about in the context of working in nonprofits. I think partly my success in nonprofits is because I've been in predominantly White spaces most of my life. So there is this kind of feeling of I'm used to being a certain way...[my parents] didn't speak Tagalog to us when we were growing up...They were like, well, we wanted you to not be different, and we didn't want you to feel like you were not like everybody else. So that obviously, good intentions, but it has repercussions, I think, further down the line for how you see yourself and your identity as an adult.

Hemal cited intentionally sticking to “safe” topics of conversation with colleagues. She shared the aspects of herself with which she felt they were more likely to relate and avoided others. Being a “foodie” or “a huge sci-fi and fantasy nerd” was fair game, but “the Indian aspects of my culture” or the process of “becoming a citizen” was not. She explained:

It often felt really, for me not to like stand out or like draw attention to myself, it was easier just to, not to not mention those things...I think for me, it was sort of like an acceptance that work would not be the place where I would get to be myself...So like my friends all know about like all the Indian stuff, like my cultural heritage stuff. But people

at work, maybe not necessarily so, right. And so that, I think was something I kind of came to terms with, was like it's just easier to compartmentalize.

Le described assimilating to the point where she “never even thought of [her]self as Asian.” She could identify the impact of race when she was in school or the “fetishization” that occurred when she was waiting tables but not in a nonprofit professional context:

Like I assimilated into the American female perspective in terms of being overlooked – not because I'm Asian...That's the crazy thing. Even though in school, I always identified as Asian female, but in my professional world, I always identified just as female and having the same kinds of struggles as other females, but I did not recognize that I had the additional thing.

I don't know if it's because I just wasn't, it wasn't as glaring. You know, I'll have to, I thought about that, and I'm like, maybe it's because I was raised [professionally] by White women, you know, that I only saw things through that lens of being submissive to just males in general or being overlooked for positions because I was female, not because I was Asian female.

Physical appearance. Some participants identified a particular aspect of assimilation, which involved altering their appearance or developing “executive presence.” At age 48, Nitara expressed that she still gets “that feeling I felt when I first started working where I’m like, ‘I’m going to dress up the part,’ you know?” She further explained:

Putting my hair up and wearing glasses makes me look older. I mean, now I've got gray so maybe, but like, I feel Asian women, when we get together, this is what we talk about...I wear a suit. I don't think I could ever show up to a meeting in jeans...How we

show up, the language we use, the intonation, what we wear – it presupposes like their interactions with us.

...I've taken all those courses that, one of the leadership development, they videotaped us and they were like, look at the way you're sitting. I just gave you an assignment to talk to your board. And you are not with the Wonder Woman pose. You are standing and sitting in a way that makes you feel like they're in control.

Hemal noted how pressure to conform to dominant culture meant that she could not practice a part of her own culture:

There are a lot of elements of how I look and dress that don't really mesh with sort of White supremacy ideas of professionalism...Most of the women in my family have their noses pierced. I chose not to do that because I was worried how I would be seen in the workplace.

Credentialing. Another way that participants assimilated involved establishing their credentials – as defined by dominant culture – up front. Chloe stated:

When I am leading on a project or introducing a new process I am implementing, I have to always set a precedent of stating, “I have been in the fundraising field for over x years,” or state the years of tenure I have at the organization to ensure I will be taken seriously. It's really frustrating to have to state my credentials on the front end, but I found that early on colleagues will question me more and force me to prove I have the expertise to lead. I've never had to use this tactic with other API groups.

Nitara further elaborated on this point:

I fell into that pattern, you know, of like listing what I've done and how I've worked or where I've worked or whom I've worked with, like I had a job at [a national foundation].

You'd be surprised, like how that got my resume looked at. And I would say things like the year I graduated. So people knew I had more than a decade experience...But sometimes I would model what I saw other people doing just to kind of walk in the room with that...the credentials.

Practicing self-regulation. Instead of or in addition to attempting to influence or change how others perceive them, some participants spoke about regulating their own reactions to such perceptions. They primarily did this through therapy, mindfulness, and self-care.

Therapy. Emily, Hitha, Lisa, Mia, and Sofia all identified using therapy to help process their emotions and experiences. Emily, Lisa, and Mia explicitly stated that they sought out an Asian American therapist. Emily elaborated:

So this past year, I've actually been seeing a Filipino therapist...I was originally seeing a White woman, and I ended up changing actually in the middle of all the stuff that I was experiencing last summer. And so, yeah, like that, she's been an amazing resource. And it has, I think, for me at least, made a huge difference seeing someone that identifies with my cultural background...much more quickly than the therapist I saw before, she was able to connect a lot of the dots in a way that I probably didn't even realize was not happening with the previous therapist. So she's been a really huge resource.

Lisa explained her need to attend therapy to address past work trauma:

I had decided I need to seek professional therapy for my work trauma. Everything that I experienced at my immigrant rights organization. I was starting to have a hard time deciding whether I was experiencing the same issues at my current employer or if I was projecting. To some extent that absolutely interplays with who I am as an Asian

American woman questioning what mental health looks like, what all of I have experienced looks like.

Mindfulness. Some participants also identified using mindfulness, particularly for emotional awareness, to self-regulate. Hitha asserted:

I think it takes a lot of emotional awareness for me to just step back and interrupt those, like narratives... There have been times where I've been in meetings and there is a voice that pops into my head that's like, you're stupid, you're stupid, but I'm able to interrupt that and be like, okay, that's like from a long time ago, and I'm going to not listen to that, but I'm going to acknowledge that and move forward.

...I think, like in in this virtual world that we're in now still, I think Zoom helps with that sometimes where I can turn off my camera, mute myself, and just like take a minute and just be like, "Okay, let's like breathe for five minutes and let's just like completely just remind myself of who I am and any anger that might be like overcoming me." But in person, it's a lot harder.

Emily reflected on a conflict she experienced with a colleague:

I think that's just also the exercise that I need to remember is like don't just hold all these things inside. Like, you need to kind of voice how you're feeling in the moment... So that's been, for me, like a big unlearning is no, like you do need to kind of process your feelings and also share what you're feeling rather than just letting it kind of fester.

Isabelle surmised that she had been "numb for so long," until she was forced to confront her feelings after the murder of George Floyd:

Finally, people were talking about the things that I always was bothered by, but I also didn't want to talk about it because I was like what's the point, right? You just bury it

deep in your heart...[But] it still went somewhere. You know, it's like it went inside of me, and I think it perpetuated this kind of apathy and wanting to not, yeah, just not feel...And then, like last summer, it was forced on all of us. I think that was the first time I actually sat with myself and allowed myself to feel what I've always felt but was too scared to express.

Self-care. Self-care presented another way in which participants self-regulated. Hitha noted the importance of “rest and relaxation and healing.” Hemal elaborated on this point:

The thing you should really protect more than anything is your well-being, whether that's your mental health, your emotional health, your physical health. Don't let that be the thing that stops you from achieving some really important like potentially groundbreaking work. The work we do in our sector is so important...Our work is really critical and has a huge impact on the communities we serve. So in order to do that effectively, we really need to care for ourselves radically. And so getting enough rest, getting enough sleep, getting water. If you see a therapist, seeing a therapist, see your doctor regularly, but really making sure that you're taking care of yourself.

Finding your people. All participants named the importance of finding your people. This included receiving validation and support from other Asian American women and racialized people, as well as finding mentors, sponsors, and allies for professional growth and advancement. While I present these as distinct categories, many participants spoke about the same person filling multiple roles, depending on the context. Additionally, although I list this sub-theme as a “strategy for coping,” at times it also helped facilitate multiple “strategies for self-determination,” which I detail in a later finding.

Asian Americans and racialized people. Nearly all participants identified the need to seek validation and support among community, particularly with other Asian American women and racialized people. This was especially important for participants who worked in predominantly White organizations or fields, such as fundraising, where they were often the only Asian person or racialized person in a room. Hemal asserted, “Even if the shared experience is one of like sharing the shit that you're going through, knowing that you're not alone and that you're not the only person experiencing this can give you a lot of relief.”

Often, participants needed to find or create that community for themselves. Mia found support in an online Facebook community for BIPOC nonprofit professionals. Emily joined her organization’s newly formed Asian Pacific Islander affinity group. She reflected:

That has kind of helped change my perspective of my current job, and a lot of it was because I realized there's other Asians. There [are] other people that work here. So there isn't the diversity in my particular unit, but there is diversity within the [organization]...So that has been inspiring for me to see all these other Asian American leaders or Asian Pacific Islander leaders. It feels like, very comforting, to kind of have that network. So find your people. Find your network, so you're able to kind of navigate the situations that you'll come into the in the field.

While participants affirmed the importance of community with non-Asian racialized people, many also acknowledged the complexities of these relationships. Isabelle described her experience of being “in the middle” and how that changed after the Atlanta shootings:

This is the first time in my life where I hear people talk about that like yeah, there is, Asian Americans do feel racism and are recipients of racism. And this whole model minority thing is shit, you know. For some reason, I feel like that brought so much

healing for me. To be included now, to see like we're all struggling, and we all are oppressed by this system of White supremacy. I think that finally being part of that community for me has brought a lot of healing, you know...Because like for me as an Asian American, I was like I'm in the middle, like I'm not there or there. I'm just like in this nebulous gray area constantly. And I feel like for the first time it's like, no, I am a woman of color. I am an Asian American, and I belong here in this group and working towards, you know, progress. And I think that's what I've been wanting my whole life.

