

**Fighting for Recognition: Asian American Advocates and Their Strategic Uses of Identity**

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## **Abstract**

Nonprofit advocacy organizations play a key role in advancing the rights of disadvantaged individuals and groups. Further, these organizations strategically frame issues and their image in ways that facilitate their ability to mobilize individuals, gain credibility, and sway public opinion.

While scholars recognize that immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations have the potential to serve, advocate for, and/or mobilize some of the most disadvantaged communities in the US, there is little focus on organizational identity (very simply, the answer to “who are we as an organization?”) and how organizational identities are deployed as a political strategy, especially in a political environment where politicians blame immigrants for damaging the livelihoods of Americans and in which racist and xenophobic rhetoric is increasingly normalized.

I use the example of Asian Americans, a group with tremendous intragroup socioeconomic, cultural, and political diversity, and the nonprofits serving this community, to examine how their identity deployment practices, in conjunction with other factors internal and external to these organizations, relate to social service and advocacy outcomes for immigrant constituents in New York City.

Although these organizations differ in multiple ways (e.g., varying levels of attachment with Asian American identity, history, location in the city, constituency, size, organizational capacity, and programmatic and advocacy expertise), they also seek to mitigate organizational uncertainties in the midst of demographic, political, and economic change. I find three cross cutting themes that contribute to the bulk of my findings: 1) flexible identity deployment and its “mixed” programmatic and advocacy outcomes, 2) boundary maintenance within organizations to maintain organizational legitimacy, and 3) claims of disadvantage relative to other groups. Ultimately, these findings contribute to understandings of the current state of Asian American politics and how these dynamics impact panethnic and multiracial forms of collective action.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In November 2014, Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) sued Harvard University, claiming that the university intentionally discriminated against Asian American applicants by limiting their enrollment in its race-conscious admissions to promote “racial balancing.” In an attempt to appeal to potential sympathizers, the SFFA proclaims that “there is a line between ‘competitive’ admissions and just flat out ‘unconstitutional’ ones” and asks individuals, “Help us draw that line!”<sup>1</sup> In these ways, the SFFA posits that Asian American applicants are like “Jewish applicants in the 1920s and 1930s” as they continue suffer from “discrimination and stereotyping.”<sup>2</sup>

With its crusader-like tone and an organizational name that suggests it is a grassroots mobilization effort, the SFFA is in fact a nonprofit membership organization founded by long-term anti-affirmative action activist Edward Blum. Supposedly, he recruited Asian Americans to be a part of this effort.

Not surprisingly, Harvard University denies these charges and defends its admissions practices. On its website dedicated to the lawsuit<sup>3</sup>, the university claims that it “seeks to assemble an extraordinary and diverse class of undergraduate students by conducting a wide-ranging review of every aspect of each applicant’s background and experience.” In this way, the university seeks “the educational benefits that come from a class that is diverse on multiple dimensions,” giving students the opportunity to learn from one another. Further, Harvard prominently features the names and links to several established Asian American civil rights organizations such as Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAAJ) that support Harvard. AAAJ is a consortium of civil rights organizations that collectively claims “to advance the civil and human rights for Asian Americans and to build and promote a fair and equitable society for all.” In fact, the consortium claims to be “the voice for the Asian American community... fighting for *our* civil rights through education litigation, and public policy advocacy (emphasis added by author).”<sup>4</sup> By clearly displaying their support, Harvard signals to the public: *Look, this established Asian American civil rights organization that claims to be the voice for the Asian American community is on our side!*

I use this example for several reasons. First, it highlights the diversity of the Asian American “community” and how group interests may diverge dramatically and very publicly. Second, this example demonstrates the important political role that nonprofit advocacy organizations play in advancing (or at least claiming to) the rights of disadvantaged individuals and groups. Last, these organizations strategically frame issues and their image in ways that facilitate their ability to mobilize individuals, gain credibility, and sway public opinion.

While scholars recognize that immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations have the potential to serve, advocate for, and/or mobilize different immigrant communities, there is little to no focus on organizational identities (very simply, the answer to “who are we as an organization?”<sup>5</sup>) and how they are deployed as a political strategy at the collective level<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://studentsforfairadmissions.org/> (Accessed July 2019)

<sup>2</sup> <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/43-sffa-memo-for-summary-judgement/1a7a4880cb6a662b3b51/optimized/full.pdf#page=1>

<sup>3</sup> <https://admissionscase.harvard.edu/> (Accessed July 2019)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/index.php/who-we-are> (Accessed July 2019)

<sup>5</sup> Albert and Whetten 1985

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein 1997

Existing scholarship on collective and organizational identities point to a strong relationship between organizational identity and action whereby organizational identities<sup>7</sup> may be seen as both drivers and product(s) of organizational behavior and outcomes. Ultimately, studying organizational identity allows scholars to consider identity and its deployment as part of organizational repertoire of strategies for both organizational and constituent gain.

In a hostile political environment where politicians blame immigrants for damaging the livelihoods and wellbeing of (white) Americans and in which racist and xenophobic rhetoric is normalized, I believe that it is important to explicitly focus on how nonprofits that serve and represent immigrant groups (and those most vulnerable in these communities) utilize different organizational identities to not only protect and empower constituents, but to bolster organizational capabilities to do so.

I use the example of Asian Americans, a group with tremendous intragroup socioeconomic, cultural, and political diversity, and the nonprofits serving this community to examine how their identity deployment practices<sup>8</sup>, in conjunction with other factors internal and external to the organizations, relate to social service and advocacy outcomes for immigrant constituents in New York City. In this vein, I ask the following research questions:

- How and why do staff in immigrant-serving advocacy and social service nonprofits in New York City (such as those serving Asian American groups) deploy organizational identities?
- How do these practices impact organizing and advocacy outcomes for different organizational constituents and partners?

### ***Demographic Snapshot of Asian Americans in New York City***

Asian Americans comprise 14% (1.19 million) of the total population in New York City (8.5 million). Of this total, Chinese Americans comprise almost 6.8% of all New Yorkers (or 49% of Asian Americans), followed by Asian Indians (2.7% or 20% of Asian Americans), Korean Americans (1% or 7% of Asian Americans), and Filipino Americans (.9% or 6.5% of Asian Americans). The “Other Asian” category makes up 2.1% of the total population in the city (or 15% of Asian Americans), which one could argue is a sizeable portion of the Asian American community in New York City<sup>9</sup>.

Asian Americans also represent the fastest growing racial group in New York City. The highest numeric increases in population (as opposed to overall growth by ethnic group) occurred among individuals of Chinese, Bangladeshi, and Indian descent. Almost half of all Asian Americans in New York City reside in Queens, one of the five boroughs in New York City.

With significant demographic growth, rates of poverty among Asian Americans also grew by 44 percent between 2000 and 2016 (largely among immigrants). Immigrants comprise almost 70 percent of all Asian Americans in New York City, with one in four being recently arrived (or having resided in the US for less than 10 years). In the aggregate, Asian Americans experience relative parity in income with non-Hispanic whites; however, Asian Americans also have the highest poverty rates in New York City (after adjusting for cost of living), despite high levels of

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<sup>7</sup> Like individual identities, organizational identities may be multifaceted

<sup>8</sup> While I assume that many immigrant advocacy organizations may prioritize racial and/or national origin identities, I assume that these organizations have multiple identities. For example, even though an organization may primarily identify as Korean American, it may identify panethnically, as an organization supporting immigrants, communities of color, and/or socioeconomically vulnerable populations, depending on the organizational activity, perceived constituents, and/or analysis of perceived benefits associated with this identity.

<sup>9</sup> Based on 2013-2017 ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates, US Census Bureau

educational attainment among youth<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, it is important to note how economic disparities vary by ethnic group. Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Chinese, and Koreans experience high levels of poverty relative to other Asian American subgroups in New York City.

As of 2010, Asian Americans represented 11 percent of all New Yorkers who could vote. At the same time, the numbers of those who could vote grew by over 50 percent from 2000 to 2010.<sup>11</sup>

### **Overview of Cases**

By examining three different nonprofits that serve Asian American communities in New York City, I find that identity deployment strategies are associated with opportunities (e.g., material resources and increased exposure) as well as with additional concerns (e.g., concerns over expertise and legitimacy among staff and uneven resource allocation among different constituents, leaving some equally or more vulnerable despite organizational efforts).

Further, as nonprofits claim to represent larger constituencies and engage in collaborations with organizations representing other ethnic and racial groups, I observed a general tendency among organizational staff to claim disadvantage vis-à-vis other groups. This points more broadly to the ambivalent position of Asian American social justice advocates and activists. More specifically, these individuals often hope to work in allyship with other historically marginalized groups yet feel compelled to draw attention the needs of their specific constituents, at times feeling as though they may be more disadvantaged as an organization and/or as a group in certain advocacy contexts.

#### *Case 1: Asian Pacific Americans Together (APAT)*

APAT was founded in the 1980s to advocate for Asian American children and families struggling with poverty and limited English skills in New York City. The organization is a stand-alone entity with its own staff and board, but is also comprised of 40-50 member organizations, the majority of which serve low-income Asian American immigrant communities in the New York City area.

Although the organization may have focused more heavily on issues pertaining to Chinese-American communities in the past, there is now a greater focus on recruiting and supporting South Asian and Muslim groups largely due to increasing diversity of the Asian American population in the New York City area. In this way, staff members identified their organization as “Asian American” or “Asian Pacific American” in broad terms to be inclusive of diverse members and constituents. A broad understanding also facilitated access to various policy spaces as well as material and symbolic resources for the organization and for Asian Americans, more generally.

In addition to associating pan-Asian identity with diversity and inclusion, staff often associated pan-Asian identity with disadvantage. I offer the example of the Data Disaggregation Campaign to highlight how APAT staff negotiated their commitment to inclusion and their desires to address the needs of disadvantaged subgroups and member organizations representing these groups.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/Social-Indicators-Report-April-2016.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Demographic information obtained from [http://www.aafny.org/pdf/AAF\\_nyc2010report.pdf](http://www.aafny.org/pdf/AAF_nyc2010report.pdf) and [http://www.aafny.org/doc/AAF\\_poverty\\_2018.pdf](http://www.aafny.org/doc/AAF_poverty_2018.pdf)

*Case 2: East Asian Social Services, Organizing, and Advocacy (EASSOA)*

EASSOA is a nonprofit organization founded in the 1980s to meet the needs of Korean Americans in New York City. Despite the many changes that occurred in the area (notably, an increase in the Chinese American population), EASSOA staff believed the organization was fundamentally a Korean American organization that focused on the needs of disadvantaged group members. At the same time, staff recognized that the organization was increasingly becoming an Asian American organization through some of its activities (e.g., civic engagement).

By presenting two initiatives – civic engagement and DACA organizing – I observe how EASSOA's identity deployment practices confers a level of flexibility in how the organization presents itself to stakeholders, and in this process, the organization may claim different constituencies and open up opportunities for funding and increased influence. However, one could argue that this strategy also appears to be negatively associated with issues of accountability and resource allocation, potentially exacerbating inequalities within organizational contexts. Finally, I observe how these activities may be associated with staff members' efforts to maintain social boundaries within the organization.

*Case 3: South Asian Women's Empowerment (SAWE)*

SAWE is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization located in a part of New York City with a burgeoning Bangladeshi population. The organization was founded relatively recently (2008) compared to the other two in this research.

SAWE focused on serving and advocating for relatively recently arrived Bangladeshi women who were poor, limited English proficient, and had limited mobility beyond their immediate neighborhood. Most clients were also Muslim, making them vulnerable to anti-Muslim sentiment. In these ways, staff believed that they served a particularly disadvantaged community that was often overlooked by the city, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Despite the specificity of this client base, I found that there were several organizational identities and competing narratives about constituents at SAWE. These strategies may be tied to efforts to secure more funding and other symbolic and material resources from different organizational stakeholders.

I use the example of a childcare cooperative to demonstrate how this program failed to connect participants with jobs, at least partly due to inadequately adapting existing training models to the specific needs of this community and to an initial lack of expertise about the demand for such services in the local Bangladeshi community. Further, I observed how staff members engaged in an informal practice of boundary maintenance within the organization. I use the example of the Women's Empowerment Program to show how staff gauged one another's levels of cultural competency and expertise. However, their concerns escalated to include questions of motivation, legitimacy, and trust when they considered the executive's role at the organization given racial and socioeconomic differences.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Methodology**

### **Literature Review**

The literature review is divided into four parts: 1) Asian American Political Identity, 2) Asian Americans and the Model Minority Myth, 3) Organizations and (Immigrant) Organizational Advocacy, and 4) Collective and Organizational Identity.

#### ***Asian American Political Identity and the Model Minority Myth***

Asian American identity is “a distinctly U.S.-based concept” (Junn and Masuoka 2008, 733) that is both negotiated among Asian Americans and is ascribed by US bureaucratic entities (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2014). Okamoto defines panethnic identity as an outcome of processes “through which multiple ethnic groups<sup>12</sup> relax and widen their boundaries to forge a new, broader grouping and identity” (Okamoto 2014, 2). In this way, Okamoto points to how panethnic identities do not result from a “natural outcome or process” (3). Instead, “different ethnic groups come to share interests and a collective history and build institutions and identities across ethnic or cultural boundaries” (2).

It is therefore not surprising that a common characteristic among Asian Americans is one of difference, where subgroups differ dramatically along multiple dimensions (Wong et al. 2011); this includes language, religion, generation and nativity status, legal status, geographic dispersion, political outlook and behavior, and socioeconomic attainment. For example, while Indian Americans have high median incomes and levels educational attainment relative to other groups in the US, Hmong and Cambodian Americans are among the most disadvantaged, experiencing high levels of poverty and low educational attainment (Ramakrishnan and Ahmad 2014).