Notably, the focus group also served as a living example of this sub-theme, as participants shared their experiences and supported each other. Participants frequently expressed gestures of affirmation, such as smiles, laughter, and head nodding. Sofia explained,

I've definitely noticed that I feel like sometimes when I need just a different perspective that there really doesn't feel like there's much community or narrative or research around supporting Asian women in a lot of professional roles but especially in nonprofit. So that's kind of what drew me to this opportunity, to share perspective as well as hear from others.

Mentors. Many participants spoke about mentors – or the lack thereof – as a highly influential factor in their work and leadership. Isabelle reflected:

I realize, especially professionally if you're trying to grow in your career and move ahead, it's less about like gaining all these skills. It's really about the people you meet, the people you know. I was so focused on skills. I got to have all the skills because then I can check all the boxes and then be like, now I'm ready. And really, it's not about that. It's really about creating your network of people that is going to just support you at every stage of

your career, personally, professionally, just be there looking out for you...I can't stress that advice enough. I wish I heard it when I was twenty-two, you know.

Le spoke at length about two mentors, who were White women. She credited them with helping her find her voice and showing her the kind of leader she wanted to be:

I had no idea what my voice was in high school, in college. I wouldn't participate in discussion. I didn't know myself. I think, politically, I didn't know. I didn't know about women's issues and women's rights...They really taught me about empowerment. So for me, because I got that experience, I recognized that I could ask for what I want. I can expect a work environment that allowed people to share ideas and thoughts in a safe environment where no ideas were bad, where everyone was heard, and we worked towards consensus rather than command and control...I do think they were unique.

Participants who felt they lacked mentors affirmed that this was something they wished they'd had. Hemal asserted that peers were primarily resources for her, rather than "mentors and guides who were more advanced in their careers, who were already leaders in sort of the more traditional sense." She also noticed how "my White colleagues have, you know, women mentors who they can look at, who were leaders, who would support them. I just didn't have those same kinds of connections." While Hemal now has a network of Asian American senior leaders, she wondered what the impact would have been if she'd had them earlier in her career:

You know, in some ways I felt it was maybe a little too late for me, that I'd already gotten to the point of such severe burnout and really disillusionment with the sector that maybe if I'd had some mentors and guides earlier, I might have looked at my career a little differently. I might have made some different choices about where I ended up working and who I ended up working with. So I mean, obviously, hindsight's 20/20, right? It's

just, it's something I reflect on. Sometimes I wonder how things could have looked different if I had had access to more mentorship.

Sponsors. Some participants identified sponsors, especially White sponsors in positions of power, as critical to their career advancement. While mentors shared their wisdom and experience, sponsors were champions and advocates for participants within the organization. Nitara described taking a job at a family foundation. The head of the foundation, an older White woman, told her from the beginning, “‘If you’re looking to elevate here, you’re not.’ ...because it was a family foundation, and they were led by family. I was clearly not family, and that was fine with me.” Eventually, however, this woman became a sponsor:

Midway through our time, she realized, you know what? It's time for me to move on. And she invested in me learning the tools to be an executive director or a CEO. She helped me learn how the board works and get to know the family and the non-family board members so that they would trust her decision to want to pass the baton to me as an executive director. I had never experienced that. She was and remains a unique, like sort of unicorn, I think, in terms of managers, in terms of supervisors, in terms of really investing in my leadership development...She really invested in me and made sure I could do the job before she pitched me to the board and to the community and then went through a very intentional process to onboard me and make an announcement to the community and send me to professional development things so that I was qualified.

Isabelle was unique among participants in that she worked her way up at one organization, from development associate to senior director. She identified her former boss and executive director as a sponsor, who established her as an organizational leader with donors and community members:

I realized recently that in the past couple of years like that is what helped me get through the door, you know, in a way, like people finally seeing me. Especially my boss or my former boss now, just like constantly bringing me everywhere and just forcing people to deal with me as like as his partner, you know. He did that very intentionally because as a White man, he gets it automatically, right. He gets the respect. Things are just given automatically that I won't and don't...Really, I hate to say it, but that's what it took, you know. Because I work in a very small kind of like a niche industry where everybody knows everybody. And so if he didn't do that for me, I think I wouldn't have gotten here as fast as I could.

Not all experiences with sponsors were completely positive. Cai shared that she had a “champion,” a White man, who she believed helped her attain her current position but who also stopped speaking to her for a year and “made my work environment and my ability to do my job in the future very difficult.” She stated:

I felt lifted up by him and then pulled down when I asserted my leadership in a way that I don't think was welcome. I'm thankful and grateful because I did move up, but it also hurt me and impacted my confidence in many ways...Part of me is wondering how much of it was an ego thing. I sensed sometimes senior leaders like to pat themselves on the back for developing people, bringing success, like, “Wow, good for me, look what I did,” and my instinct feels like that was a part of it, even though I know that I earned it, as well.

Allies. Fewer participants reported enlisting allies to advance a cause. Those who did indicated mixed results. Le recalled when her executive director refused to implement COVID

safety precautions, which was a major concern. Instead of raising the issue herself, she recruited another colleague to speak up:

We recognized that if it was coming from me, it's not going to be perceived the same way...we need to have it come from somebody else. And then I said, "Okay, who is it going to be?" So we said, "[This person] has been there for 25 years. She's a lot older than him." So she sent the email, but even coming from her, you know, he was like, nope. I mean, he quickly shut it down.

Emily found an ally in her organization's director of human resources when she was trying to gain a promotion. While she ultimately got a title change and a salary increase, she also questioned needing an ally in the first place:

Of course, I got what I wanted. So I'm happy to that extent. But it's just when I asked for it, I was told no. But when this White woman asked for it, it's a yes. And so that signals things to me...I have to question why it was done, like my merit three weeks ago was a no, and now it's a yes. I didn't do anything in those three weeks that made you change your mind, you know what I mean?

Summary. Participants used multiple strategies to cope with the constraining conditions described in the previous finding. First, consciously or not, they fulfilled others' expectations and avoided backlash by enacting stereotypes. Specifically, participants behaved in ways consistent with stereotypes of submissiveness, quietness, hard work, and achievement. Second, they conformed to dominant U.S. culture through assimilation, including attempts to appear more "like a leader" by sharing their credentials and changing their appearance. Third, instead of or in addition to attempting to influence or change how others perceive them, some participants practiced self-regulation through therapy, mindfulness, and self-care. Finally, all participants

recognized the importance of finding your people, both those who identify similarly and those who function in career-supporting roles as mentors, sponsors, and allies. With each of these strategies, participants ultimately stayed within the bounds of dominant U.S. culture.

Strategies for Self-determination

In addition to strategies for coping, participants engaged in strategies for self-determination. These strategies, unlike the strategies for coping, all featured different ways in which participants acted *outside* the constraints of dominant U.S. culture. First, rather than attempting to influence the perceptions of individual people, participants focused on systemic change. Second, they redefined leadership beyond the standard definition in dominant U.S. culture to better match their own values, beliefs, and worldviews. Third, participants increasingly chose to act authentically, regardless of external pressures or expectations. Finally, participants disengaged when the conflict between their internal sense of self and their external circumstances became more than they could bear.

Focusing on systemic change. Of all the strategies for navigating stereotypes, participants identified focusing on systemic change least often. Notably, Hitha, Lisa, and Hemal all worked in organizations with missions rooted in organizing and advocacy, and they were also the participants who focused on changing systems *within* their organizations. Hemal, who explicitly claimed an “activist” identity, explained:

It sort of becomes second nature. I dealt with a lot of racism within [my organization]. So it was just sort of like, okay, this is the organization I'm a part of, you know, and I'm going to try to do what I can on a systemic level to sort of shift things instead of trying to have this one on one conversation with members who, quite frankly, I knew I wasn't going to change their minds.

Hemal then detailed her efforts to make immigration a core issue at a national feminist organization:

To be able to, like when we were talking about issues impacting women, that we were including women of all races and not just talking about it from a White perspective. For example, [this organization] had no positions on immigration at all. And I was like, that's a huge swath of women you're just missing altogether, right? And so, like, it was something I really, really pushed when I was there...Immigration is a feminist issue. And if we're not talking about it, we are doing a disservice to like a significant portion of women in this country. It was things like that where it was really important to me to be able to advocate around those kinds of systemic issues, to really talk about it from a policy perspective.

Hitha and Lisa also sought to create change at a systemic level by helping to unionize their organizations. Lisa, who worked at a national immigrant rights organization, further organized with Asian American women colleagues. "First, we wanted to connect and make sure that we were validating each other's experiences. There was power in the collective, so none of us bore this burden alone." Then, they called on senior leadership to be more responsive to the needs of their community:

Like, hey we haven't put out an organizational statement on the COVID hate crimes against the API community. We've also noticed over the past several years that, as much as we say we're a multiracial organization and serving a multiracial immigrant community, it still heavily leans on Latinx and Spanish [speaking] immigrant populations...When you think about who was in like hiring and firing management

positions, none of them were API. None of them were API women. So we used COVID as a way to call out our program leadership internally.

They also enlisted the support of the organization's racial justice committee, which helped them secure a meeting with leadership:

On behalf of this group of API women, the Racial Justice Committee, which is like across different departments, just wrote a letter like, "Hey, we stand in support with the group of API colleagues that have raised this issue." So it took external, still internal, but it took pressure outside of the core seven to get a response from leadership.

Redefining leadership. Participants described expanding their own definition of leadership beyond the definition prevalent in dominant U.S. society. Rather than subscribing to a hierarchical, top-down model – which they identified as White, male, and Western – participants embraced a more horizontal and collaborative leadership style. They described leadership as empowering others around them, rather than making it about themselves. They also asserted a drive for leadership that was rooted in social change and a desire to give back to future generations.

Collaboration. Participants preferred a more collaborative leadership style, rather than a top-down approach where the leader makes the decisions at the top while everyone below follows orders. Emily stated:

I think for me, the way I would want a leader and the way that I try to be myself as a leader, is you're leading by example. So no job is too small for you to take on. I'd be the first person to kind of be in the trenches doing whatever the grunt work, if you will, with the people I'm managing, for example. So it's not like this feeling of superiority or I'm too good for that or like I give you all the stuff that I don't want to do. There's this kind of

feeling of like we're all in this together...when I was managing people in my previous job, I made it clear to them that there wasn't this, I wanted to feel like we're all part of the same team rather than like I'm your boss.

Participants described this collaborative style being generally well received in situations where they were leading others. Eve explained:

In times when I've been with peers and supervisees like in collaborative experiences, those have almost always been good. I think all of this ties into the whole like, the whole Asian...being about the group. It's the other thing we're trained to be, right? It kind of makes us collaborative, good sports like people, right? And always just sort of advocating for the group and the team. And so yes, all of those experiences I've had where I've had to be part of a team or leading a team, I get good feedback from there.

Le further added:

I cared about [my team]. I felt like they trusted me...I was always open about my feelings and my whole support was always with staff. When we made decisions, it was always, what are your ideas? What are your thoughts? Even though I was the most senior in my role and my duties...I wasn't trying to be the only one to know everything or to know the solution to everything. I was raising the question so that we could figure things out together.

Empowerment. Beyond collaboration, participants defined leadership as actively seeking to decenter themselves and empower others. Isabelle stated, "For me, [leadership] means, it truly means being less about you. It's really about the people around you and like lifting the people around you up." Hitha similarly asserted, "Not everyone is going to be like with their hand up, talking all the time...Leader can mean many things. They don't have to be front and center. Like

leaders could be at the back and supporting everybody.” She also elaborated on how her own culture and values informed her leadership practice:

I think for me, it has been helpful to lean back on my culture and the things I've learned and to utilize it in my work and not fall into this very White supremacist kind of way or this White way of doing things. I've been able to lean back on what I know I care about and what I value...So I can draw on the way I grew up, which is connecting with people, supporting people, and also ensuring that the pace that I go is like ensuring that, quote unquote, “the slowest person is met.” I don't ever want to go so fast that we're leaving people behind. I want to move in a very relational way.

Social change. Participants spoke about leadership as a means of creating social change.

Hemal explained how her drive as a leader was grounded in her commitment to equality and justice:

It felt like I had to do something about it, and so I think that was the innate part of that leadership for me, was like if I'm noticing this, if I am made aware of what's happening, then it's my responsibility to actually speak up and say something...What's, to me, it's like what's the point of having all this knowledge, education, and privilege if I can't use it to make the world a better place and advocate for the world to be a better place and work alongside people who also share those values and those beliefs?

Isabelle demonstrated the way in which finding her people also led her to redefine leadership as working toward change within her profession:

Yeah, actually finding a community of fundraisers, a lot of fundraisers of color who feel the same way I feel, who are dedicated to changing how we fundraise...I mean, I like the challenge of my job, but again like I didn't grow up wealthy. I didn't grow up with

privilege. So I've always felt very uncomfortable in those spaces...Now I have this group who's there, who's trying to make change happen. And I am part of that, too, like changing the way my office is fundraising, fundamentally. I just feel so inspired by that. I feel inspired by this work that we're creating to make the nonprofit sector better. That's a huge motivator for me, and it's totally changed my, yeah, how I see my job forevermore.

Future generations. Participants described the importance of “giving back” to their communities and making things better for future generations. Chloe stated that she was determined to “be a part of senior leadership someday...because there aren’t that many of us, and I want to be that representation I sought.” Lisa, additionally, reflected on a mentoring relationship she has fostered with a young Asian American woman:

I feel like she's so much more prepared to enter the workforce as a young Asian American college graduate than I ever was...That's why I also consider myself a leader, is because I don't see it in traditional forms. I can see it as making my generation or the next generation and the generation after that a better place for each of us to exist.

Acting authentically. Out of all the strategies for navigating stereotypes, acting authentically was the theme with the largest volume of data. All participants expressed a desire to act authentically, though they varied on how often they felt they were able to do so. They identified self-reflection and intersectionality as important to authenticity. They also described an overall trend towards authenticity, which was often prompted by either gradual exhaustion or a critical event and made easier by increased awareness of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Self-reflection. To be authentic first requires knowledge of oneself. Several participants engaged in critical reflection to understand who they are and for what they stand. Sofia, who

described being raised in a household where she was taught not to show her feelings, wondered, “Am still hiding myself and trying to figure out who I am as an overall person because of background or past versus who I am in the moment versus who I would like to be?”

Lisa reflected on how she would “use the joke of make decisions like a White man would...no second guessing, no saying no to yourself before others have a chance to.” She maintained that while she attained a lot of positions this way, she did not want to do that anymore because it was not authentic to who she wants to be:

I don't want to prop up that as the center of power. So I would advise, because what I'm doing for myself is to lead with vulnerability. It's to understand who you are and accept that the world is changing at a pace that is comfortable for it, but you can lean into your own values and your principles.

For Isabelle, the events of the past year and a half, particularly the murder of George Floyd, caused her to “really dig into those issues of my own identity.” She elaborated:

It was a lot of kind of just really grappling with, you know, just my life, and I think it was one of the best things out of that time of great sadness and pain in our country, this kind of waking up and self-awareness that I developed about having a very clear purpose, of like okay, I know who I am, you know. It was like the first time I realized I don't have to be the silent Asian woman in the corner if I don't want to be...I think now I can honestly say I'm being my authentic self, fully.

Emily similarly identified the past year as an impetus to examine her own life trajectory and leadership pursuits:

This past year with the pandemic, it's really been like a time of reflection. And I felt like, you know, is this the job for me, and why am I so hellbent on getting to the next level,

like what is my end game? And so I've been reflecting a lot about that. I do think it's partly this idea of, well, you should want to always take on more. You should always want to be going to the next level. But I don't know if that's necessarily even what I personally want for myself. I feel very conflicted about it because I've been trying to distinguish what parts of how I see myself are me and then what parts of me are what people have kind of told me I should be.

Intersectionality. While this research focused on race and gender, some participants named additional identities as integral components of who they are. In particular, participants identified class, immigration status, and sexual orientation. Eve surmised:

Well, everybody has intersectional identities, and one of my intersectional identities is that I'm also queer...One of the things that I committed to myself in that whatever job that I end up taking, that I can be myself at that job, meaning that I am not going to be in the closet about being queer or about being Asian – because I can't really hide that one anyway – being a woman, or being a big nerd.

Breaking point. Many participants described reaching a point, either through gradual exhaustion or a critical event, where they chose acting authentically over managing others' perceptions of them. Hitha described how her response to stereotypes has changed over time:

I think I used to really take it seriously and get really hurt or internalize it, and I think currently where I'm at, I need to focus on myself and the people around me and just take it day by day. I just don't have time for anyone who's energy, like I can't take this other projection someone is giving me or their own perception. So I think that's like a good feeling, you know, to be able to be like, “I don't care. I don't give a shit. It doesn't matter, it won't matter to me.”

Hemal also described a shift in herself:

I think that there were times where I would really like be mindful if someone said, “Oh, you seem a little pushy,” I'd sort of try to soften my language and like try to adapt. It was like that same calculus, right? Like do I actually do something in this instance to like change my behavior so I'm more palatable...or do I have even the emotional and physical energy to deal with this right now? And like I said, increasingly, as I was more burnt out, I just literally had no fucks to give...I would say I definitely felt more empowered when I would respond in a way that was like affirming to me and being like, “Hey, you can't say that.” Because that felt like I was defending who I was as a person, right, being able to claim my identity.

For others, the murder of George Floyd was a watershed moment. Emily described her frustration with the response from leadership at her organization. As head of communications, she could “suggest anything I would want to happen...[but] was also not in a position of power to make these decisions.” She continued:

I had to really dig deep in myself and was like I have to say something because it's just not right, and I can't accept it. I basically told them, like I'm not doing this anymore. I'm not going to write for you anymore when it comes to issues about race, like you're on your own because it felt like I was always having to explain why what they were saying was problematic. I just didn't want to be kind of like that person of color shield for them anymore. So that was kind of a breaking point for me...I'm more likely to say something now than I ever was before, and it was because I was really pushed to that that edge...I'm also willing to take that risk now in order to kind of say what needs to be said.

Many participants also shared about the impact of the Atlanta shootings, which targeted Asian American women. However, they did not describe this event as transformational in the same way that some talked about George Floyd. Mostly, participants expressed frustration, either because people were only now paying attention or because colleagues failed to acknowledge what had happened. Cai shared:

When the uptick in anti-Asian crimes happened, this was prior to the Atlanta murders, when it was kind of really coming to a head, even though it'd been happening, we all know, for a very long time...We really promote vulnerability, we promote bringing your whole self to work. So I shared. I got emotional, and I was one of seven people on that meeting. Nobody knew what the hell I was talking about, and it really pissed me the F off. I was really upset. I would say, it's angered me and lit a bigger fire under me to hold our organization accountable, to support our Asian siblings.