Such differences are partly attributed to the fact that the conditions under which many groups entered the US have varied significantly (e.g. Vietnamese political refugees versus Indian engineers). Further, Asian Americans “are the most heavily immigrant group” among the major ethnic and racial groups in the US, whereby the foreign-born account for almost 70% of Asian Americans compared to 4% for whites, 8% for blacks, and 40% for Latinos<sup>13</sup> (Wong et al 2011, 12).

Given these dynamics, Espiritu characterized “...Asians in the United States” as having “rarely conceived of themselves as a single people and many still do not” (1992, 14). Most individuals with Asian heritage combine their ethnic and American identities (e.g. Japanese American), and to a lesser extent, identify solely along ethnic lines (e.g. Vietnamese). Relatedly, Wong et al. (2011) find that few Asian Americans do not express a strong sense of linked fate (Dawson 1994) despite most sensing cultural commonality with other Asians (Wong et al. 2011, 173). Part of this may also be due to the fact that Asian Americans have not experienced the extent and long-term history of racial discrimination and the kinds of structural

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<sup>12</sup> By ethnic groups, or more generally, ethnicity, I mean a form of identification based on supposed common descent, claims of shared history, and shared symbols of cultural identity among a group of individuals (Cornell and Hartman 2007).

<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term “Latino” instead of “Latinx,” a gender-neutral term that is increasingly used, especially among younger advocates, activists, and academics. Where appropriate, I use the term “Latinx” (i.e., when my interview participants use this term). I use “Latino” because this study pertains to advocacy organizations, many of which continue to use this term. For examples, please refer to: [naleo.org](http://naleo.org), [unidosus.org](http://unidosus.org), [hispanicfederation.org](http://hispanicfederation.org), [uprose.org](http://uprose.org) (websites accessed July 2019). In some cases, organizations may use both ([votolatino.org](http://votolatino.org))

barriers to socioeconomic mobility in this country as other groups such as African Americans (Junn and Masuoka 2008). Historically, when Asian Americans have experienced exclusion, it was often based on national origin (e.g. the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Japanese American Internment). These dynamics problematize our understanding of racial identity in the US as it is based primarily on analyses of black racial political identity, which has generally pointed to how a sense of linked fate among African Americans holds despite intra-group difference (Dawson 1994; Dawson 2001).

Yet this identifier persists and several factors account for this. To begin, racial discrimination and instances of hate crimes have often driven Asian Americans' political participation (Wong et al. 2011, 212) and have spurred Asian Americans (and Asian American organizations) to mobilize on a panethnic basis since the 1980s with the murder of Vincent Chin<sup>14</sup> (Espiritu 1992). In other cases, labor market segregation, community organizations, and community leaders in these nonprofits may encourage panethnic mobilization (Okamoto 2014). Further, as long as US government agencies continue to use this identifier, advocates and activists will likely adhere to a logic of gaining power in numbers, perpetuating the use of this term (Espiritu 1992; Mora 2014).

Even as this identity persists, research also points to how this identifier is malleable and context dependent. To begin, Wong et al. (2011) find that when individuals do identify as Asian American, it is usually based on several factors such as political environment, whether one perceives a political advantage in using this identity, generation, level of education, and geography. Additionally, Junn and Masuoka (2008) find that Asian Americans may possess a "latent" and "malleable" racial identity that may be activated to encourage a stronger political identity and a sense of linked fate. Last, Jerry Park (2008) observes how this identifier may be associated with a "plurality of meanings" among the second generation (541). Specifically, Park finds that although Asian American identity originated as racial political identity, the term may now be associated with ethnic diversity, certain religions and religious practices, the model minority stereotype, and a sense of common values among those with Asian ancestry.

All of these considerations point to how Asian American panethnic identity, like all racial identities, are socially constructed (Omi and Winant 2014). This aligns with more general understandings of social identity whereby any group identity is dependent on the reflexive processes of ascription and self-identification. Further, individual and group identities and boundaries may change, depending on context (Mead 1934; Barth [1969]1998; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Serpe and Stryker 2011). In this way, there are multiple "personal selves corresponding to different comparative contexts" (Spears 2011, 208) as there are also personal, relational, and collective levels of identity that co-exist in individuals (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Waters (1999) for example, examines the interplay between structure and agency with regards to identity formation among first- and second-generation West Indians in New York City, describing how some members of the second-generation "code switch" between West Indian and black identities.

### *The Model Minority Myth*

The tremendous in-group diversity among Asian Americans suggests that group members are not on their way to joining a (privileged) white American "mainstream" (Nee and

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<sup>14</sup> Vincent Chin was a Chinese American autoworker who was beaten to death by white autoworkers in Detroit in 1982. The two autoworkers mistook Vincent Chin for someone of Japanese ancestry, blaming him and Japanese auto manufacturers for the loss of their jobs and the demise of the US auto industry. The leniency of their sentence spurred many Asian Americans to political action across ethnic lines as many recognized their collective vulnerability.

Holbrow 2013), but may instead experience forms of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993)<sup>15</sup>. Perhaps a more nuanced approach takes into account how intersectionality (Crenshaw 1993) plays out within this “community” as various forms of disadvantage may intersect, forming “multiple ‘roads’ of oppression and disadvantage (such as those based on race, gender, and economic status)” (Strolovitch 2007, 25).<sup>16</sup> This adds more complexity to our understanding of group identity and membership by explicitly focusing on the existence of intragroup disadvantage and relatedly, privilege.

However, these realities are dwarfed by the prevalent view that Asian Americans are “model minorities” whose cultural values of diligence, family solidarity, respect for education, and self-sufficiency have propelled” group members “to notable success” despite historically being subject to racism and exclusion (Kim 1999, 118).<sup>17</sup> More recently, Poon et al. (2015, citing Osajima 2000) offer a similar description, but emphasize achievement as a key characteristic. The model minority stereotype “defines AAPIs, especially Asian Americans<sup>18</sup>, as a monolithically hardworking racial group whose high achievement undercuts claims of systemic racism made by other racially minoritized populations, especially African Americans.” Both definitions account for how this stereotype must be understood in relation to other racial groups.

In Claire Jean Kim’s model of racial triangulation (1999), for example, Asian Americans experience “relative valorization” by whites who blame blacks for lacking these cultural values. Simultaneously, Asian Americans are subject to “civic ostracism” by whites who consider group members as “immutably foreign and unassimilable” on racial and cultural grounds (107). Therefore, Kim’s model focuses on group power dynamics in relation to one another and is an alternative to conceptualizations a top-down racial hierarchy where whites are on top, blacks are on the bottom, and Asian Americans and Latinos fall somewhere in between.<sup>19</sup> In addition, this model points to how privileged whites maintain power in an apparently color-blind society by masking “what is fundamentally a White-non-White conflict over resources...onto a proxy skirmish between non-Whites” (118).

In response, scholars, activists, and advocates have extensively engaged in what Poon et al. (2015) describe as “counter model minority myth projects.” In their review of educational research, the authors explain how these projects usually occur in two main ways. They 1) emphasize the diversity of the Asian American population to highlight disadvantaged subgroups and 2) point to how Asian Americans continue to experience racism and barriers to achievement. But by doing so, stakeholders often bifurcate Asian Americans into high-achieving and low-achieving groups, inadvertently framing the latter negatively. Further, by failing to

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<sup>15</sup> Segmented assimilation suggests that not all immigrants experience upward mobility. Some members of the second generation (e.g. born in the US) may experience the “time honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle-class.” Others may experience the complete opposite and experience long-term or even permanent poverty and downward assimilation into the underclass. Alternatively, others may experience economic advancement while deliberately maintaining group solidarity and cultural values (Portes and Zhou 1993, 82). Ultimately, assimilation to the host society may not always be in an immigrant group’s interest (i.e. in low-income neighborhoods where native-born youth face downward mobility). Instead, choosing a road of “paced, selective assimilation” may be “the best strategy for capitalizing on otherwise unavailable material and moral resources” in different locales (Portes and Zhou 1993, 96).

<sup>16</sup> Although Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited for coining the term, there has been an extensive body of scholarship, particularly by black feminists, focusing on how individuals may be subject to multiple sources of oppression, making single identity frameworks (based only on race, for example) inadequate to address oppression.

<sup>18</sup> The authors make a clear distinction between Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) and Asian Americans.

<sup>19</sup> Scholars often cite Matsuda 1993, Okihiro 1994, Kibria 1998, and Feagin 2000 with regards to Asian Americans’ position in a racial hierarchy. For an overview, see: Miri Song. 2004. “Introduction: Who’s at the bottom? Examining claims about racial hierarchy.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27(6): 859-877.

directly link the model minority myth to larger discussions of power relations, these approaches continue to pit Asian Americans against other historically marginalized racial groups through equal claims to minority status and resources associated with it. In these ways, well-meaning individuals and groups reproduce the very dynamics that they wish to dismantle.

More recently, Kim (2018) problematizes what it means to be a “minority” by tracking how Asian Americans have historically been used by privileged whites to disassociate affirmative action’s intended purpose as a policy for repatriation for blacks. However, what is distinct in the present is how Asian Americans, particularly conservative Chinese Americans, not only insist on their “minority” status but also now claim to be more disadvantaged than blacks in this case – that they are “the new Blacks” (2). Consequently, Kim raises concerns about how Asian Americans’ identification as “minorities” may blur “the differentiated position of non-White groups and its impact on group outcomes” (10). In other words, while groups such as Asian Americans may claim disadvantage vis-à-vis whites as “minorities,” they are still, in general, more privileged than blacks as they live in a society that is fundamentally anti-black. Going one step further, one may conclude that Asian Americans’ claims of disadvantage and demands for more rights and resources perpetuate existing power structures (as Poon et al. point out) and may exacerbate disadvantage for other groups.

Ultimately, these authors emphasize that *how* Asian Americans and other groups claim disadvantage and resources matters for both in-group and out-group members. Though not the main focus of these scholars, nonprofit organizations are key players in debates over group inequality and disadvantage because advocates and social service providers take it upon themselves to serve and represent constituencies that they determine to be most disadvantaged. They are also important to encouraging group identity formation, facilitating collective action. In the next section, I offer an overview of social service and advocacy organizations, paying particular attention to immigrant-serving organizations.

### ***Organizations and (Immigrant) Organizational Advocacy***

For the most part, the literatures on immigrant and advocacy organizations fall in line with scholarship that examines civil society associations’ (or organizations’) potential to act as a force for stable democratic governance and as a catalyst for social and political integration.

In the broadest sense, civil society organizations are often seen as meso-level structures that mediate between micro level (e.g. individual level) and macro level (e.g. state policies and institutions) structures and processes. This happens as civil society organizations may encourage individuals to overcome narrow self-interest by developing attachments and collective interests, thereby promoting collective action. Ultimately (and ideally) these processes contribute to stable and healthy democracies (Tocqueville 1969 in Warren 2001; Putnam 2000).

Nonprofit advocacy organizations, more specifically, have often been seen as key players representing and addressing the interests of minority groups in the US (Strolovitch 2014, 137). Advocacy organizations represent minority group interests by acting as counterweights to the large number of organizations that advocate for more elite (and potentially anti-egalitarian) interests (Schattschneider 1960 in Strolovitch 2014, 137-138) and by filling in gaps in representation by the two major political parties. In fact, such organizations are increasingly viewed as “self-appointed” or “self-authorized” representatives” (Urbinati and Warren 2008; Montanaro 2012), and in some instances, appear to supplant locally elected officials as legitimate representatives (Levine 2016).

Sociologists interested in “the community question,” have often examined community-based organizations (CBOs) as mechanisms that facilitate social interaction and the creation of social capital at the local level (Marwell 2007; Small 2009). Said differently, individuals’ affiliation with and participation in organizations help them to share information with one another and to develop a sense of community attachment, common identity, and collective efficacy (Small 2009). Further, CBOs are seen as essential to the “opportunities, choices, and outcomes of the urban poor” – the fewer their resources, the more likely individuals will depend on local organizations as well as “the systems in which these organizations operate” (Small and Allard 2013, 10).

Interdisciplinary research on immigrant organizations examines how they facilitate immigrants’ social and political incorporation<sup>20</sup> (Chung 2005; Bloemraad 2006; Wong 2006; Cordero-Guzman et al 2008; de Graauw 2008; Hum 2010; Bloemraad and Gleeson 2012; Kondo 2012; de Graauw 2016). In line with theories of civil society associations, immigrant organizations may act as sites that mediate “between immigrant individuals and larger political communities” to facilitate immigrants’ integration (de Graauw 2016, 4). Said differently, “immigrants rely on fellow immigrants and local institutions such as community organizations to become participatory citizens” because integration is a “social phenomenon” (Bloemraad 2006, 237).