Importantly, while participants described an overall trajectory towards authenticity, their progression did not follow a straight line. Hitha explained, "I would say it took time, and I still feel it's nonlinear." Nitara further elaborated, "So, yeah, you know, you test the waters. You try to be your authentic self. You try to be who you [are], show up doing the right things, and then again, that self-doubt from 20 years ago pops up."

Outliers. Not all participants identified struggling to act authentically. Anne asserted, "I'm one of those people who, when I'm in a group, it's hard for me not to say anything. It's hard for me not to chime in." Le also felt free to voice her opinions because of the "empowered culture" she'd experienced early in her career through her mentors. When she entered a workplace where she felt pressured as an Asian American woman to mute herself, she adamantly refused. She recalled how another colleague "was more traditional in terms of her style related to

that Asian submissiveness, particularly of women with men in leadership.” Although Le recognized that this colleague “absolutely knew how to play the game,” she also stated, “I was never going to do that because I wasn't going to be submissive like that or passive, I guess I should say. That wasn't my style. It would betray everything that I stood for.”

On the other end, Mia expressed a desire for authenticity but felt she still struggled with the weight of others' perceptions:

It's easy to say like, well, just don't care what people think, but it's a lot harder to actually do that. I wish I cared less and could just say as long as I'm happy with myself that's all that matters. I really admire others, especially women of color, who I see doing that or at least seeming to do that from the outside. Maybe as I'm getting older, that's happening more and more, but it's definitely a process.

Changing times. Encouragingly, some participants thought that it was easier to be their authentic selves today than in the past, due to increased attention to diversity in the workplace.

Nitara asserted:

Back then, like rushing home to deal with family responsibilities or celebrating holidays in between that weren't then recognized in the workplace. These are things that now there's more acceptance and openness to. But back then, juggling that was something that I always, you know, I didn't grow up with a lot of public opportunities to celebrate who we were as a family...it looks different now. Again, the sector, the work that we do, in most cases, not all, there's an acceptance and openness to making space for people to bring their whole selves. I have an opportunity to be me more than I did before.

Disengaging. Many participants identified disengaging as a strategy when circumstances became untenable, usually after first engaging in other strategies for navigating stereotypes.

Often, disengaging was also an act of authenticity. Participants described a range of options for disengaging, including emotional withdrawal, consideration, exit, and new endeavors.

Emotional withdrawal. Some participants identified mental or emotional withdrawal from a situation as a form of disengagement. They described attempting to “minimize interactions,” deciding to “let a lot of things slide,” or getting “to a point where I didn’t care if I was going to get fired.” Mia described one conflict with a colleague, “At that point, you know, I was done. I was like, I’m not putting any more energy into this, like you know that I don’t agree with this, and that was just kind of the way it ended.” Lisa shared that the group of Asian American women who were organizing together eventually disengaged when leadership was unresponsive to their efforts: “I think by March we had lost a lot of energy around it, particularly because the Atlanta spa shooting, it just hit harder and was harder to advocate when we had to be grieving.”

Consideration. Participants also described situations where they weren’t ready to leave but were starting to consider doing so. After she failed to receive a promotion for the second time, Lisa began to ask herself, “Do I leave? Do I stay? Do I make myself small and just get paid?” Nitara further elaborated:

I actually said this to the board recently. I was like, I'm fine with stepping down if you need somebody that's going to play that political game, because I am not that person...If I have to sacrifice self and muzzle myself, what's the word I'm looking for, silence myself in certain rooms, I don't know if I can do this job well. I get that I have to you know, be amenable to certain situations to get the dollars from elected officials or the funding from a certain provider. That's just hard. It's like exhausting to do that. I go to bed wearing all of that, not because I ran around all day at meetings and did a marathon, you know. It's

because the weight of that, emotionally, having to show up in a certain room in a certain way and then have a board ask you why you didn't get the grant and not understand why. That's work that I don't know how long I can do. So the leaders that I see, they're still playing that game, but I don't know how long I can do it and how many more sacrifices I can make for self.

Exit. Hemal, Lisa, Le, and Sofia all spoke about leaving organizations. Le recalled quitting shortly after starting a new job at an organization whose mission was “about diversity and inclusion, DEI stuff.” A colleague used a racial slur in front of her and others. When she went to her supervisor with her concern and the supervisor made excuses, Le stated: “And then I said I quit. I quit. I did right there...I was like this clearly is not the place for me. I’m very principled in that way.” For Lisa, the breaking point came when she was repeatedly told to “manage 36 million dollars on a one million dollar [system].” She also noted, of the seven Asian women who organized together, four had left the organization and one of the remaining was job searching. Hemal decided to leave the nonprofit sector entirely:

It resulted in burnout for me, and it resulted in really not feeling aligned at all in terms of my values and culture. And so I think that was really the, that was really a turning point when I realized just how out of alignment with myself I was. I was like, I need to take a step back. This is why I need to leave the nonprofit sector. I need to figure out what I want to do. And, you know, the idea for me was like after I took that time to heal and to rest, then I would go back into it because then I would have had knowledge about how I want to show up as a leader and particularly as a South Asian woman in these spaces. I didn't want that part of me to get lost anymore. And what I realized after taking some time away was that it was either I hold out hope that someone opened up a position where

I could be myself and do the kind of work I cared about, or I go back into another toxic workplace that really didn't serve me, and I was like, none of these are tenable.

New endeavors. Some participants also realized that they needed to create new spaces where they were free to lead the way they wanted. Le considered starting her own nonprofit. “I've always thought about what kind of nonprofit I'd like to start. So after I got fired, I was like, you know what? I'll show you. I submitted my 501(c)3.” Chloe decided to become a leader in professional groups for women of color fundraisers:

I co-launched a major gifts officer support group. I also co-launched an API affinity group for professional fundraisers and am part of a DEI fundraising committee. I also lead Fundraising 101 sessions in my city. My affinity for fundraising and my dedication to diversify our professional sector is what drives me to do this work. It is extremely frustrating that I have to create opportunities to lead outside my organization.

Nitara and Hemal both decided to go into consulting, though Nitara still also works for a nonprofit organization. Hemal commented that consulting has given her, “more flexibility, the ability to determine my hours, the ability to say no to things, draw really clear boundaries around work life balance and generally just be happier than I was when I was working in the nonprofit sector.” Nitara added that consulting gave her greater freedom to stay true to her values:

In my consulting practice, I feel like people hire me because of self, like what I've done and who I am and what I, what views I can bring. But when you work with an organization, sometimes the values of the organization and the values of the individual, the professional, don't always align.

Summary. In response to the constraining conditions they faced, participants employed strategies which helped them further their own self-determination. First and least often, rather

than attempting to influence the perceptions of individual people, they focused on creating systemic change. Second, they redefined leadership from the Western, White, and male styles favored in dominant U.S. culture to emphasize collaboration, empowerment of others, social change, and the betterment of future generations. Third, all participants increasingly sought to act in ways that were authentic to them, though they varied on how often they felt they were able to do so. Many described reaching a breaking point, where authenticity became the only sustainable option. Some also noted that increased attention to diversity in the workplace made it easier to be themselves today than in the past. Critical self-reflection and intersectionality functioned as important components of authenticity. Finally, participants described disengaging along a spectrum, including emotional withdrawal, consideration, and exit. Upon disengaging, some participants recognized the need to create new spaces where they would be free to be their authentic selves. Each of these strategies featured ways in which participants acted outside the constraints of dominant U.S. culture.

Summary of Findings

In summary, the participants in this study employed a variety of strategies for navigating the constraining conditions of stereotypes and culture, which created a universal struggle to be perceived as leaders in the nonprofit sector. Overall, participants demonstrated a trajectory away from strategies for coping towards strategies for self-determination. Specifically, participants identified enacting stereotypes and conforming to dominant culture less frequently over time, though they continued practicing self-regulation and finding their people as a means of coping. Further, they described focusing on systemic change, redefining leadership, acting authentically, and finally disengaging in order to move towards their own self-determination and, ultimately, authenticity. Importantly, while participants' journeys reflected this larger narrative arc, they also

did not follow a straight line. All participants used multiple strategies in different contexts at different times, though not all participants used all strategies.

Discussion

Yoshino's (2006) theory of covering offers a valuable framework for understanding how Asian American women leaders in the nonprofit sector navigate stereotypes. As discussed earlier in this paper, Yoshino (2006) draws upon Goffman's (1963) earlier work, which defines *covering* as a process wherein "persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma (in many cases because it is known about or immediately apparent) may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large" (p. 102). In other words, an individual possessing a stigmatized or marginalized identity downplays or mutes that identity to fit into the dominant culture. In this section, I use this study's findings to explicate the ways in which participants engaged in processes of covering, reverse covering, and uncovering in an ongoing journey towards authenticity.

Covering

To cover is to assimilate into the mainstream (i.e., conforming to dominant culture). This was notably the only form of assimilation available to participants, given the visibility of their identity as Asian American women. As Eve noted, "Can't really hide that one anyway." I suggest that participants felt compelled to cover for two reasons. First, all participants identified struggling to be seen as a leader, which they attributed to incompatibility between perceptions of Asian American women and perceptions of leaders in dominant U.S. culture. Therefore, to be perceived as leaders, participants had to cover their identity as Asian American women. Second, in identifying stereotypes, some participants described being perceived as the perpetual

foreigner. This created a need to cover to be accepted in the mainstream, though by definition the perpetual foreigner can never fully assimilate in the eyes of dominant culture.

Specifically, I identify times where participants covered along each of Yoshino's (2006) four axes – appearance, affiliation, activism, and association. Once again, “*Appearance* concerns how an individual physically presents herself to the world. *Affiliation* concerns her cultural identifications. *Activism* concerns how much she politicizes her identity. *Association* concerns her choice of fellow travelers – lovers, friends, colleagues” (p. 79). Along the axis of appearance, Nitara – who was one of two interviewees at the executive level – described attempts to project an executive presence by dressing “the part.” For example, she always put her hair up and wore a suit, even when the rest of the room was wearing jeans. Along the axis of affiliation, Hemal compartmentalized her professional and personal life, intentionally covering references to Indian culture at work. She also chose not to get a nose ring, a cultural practice which most of the women in her family followed, because she was afraid of how she would be perceived professionally; this doubly falls along the axis of appearance. Isabelle covered along the axis of activism. Instead of responding to racism, she wanted to “blend into the background,” moving through the world with “this kind of apathy” because “what’s the point” of talking about it. Finally, along the axis of association, several participants identified establishing their credibility as leaders through association with White colleagues in positions of power. While this may not necessarily be an act of covering – participants largely described these relationships as meaningful and genuine – these associations did help them assimilate as leaders in the dominant culture. I have given just one example of each form of covering here, but there were multiple examples throughout the data.

Reverse Covering

As I viewed my findings through this framework, I noticed that there were far more instances where participants were not being asked to cover. In fact, the demand seemed to be the opposite. Participants were more often compelled to *amplify* their identity as Asian American women by leaning into characteristics associated with it. To understand this phenomenon, I turn now to *reverse covering* or *flaunting*, which Yoshino (2006) defines as “demands that individuals act according to the stereotypes associated with their group” (p. 23).

Significantly, Yoshino (2006) proposes that demands to reverse cover primarily come not from dominant culture but from within a marginalized group. For example, a person who is Black may be pressured to “act White” to get along in dominant culture but be expected to “act Black” within their own community. Thus, an individual gets caught in the crossfire of competing demands. As I previously noted in this paper, Yoshino admits only one exception to this rule – women. In what is known as the double bind, professional women simultaneously face demands from the dominant culture to both cover and reverse cover. They are expected to be “‘masculine’ enough to be respected as workers and ‘feminine’ enough to be respected as women” (p. 145). However, I disagree with Yoshino (2006). I argue that the Asian American women in this study also experienced demands from dominant culture to reverse cover, not merely because they are women but because they are Asian American women. Specifically, the intersecting and interlocking systems of race and gender, as well as the unique racialization of Asian Americans in the United States, create a demand to reverse cover that is distinct from that of non-Asian American women.

Participants provided numerous examples of times where they experienced pressure from the dominant culture to enact the stereotypes of Asian American women as quiet, submissive, hardworking, and high achieving. Many of the stories that participants shared revolved around

responding to this pressure. In some instances, participants met the demand, consciously or not. Mia described adapting her communication style to not appear “too forceful or directive,” wondering whether she did this because she was unconsciously meeting others’ expectations. In other cases, the decision to reverse cover was intentional and strategic. Nitara censored herself in certain situations because she was afraid of losing funding for her organization. When participants asserted themselves, they often faced retaliation. They were called “aggressive,” “overbearing,” “demanding,” “cold,” or “antagonistic.” Cai recounted a former champion of hers who refused to speak to her for a year when she asserted her leadership in a way that was “not welcome.” Similarly, participants were expected to be hard working and high achieving. Ultimately, these “positive” traits, which are central to the model minority stereotype, created the demand from dominant culture to reverse cover.

At the same time, participants *also* experienced pressure to reverse cover within their own cultural groups (i.e., overlaying culture with stereotypes). They described being raised to “act Asian” by putting their head down, doing their work, not rocking the boat, and demonstrating respect or deference to authority. For example, Emily observed her discomfort with openly disagreeing with her boss because it felt disrespectful. Notably, Le encountered a stronger demand to be quiet and submissive at an Asian-led organization than she did anywhere else (though this could also be understood as coming from the dominant male culture, highlighting the intersectionality of race and gender). Participants also described expectations to “act like a nonprofit professional,” which included being overworked, underpaid, and under-resourced – all without complaint.

Thus, participants experienced reverse covering demands from dominant U.S. culture, their own cultural groups, and nonprofit professional culture to be quiet, submissive,

hardworking, and high achieving. These persistent and reinforcing stereotypes and cultural norms created an intense amount of pressure, prescribing who and how participants should be. However, the story does not end here. To understand how participants navigated these demands requires discussion on another topic – uncovering.

Uncovering

While participants described situations where they both covered and reverse covered, they also engaged in processes of *un*-covering. By this, I mean that participants moved in the opposite direction along three of the four covering axes – affiliation, association, and activism. I now elaborate upon each of these.

Affiliation. To cover along the axis of affiliation, one downplays their cultural identifications with a marginalized group. To uncover, then, is to reclaim those cultural identifications. I posit that in redefining leadership, participants are doing exactly this. Participants identified leaders in dominant U.S. culture as Western, White, and male, exhibiting a leadership style they described as aggressive, confident, loud, and hierarchical. They also recognized that this model of leadership did not match who they were, what they valued, or who they wanted to be as leaders. Rather, they sought to be leaders who worked collaboratively, expressed humility, decentered themselves, lifted up those around them, and made the world better for others – all characteristics which align with the collectivist, group orientation common among Asian cultures. In this way, participants redefined the individualistic, Western model of leadership by reclaiming a piece of their own cultural identity and values.

Association. Participants also uncovered along the axis of association, as nearly all described finding their people among other Asian American women and racialized people. They identified such association as a critical source of validation, connection, support, and emotional

resilience. This was especially important for those who worked in predominantly White organizations or fields, to know that they were not alone in their experience. Additionally, several participants described seeking out an Asian American mental health practitioner as part of practicing self-regulation.

Activism. Finally, participants uncovered along the axis of activism, as they developed political consciousness around their marginalized identities. I posit that this uncovering was the most transformational of all – especially given that participants worked in the already highly political and social justice driven nonprofit sector. Often, politicization served as the catalyst for participants to break through the constraints placed on them as Asian American women. It provided a framework for understanding who they were and why they were perceived the way that they were, not only as Asian American women but also as people of color. For Emily and Isabelle, the events of 2020, particularly the murder of George Floyd, pushed them to speak out and stand up in ways they purportedly never would have before. For Le, earlier politicization around gender left no doubt about using her voice when she felt pressured to be quiet and compliant later in her career. While Hemal, Hitha, and Lisa did not specify when or how their politicization occurred, they all clearly identified focusing on systemic change as a strategy for navigating stereotypes. They engaged in activism to change the status quo rather than simply cope with it. Additionally, participants described their activism as a matter of principle, noting that their values compelled them to speak out.

Being Authentic

Ultimately, participants described pursuing what Yoshino (2006) refers to as a “universal impulse towards authenticity” (p. 187). All expressed a desire to break free from the confines of others’ expectations and be authentically themselves, though they varied in how often they felt

they were able to do so. Many described acting authentically in one moment and faltering in fear or doubt the next, indicating that the journey towards authenticity was neither linear nor absolute. However, participants identified an overall shift away from strategies connected to covering and reverse covering – especially enacting stereotypes and conforming to dominant culture – and towards strategies connected to uncovering. Specifically, by focusing on systemic change, redefining leadership, acting authentically, and disengaging participants exercised autonomy to forge their own paths outside the constraints of dominant culture and their own cultural groups.

Importantly, even as I advocate for authenticity, I do not argue categorically against covering. Nor do I criticize participants for the times they chose to cover or reverse cover. Like Yoshino (2006), I recognize that such decisions were often useful and even necessary for participants to stay safe or get where they wanted to be within an overall context of racism, sexism, and xenophobia. However, I do suggest that striving toward consistent authenticity may help Asian American women endure as leaders in the nonprofit sector. Participants described experiencing mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion as they worked to fulfill others' expectations of who they should be. Often, this exhaustion is what compelled them to move towards authenticity, as inauthenticity took a toll that was unsustainable over time and participants determined they simply could not continue on the way they were.

I also note that Yoshino (2006) does not prescribe what authenticity might be, as this will look different for each person. Authenticity does not simply equal contrarian behavior. Rather, what matters is autonomy, the freedom to choose how one wants to be, without coercion. For example, some participants described breaking free of certain constraints within Asian culture, such as expectations to mask emotions, defer to authority, not speak out, and suffer silently. However, participants also embraced a part of Asian culture by redefining leadership in ways

that aligned with a collectivist worldview. In both instances, participants felt that they were acting authentically.

Finally, because authenticity differs for each person, it relies heavily on individual self-knowledge. While this may seem simple enough, some participants questioned which aspects of themselves were truly them and which were the product of external influences. To discern their true selves, participants used several strategies. First, they engaged in critical self-reflection to better understand who they were and for what they stand. Second, they used mindfulness as part of practicing self-regulation. While I categorize this as a strategy for coping, it also helped Isabelle and Emily access their authentic reactions in the moment and Hitha to “just remind myself of who I am.” Third, another strategy for coping, finding your people, helped facilitate authenticity when relationships were close and people knew them well. Fourth, participants relied on their values to guide them. Through these practices, the Asian American women leaders in this study came to know themselves.

Implications and Recommendations

This study sought to understand how Asian American women leaders navigate others’ stereotypes of their intersectional racialized and gendered identity to lead in the nonprofit sector. My analysis revealed several key findings. First, participants affirmed that stereotypes, reinforced by the norms of their own cultural groups, present barriers in their work and leadership. Second, participants employed multiple strategies to navigate these stereotypes, including strategies for coping and strategies for self-determination. Third, using Yoshino’s (2006) theory of covering as a theoretical framework, I found that participants followed an overall trajectory away from covering and reverse covering towards uncovering and authenticity.