By using culturally competent approaches, immigrant organizations may serve, advocate for, and politically mobilize immigrant populations that have traditionally been overlooked by the political establishment (Wong 2006). This may include the most disadvantaged segments of the immigrant population – those who lack English language proficiency, have low socioeconomic status, and may lack legal status (Wong 2006, 11). These organizations may also be able to incorporate constituent views in previously inaccessible political arenas (Hum 2010). These activities may be particularly important for Asian Americans because this group has the largest percentage of foreign born members among immigrant groups, rendering many to be excluded, by default, from traditional forms of political participation. From the standpoint of panethnic scholarship, organizations are integral to panethnic identity formation and mobilization as they act as sites where ethnic boundaries expand to form a collectivity, facilitating groups’ claims for more resources and political voice. (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2014)

However, this sense of optimism may be tempered by research that points to such organizations’ limitations. For instance, immigrant organizations experience significant capacity constraints in their abilities to politically mobilize their constituents, often pursuing what may be called “limited engagement” which include recruiting a limited number of people to participate in issue-based political activities (Wong, 2006, 9). Similarly, de Graauw (2008) states that it is unclear if there are positive spillover effects from political mobilization at the organizational level to other aspects of political life – many immigrants are often recruited around a narrow set of organizational issues, resulting in what might be termed organizational incorporation. Finally, panethnic scholarship points to potential inequalities among different ethnic groups that mobilize panethnically. For instance, Espiritu (1992) describes how different organizations representing

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<sup>20</sup> Sociologists often examine “assimilation,” defined as the “decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences” where ethnic distinctions decrease “in salience” in various “domains of social life” and in identification with members of other groups (Alba and Nee 2003, 11). A very broad definition of political incorporation may be the ability for sustained claims-making for the allocation of material or symbolic goods in the political arena, regardless of whether individuals or groups experience successes, impasses, or reversals (Hochschild, Chattopadhyay, Gay, and Jones-Correa 2013, 16). Naturalization is often seen as a key indicator for “political incorporation.”

ethnic subgroups may experience unequal representation in panethnic coalitions. For example, she offers the example of how the Filipino American Service Group, Inc. (FASGI) opted to leave a pan-Asian coalition (Asian Pacific Planning Council or APPCON) claiming unequal funding and representation.

These observations fall in line with more general critiques of civil society and advocacy organizations that involve questioning and countering long-held assumptions about their conferred benefits for American social and political life (Rosenblum 1998; Warren 2001; Skocpol 2003; Strolovitch 2007). Similar to what I have mentioned above, Strolovitch (2007) points to inequalities within organizational contexts as many (but not all) national advocacy organizations advocate for the interests of more privileged subgroup members than those who are intersectionally disadvantaged. This may be due to several factors such as financial pressures and political environment. Similarly, Cohen (1999) warns that the most vulnerable members of minority groups may experience “secondary marginalization” in “indigenous institutions” that are, in theory, most capable to address the needs of disadvantaged minorities in ways that mainstream organizations are not.

In this section, I have reviewed scholarship on civil society associations and more specifically on nonprofits that serve immigrant communities as potential engines for stable democratic governance and social and political integration. I also outline some of the limitations and constraints that these organizations face. Yet much of this literature does not explicitly incorporate an analysis of how organizational identities may impact advocacy and/or service outcomes.

Much of the time, I argue that organizational identities are taken for granted and scholars may inadvertently depict organizations monolithically and as relatively stable (e.g., a Vietnamese nonprofit serving Vietnamese Americans). While Okamoto (2014) does acknowledge how ethnic and panethnic identities may co-exist within organizational contexts, she stops at examining how processes of identity formation impacts intragroup inequalities given that her objective is to examine how organizations contribute to panethnic identity formation, more generally. Alternatively, Espiritu (1992) examines the politics of pan-Asian identity formation, the potential inequalities that arise as different ethnic groups work on a pan-Asian basis, and to a certain extent, intragroup difference at the ethnic group level; however, she, like Okamoto, does not approach this topic through a lens of *organizational* identity formation; organizations strategically develop and present different identities for political gain at the organizational and group levels.

I demonstrate, below, how processes of organizational identity formation and deployment are fundamental to how these organizations attempt to serve, represent, and advocate for vulnerable groups. I draw from social movement scholarship and organizational studies on collective and organizational identities to fill in gaps in the literature.

### ***Collective and Organizational Identity***

Scholars have increasingly acknowledged how identity is an integral part of social movements<sup>21</sup> as social movement organizations (SMOs) may act as sites that encourage the development of collective identities and activism (Caniglia and Carmin 2005; Clemens and

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<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this research, I mostly draw upon the social movements literature given that the organizations that I study are often affiliated with social movement activities.

Minkoff 2007; Diani and Pilati 2011).<sup>22</sup> Social movement scholarship has for a long time acknowledged the importance of social movement organizations (SMOs) as resources for the basis and maintenance of social movement activity (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tarrow 1998). In addition, a “constructionist perspective” of social movements points to how collective identities are not only constructed in social movements, but also integral to all aspects of movement activity (Poletta and Jasper 2001).

Taylor and Whittier (1992) define collective identity as “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity.” In other words, it is a “shared sense of ‘we-ness’” that may derive from various activities within organizational contexts to transform individual grievances to collective ones (Snow 2001 in Hunt and Benford 2007, 440). These processes are a form of “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987), which then facilitate collective action, defined as “the pursuit of a common objective through joint action” (Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2007, 7).<sup>23</sup>

Activities that promote collective identity formation may include (but are not limited to) boundary setting, negotiating identities and symbols, storytelling, and framing<sup>24</sup> (Snow and Benford 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Hunt and Benford 2007). While not all movement activities happen in formal organizational contexts, it is worth acknowledging that “collective identities...are continually filtered and reproduced through *organizational bodies* (emphasis in original)” (Gamson 1996, 235).

Collective identities are crucial because they may lay the foundation for strategies for organizational action, organizational form, and outcomes. New identities may also be the outcome of movement participation and activity which may then challenge existing institutions and perceived norms (Poletta and Jasper 2001). In these ways, organizational strategy, structure, and processes may impact the saliency of social boundaries within organizational contexts and vice-versa (Reger 2002).

All of these processes may happen in conjunction with changes in political opportunity structures (Tarrow 1998), changes in institutional norms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and shifts in the kinds of environmental constraints and resources that organizations may be subject to (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Relatedly, social movement participants and organizations may deploy different identities as a strategy in different political environments. Specifically, Mary Bernstein’s theory of “identity deployment”<sup>25</sup> (1997, 2009) points to how identities may be “deployed at the collective level as a political strategy, which can be aimed at cultural and/or

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<sup>22</sup> I use a broad definition of a social movement organization as “any civil society organization that aligns its ‘goals with the preferences of a social movement or countermovement and attempts to implements those goals’” (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1218 in Caniglia and Carmin 2005, 202).

<sup>23</sup> As Snow, Soule, and Kriesi (2007) note, “it is useful to differentiate ... collective actions that are institutionalized or normatively sanctioned from those that are not and that fall outside of institutional channels” as social movements are “defined in part by their use of noninstitutionalized means of action” (7). Based on my fieldwork, I argue that social movement organizations (SMOs) may at times engage in contentious and noninstitutionalized forms of action and at other times, engage in more institutionalized forms.

<sup>24</sup> Framing may be defined as “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment... frames allow individuals to” place “events within their life space or the world at large” (Snow and Benford 1992, 137).

<sup>25</sup> Bernstein (1997) also defines identity deployment as: “Expressing identity such that the terrain of conflict becomes the individual person so that the values, categories, and practices of individuals become subject to debate.” However, Bernstein and Olsen (2009) add that “Although individual identities are implicated in the strategic deployment of identity, identity deployment is a collective strategy and the personal identities of individuals may or may not match up with the identities that are strategically deployed.”

political goals” (Bernstein and Olsen 2009, 871). In effect, it is “identity as strategy” for political gain (Bernstein and Olsen 2009). For example, Bernstein shows how gay and lesbian activists in the 1970s and 1980s in Oregon, New York, and Vermont strategically deployed different identities (based on arguments for similarity to or difference from the dominant culture) and how these strategies changed over time. Although Bernstein notes how there may be a “mixed model of identity deployment” within the same organization or among different organizations in the same social movement, Bernstein and Olsen (2009) suggest that this may be less likely given that this “would threaten a narrative consistency” (845); as a result, the authors believe that a mixed model would most likely happen over time.

Further, group members may experience different outcomes as a result of different identity deployment practices. For example, Zein Murib (2017) demonstrates how the interests of individuals who identified as transgender were pushed aside in favor of issues that many gay men and lesbians supported (e.g., same sex marriage and gays and lesbians in the military) in forming the “GLBT” movement. In line with some of the works that I cite above, Murib presses readers to consider the politics of group identity formation as the needs of intersectionally disadvantaged subgroup members may be overlooked.

I now turn to the literature on organizational identity, nested within the broader field of organization studies. This body of literature is valuable to my study as several scholars explicitly point to the hybridity of organizational identities, as opposed to the social movements literature, which tends to emphasize identity development and deployment over time and by context.

Organizational identity is typically defined as that which is central, enduring, and distinctive to an organization (Albert and Whetten 1985), though the nature and/or degree of what “central” and “enduring” entails may be debated as there is acknowledgement about the contestability and context-dependency of organizational identities (Gioia et al. 2000; Pratt and Foreman 2000; Rodrigues and Child 2008, 887).

Like individual and group identities, organizational identities are multifaceted and contextual, and we may, to some extent, align theories of individual and group identities to organizational contexts as organizations may be seen as one type of group formation (Ashforth and Mael 1989). In this way, organizational identities may possess a duality or hybridity of values or traits (e.g. normative versus utilitarian values) (Albert and Whetten 1985), be comprised of subgroups whose identities differ within organizational contexts (Ashforth and Mael 1989), and have mismatched public and internal identities and image (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). Organizational identities are also reflexive in that organizational identity and image derives from a dialectical process whereby organizational actors react to their environment as they try to change it (Dutton and Dukerich 1991).

Similar to views on collective identity in social movements, this literature stresses how organizational identities may motivate organizational action (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Pratt and Rafaeli 1997; Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003) and supplements interest-based (and/or rational-choice) perspectives.<sup>26</sup> However, these processes may often be political as organizational identity entails specific members using power and claiming legitimacy to make certain claims. Major changes to organizational identity, in particular, “involves a redefinition of alliances, and the inclusion and exclusion of groups in power networks” within and external to organizations (Rodrigues and Child 2008, 906). Similar to Bernstein’s work (1997), these authors point to how organizational identity formation and change are often political in nature.

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<sup>26</sup> For a summary, please refer to Rowley and Moldoveanu 2008.



## **Contributions**

Essentially, scholarship on collective and organizational identities point to a strong relationship between organizational identity and action; in effect, organizational identities may be seen as both drivers and product(s) of organizational behavior and outcomes. Further, identity deployment practices are often strategic and result in different outcomes for group members. Given the tremendous intragroup diversity among Asian Americans, I argue that it is important to examine how organizations engage in processes of organizational identity formation and how they deploy these identities in different contexts. By incorporating the concept of organizational identity and identity deployment in studies of immigrant-serving organizations, I fill in a gap in the literature.

## **Research Methodology**

This research is a qualitative comparative case study using a grounded theory approach of three Asian American advocacy and social services organizations in New York City.

The choice of a case study methodology is appropriate because this research is exploratory and is motivated by questions of *how* and *why* (Yin 2009; Gerring 2004). Also, my research topic deals with contemporary issues, which requires direct observation and interviews to carry out the research.

My findings are based on my engagement with three Asian American advocacy and social service nonprofits in New York City. I chose to work with Asian American organizations because of significant intragroup diversity in the Asian American community, lending to diverse experiences and socioeconomic outcomes among group members. Because of the role that advocacy and social service organizations play in political arenas, I was interested to see how processes of “identity work” within organizations impacted outcomes for group members.

I also approached Asian American organizations due to ease of access. I identify as Asian American, have professional experience working with nonprofits serving Asian American communities, and have a personal commitment to working on issues that involve the welfare of Asian Americans. I chose to work in New York City because this locale is home to many long-standing organizations serving various Asian American groups.

When I began this study, I planned to focus on three Asian American social service and advocacy organizations. Assuming that each organization varied in their level of identification with pan-Asian identity, I hoped to see how these different levels of identification related to different advocacy and service outcomes, if at all. However, after starting fieldwork, I realized that all the organizations that I engaged with engaged in identity practices in the short and long terms. Said differently, an organization could plan to take on a more expansive organizational identity (and increase organizational boundaries) over time but also engage in more short-term practices depending on context, strategically framing their organizations in different ways to different stakeholders. In this vein, I began to consider how identity deployment practices impacted advocacy and service outcomes, if at all.

## **Fieldwork and Access**

In order to gain access to these organizations, I offered to take on pro-bono consulting projects with each organization, in effect, becoming a member of “the team.” By being embedded in each organization, I conducted participant observation by working at each location for several days a week on a part-time basis. When possible, I attended staff meetings and

special events. At each location, I reported to a supervisor who offered guidance and feedback on whatever project I took on.

All projects were focused on, broadly speaking, empowering the communities with which I worked. These projects ranged from joining an organizing team to increase public awareness on undocumented Asian Americans, conducting a needs assessment of membership organizations after the election of President Trump, and helping to raise awareness on a growing South Asian community while also co-developing a curriculum to promote leadership development of South Asian immigrant women.

The bulk of my fieldwork took place between July 2016 and October 2017, although I continued to conduct interviews until August 2018 and examine social media sites until July 2019. I spent between six to sixteen weeks working with each group (depending on the needs of the project), but was on-site at each nonprofit for approximately four to eight weeks. More specifically, I was on-site at each location from July 2016 to August 2016 (but continued working with the organization until September 2016), December 2016 to January 2017 (but continued to work on a project until April 2017), and June to August 2017 (but continued to be engaged with the organization until October 2017).

My participation allowed me to gain staff members' trust and first-hand knowledge of organizational dynamics. Further, this facilitated being able to recruit interview participants. I interviewed the majority of staff members at each organization and when possible, interviewed affiliates and/or members. I typically conducted interviews in person while I was actively working at each organization. Interviews usually took place during lunch time or as a (long) coffee break and lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. My semi-structured interviews were mostly recorded and transcribed. Follow up interviews were conducted either in-person or over the phone. In total, I conducted 56 interviews with 45 participants.

I conducted document analysis (organizational documents, website, and other social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram) to fill in gaps in my understanding of programs and organizational history. I continued to follow organizational activities online until July 2019 to see what changes, if any, occurred at each site.