These findings have implications for both Asian American women leaders and nonprofit organizations, which I discuss as recommendations now.

Recommendations for Asian American Women Leaders

This study identified four strategies for coping and four strategies for self-determination, which Asian American women leaders used to navigate stereotypes. From these findings, I offer three key recommendations for this population of professionals.

The first recommendation pertains to the theme of finding your people. All participants identified other people as vital sources of validation, connection, support, and emotional resilience. They named mentors, sponsors, and allies who helped them work within the constraining conditions of dominant U.S. culture. Notably, among the strategies for coping, this one most clearly helped participants achieve promotion or success within a formal leadership role. Participants also described finding their people in other Asian American women and racialized individuals. In this way, participants engaged in a process of uncovering through the axis of association. These findings all suggest that Asian American women leaders must find their people – both those who identify similarly as well as those who act in career-supporting roles – and be willing to rely on them.

The second recommendation involves the development of political consciousness around identity. Experiences of politicization were often transformational, serving as a catalyst for uncovering along the axis of activism. Politicization helped participants break through constraints they faced as Asian American women and made them more willing to stand up for themselves and others as a matter of principle. It also made participants more likely to focus on systemic change as a way to navigate stereotypes. Notably, focusing on systemic change was the

least used strategy for self-determination among participants, suggesting an opportunity for growth for Asian American women leaders.

The third recommendation involves knowledge of self. In order to behave authentically, participants needed to first know who they were. They engaged in critical self-reflection and mindfulness to gain a deep knowledge of self, including what they believed and how they viewed the world. This self-knowledge led participants to rely on their core values to guide them, as well as to redefine leadership in a way that was authentic to them. Thus, to cultivate authenticity, Asian American women should regularly and intentionally look within themselves to better understand their own values, beliefs, and worldviews.

Additionally, within each interview, participants answered the question, “What advice about navigating stereotypes would you give to other Asian American women who want to establish themselves as leaders in the nonprofit sector?” While much of participants’ responses is reflected in my recommendations, I believe it is powerful and meaningful to see their complete answers altogether. This may be especially true for other Asian American women leaders. Therefore, in hopes of providing additional benefit, I provide these responses in their entirety in Appendix E.

Recommendations for Nonprofit Organizations

Asian American women leaders operate within powerful and complex systems. There is only so much they can or should be expected to do on their own. Therefore, nonprofit organizations play a critical role in creating and cultivating an environment where Asian American women leaders feel free to bring their authentic selves to their work and leadership. This is especially important in a sector that overwhelmingly claims to value diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Organizations may support Asian American women leaders in several ways. First, they must consciously and consistently take an intersectional approach to their work. This includes their own internal policies and practices, as well as the external way in which they fulfill their mission. In a sector that is predominantly comprised of White women, this means ensuring race is considered in conversations about gender. Conversely, in male-dominated, Asian-led organizations, gender must not be forgotten.

Second, as organizations engage in conversations around race, they should take care to move beyond the Black and White binary and not erase the Asian American experience. Organizations can promote awareness of the unique history of racialization for this population, as well as major issues and events – such as the Atlanta shootings – that impact Asian American communities today. To avoid perpetuating a wedge between communities, they may also highlight examples of Black and Asian solidarity and create opportunities for solidarity within the organization.

Third, organizations should examine internal policies and practices, such as hiring and promotion, that may unintentionally disadvantage Asian American women. What criteria is used to determine advancement within the organization? What style of leadership is recognized and rewarded? In what ways might Western, White, or male leadership styles be privileged? Who is represented in the ranks of leadership? These are questions that must be honestly and carefully answered.

Finally, nonprofit organizations can challenge prevailing cultural norms within the sector that reinforce expectations of submissiveness and overwork for Asian American women. Why does the nonprofit sector valorize working to exhaustion for little pay with nonexistent resources? Does this really help organizations achieve their mission? Ultimately, cultivating a

culture that supports healthy work-life balance will benefit all employees, not just Asian American women.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study contributes to the body of knowledge about Asian American women leaders, but it also has limitations. The largest of these is the lack of generalizability to a larger population. I designed this study to collect in-depth data from a small number of participants. I also employed volunteer and snowball sampling strategies, which may limit the representativeness of my sample population. Particularly, there is a risk of non-response bias (O’Leary, 2017), as individuals who self-selected into this study may be intrinsically different from those who did not. Therefore, while I fruitfully explored the rich experiences of the 14 participants in this study, further study is needed to determine whether findings may be generally applied to all Asian American women leaders in the nonprofit sector.

Another limitation involves the diversity of my sample population. Participants were diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, geographic region, years of experience, nonprofit role, and type of nonprofit. However, all participants had achieved high levels of formal education, with 71 percent holding a master’s degree, and nearly all worked in an urban environment. Additionally, while participants touched upon class, immigration status, and sexual orientation, this study did not focus on these important markers of identity, and no participants addressed disability. Future research may further broaden participant diversity and incorporate additional intersecting identities into the analysis.

Other avenues for future research include comparison studies between different populations. For example, while my findings suggest that participants shared characteristics and experiences across multiple ethnicities, the limited number of participants makes it difficult to

draw definitive conclusions. Future studies might systematically address this problem.

Additionally, it would be illuminating to compare the experiences of Asian American women and men. As I noted in this paper, participants primarily identified race as their most salient identity and drew upon the model minority stereotype, which also applies to Asian American men. While I suspect that this manifests differently between Asian American men and women, a comparison study would help clarify this point.

Further, there are additional populations that would be interesting opportunities for future research. This study did not require participants to hold a formal position of leadership for reasons I described in the method section. However, it would be worth investigating senior or executive Asian American women leaders, who encounter a different level of responsibilities, to see whether unique or similar findings emerge for this specific group. It would also be fascinating to learn from followers and team members of Asian American women leaders. From their perspective, how do they perceive the Asian American women leaders with whom they work?

Finally, this research ultimately recommends that Asian American women leaders move towards authenticity to navigate stereotypes. It also begins to suggest conditions and practices which help enable authenticity. However, additional studies investigating how Asian American women leaders and their organizations implement these practices and intentionally cultivate authenticity (and eliminate barriers to it) are needed as a next step.

Conclusion

This study affirms that Asian American women face enduring stereotypes, reinforced by cultural norms, that present barriers to being seen as leaders in the nonprofit sector. These stereotypes most notably draw upon the model minority stereotype, which includes expectations

of being quiet, submissive, hardworking, and high achieving. Participants navigated these stereotypes with four strategies for coping and four strategies for self-determination. Strategies for coping included enacting stereotypes, conforming to dominant culture, practicing self-regulation, and finding your people. Strategies for self-determination included focusing on systemic change, redefining leadership, acting authentically, and disengaging. Using Yoshino's (2006) theory of covering, these strategies may be understood through the lens of covering, reverse covering, and uncovering. Overall, in an ongoing quest towards authenticity, participants identified a shift away from strategies aligned with covering and reverse covering and towards strategies aligned with uncovering.

While it is discouraging that decades-old stereotypes continue to loom large in the lives and leadership of Asian American women – even in racially conscious, progressive nonprofit spaces – the findings of this study are also hopeful. Despite intense pressure from multiple directions to conform to others' expectations of who they should be, participants increasingly managed to stay true to themselves and pave their own way. This resilience and resistance suggest that true authenticity is not only desirable but also possible, as more Asian American women leaders resolutely stand up to say, "I know who I am."

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

The questions underneath the main questions are potential follow-up questions only to be used as needed.

1. Please tell me about your career path and how you came to your current position.
2. Please describe your current and/or previous leadership role(s) (either formal or informal) in the nonprofit sector. What do/did you enjoy? What is/was challenging?

POTENTIAL FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- a. How did you come to see yourself as a leader?
 - b. How would you describe your leadership style?
 - c. What barriers and opportunities have you experienced as a leader in the nonprofit sector? If you have experience in other sectors, how do these compare?
 - d. If not in a formal position of leadership: Have you ever wanted or sought a formal leadership position at your organization? If yes, what happened? If no, what factors contributed to your decision?
3. Please tell me about your ethnic and racial background and its relevance in your life, if any.

POTENTIAL FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- a. How do you think most people in our society view Asian American women?
What are common perceptions or stereotypes?
- b. What perceptions or stereotypes do you believe Asian American women face as leaders? Is there anything facing Asian American women leaders that you feel is unique to the nonprofit sector? If so, what?

- c. How do your identity, views, or experiences as an Asian American woman inform your leadership style, if at all? Has this been an intentional or conscious decision or not? If so, what led you to make this decision?
 - d. In your leadership role, when has your identity as an Asian American woman most impacted your ability to lead? Please describe examples of times when you felt your race and gender identities helped or hindered your ability to lead.
 - e. What are your thoughts and experiences about being able to be your authentic self or not in your work and leadership?
4. Who is/was generally perceived as a “good” leader at the nonprofit(s) where you work(ed)? What are/were the characteristics of a leader/leadership? How do you know? In other words, what did you hear, see, or perceive that communicated this to you?
 5. In your nonprofit work, have you personally experienced any perceptions or stereotypes of Asian American women directed at you? If so, please provide specific examples.

POTENTIAL FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- a. How did you feel in the moment? How did you feel later?
- b. Who made you feel this way? What was their role and what was yours? What power dynamics did you notice at play, if any?
- c. Please describe in detail what you did (or didn’t do), in the moment and afterward, and whether there was a reason or specific motive or intention for your response.
- d. What was the result in the short term? In the long term?
- e. How did this impact your ability to lead?