Last, I wrote detailed field notes about my work, observations, and interactions with staff. I mostly use field notes to ensure that data from interviews did not veer substantially from my observations. For analysis, I used Atlas.ti to systematically review all data for emerging themes.

To protect the identities of the organization and staff who participated in my interviews, I use pseudonyms throughout this research and avoid the use of other obvious identifiers (e.g., staff title). In addition, I generally refrain from giving detailed information about websites and documents. The names of all of the organizations that I worked with have been changed to protect the identity of the organizations and staff.

### ***Potential Limitations***

A key limitation to this research is its potential lack of generalizability – I compare three immigrant advocacy organizations in New York City that each have operational idiosyncrasies, represent different ethnic groups with different histories and experiences that affect organizational advocacy goals and activities, and are situated in a city that is typically characterized as having a relatively hospitable environment for immigrants (as well as other characteristics that may set it apart from many other cities in the US).

Despite these limitations, my findings may still be applicable to immigrant organizations that are located in similar political environments, share similar characteristics (e.g., funding streams, mix of social services, advocacy, and organizing), and experience demographic shifts in their environment. Further, I am able to control for organization type (nonprofit), racial group (Asian Americans), and activity type (empowerment initiatives). Last, I interviewed individuals representing other Asian American organizations in New York City to account for generalizability (16 individuals); several individuals represented organizations that were affiliated with APAT. Other individuals could broadly be considered stakeholders (e.g. funders) and organizational partners.

## **Chapter 3: Asian Pacific Americans Together (APAT)**

### **Organizational Background**

Asian Pacific Americans Together (APAT) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization located in New York City. As a membership organization, APAT is comprised of over 40 nonprofit organizations serving various APA communities<sup>27</sup> in the New York City area.

APAT usually works alongside other nonprofits in various social justice-oriented coalitions either as a lead or member. While APAT mostly partners with Asian American organizations, it continues to work with nonprofits representing other historically disadvantaged groups in the US, as well as with more “mainstream” organizations such as settlement houses that may serve Asian Americans in New York City.

#### ***History***

APAT was established in 1986 to bring attention to the needs of the city’s growing APA population, paying particular attention to the needs of children and families. During this time, the organization mostly focused on child welfare advocacy, pushing for more services, resources, and cultural awareness in public schools and social service agencies across New York City. Under new leadership in 2005, Alice, a long-term staff member, recalled how the organization “became a different type of advocacy organization,” shifting from “gathering information” to “making policy changes.” To do so, APAT more actively engaged members and collaborated with other organizations locally and nationally, putting it “at a different level.”

Membership composition also changed. While APAT began as an organization focused on Chinese American immigrant communities in New York City, membership became more diverse with increasing representation of South Asian groups. Although some staff believed that this change was simply reflective of larger demographic changes in New York City, others framed this trend as an organizational effort to be more representative of the diversity of the Asian American population in New York City.

#### ***Constituents***

APAT staff usually described constituents in two parts – first as member organizations (mostly community based organizations) serving APA communities and second, as “the Asian American community.” Although staff believed that they advocated on behalf of Asian Americans through their policy activities, they were also clear that APAT was a “grasstops” organization, primarily relying on member organizations to inform advocacy initiatives because they had the “direct touch” with local communities.<sup>28</sup>

Member organizations ranged from newly founded, smaller organizations with growing infrastructures to more established nonprofits exhibiting more financial security, advocacy expertise, and greater capacity. Pauline, a staff member, estimated that most members were involved with one to two initiatives at any given time, though participation was not equal. Nancy, another staff member, elaborated on why member participation was inconsistent:

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<sup>27</sup> I use “APA” (as opposed to Asian American) more frequently in this chapter as APAT members referred to their constituents as APAs.

<sup>28</sup> APAT member organizations were usually social service organizations that did not spend significant resources on politically mobilizing constituents.

They have to decide how much work are they going to do on their own and how much would make sense to be part of the committees... because it does take us a lot of manpower and time. If they don't see a return, which is often - an increase in funding or increase in support later on - how are they going to find that? I think that's the biggest push back... They have to feel like their involvement is worth-their-while.

In this way, members' participation was based on general capacity constraints, their appetite for involvement, and their constant assessment of the benefits and drawbacks to participation.

### ***Mission***

During my time there, APAT's mission was to "improve the quality of life for Asian Pacific American children and families in New York." However, a more recent analysis of APAT's website showed that the organization revamped its mission as a part of a "strategic revision."<sup>29</sup> APAT now claims to advocate "for equity and opportunity for marginalized Asian Pacific American (APA) children and families." In addition, the organization claims to be guided by a "social justice" perspective and seeks to mobilize "a coalition of partners to fight for systems and policy change." These statements contribute to their overall vision "for all children and families, including Asian Pacific Americans, in New York City to be safe, healthy, and able to reach their full potential in life." In this way, APAT now has an explicit social justice orientation and appears to have opened up the possibility for advocating beyond the APA community.

### ***Core Activities***

During my fieldwork, I identified three main interrelated activities: (1) policy and budgetary advocacy, (2) capacity building support, and (3) raising awareness of the Asian American population.

#### ***1) Advocacy***

Advocacy usually involved leading or joining coalitions related to health care access (e.g., increasing awareness of affordable health care options for hard-to-reach communities), budgetary advocacy (e.g., pushing for greater equity in the distribution of city council funding), and public school educational reform (e.g., pushing for reforms on how public schools discipline students of color). Staff were also considering how to implement new legislation aimed at collecting disaggregated data on the top 30 ethnic groups and languages in New York City.

#### ***2) Capacity Building***

In addition to training members to push for more funding from the city and other private sources, APAT directly supports members through its own funding initiatives. APAT may convene members on advocacy days, collectively apply for grants, or act as a pass-through to disburse funding from other sources; for example, APAT is responsible for disbursing a capacity-building grant from the New York City Council to selected APA-led nonprofits.

APAT also supports members through trainings and policy updates. Trainings included how to improve grant applications and develop messaging strategies. Further, APAT may offer policy updates on pressing issues; during the early months of the Trump presidency, the organization scheduled weekly calls to update members about potential policy changes on health programs which could affect their budgets.

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<sup>29</sup> Featured in the organization's March 2019 newsletter

Last, APAT facilitates ways for members to collaborate with one another. For instance, member organizations serving Japanese and Arab Americans found potential ways to collaborate given the similarities between the proposed Muslim registry and government-led efforts targeting Japanese Americans during World War II.

### *3) Raising Awareness*

APAT staff often stressed the need to inform stakeholders about the needs of vulnerable APAs. This included debunking the model minority myth and educating elected officials and social service providers about the Asian American population; despite increased Asian American representation in the city council, Alice, a long-time staff member believed that stakeholders still “don’t know a lot.” More specifically, Pauline explained how “some people just don’t believe that... there are poor Asians in New York City.” Don offered a scenario that he encountered often:

Every time I say, "I am a Filipino," they say, "Oh, you guys have a lot of doctors and nurses, right?" That kind of mentality, and I'm like, "Yeah, but didn't you see all these undocumented people that we have here, and the kinds of living condition that they have? If not, you should try...Go to Woodside, go to Elmhurst. These are working classes trying to get by every day.

Many staff members also pointed to the importance of debunking the model minority myth among Asian Americans and within other communities of color. Heena, who was a part of the management team, explained: “It’s still, ‘We [Asian Americans] work hard. We went through [a] good school. This is the way it should be done.’... They wouldn’t understand there are groups... not finishing schools...It’s like, ‘That’s not us.’” Relatedly, Pauline noted how “a lot of [the] narrative around people of color is that Asian Americans are doing just fine – even in our own [advocacy] circles.”

Finally, APAT sponsors a youth leadership program whereby high school participants are exposed to Asian American history and find opportunities to engage in policy advocacy. Ideally, this program encourages group identity formation, pride, and leadership development to create future leaders engaging in policy on behalf of Asian Americans.

### ***Financial Status and Staff Change***

During my fieldwork, there were five full time staff members and four part-time staff. Staff described the organization as being at a “standstill” given limited funding and shrinking staff size. This situation largely stemmed from a previous executive director’s financial mismanagement of the organization. Perhaps more troubling, the organization has experienced three leadership changes between 2015 to 2018. To Heena, this instability exacerbated APAT’s financial condition as funders perceived this dynamic as a “red flag” and were hesitant to extend financial support. As a result, APAT leadership chose not to expand or replace staff, exacerbating the workloads for those who remained. Further, staff atrophy resulted in haphazard attempts to fundraise. Pauline stated, “We kind of just applied to the funding streams that run across our inbox. That’s kind of all we have the capacity for which I think it’s like indicative... that we are just kind of chasing whatever comes by, just trying to catch up, just trying to put out fires.”

These challenges may have spurred additional staff departures. When I revisited APAT in spring 2018, I learned that the majority of staff members with whom I worked had left and that there had been another leadership change. However, based on my review of the organization’s

website in May 2019, the organization appears to be more stable (i.e., fully staffed and no leadership change).

### **Board**

APAT's board of directors was comprised of 14 individuals largely from the corporate sector<sup>30</sup>. The board is mainly responsible for fundraising and does not usually interfere with APAT's day-to-day activities. However, staff noted how the board could influence how much staff could be involved on issues considered to be controversial. Alice offered an example:

Immediately post-Ferguson, some of the other Asian American organizations were organizing, and some of them invited APAT to become part of Asians Stand Up for Black Lives Matter. The board didn't feel comfortable for us to sign onto that...They didn't say [why], but what we can guess is that they felt it was too contentious, or too political...They felt that some of our funders might not like that.

In this way, staff often described board members as politically conservative and economically privileged, uninterested in supporting initiatives that could go against their personal interests. In fact, several staff members suggested that board members were often at odds with staff perspectives on affirmative action because they believed that this policy hindered their children's entry into selective schools. These perspectives point to how organizational funding is strongly tied to funders' political leanings, and how this dynamic could interfere with organizational action.

## **Findings**

### ***Asian American Identity***

Staff usually described APAT as an APA organization<sup>31</sup>. In addition, several described the organization as "immigrant focused." To a lesser extent, individuals referred to the collaborative nature of the organization and the need to be a coalition not just in name, but also in practice.

When I asked staff members to describe what they meant by APA, pan-Asian, or Asian American, they offered a range of responses. Several individuals immediately relied on Census criteria. Another staff member Yoon, answered less definitively: "I don't know enough to answer that question but I assume that it would be families of Asian descent who come from different walks of life, who value [life in] America, who are here, who want to stay here, who want to build their life." Others struggled to find a succinct definition, primarily because of concerns over inclusion. Alice, for instance, stated, "That's a hard question for me to answer" given that APAT did not "serve just one community." Similarly, Don admitted, "I really don't know how to describe it. To be honest, I don't have a set of qualifiers for the community." Asked why, he explained, "If I use qualifiers, I feel I would be partial."

Despite this variation, I noticed three consistent themes. First, all staff pointed to differences within and between group members. Second, staff believed that being inclusive was a key component to being a legitimate Asian American organization. Third, staff unanimously portrayed APA organizations as being disadvantaged compared to those serving other racial

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<sup>30</sup> Reviewed May 2019

<sup>31</sup> Staff also used "pan-Asian" and "Asian American," but less frequently.

groups. Relatedly, they saw their work as mostly focusing on disadvantaged Asian American subgroups, though they questioned the extent to which they could focus on intersectionally disadvantaged subgroup members.

### ***I. Diversity and Difference***

All staff members were highly attuned to the diversity of the Asian American population and the challenges associated with advocating for a diverse population. For instance, when youth participants planned a public awareness event about Fred Karamatsu<sup>32</sup> in Chinatown, Heena dissuaded the group to carry out their plans. She recalled,

They wanted to hand out fliers in Chinatown, and when Don and I heard about it, Don and I looked at each other, I said, "Don, forget that." First, it's like I don't want the kids to have a bad experience, and two, it's like go to Chinatown, and the first thing [others would say] is like, "Why do I have to care about this Japanese guy?"

I also found stark differences in how the political environment impacted member organizations. When I spoke to staff from member organizations serving East Asian senior citizens, they discussed how their clients did not appear significantly troubled by various proposed policy changes after the 2016 presidential election. Staff from these organizations surmised that this was due to the prevalence of clients who were either citizens or green card holders. Alternatively, staff from an organization serving Arab Americans and South Asians relayed how many of their clients expressed fear due to increasing public hostility towards Arab Americans, South Asians, and Muslims in the US.

APAT staff took these differences into account as they considered which advocacy issues to take on as well as how to strategize for different campaigns. On the one hand, Pauline suggested a strategy of avoidance: "We just don't work together on campaigns that aren't mutually beneficial [for different groups], I guess." Don elaborated on the benefits of this approach:

I mean this is just for me personally, [but] there's a convenience about it. It's a convenience because you don't have to argue with too many people. You try to find a common issue that can be supported by a lot of different people. One of them arguably is health. Everybody agrees to that. We need universal health.

Alternatively, Nancy offered a strategy that took advantage of intragroup difference. For APAT's data disaggregation campaign, she often pitched an "overarching" message and then offered an example of "how it's impacting that one community." She continued,

Then, they can share stories, like, "Because we don't have this data we can't do x, y, and z" or "If we have better data, besides what we're collecting on our own, and it was in a larger-scale level of the city, this is one way we could extend our work."

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<sup>32</sup> Fred Korematsu resisted a military evacuation order during World War II and he had plastic surgery on his eyes and changed his name so that he could "pass" as white. After being arrested for resisting to comply with the evacuation order, Korematsu eventually agreed to work with the ACLU to challenge President Roosevelt's executive orders for the mass removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans. His case went to the Supreme Court in 1944.



After demonstrating how data disaggregation could help one community, she believed that it was important to then refer to the larger message of how this policy could address the needs of more communities in the city.