- f. How are these perceptions or stereotypes similar or different from the way you view yourself and your leadership?
 - g. How do you think these perceptions or stereotypes are similar or different to how others who do not share your racial and gender identities are perceived? What leads you believe this?
 - h. How has the way you feel and respond to examples like this changed over time, if at all?
 - i. Can you describe a time when you feel you successfully managed others' perceptions of your race and gender identity to be successful in your leadership role? A time when you feel you were not successful? What strategies did you use?
 - j. Who or what has been a resource to you in managing these perceptions or stereotypes?
 - k. What is/was the demographic composition of leadership at the nonprofit(s) where you work(ed)? How do you feel this impacts/impacted your experience there, if at all?
6. What advice about navigating perceptions and stereotypes would you give to other Asian American women who want to establish themselves as leaders in the nonprofit sector?
7. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think would be useful to know for my study? Is there anyone else you think I should talk to about this topic? If so, would you be willing to pass on the information about the study to them, along with my contact information?

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself, your name, role or position, and number of years in nonprofits.
And share what made you interested in participating in this focus group. What do you think you might get out of it?
2. What are your experiences with promotion or career advancement?
 - a. Have you ever achieved or attempted to achieve a promotion? If yes, how did you do so and what was the outcome? If no, why not?
3. What does authenticity or being your authentic self mean to you?
 - a. How do you know you are being authentic or not (vs responding to external influences/pressures)?
 - b. In what context have you felt like you were able to be your authentic self at work?
 - c. In what context have you felt like you were not able to be your authentic self at work (ex: having to mask or downplay parts of your identity)?
4. Interviewees repeatedly spoke about stereotypes of Asian American women as being quiet, passive hard workers who “keep their head down,” and “don’t rock the boat.” What are your experiences and/or reactions related to these stereotypes specific to your own leadership?
 - a. In your work and leadership experience, when and how have you decided to “raise your voice” or not? To what extent and how have you made yourself heard?
 - b. When and how have you found yourself conforming to vs resisting stereotypes? Or being true to self vs “playing the game” or “picking your battles”?
 - c. How has the way you respond to stereotypes changed over time, if at all?

5. In your experience, to what extent does the way others see you and your leadership match the way you see yourself – or not?
 - a. How have you navigated any mismatch in perceptions?
 - b. Interviewees generally described internal strategies (ex: mindfulness, staying true to self) and external strategies (ex: appearing older or more professional, moderating tone or directness) for navigating stereotypes. Internal strategies seem focused on regulating one's own emotional response to others' perceptions, while external strategies seem focused on actually changing those perceptions. To what extent and in what contexts do you think you have used external or internal strategies (or both), if at all?
6. Several interviewees spoke about this past year – with COVID, anti-Asian hate, George Floyd, etc. – being a transformational time. How have these experiences changed how you think, feel, and/or act - if at all - in terms of how you navigate stereotypes as an Asian American woman? What have you learned?
 - a. What other experiences, if any, have been transformational for you in your work and leadership?
7. Interviewees repeatedly described struggles with authority figures or individuals “above” them in the formal leadership hierarchy (ex: being labeled a “troublemaker”). They more often described positive experiences with peers or supervisees. What meaning do you make of this, and does this match your experience or not?
8. Interviewees repeatedly spoke about difficulties with others not perceiving them as leaders. How do/have you established credibility as a leader?

9. Interviewees spoke most often about the impact of race/ethnicity in work and leadership, noting that gender hasn't seemed as relevant because nonprofits are predominantly women dominated spaces (whereas only one interviewee worked at an Asian org). How do you view the relationship between race and gender and their impact on your work and leadership?
10. Interviewees spoke repeatedly about being expected to take on duties and responsibilities beyond their job description (without a change in compensation or title), work extra hours, etc. without complaint. They described this as specific to the nonprofit sector. I'm wondering if this is simply a part of general nonprofit work culture or if identity comes into play. What are your thoughts on this?
 - a. What else, if anything, do you think is unique to experiences of Asian American women in nonprofits?
11. What role, if any, have mentors played in your ability to successfully navigate stereotypes?
 - a. To what extent and in what way, if any, are the race and gender identities of mentors significant?
12. Do you have any other insights that may benefit my study?

Appendix C

Demographic Questions

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the following demographics questions.

Note, for any question you do not wish to answer, please mark “prefer not to answer.” Choosing not to respond to any or all questions below will not negatively impact your participation in the study.

- Name
- Age
 - 22 – 24 years old
 - 25 – 34 years old
 - 35 – 44 years old
 - 45 – 54 years old
 - 55 – 65 years old
 - 65+ years old
 - Prefer not to answer
- Ethnicity (mark all that apply)
 - Bangladeshi
 - Bhutanese
 - Burmese
 - Cambodian
 - Chinese
 - Filipino
 - Hmong
 - Indian
 - Indonesian
 - Japanese
 - Korean
 - Laotian
 - Malaysian
 - Mongolian
 - Nepalese
 - Pakistani
 - Sri Lankan
 - Thai
 - Vietnamese
 - Other _____

- Prefer not to answer
- Highest formal education level completed
 - Some high school
 - High school diploma or GED
 - Some college
 - Trade/technical/vocational training
 - Associate Degree
 - Bachelor's Degree
 - Master's Degree
 - Doctoral Degree
 - Prefer not to answer
- In what geographic region do you work?
 - Northeast United States
 - Southeast United States
 - Southwest United States
 - West United States
 - Midwest United States
 - Prefer not to answer
- In what environment do you work?
 - Urban
 - Suburban
 - Rural
 - Prefer not to answer
- How many years of experience do you have working in the nonprofit sector?
 - 0 – 4 years
 - 5 – 7 years
 - 8 – 10 years
 - 11 – 15 years
 - 16 – 20 years
 - 20+ years
 - Prefer not to answer
- How many years of leadership experience do you have in the nonprofit sector?

- 0 – 3 years
 - 4 – 6 years
 - 7 – 9 years
 - 10 – 15 years
 - 15+ years
 - Prefer not to answer
- In what type of nonprofit do you work (ex: arts, education, environment, etc.)?
 - _____
- In what size nonprofit do you work (by budget)?
 - Less than \$99,999
 - \$100,000 – \$499,999
 - \$500,000 - \$999,999
 - \$1 million - \$4.99 million
 - \$5 million to \$9.99 million
 - \$10 million - \$49.9 million
 - \$50 million or more
 - I don't know
 - Prefer not to answer
- What is your role in the nonprofit where you work?
 - _____

Appendix D

Pre-survey Questions (to determine eligibility)

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study!

In order to determine your eligibility, please complete the pre-survey below. It should take no more than a few minutes. By completing this survey, you are agreeing to be contacted about participation in this study; however, completion of this survey does not guarantee participation, and you may not be contacted.

As a reminder, your participation in this study, while important and valuable, is completely voluntary. You are free to drop out of the study at any time, for any reason, without any negative consequences.

- Do you identify as a woman? (Y/N)
- Do you identify as Asian American? (Y/N) For the purposes of this study, this term includes individuals living in the United States who have origins in any of the original peoples of East Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.
- Do you have at least five years of experience working in a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in the United States? (Y/N)
- Do you see yourself as a leader within a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in the United States? (Y/N)
- Are you interested in participating in an interview in which you talk about the way you are perceived as an Asian American woman while working at a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in the United States? (Y/N) If yes, please provide a brief example of a perception or stereotype you have experienced as an Asian American woman at your organization.

- Name
- Preferred contact information (email or phone)

Appendix E

Interview Question: What advice would you give other Asian American women who want to establish themselves as leaders in the nonprofit sector?

Emily:

I guess one piece of advice, and this is from my personal experience, has been don't buy into that stereotype that you should be complicit and follow the rules. I think the follow the rules, in particular, that was definitely ingrained by my parents. They were very extreme in the way that they expressed that. I found that that hasn't really served me in my career. I do feel like the people who not necessarily bend the rules but question the rules or question what's happening are the ones that are more successful. So I feel like there is a sense of trying to kind of go against that grain that has been helpful.

I also feel like it's been important for me, and particularly in this past year, so the other kind of resource I didn't mention is just recently, within the last month, there has been an affinity group that was created at [my organization] for Asian Pacific Islander [staff]. I've become more involved in that group. I'm leading one of the committees, and I'm on a couple other committees as well, just wanting to be more involved. That has kind of helped change my perspective of my current job. A lot of it was because I realized there's other Asians, there's other people that work here. So there isn't the diversity in my particular unit, but there is diversity within the organization. It was really inspiring to kind of be in this, and it's just been on Zoom too. So that has been inspiring for me to see all these other Asian American leaders or Asian Pacific Islander leaders. It feels very comforting to kind of have that network, so my other piece of advice is find

your people. Find your network so you're able to kind of navigate the situations that you'll come into the in the field.

Hemal:

Authenticity is really important. Don't be afraid to be who you are. You deserve to take up space, and you deserve to be whoever you want to be, whether that's in the work space, coalition spaces, [etc.]. And you get to decide how much of yourself you want to share and what is important for you, for people to know about you so that you can feel whole and authentically yourself in that space. But don't do what I did, and don't hide it away, because it's going to actually create a lot of issues for you in the long run, particularly around your mental health and wellbeing.