While this example demonstrates how APAT staff developed strategies to both manage and make the best of significant intragroup diversity, one could also argue that these methods still encourage inclusion.

## ***II. (Racial and Ethnic) Inclusion and Boundary Expansion***

All staff expressed a strong commitment to inclusion and this commitment was an integral part of how they defined “Asian American.” Alice, for instance, stressed how Asian American identity should be “self-determined” to be as inclusive as possible. She continued, “Any person that, themselves, identifies as having belonging, or history, or ancestry to Asia, and having a lived experience here... Anyone who identifies within that, we advocate for.” Further, staff members’ commitment to racial and ethnic inclusion also influenced their decision to formally describe their constituency as Asian Pacific American (APA) even though the population of Pacific Islanders in the New York City area remains relatively small.<sup>33</sup> Alice recounted,

We've had a long conversation, many strategic planning sessions, where myself and one of our former executive directors felt strongly that we shouldn't use the term Asian Pacific American, and the reason we didn't feel comfortable doing that, even though we do use it, is because we didn't feel we actively worked with the Pacific Islander population. Then we'd always go back and forth, because whether or not we adopt a racial term, or more politicized term, trying to be more inclusive of all the Asian communities, that's why we left the “P” in.

For better or for worse, Vicky, a member of the management team, acknowledged how this discussion goes on “to this day oftentimes.” She continued, “Are we fully being inclusive, and can we really represent everybody in that same way? So oftentimes... we say Pacific Islanders, but the reality is the community here in New York represented [is not Pacific Islander].”

Concerns over inclusion and representation extends to South Asians. For example, Heena stressed the need for continued efforts to recruit organizations serving South Asian communities in order to be a legitimate APA coalition: “I have the pet peeve. If you call yourself an Asian nonprofit or agency you really have to serve all Asians, not just one particular group... I think it's still, to a lot of people, Asian American it's more Eastern Asians than Indian, Pakistani, and South Asians.” In addition, APAT has had South Asian executive directors, continues to increase South Asian staff members, and has increasingly recruited South Asian board members (there are now at least two).

Considerations of diversity also impact short-term decisions for special events, such as choosing speakers and award recipients. Nancy elaborated:

Even as stupid as an example like this, we have a workshop on public-safety, we literally have to think about who the speakers are. We went to some conference and it was just like, “Wait, three out of the five speakers are Chinese – No! We

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<sup>33</sup> Pacific Islanders make up .1% of the total population in New York City. 2013-2017 American Community Survey (ACS), Census Bureau. Accessed July 2019.

need a South Asian! We need someone from the Southeast Asian community... Call one of the groups that we work with!"... It's like that. You don't want to appear that you're being too partial to one community and that you're always giving them the spotlight. These are things that we think about – down to that... If we're going to be representing a pan-Asian community, even by appearance, we have to make sure that is the case. Right now, we have gala planning and it's literally like, "Who are our awardees? Like last year, how many did we award?" I think someone said, "When is the last time we awarded somebody from the Japanese community?" It's stuff like that...Our agonizing over that...

In fact, an analysis of APAT awardees from 2017 to 2019 shows that all award recipients are consistently of evenly split between South Asians and East Asians.

APAT staff continue to push the boundaries over who is included in the APA community. Vicky alluded to how the organization had "recently tried to expand" how it defined the APA community, increasingly partnering with an Arab American social services organization and strengthening its work with other immigrant communities, more generally.

#### *Motivations for Inclusion*

While staff were unanimously concerned over issues of inclusion, staff exhibited different motivations for wanting to be more inclusive. Heena, for instance, saw inclusion as a means to obtain additional sources of funding. Specifically, inclusion allowed groups to "learn from each other" and gave organizations opportunities for "sharing... money from funding" through joint efforts. On the other hand, Pauline believed that being inclusive was "not necessarily related to funding or wanting to have as many members as possible." Instead, she believed that inclusion was a core value for organizational members: "I think wanting to be as inclusive as possible is definitely part of why we exist and it kind of plays into why we want to be at the table; because we want to be included...We have to walk the walk."

At the same time, Pauline admitted that there were benefits to inclusion, particularly with groups that do not fit people's perception of who was or was not aligned with the APA community:

Sometimes we say, "Oh we are a Pan-Asian coalition and we also work with organizations that serve the Arab American community." Sometimes we just say that explicitly. I think we are sort of like fighting the same fight though [with the Arab American community]. It's about representation. It's about dealing with these myths about our communities... Sometimes we want to say like, "This is also part of our group." For example, if we're talking with like the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs or if we're talking these days specifically about Muslim New Yorkers, then we say "we work with these people a lot."...I think we do say it when ...it's beneficial to be like, "Our coalition is a little bit more inclusive of like, who you will think of."

Here, inclusion appears to allow APAT staff to expand organizational boundaries to claim solidarity with a group under political scrutiny, increasing its political relevance and potentially, its influence and access to different policy "tables."

#### *Other Examples of Boundary Expansion and Identity Deployment*

In addition to expanding organizational boundaries as a means to be inclusive and experience benefits associated with inclusion, I observed other ways in which organizational identities were strategically deployed in different contexts.

Similar to Jerry Park's findings on multiple meanings associated with Asian American identity (2008), I found that meanings associated with Asian American identity at APAT were not static. Pauline, for example, described how staff could emphasize either the diversity or inclusiveness of the APA population, depending on the audience and the policy. She continued, "Depending [on] who we are talking to... That's how we talk about the community." In the case of budgetary advocacy, she recalled how she and other staff members would often "use 'community' as singular." She elaborated: "We say we are 15% of New York City - that's like all one group." On the other hand, the data disaggregation campaign "was a fight against using that whole blanket word" and "calling for a separation of identification." She added, "When we talk about data disaggregation we're like, 'No we're [distinct] ... Chinese people we are very different from Filipinos and like Indian people are very different from Pakistanis.'"

In other settings, APAT staff de-emphasized Asian American identity and constituency altogether. Alice noticed that "with different advocates," the framing of issues "would sometimes shift." Specifically, Alice observed that "when APAT is participating more broadly with education advocacy groups, APAT staff may speak "more on behalf of English language learners, and be more active on trying to elevate what the English language learner community needs" instead of "talking about race or class, even though we know who's mostly impacted." In these broader conversations, she noted how "It's not so much about, 'Should Asians this,' and, 'Should Asians that,' it just shifts more about, 'How can all kids go to safe schools?...How can we make sure that ... bullying isn't happening? How can we make sure that there's more information for parent training?'" Said differently, APAT (temporarily) expands its organizational boundaries to claim a larger constituency, reframe issues as affecting multiple communities, and de-emphasize APA identity. When I asked whether this was purposefully done, Alice answered affirmatively and continued, "We're still fighting to have an Asian American voice at the table, so it seems more of a priority to be invited to work on larger policy changes that are happening." Further, she believed that "any 'ask'" that focused principally on Asian Americans "would seem less relevant" in certain spaces.

A similar approach was also necessary to secure discretionary funding from the city council. Don explained,

From their [elected official's] perspective, they are not voting for legislation to pass or funding to pass to benefit specific ethnic groups in their communities... And so it's easier to present an initiative when you can say, "This can benefit entirely your district because it touches on every single ethnic group, represented by the coalition." Rather than say, "Oh. We are a Filipino group. We want to help the Filipinos in your district." An elected official would say, "Wait...That's tax dollars... I just can't give that specifically for you."... And so strategically, when you approach an elected official, it's easier for them to digest, "Here is a coalition...of different communities and ethnic groups, trying to solve a specific issue in my district that can have a collective impact." So it's easier to sell that... in such a way that it's for the benefit of everyone, for everybody in your district... But if the council member asks, "So can you tell me specific stories?" Of course, we bring up the stories that we hear from *our* community.

Though APAT does not claim a larger constituency, the organization is able to expand its boundaries through coalition affiliation to account for how an issue affects not only Asian Americans, but other racial and ethnic groups in a district.

Don's comment also reflects Espiritu's observations (1992) about how funder expectations may drive staff members in nonprofits serving specific ethnic groups to coalesce as a pan-Asian entity or coalition. However, he suggests that funders and elected officials now expect more diverse coalitions – that identifying as a pan-Asian group is not enough. During another conversation, Don explained that private funders and foundations were now looking to fund a “population impact program” which meant funders were “looking for a bigger collaboration...” Based on his work with a state agency, he observed:

The tide is changing now there. They're asking us to form coalitions of different *sectors* within the community to have a more collective impact. It's not just the health department or the public health workers who will provide education to the grassroots of the community about the dangers of drugs, for example... But they're trying to involve businesses, they're trying to involve schools. They're trying to involve law enforcement. They try to involve youth organizations, civic organizations, and neighborhood associations... So it's not an individual treatment... but it's helping the *community* raise its awareness.

Given that funders were guided by an ethos of, as Don explained, getting the “big[gest] bang for your buck,” APAT's strategies may facilitate the organization's ability to appeal to funders. But these behaviors were not limited to APAT staff. For instance, Nancy described an incident where APAT was trying to determine whether it would apply for a state contract as a collaborative or as an independent entity. She recalled:

Later, we found out some of our members were being poached by other mainstream organizations to be part of their application, because like I said, they met that - check of the box, right? We actually had a big meeting about it and I think it was unfortunate because we had such little trust among the members that we had decided that the individual member groups, they would just have to talk amongst their leadership to decide which application they were going to go on... Some went there... But it was tough because it was just one of those things like, how do you hedge your bets, when you're thinking about the sustainability of your organization, and funding, and how's this going to look like?

When I asked if this meant that member organizations would strategically utilize different identities – panethnically through coalitional work or another identity – she responded, “That's exactly the conversations that we had.” She added that organizations play “that game” to determine how to benefit from various affiliations. Nancy's insights also shows how mainstream organizations try to utilize affiliation with communities of color-led nonprofits to claim racial and ethnic diversity within coalitional structures.

### **III. Disadvantage as an Implicit Component of APAT's Identity**

The theme of disadvantage surfaced in two ways. First, most staff described how they tried to focus on the needs of disadvantaged APA subgroups despite claiming to advocate for APA children and families, more generally. Second, while staff did not explicitly identify APAT as “disadvantaged,” they discussed how APAT and other APA organizations in New York City experienced compounding forms of disadvantage. In this way, I call this an *implicit* identity.

### *Serving Disadvantaged APAs but to What Extent?*

As previously mentioned, staff described how the organization advocated on behalf of APA children and families. In this way, Don claimed that APAT's advocacy "ranges from youth to capacity building" and "touches every corner of...youth and the family as a collective group." But when I spoke to staff in more detail, they often expressed a desire to work on behalf of disadvantaged segments of the Asian American population such as those who were Limited English Proficient (LEP), low-income, and had limited access to public resources.

Pauline and Alice were most vocal about APAT's obligation to focus on disadvantaged Asian American subgroups. Pauline stated, "I would say that the organization works on behalf of the Pan-Asian community though we have... a special focus on low income immigrant. That's who we want to benefit most." She further extended this line of thinking to organizational members: "Even the organizations that we are serving - the work that we do is targeted towards new or smaller organizations...Even then we are still talking about the little guy." However, Alice believed that APAT did not "fully reach a lot of the marginalized groups... or people who are really invisible" despite its claims for doing so. She observed, "In our grant reports, or when we present some of our advocacy agendas, we often speak about representing marginalized communities, but I think we don't do that as thoroughly." She offered an example: "Let's say specifically within LGBTQ communities, like Asian trans folks. We don't do so much work with [these groups]..." Consequently, she felt as if APAT was "more comfortable to safely put it into language" but did not "actually do so much active work with certain communities." Pauline agreed:

Yes, our organization stands for the more vulnerable of our communities and I want to believe that those are women and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. We just don't think of them in our advocacy... There are no trans leaders that we work with... there is vulnerability there and that's like a group of people that we just like, don't fight for actively.

While Don also supported the idea of advocating for disadvantaged Asian Americans, he strongly believed that the organization could not address "all the malaise of the group," pointing to the limitations of APAT's organizational capacity and expertise. Specifically, while a few staff members at APAT were experts on health-related issues, for the most part, Don believed that APAT could most confidently help organizations with issue framing and how to be better advocates for their respective causes. Even with its focus on socioeconomic disadvantage, Don believed that APAT staff were ill-equipped to discuss specifics. He elaborated: "When you talk about class, economics, we don't have... [a] strategy... We cannot talk about workforce development or what's happening about gentrification here in New York City...Some of our members can deal with that."

Don's comments suggest that at best, APAT can offer generic forms of support and that it could create opportunities for member organizations to collaborate with one another. Further, while APAT did work with organizations such as Planned Parenthood on their disaggregation bill, staff informed me that collaboration happened mostly through coordination between individuals at the two organizations. While this does not detract from APAT's general support for issues on gender rights or other progressive causes, it does leave room for one to question how much the organization oversells its ability to advocate for disadvantaged Asian American subgroups, particularly those who may be intersectionally disadvantaged.

Heena, on the other hand, approached the issue of disadvantage more cautiously<sup>34</sup>. Although she believed that organizations such as APAT were necessary to level socioeconomic and political inequalities among Asian Americans, she stressed that APAT needed to be inclusive and align the interests of all group members:

It's like the more upper class or the more educated, they sometimes don't understand all the issues or the barriers that all the other groups have. How do we engage them back? How do we educate that group? There may be conversation[s] like that, but I think it's to be more inclusive. Making sure that we're not forgetting any particular group.

Using the example of data disaggregation, Heena insisted on framing the policy as beneficial to all Asian Americans:

I think it's important to collect it, but I think it's a matter of education to different groups. Yes, the Chinese may not...[be] concern[ed] about which groups speak which languages, but I think when you talk about going to hospitals, going to government offices, and didn't have language access...I think they can relate to, or they try to understand.

However, Heena stopped short of claiming that all policy issues could be framed as benefiting all groups (e.g., the youth group's efforts at instituting Fred Karamatsu Day). Given these various perspectives, it may not be surprising that Nancy did not immediately think that APAT's work targeted disadvantaged Asian Americans. Over the course of our conversation, this became clearer:

It's funny... because in my mind it's not... something that I think of right away, but when I look at our work, we have always focused on low-income Asian-American immigrants. Whether it's explicitly said or not. That has always been our target community... We're not necessarily out there advocating for the top one-percent of Asians. We're looking at the people of communities who don't access to resources, many of which they are entitled and don't even know about.

One could say that Nancy's comment is a product of the ambivalent position that APAT holds with regards to issues of inclusion and disadvantage. Although the organization formally claims to advocate for APA children and families (and in some cases, those outside of the APA community), staff also attempt to prioritize the needs of disadvantaged APA subgroups. However, APAT's attempts to advocate for disadvantaged subgroup needs may be mixed given capacity constraints, limits to staff expertise, and an organizational commitment to an inclusive advocacy approach. One way that staff address this dynamic is to educate and generate "buy in" from more privileged group members by framing issues as beneficial to all group members. Alternatively, staff members such as Heena suggest that not all advocacy initiatives are designed for similar "pockets" of constituents. In other words, one initiative may be more applicable to a broader constituent base while another may be more focused on a particular subgroup.

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<sup>34</sup> Out of all staff, Heena had the strongest relationship with board members, which may explain her commitment to these views.

### *Political Disadvantage*

During my fieldwork, APAT staff often discussed their lack of political influence. Specifically, a common concern and source of frustration for APAT staff was how Asian Americans were generally considered an “afterthought” to policymakers in New York City. When they were invited “to the table,” several APAT staff expressed wariness for potentially being tokenized in policy settings.

Vicky, for example, felt “that if you're not right in their face,” policymakers would overlook the Asian American community. She continued,

I've known a lot of APAs who are in city government, and frustrated with the fact that... when the mayor was doing “City Hall in Your Borough” and going into Queens... and not taking an effort to go into certain APA communities, it's almost like – either an afterthought or not even thought about... They weren't going to go to Flushing... It wasn't on the original schedule, let's put it that way... They were doing a town hall in Astoria, they were going out to Jamaica... They didn't even stop at a senior center [serving APAs]... It's almost like, “Okay, ‘check’ because I have a number of commissioners and appointees that are Asian.”

Eventually, the mayor did visit a health center in Flushing<sup>35</sup>, but to Vicky, this situation demonstrated how decision makers wanted to appear inclusive of APAs but ultimately did not, in practice, prioritize this group.

Relatedly, APAT staff lamented that when policymakers did invite APAs, inclusion was limited, at best. Nancy stated, “I think there's always been this perception of people who are in elected offices that if they just work with one group, this group in Chinatown, that they've hit the Asian-American community.” Although she was unsure whether this stemmed from a “lack of awareness or laziness,” she did acknowledge that being a membership organization made this situation more complicated: “Elected officials think if they just invite us they can just check off that box. They're not going to involve other groups that work in different communities that happen to be Asian-American. It's just like... ‘Oh, okay, we invited them and they represent, you know, there's forty-some members.’”

An historical lack of Asian American advocacy, in addition to demographic characteristics also contributed to this dynamic. Don stated, “Right now, it's changed a lot from where we were before. I think each of our organizations are now much vocal and we are really into having public officials engage with what we do... And I think it's good because politicians see us differently.” Despite these changes, Don still thought that public officials did not recognize Asian Americans “as a force to be reckoned with in terms of votes” with the ability to “alter the results” due to population size, a high proportion of those who are foreign-born, and a relatively small proportion of those who are registered voters<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Flushing is a neighborhood in Queens, NY where almost 70% of residents are Asian American. For more information: [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/data-maps/nyc-population/census2010/t\\_pl\\_p3a\\_nta.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/data-maps/nyc-population/census2010/t_pl_p3a_nta.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Asians were eight percent of registered voters in New York City between 2004-2010. Asian American Federation. 2012. “Asian Americans in New York City: A decade of Dynamic Change 2000-2010.” [http://www.aafederation.org/pdf/AAF\\_nyc2010report.pdf](http://www.aafederation.org/pdf/AAF_nyc2010report.pdf)

Consequently, APAT staff often mentioned how they were “the only ones” representing Asian Americans in city-wide policy settings and recounted feeling undue pressure to fairly represent their membership and to educate others about the nuances of the Asian American population. Relatedly, staff such as Nancy hoped that their participation in city-wide committees were “meaningful” and “not just tokenized” even though she admitted, “Sometimes, that’s the way it feels.”

A similar dynamic sometimes played out during discussions that affected communities of color. For example, Vicky described how Asian Americans were usually excluded from conversations about public school reform (e.g., access to specialized high schools) in New York City. She explained,

Even if you look at the city and how they present information on education gaps or service gaps, or like - Asian Americans aren't always part of those discussions...It's always kind of one of those challenges when the dynamic has always been about closing the achievement gap between white students and the black and Latino students.

According to Vicky, part of this stemmed from the model minority myth and the “regular narrative” that Asian American students were graduating at rates comparable to those of white students, leading policy makers to focus on achievement gaps between white, black, and Latino students. To exacerbate this situation, she believed that “other communities” also lacked a nuanced understanding of Asian American community and were therefore not “cognizant of the impact” of how their policy decisions excluding Asian Americans impacted this group.

While Vicky stressed her personal commitment to working with other communities of color to achieve greater social equity, her desire to be aligned with various groups also allowed her to have more control of the narrative of how Asian Americans were being represented and/or being “used in certain spaces.” By being present, she hoped that community partners would begin to consider policy implications for Asian Americans. She continued, “I’m not even gonna ask them to understand.” Instead, she would be happy to settle with partners “just asking” questions such as, “Have I thought about how this will impact the APA community, and if I don’t know, have I gone and made the effort to include that perspective?” At the end of our conversation, Vicky expressed resignation, questioning whether it was “better to be invisible completely” or “better to be included but somewhat misrepresented” in larger policy debates.

These concerns were again replicated among member organizations as staff often pointed to the lack of political representation and influence for their respective ethnic groups in policy arenas. For example, an advocate from an Arab American services organization stated, “Nobody is going to come [and say]: ‘Okay, let’s include the Arabic language in our programs.’ Nobody is going to say that until I’m sitting there at the table, so you need to bring it in.” She continued,

We need someone from our community .... I know we have people from the Chinese community, from the Haitian community, from every community. Gay and Lesbian community with people speaking on their behalf. There is nobody speaking in City Hall on behalf of the Arab-American community. I think it's about time to have someone, some... lawmaker that he could vote for our community and advocate and fight for us.



A lack of representation compared to other APA and marginalized groups led this staff member to engage in APAT coalitions, finding as many avenues as possible to advocate for Arab Americans. She added, "When we have to advocate on behalf of immigrant population...we give information about Arab-Americans because I know other agencies, they're bringing their own information, okay?" Although this strategy could be interpreted as opportunistic, this staff member defended her actions and believed that "if you're not there for your family, nobody will be there to feed your family. So if no one [is] representing our community, nobody would think about us. Nobody will bring the service to us in our language and our culture." She concluded, "It's so sad, because that's the way the system is, that's what politics is all about."

Similarly, the staff member from an organization serving Nepalis in New York City (mentioned above) used coalition membership to counterbalance disadvantages experienced as a marginalized South Asian group:

Because we are South Asian, and within the South Asian, we are Nepali, and the Nepali is also marginalized among this [group]-- yeah, so because when we speak the South Asian, first number one is Indian. Indian are most educated and the Bangladeshi. Bangladeshi, they have a huge number. Then after, Pakistani and [then] comes Nepali. So we want to show our presence. So if we go through this American Asian [coalition], and it will be helpful.

Similar to many interview participants already mentioned in this chapter, this staff member compares Nepalis to other South Asian groups, framing them as minorities among minorities. Consequently, she uses coalitions such as APAT to access larger policy arenas to highlight the needs of Nepalis in New York City.

#### *Disadvantages Related to Organizational Sustainability*

APAT staff described APA-led nonprofits in New York City as being at a disadvantage compared to those that were APA-led in the west coast, mainstream organizations in New York City, and finally, New York City-based communities of color-led nonprofits.

To begin, staff compared New York City-based APA organizations to those in California and believed that there was a general lack of support from recently-arrived immigrant communities in the New York City area. For instance, Alice observed how Chinese immigrants who were new to the US often had "a lot of distrust with any involvement in politics" and were therefore "not culturally supportive" of political activism and advocacy. According to staff, this lack of a "culture of philanthropy" among various Asian American groups also negatively impacted succession planning, creating, a dry "pipeline of leadership."<sup>37</sup> Vicky offered a personal anecdote:

When I went into non-profit, my family was like, "Oh." They've always talked about giving back to the community, but it was never a profession to be doing and working in a non-profit, so for a while, they didn't quite understand what exactly I was doing... So, I think that becomes really common, and also an additional barrier for lots of folks that think about that kind of role and what that means.

Alice also believed that advocacy organizations in California were better off because of their longer history. This translated to advocates being able to coordinate events on a pan-Asian

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<sup>37</sup> Based on interviews with Vicky and Nancy

basis with relative ease due to higher rates of English proficiency in the west coast, along with greater organizational recognition and legacies. This situation differed in New York City where, according to Vicky, Asian American-led groups were “newer” and “smaller” compared to mainstream organizations that “have historically been... around for centuries...” This allowed them to be “set up” with symbolic and material resources in the form of “recognition or... real estate or endowments that have allowed them to kind of weather a lot of ebbs and flows of the economy.” In other words, longer legacies allowed for organizations to have “back up.”

Further, Vicky believed that these dynamics were reflective of systemic inequalities based on race as there was “always a challenge of the big ones versus the small groups” and “for the most part, most communities of color are on the small side.” These challenges then compounded so that larger “mainstream” organizations – or as Heena described, “white organizations” – continued to receive a greater portion of contract dollars from the city and unduly influenced how contract dollars were being distributed. Consequently, smaller groups were “just living it day to day” and being subject to changes to contract reform tailored to the needs of mainstream federations and larger groups.

While Vicky drew comparisons between mainstream organizations and communities of color-led nonprofits, Don pointed to inequalities between Asian American, Latino, and African American organizations in the city. As someone from an organization representing Asian Americans, he declared, “You're always seen as a minority.” He offered two ways in which this happened. First, he considered Asian American nonprofits to be smaller in size and capacity than Latino- and African American-led organizations. Second, because Asian Americans constituted a smaller portion of the population, organizations serving this group received less funding from the city council. He elaborated:

So, for example, what happened with the [name of program omitted]. Our organization gets a smaller pot of funding than the two organizations that we're partnered with. One is [an] Hispanic organization, and the other one is [an] African American organization. Because at the time of splitting the \$2.5 million city council money for the [program name omitted], they said, "Well, you Asians are a smaller population than the Hispanic and African Americans." My argument is, "Yeah. We are smaller, but our needs are the same and we are a growing population."

Heena echoed Vicky and Don's comments but also believed that whites, or generally those in power, often assumed that “people of color” only referred to “the Latino and the African American community.” To support her views, she cited how Asian Americans made up 14% of the total population in New York City but received approximately 5% of total discretionary funds from the city council. Although Heena offered an ambivalent response to the organization's stance on serving disadvantaged subgroups, she unequivocally stated Asian Americans' disadvantage compared to other racial groups.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> This may in part be due to how New York City-based Asian American organizations, according to several interviewees, were slow to engage in advocacy and were only now beginning to develop expertise in this field. However, I also observed how APAT staff and organizational affiliates relied on cultural explanations for Asian Americans' hesitancy in asking for more funding. For instance, upon hearing that a large Latino-led coalition asked the city council for a significant amount of money, Nancy stated that APAT was “so Asian” because staff usually asked for funding within prescribed limits.

This behavior was not limited to APAT as I observed how staff from member organizations compared themselves to other APA organizations and groups. For example, a staff member from an organization serving Nepalis compared pipelines for leadership. She continued:

So that's why when I go the conference, and the mostly Chinese, Korean people are there. The Chinese are very huge number. Right?... And their leadership also very strong. In different ways, Chinese is number one within the Asian. It's my perspective...And the Filipinos also they have a good number, and the good leadership. And the Indian also, they have powerful leadership...But wherever we go...we don't.

This assessment fueled her plans to foster leadership development in her own organization so that there would be more representation of Nepalis in advocacy settings.

In sum, at both the coalition and member levels, staff claim disadvantage compared to other groups on issues related to political influence and representation and organizational sustainability.

While APAT's desire to serve disadvantaged subgroups does not directly translate to having an organizational identity of being disadvantaged, I argue that it may contribute to staff members' perceptions of disadvantage as they may be unable to adequately address the needs of intersectionally disadvantaged subgroup members. Part of the difficulty may lie in attempting to bridge the needs of both privileged and disadvantaged group members. This commitment to inclusion aligns with staff members' belief that a legitimate APA organization is an inclusive one.

Further, one may argue that these claims of disadvantage contribute to the organization's strategic use of inclusion whereby APAT expands its organizational boundaries and the meanings associated with Asian American identity to compensate for these disadvantages.

In the next section, I examine APAT's Data Disaggregation Campaign to examine tensions inherent to staff members' commitment to inclusion and their desires to address the needs of disadvantaged subgroups.