I think that's the other thing that I would say is like that's the thing you should really protect more than anything is your well-being, whether that's your mental health, your emotional health, your physical health. Don't let that be the thing that stops you from achieving some really important, potentially groundbreaking work. The work we do in our sector is so important, especially if we're doing direct service or even if we have opportunities for policy change at leadership levels within government. Our work is really critical and has a huge impact on the communities we serve. So in order to do that effectively, we really need to care for ourselves radically. So getting enough rest, getting enough sleep, getting water. If you see a therapist, seeing a therapist. See your doctor regularly, really making sure that you're taking care of yourself.

Then the third thing I would add is lean into community care. What does it mean to create a community of people who share your values, who are aligned with you and how work should be done and how you care for yourself and how you care for others? I

think in the nonprofit sector, in particular, we talk so heavily about self-care without context around the systems and structures of oppression that actually prevent self-care from happening, particularly for those of us who are in racialized bodies. We act as though getting a massage or getting a mani-pedi is going to be the thing that distresses us. And let's be honest, a lot of times our stressors are other things like racism and sexism and xenophobia. No mani-pedi is going to solve racism for you. But if you have a community of folks around you, that is going to make a huge difference in just knowing you're not alone, even if the shared experience is one of sharing the shit that you're going through. Knowing that you're not alone and that you're not the only person experiencing this can give you a lot of relief. And oftentimes when I've been in those spaces, there's been some really beautiful relationship building but also some solutions that come out of that too, where we can come together and work on those things. I think that's really the importance of community care that I want to stress to other AAPI women leaders is that we've got to have each other's backs, and we've got to figure out how to make shifts together. Because self-care is not going to cut it.

Hitha:

There are so many things I could say. But I think for me, it has been helpful to lean back on my culture and the things I've learned and to utilize it in my work and not fall into this very White supremacist kind of way or this White way of doing things, which might be like expecting a prompt response from someone or expecting someone to be professional or talking in a certain way. I've been able to lean back on what I know I care about and what I value, which is connection with other people and actually getting to know people and supporting people, like that's like very important to me. And so, and that's things I

can draw on from the way I grew up, which is connecting with people, supporting people, and also ensuring that like, the pace that I go is like ensuring that, quote unquote, “the slowest person is like met.” I don't ever want to go so fast that we're leaving people behind. I want to move in a very relational way. And I would encourage other Asian Americans to do that and to really seek connection with other Asian American women and also other people of color in the organization you might work with or at.

And for me, it's like understanding these communal tensions [between racialized groups] and also understanding the ways that I need to leverage my position or privilege that I might have in the nonprofit sector, as well. Being perceived a certain way too. Like I'm not perceived as angry, but I'm perceived as submissive. I might be perceived as someone belonging to the model minority myth. So I try really hard to figure out how to amplify other people's leadership and step away when I need to and encourage other people to step into their own leadership. So I really hope that other Asian American woman can do that and really lean on what they're good at, but also know that we all can be abundantly leadership-y. We can always be abundant in our leadership without it needing to be a competition.

Isabelle:

I think finding those allies, those mentors, is so, so important. I think you need to talk to people, you know. It's so easy to struggle alone. And what I learned is like, this is a perfect example. There's a funder at a big foundation who's Korean American, and I've seen her several times but always felt so scared to like talk to her because I'm like, “Oh, I'm nobody.” She's a big important funder, you know, but I reached out to her last year. I'm like, “What do I have to lose at this point?” So I just emailed her, and she was very

lovely, and she was like, “I’m so glad you reached out,” you know, and it’s turned into something. And I realize, like, why did I stop myself? And she was like, “Why did you stop yourself?” And that’s something I wanted. If there’s young Asian American women, it’s just like don’t be afraid to reach out to people, especially other Asian American women in leadership positions. No matter, it could be the funder of all funders or whatever level they are because you just never know and the willingness for people to want to help you.

I think that’s another Asian, okay, a Korean thing for sure. Like don’t ask for help. Figure out how to do it yourself. Asking for help is weakness. I don’t know if all Asian cultures are like that, but I know definitely that’s what I grew up with. So I think just not to be afraid to reach out and foster relationships with the mentorships and whatever you want to call them with other, and not just other Asian Americans, but just like allies.

I realize, especially professionally, if you’re trying to grow in your career and move ahead, it’s less about, and this is what the funder told me, it’s less about like gaining all these skills. It’s really about the people you meet, the people you know. I was so focused on skills. I got to have all the skills because then then I can check all the boxes and then be like, now I’m ready. Really, it’s not about that. It’s really about creating your network of people who [are] going to just support you at every stage of your career – personally, professionally, just be there looking out for you. I didn’t understand how important that is in my 20s. It’s only now in my 30s, I’m like, wow. Yes. These people, these mentors, these relationships are what is helping me grow. I can’t stress that advice enough. I wish I heard it when I was 22, you know, [because] I didn’t.

Le:

I would say that their perspective is needed and understand your values and think about that and hold on to those things and that will guide you. I think it's different for young people now because I think they are valued more. Because I can tell you my daughter like, they teach us things. My kids teach me things about what world they want. And they won't settle for anything less.

Lisa:

I use the joke of make decisions like a White man would. That's how I got in, like applied for a lot of positions that I have been in, but I don't want to do that anymore because I don't I don't want to prop up that as the center of power. So I would advise, because what I'm doing for myself is to lead with vulnerability. It's to understand who you are and accept that the world is changing at a pace that is comfortable for it. But you can lean into your own values and your principles. There is a generation, including my own millennial [generation], that is thinking about systemic change. We have workers unions. We have racial justice in the public narrative. Everything is turning out even half a generation later for the better. That's something to be really proud of and something I didn't have 10 years ago.

Mia:

I would say find community. Find people who have been where you are or who can relate or understand to what you're going through and be mentors. That's one thing I haven't really had is mentors. And I guess it's easy to say, "Well, just don't care what people think," but it's a lot harder to actually do that. I wish I cared less and could just say, "As long as I'm happy with myself that's all that matters." I really admire others, especially women of color, who I see doing that or at least seeming to do that from the outside.

Maybe as I'm getting older, that's happening more and more, but it's definitely a process. But yeah, just try to remember you matter. Your voice matters, and it's okay, it's good for you to use it. Don't feel like you need to like make yourself small to fit whatever somebody else might expect.

Nitara:

You know, I have a daughter who's 16, and she's just starting to interview and go out there. I used to be a Girl Scout troop leader, and so those tenets of courage, confidence, and character are really, I mean, there's subcategories under each of that. But when I mentor other women, I ask them to do sort of a personal values assessment before they go to a job or before they enter a new role. I didn't do this. I feel like we were raised to self-sacrifice to get the job and to do the job and to get the raise and to climb the ladder. I find, in addition to the sector changing in general to take more of one's self into [account], you know, the work life balance thing is just everywhere these days. But in terms of being an Asian woman, I think an understanding of self is really critical.

So there are some leadership assessments that, you know, you don't have to go to a consultant or a coach. You would do it [yourself], so that when you enter an environment, asking the right questions. How to really understand a job, not just from the description that they give you but from the people that you're interviewing with. Will they have space for you showing up authentically and holistically? There are now ways to kind of assess that, so that you're not disappointed. I also ask women to be open with what they need.

Again, not everybody's in the same role. Like during COVID, my husband dropped to part-time and part-time salary. So I couldn't, some of the things I'm telling you

now, I didn't have the liberty of this past year. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to pay our bills. So I didn't rock the boat too much. Like when those elected officials, when I was in those rooms, I just went off-screen, and I left, and I dealt with it because I wasn't in a position to not have that job. I couldn't risk my role. But that comes from an assessment. I assessed with my family, with myself, that I needed these kinds of things right now. I ask women to give themselves, that they owe themselves that.

I also think having a mentor and having a sponsor and more than one. We call it like our kitchen cabinet of advisors. Asian American women taught me this. You're not going to get everything from your partner. You're not going to get everything from your coworkers. That's what we're here for. Having them Zoom with me through this year and being able to talk to them about things I was dealing with was invaluable. They don't have to be professional. They can be personal. Like my Asian American women giving circle or my, you know the counsel that I was part of, finding places where I could be bringing my challenges or be myself and have someone to bounce off, like how you handle that was helpful.

But I also think it shouldn't be the only thing. These White women mentors and sponsors for me are my everything. They have given me the courage and the confidence to make decisions or try things that I might not have. You know, there's that age-old tenant, right. Men don't read a job description and think, "Oh, I don't meet bullet point 10," and don't apply. But we do. I do. I go through everything with a fine-toothed comb. So I encourage women to not be judgmental of themselves, to just go for it. You have other things that you can bring to the table that might not even be on that job description, and sometimes you need other people in your life to show you that. So surrounding

ourselves with that cabinet of people, your advisors, your mentors, your supporters, that will help you see those things when you can't. I didn't always have that, but I have learned how invaluable it is. The way that we get out of our self-doubt and build that courage and confidence is sometimes from other people. It's hard to do it on your own.

Some of these, you know, having a coach. I was lucky enough to have several workplaces pay for that, like three times I've had coaches. One time it was a White woman in corporate, so I learned a lot from her for my nonprofit role. It was amazing how much she taught me. Then another time, it was a an African American male, who also had an awareness of a lot of the things that Asian women dealt with and helped me got over some of my challenges. Then another time, there was a woman in the nonprofit sector. Yeah, those three coaches, and again, it was the organization that I was working at that invested in that. So ask for what you need or what you think you might want without fear of rejection. Even if there's a no, finding another way to get at it. Because I always say this to others now. You don't know unless you ask. We need other people in our circle to help us see those things sometimes.