### **Case: Data Disaggregation**

APAT launched what I will call its "Data Disaggregation Campaign" in 2012. APAT ran parallel campaigns at the local and state levels, but for the purposes of this dissertation, I primarily focus on the organization's experiences at the local level, particularly between 2015 to 2016.

APAT's Data Disaggregation Campaign was a part of a larger, national campaign spearheaded by a Washington, D.C.-based Asian American health advocacy organization. APAT's goals were closely aligned with the goals of the national campaign, pushing for more detailed and accurate information about Asian American communities to ensure increased equitable outcomes among group members.<sup>39</sup> In APAT's case, staff often discussed how data

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<sup>39</sup> Information obtained from Washington, D.C.-based organization's website.

disaggregation would impact services and programs in health, education, civic and voter engagement, housing, labor, and language access in New York City.<sup>40</sup>

### **Brief History**

The organization has been arguing for data disaggregation from at least 2010.<sup>41</sup> However, its analysis was limited in scope, calling for the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to develop "a more accurate view of the child welfare needs of the various ethnic groups" within the Asian American community. For example, APAT noted how "the needs of Indian families may be different than the needs of Filipino families."<sup>42</sup> This fell in line with their consistent call for culturally competent approaches to social service provision.

As a part of their due diligence in 2012, APAT staff examined best practices for similar campaigns in Oregon and California. Further, APAT staff met with membership organizations and found that they had uneven access to information; smaller and newly founded organizations serving Nepali, Bangladeshi, and Cambodian communities, in particular, were most disadvantaged with regards to data access.<sup>43</sup> APAT staff then sought a legislative sponsor and general support from elected officials who represented districts with large and/or growing Asian American populations. Finally, APAT sought endorsements from over 100 organizations nationally and locally.

### **Mixed Messages?**

In a 2013 template for its letter-writing initiative, APAT points to how APAs are the fastest growing racial group in this country but that "the needs of *underserved* segments of the APA community outstrip current levels of service (emphasis added)." At the same time, APAT points to how "little is known about the over 40 different ethnic groups comprising the APA community" and that this "omission... leads to invisibility and masks the unique social, educational, and economic differences associated with diverse Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicities." In other words, APAT suggests that all subgroups experience disadvantage due to lack of information, and collecting more fine-grained data on different APA groups would capture the needs of different community members. This would then improve government efficiency and potentially enable the city and state to push for increased federal funding. An examination of APAT's 2015 fact sheet on data disaggregation offers similar arguments, mostly focusing on how data disaggregation would benefit APAs, in general. However, in the same document, APAT mentions how "aggregated data and/or data that only focuses on the performance of a few subgroups *masks the diversity of experiences and the real challenges* facing many APA children and families (emphasis in original)."<sup>44</sup>

When I spoke to Pauline about how APAT framed arguments for data disaggregation, she was emphatic that the "policy wasn't meant for higher income people." She added, "Even middle income people won't necessary benefit from it. It won't take away anything from them, but it was really meant to benefit low income immigrant Asian Pacific-Americans." Yet I also saw how other APAT staff continued to frame the initiative as benefiting more privileged subgroups. Nancy used the example of Korean Americans<sup>45</sup> when we discussed the campaign:

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<sup>40</sup> From an internal document from 2013 designed for a letter-writing campaign. Accessed online.

<sup>41</sup> Based on the organization's "Briefing Book" from 2010. Accessed online.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Information obtained from a staff member's conference paper.

<sup>44</sup> Documents accessed online

<sup>45</sup> Korean Americans represent the third largest Asian American group in New York City.

If we get better data, let's say for the Korean community, and we make it mandatory for the city agencies to have to collect that data; this is how our Korean groups could use it, they can use it to justify its programs, because now we're finding out about gaps and services. Again, justify the need for more funding.

Heena, who appeared to be the most committed to ideals of inclusion at APAT, described how data disaggregation would help all APAs, especially with language access in hospitals and facilities that impacted all community members<sup>46</sup>.

APAT's efforts to be inclusive were not limited to the APA community. As the organization was crafting their disaggregation bill, APAT's legislative sponsor from the city council suggested combining efforts with LGBTQ groups and mixed race communities, resulting in a bundled package of three bills calling for disaggregated data. Staff such as Nancy recalled feeling that this was "an opportunity" that was "really great for the Asian-American community" because it could "start working with the LGBT community on an issue that is so dear to both our communities."

In 2015, APAT's bill was presented to the city council, calling for city agencies to collect demographic information on ethnic origin and languages for at least 22 Asian Pacific American groups, which included, but were not limited to individuals who identified as Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Guamanian, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, Native Hawaiian, Nepalese, Pacific Islander, Pakistani, Samoan, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, Tibetan, and Vietnamese. City agencies that collected this voluntary information would be limited to those that provided social services (e.g., senior services, housing, and mental health).

Further, the three bills would allow for the city to not only be more "aware of and sensitive to the demographic and cultural characteristics of the populations to which they provide services" but to also track "metrics on opportunity, progress and livability across all of New York City's traditionally disadvantaged groups." These efforts would then advance Mayor De Blasio's platform to address inequalities throughout the city.<sup>47</sup>

It is important to note that while the 2015 bill focused on Asian American groups, it also stated that data disaggregation could "be similarly valuable among other commonly used ethnic categories like Hispanic, Black or African-American and White." If enacted, the city had the option to collect data on groups outside of the APA community. However, Pauline offered a different angle:

The way that we were talking about [it] with city council when we introduced it ourselves was that this would be just the beginning, this would like, open the door for like Hispanic communities to identify by national origin because there are definitely differences within the Hispanic- Latino community.

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<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that while staff often described data disaggregation as benefitting APAs at the individual level, Pauline acknowledged that at least within APAT, staff understood that the campaign was primarily designed help organizations to be better equipped to advocate for their constituents. APAT staff believed that it was important to focus on organizations, not only because their membership was comprised of nonprofit organizations, but also because their members needed detailed data to demonstrate their need for more funding. As is, Nancy asserted that organizations "don't have this data" and in some cases, are "collecting [it] on our own."

<sup>47</sup> Information gathered from 2015 Committee Report of the Governmental Affairs Division and the 2015 Transcript of the Minutes of the Committee on Governmental Operations and the Committee on General Welfare

At first glance, the language in the 2015 bill and Pauline's framing appear to be at odds, yet one could also argue that both are, in fact, inclusive. The main difference lies in Pauline's perception of which groups come first (Asians), but ultimately, APAT staff envision that all groups will be accounted for. The bill failed to gain traction in 2015 but in 2016, a revised version was signed into law – instead of requiring New York City agencies to collect data on Asian-origin groups, the new bill called for collecting data on the top 30 largest ancestry groups and languages spoken in New York City<sup>48</sup>. Pauline recalled,

Yeah, they didn't even keep the original [2015] bill language and they didn't tell us. We only found out that the bill language changed when we looked at the [2016] bill, like two days before... committee because they wanted it to be unanimous. It would only get passed unanimously if it was the top 30 groups.

She continued,

When we asked why it expanded... They said that they were getting calls from other communities saying, "What about us? We want it to be more inclusive." There are differences between Cubans and Dominicans for sure... There's definitely a difference between like African Americans...and like, new immigrants from Africa and new immigrants from the Caribbean countries. We acknowledge that those exist, and I think that they [council members] were getting called...They just wanted it to be as inclusive as possible...

Two of the three ethnic origin and language categories identified by APAT as significantly benefitting from data disaggregation – Nepali and Cambodian — would not be included. Pauline concluded: "It defeats the purpose because the people who are the most marginalized and have the least access are the people who are not going to show up on the form."

Pauline explained why she hoped that these categories would eventually be incorporated: "The Nepali community has a lot of TPS<sup>49</sup> people who have some kind of refugee status. The Cambodian community in the Bronx also has generational refugee or refugees of the past generation and some older folks now, so they are especially vulnerable." Lack of data on these groups further exacerbated their vulnerability as advocates would have to heavily rely on anecdotal evidence to demonstrate need. She continued, "There's no data about them at all. And there's no way to create the data."

Pauline believed that a major reason the bill was altered in this fashion was due to APAT's lack of political and legal expertise (i.e., having the bill co-opted by city council members and no lawyer on staff to craft bill language). Regardless of the cause, Pauline felt both deflated and "ambivalent" from this outcome. Like Vicky, Pauline appeared resigned about the lack of political influence that Asian Americans had based on this experience: "If it was just for Asian Americans, they probably wouldn't even have voted." Further, she pointed out how "there are tons of Dominicans in New York. There's probably enough data about Dominicans." Yet, she also noted how APAT wanted "to work with other communities of color."

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<sup>48</sup> Based on data from the US Census Bureau

<sup>49</sup> Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is a temporary status that allows individuals from designated countries (usually affected by natural disaster or conflict) to live and work in the US for a limited amount of time.

Although Pauline focuses on APAT's losses, it is also worth noting how several APA subgroups were included such as Chinese, Korean, and Bangladeshi Americans. In this way, one could argue that this outcome was an improvement from the status quo.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

During my time at APAT, staff members described the organization as a Pan-Asian entity that primarily serves its member base in addition to APA children and families, more generally. Staff defined "Asian American" or "APA" broadly and deployed identities in a flexible manner. Despite the range of responses, I identified three common themes related to staff members' understanding of Asian American identity: 1) diversity, 2) inclusion and 3) disadvantage.

To begin, staff primarily deferred to well-known characterizations of the APA "community" – a group with significant intragroup diversity but drawn together out of political necessity – in other words, a group driven to be inclusive for political gain. Staff members' commitment to inclusion manifested in various ways, impacting organizational structure, membership composition, advocacy strategies, and partnership opportunities.

In addition, I observed how staff and affiliates often evoked disadvantage status. This happened in three main ways. First, staff members believed that they primarily focused on the needs of vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged APAs despite the organization's formal claims of serving APA children and families. However, it was unclear to what extent the organization could sufficiently address the needs of intersectionally disadvantaged subgroups given capacity constraints and lacking expertise on the range of policy issues that member organizations focused on. Second, staff shared a belief that APAT and Asian Americans, more generally, lacked political influence and staff appeared to be resigned by the insurmountable challenges of getting Asian American perspectives "at the table." Third, staff believed that APAT and other APA organizations lacked long-term support systems to maintain organizational sustainability compared to mainstream organizations and those representing other racial groups. Consequently, Don felt that being a part of APAT was like being a minority among minorities. In a similar vein, I found that staff from APAT member organizations also frequently pointed out how their respective group was more disadvantaged than others, even those within APAT's membership. In some instances, these perspectives may have driven member organizations to use APA coalition events to primarily advocate for their specific constituency.

Given this sense of disadvantage, APAT's commitment to inclusion can be seen as a way to mitigate political and financial disadvantages. Said differently, inclusion could be seen as a form of strategic boundary expansion. But staff members' commitment to inclusion was not simply based on instrumental motives. They also believed that they had to "walk the walk" and be inclusive just as they wanted to be included "at the table." In addition, some staff members believed that being inclusive was fundamental to being a legitimate APA organization, representing the various ethnic groups that made up this diverse community. These dynamics also happened at the member level as staff from these organizations also played "that game" to gain more symbolic and material resources, mitigating perceived disadvantages.

I offer the example of the Data Disaggregation Campaign to highlight tensions inherent to staff members' strategies for inclusion versus their desires to address the needs of disadvantaged APA subgroups.

During the disaggregation campaign, APAT's efforts to be inclusive manifested in several ways. First, APAT consistently framed data disaggregation as a benefit to both disadvantaged APA subgroups and APAs, more generally, even though staff acknowledged how certain subgroups were more disproportionately disadvantaged than others regarding data access. Second, APAT agreed to team up with LGBTQ and multiracial advocates so that their bill would be a part of a legislative package for disaggregated data. Last, APAT framed disaggregated data for Asian Americans as a first step to larger data equity efforts for other racial groups. Although staff may have intended for the bill to focus solely on Asian Americans, the 2015 bill included language that opened up the possibility for the city to collect disaggregated data from other racial groups.

The 2015 version failed to gain traction, but the city council passed a 2016 version that the mayor eventually approved. However, APAT had no input on the newer version which required city agencies to collect data on the top 30 ethnic groups and languages in New York City. While many APA groups would be accounted for and benefit from this legislation, two of the three groups that APAT originally identified as key beneficiaries (Nepalis and Cambodians) would not. To Pauline, the exclusion of these groups represented a loss: "The people who really could've benefited from it just didn't. They just were left out." Ultimately, legislators had missed "the point."

Given the pervasiveness of the model minority stereotype and staff member's determination in countering it, it is worth asking why staff members remained committed to a message that could be characterized as ambivalent and whether APAT's strategy of inclusion backfired. In fact, the 2016 bill could be seen as an outgrowth of the 2015 bill; even if APAT staff intended for the 2015 bill to act as a precedent for collecting more information for other racial groups, the language of the bill explicitly left open the possibility that disaggregation efforts could incorporate other racial groups.

Ironically, the 2015 bill changed as advocates for other communities put pressure on their council members for *inclusion and representation*. Consequently, it is worth asking if these events contributed to leadership's decision to revise APAT's mission statement which now focuses on advocacy for the needs of disadvantaged Asian Americans.

One could argue that the campaign's outcome had nothing to do with APAT's concerns over inclusion and that this was simply a political maneuver on the part of their legislative sponsor to gain credit for this bill. But if this were the case, it would bolster APAT's claims of being politically disadvantaged.

At the same time, it would be an overstatement to say that the outcome of the campaign resulted in a total loss for APAT and its members. Groups such as Chinese, Korean, and Bangladeshi Americans were included. Advocacy groups representing these communities will have access to new demographic information (assuming individuals offer this data as the forms will be voluntary) to facilitate advocacy, potentially for those most vulnerable in their communities. From an organizational perspective, APAT was also able to establish stronger political relationships with policy makers, thus increasing its name recognition among legislators and raising the visibility of Asian Americans to increasingly become, in Don's words, "a force to be reckoned with" in policy considerations.



## **Chapter 4: East Asian Social Services, Organizing, and Advocacy (EASSOA)**

### **Organizational Background**

East Asian Social Services, Organizing, and Advocacy (EASSOA) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization located in an area of New York City with a large concentration of Asian Americans, the majority of whom are Chinese and Korean.<sup>50</sup> EASSOA frequently collaborates with other social-justice oriented nonprofits, often as a member of a coalition and at times, as a lead.

EASSOA has experienced declines in the Korean American population as group members have increasingly settled in suburban areas, particularly in and around Long Island and New Jersey. In addition, Korean migration to the US has stagnated with increasing economic opportunities in South Korea while Chinese migration to the US has increased six-fold since 1980; the New York City metropolitan area is now home to the largest concentration of Chinese Americans in the US.<sup>51</sup>

#### ***History***

EASSOA was founded as a volunteer organization in the mid-1980s and offered resources for Korean American immigrants in the New York City area who lacked English proficiency and access to social services. Services included childcare for working parents and support in applying for government benefits and obtaining US citizenship; but more generally, EASSOA offered a space where Korean transplants could feel a sense of community. In its early days, the organization also functioned as a gateway to political participation as individuals were invited to join its sister organization, which sought to engage Korean Americans to push for democratization in South Korea and unification of the Korean peninsula. The organization's focus on civic engagement continues to this day.

With increasing political stability and democratization in South Korea in the late 1980s, EASSOA shifted all of its focus to the needs of Koreans in the US. While it continued to offer necessary social services to community members, the organization also began engaging in immigration rights work at both the local and national levels, and fought to preserve social safety nets in the face of increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation during the 1990s. Starting in the late 2000s, the organization underwent significant expansion and change under new leadership.

#### ***Expansion and Funding***

In 2009, a new executive director established a permanent legal team to focus on issues related to housing, labor, and immigration. The organization also increased its social services capacity, shedding its role as a "community center for recent Korean immigrants who wanted a place to gather and feel at home"<sup>52</sup> to becoming a more structured nonprofit. In line with an expansion of services, the organization also began taking on Chinese American clients around this time (although the majority of its clients remain Korean American).

Based on an analysis of organizational tax returns from 2009 to 2015, organizational revenues tripled from 2009 to 2015 – from \$616,000 in 2009, growing to almost \$1 million in 2010, and approximately \$1.9 million in 2015. Foundation funding is a key source of support for

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<sup>51</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/korean-immigrants-united-states>

<sup>52</sup> Staff interview on September 2, 2016

the organization but other sources include donations from individuals and small businesses, and grants from government, corporations, and other nonprofits.

### ***Staffing and Board of Directors***

During my fieldwork, there were 17 staff members and nearly 10 interns and volunteers. Staff and volunteer numbers often fluctuated between summer and the rest of the year due to the influx of volunteers and college interns.

When I began my fieldwork, the organization was in the middle of a leadership transition whereby the former executive director had just left the organization and a temporary director was responsible for day-to-day operations. By the time I was wrapping up my fieldwork at EASSOA, staff members were increasingly leaving the organization. During one of my follow-up interviews several months later, I learned that most of the staff had left, citing issues with management style and a corporate culture that was not “progressive.” Although this does alter my findings, it is worth noting that there was significant flux in staffing and management at this organization, like the other two in this research.

EASSOA’s board<sup>53</sup> was composed of nine Korean American individuals who play a significant role in determining the programmatic and advocacy initiatives of the organization; in other words, board members offered relatively little support with fundraising. At least six of the nine members of the board had ties to EASSOA’s sister organization in the 1980s. Two members have previously taken on executive leadership roles, and several members regularly engaged in organizational activities. A more recent review of the organization’s website shows that there are currently 12 board members and all members have been extensively involved with the organization<sup>54</sup>. The board may thus be described as a “tight knit” group, with many members having maintained ties with the organization for several decades. Most board members are first-generation Korean Americans.

### ***Core Activities***

The organization focuses on four key activities and services: advocacy and organizing, civic engagement (pressing for voter rights and encouraging voter engagement and education), social services (legal and financial assistance such as applying for citizenship and government benefits), and youth empowerment (annual youth program). All social services are limited to individuals and families with incomes under the 200 percent federal income poverty level. However, activities related to civic engagement, youth programming, and advocacy and organizing do not always emphasize financial status. Given its history with encouraging civic engagement and political mobilization, some current and former staff see the provision of social and legal services as a means to eventually politicize organizational clients.

During my fieldwork in 2016, I joined the Advocacy and Organizing team and worked on a campaign to increase public awareness of undocumented Korean and Asian Americans. The team also began an affordable senior housing campaign to address the challenges of navigating the senior housing application process in New York City as well as the dearth of availability of affordable housing options for senior citizens. Between 2018 to 2019, EASSOA organizers have been active on securing undocumented drivers’ access to driver’s licenses in New York and on preserving rent stabilization measures in New York City.

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<sup>53</sup> Based on my review of the board in 2017

<sup>54</sup> Reviewed July 2019. Information gathered from board member’s bios.

## **Mission**

EASSOA casts its net wide with regards to how it describes itself and for whom it claims to represent and serve. The most current iteration of its mission statement<sup>55</sup> reads as follows:

EASSOA empowers the Korean American community and works with the wider Asian American and immigrant communities to achieve economic and social justice for all. We envision a just and equitable society where all people can live in harmony, dream and achieve their full potential.

Alternatively, another version mostly focuses on addressing the needs of the Korean community, particularly “the needs of our marginalized community members, including low-income, limited-English-proficient and undocumented residents.” Another version does the same, but also stresses the organization’s increasing role in specifically working with Chinese Americans without expanding to all Asian American and immigrant communities.

These multiple mission statements suggest that the organization has consistently upheld its commitment to serving and advocating on behalf of the Korean American community in and around the New York City area; however, they also appear somewhat inconsistent with regards to the organization’s focus on other constituents, reflecting the equally varied perspectives of EASSOA staff.

## **Findings 1: Organizational Identities and Deployment**

### ***Organizational Identities and Constituencies***

Staff unanimously stated that the organization was a Korean American organization. Jung, a staff member, qualified this view by citing the organization’s history, organizational leadership, service population, and its organizing base as being all or primarily Korean American<sup>56</sup>. However, staff were careful to point out how EASSOA aimed to serve those most marginalized in the Korean American community. John, a part of the organizing team, elaborated: “Not just any immigrant, but [those] who are really disadvantaged. This often meant individuals who were low-income, undocumented, and Limited English Proficient (LEP). For John, these criteria were helpful in prioritizing organizational initiatives; he continued, “We are doing so many different things, we have a capacity issue. It’s hard for us to engage in every part of the problem and every group of our community members.” Mike, another member of the organizing team, went further by suggesting that EASSOA was different from other Korean American organizations because they did not “care much about the most vulnerable constituents,” particularly those who were undocumented because most social service organizations preferred to serve citizens or legal permanent residents for funding purposes. On the other hand, he pointed to how “EASSOA is the one that does.”

Many individuals also noted that the organization was trying to transition to becoming an Asian American, or pan-Asian organization. Staff cited the need for more political power as a key driver for adopting this panethnic identity so that the organization could expand its boundaries to accommodate other Asian American groups. For Helen, another second-generation staff member, Asian Americans’ lack of political power represented the “biggest

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<sup>55</sup> For the purposes of anonymity, I do not cite website information. The most recent version was posted online during the time of my fieldwork. It remains the same as of June 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Another criterion could be language use. On the day to day level, I noted how several second-generation staff members often spoke to one another mixing Korean and English; further, several first-generation staff members primarily spoke to one another in Korean. While all formal meetings were held in English, I noted how non-Korean speaking staff members were sometimes unintentionally left out of casual group conversations because of language.

Asian American issue.” As a result, she believed that Asian Americans still had to fight for equal political rights and economic opportunities while also working to overcome discrimination in a largely white society; these racial dynamics presented what she considered to be “the biggest challenge – of being perceived as *Asian American* – that we are not ‘the other.’”

At the same time, several staff members suggested that the transition was not worth the trouble. Jenny, a former staff member, questioned why the organization overextend itself and tried to focus beyond the Korean American community when it had not yet “perfected” mobilizing its own base.

This ambivalence extended to staff members’ identification as Asian American. For example, Jung, a first-generation staff member expressed skepticism about this identity: “PanAsian identity?... Personally, I have a serious identity question.<sup>57</sup> When we talk about Asian American community... you can’t really... make Asian American community as one group” given the diversity of group members. He believed that this differed for Latinos as assumed that all Latinos shared the same language; this explained what he perceived to be a “strong identity there among [the] Latino community.” However, he still supported identifying as pan-Asian organization to gain more political power.

1.5 and second-generation staff members appeared to be more willing to use this identifier. For instance, Jenna, a second-generation staff member, believed that Asian American identity was based on “the not black, not Latino, not white - Asian American experience with immigrant parents.” In this way, she described a distinct “experience...that a lot of people now have in common.”

Others saw EASSOA as more broadly incorporating immigrant communities. Sara, a former staff member affiliated with the legal services team, used the analogy of sunny side up egg: while the main service population was Korean – the egg yolk – the whole egg consisted of the immigrant population in the New York City metropolitan area.

A handful of interview participants also described the organization as “progressive.” However, Shirley, another staff member affiliated with EASSOA’s legal team, believed that EASSOA made a clear distinction with regards to when and how the organization was “progressive”:

Well, I think we have two identities... The way that we frame ourselves to white donors, and white organizations is we are very liberal. We are one of the most progressive Korean organizations in the country... But I think in practice within our own community members, we tone that down... when they were... thinking of going heavy on the nail salon work, they got a lot of push back from the community, labeling EASSOA as like [a] Communist organization, for example. So I think there's a difference between how our own community sees us, and nationally how we're seen by the larger white public, that do know of us.

Laura also problematized this term, as she also believed that a “progressive” identity depended on “white liberals’ political stand point” and that this was the standard through which “everyone else is forced to relay themselves” because whites were “people in power.”

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<sup>57</sup> Jung is a non-native English speaker. His comment could be interpreted as: “I have a serious question about this identity.”

Similar to Claire Jean Kim's model of racial triangulation, Laura points to how meanings associated with organizational identities exist *in relation* to other groups and the social dynamics between these groups. In addition, despite what appeared to be staff members' prioritization of certain identities over others (e.g., Korean American first and Asian American second), Shirley's comments allude to the context-dependent nature of how EASSOA presents itself *in practice*.

Consequently, it was not surprising that Sara acknowledged, "I think we haven't come to terms that crystal clearly in terms of our organizational identity. Who exactly are we working for and what exactly is our goal? It's easy to say, 'Oh we want to empower low income Asian immigrants, especially Korean immigrants.' It's very pithy..." More specifically, she questioned whether the organization was Korean-American or Asian American because different initiatives appeared to be tailored to these two constituencies. She explained, "a lot of our civic work... is much more like pan-Asian. Our youth program is much more pan-Asian." Despite this variation, she did not seem to think that these initiatives were "mutually exclusive" because Korean Americans could "exercise more power politically and civically... if Asian-Americans, as a whole, were considered much more of a recognized and powerful political block."

Alternatively, Jung appeared to cope with these dynamics by disassociating organizational identity and organizational constituency. As mentioned above, Jung was emphatic that EASSOA was a Korean American organization. However, he suggested that this identity was only used "to represent our natural identity in terms of ethnicity or race..."<sup>58</sup> and that an organization's identity did not need to be strongly associated with what it was doing in practice. He continued,

For me, I think it's a mixture of different constituents... with regards to our services, we definitely serve predominantly those who are low-income constituents... there are also advocacy agendas representing small business owners... So it's a mixture... Our mission points out that we work with low-income constituents but in reality... let's take the issue of civic participation and voting. We don't only ask poor people to vote... we encourage everybody to vote, whether you are rich or low income people. So the result is that it's [a] mixture. For social services, it's true that we serve low-income folks but in terms of GOTV (Get Out the Vote), advocacy, we take care of the whole community.

Although Jung does not ground his observations on organizational identities, he points to how different services and programs are geared towards different constituents. Sara, on the other hand, explicitly associates different organizational identities onto different constituent bases at EASSOA. At the same time, other staff members prioritized different identities over others during interviews, with the majority of staff claiming that EASSOA was fundamentally a Korean American organization. Consequently, one may assume to see a prioritization of some constituents over others. In the two initiatives, below, I show how these dynamics "play out" at the program level and (temporary) outcomes associated with these dynamics.

### ***Initiative 1: Civic Engagement***

Since 2004, EASSOA has engaged in voter registration, but it was only after 2011 that the organization ramped up its civic engagement activities by acting as a coalition lead for an Asian-American redistricting coalition that sought to "keep together communities of interest that

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<sup>58</sup> Jung is a non-native speaker of English and has used "natural" in other contexts, usually to mean "obvious" or "happening by default."

exist in and around ethnic neighborhoods across New York,” particularly in Queens.<sup>59</sup> Over time, EASSOA recognized the need and funding potential for coordinated and consolidated civic engagement activities among Asian American groups across New York City and took the lead in “courting” a major foundation for developing a pan-Asian civic engagement initiative.<sup>60</sup>

Starting in 2014, EASSOA and its allies transitioned to focusing on broader civic engagement and created the pan-Asian coalition (or what I will call the “voter engagement coalition”) focusing on increasing the number of Asian American voters in New York City.<sup>61</sup>

EASSOA, in partnership with coalition members and other community partners, coordinate on-going activities such as voter registration drives, candidate forums for local elections, reports on Asian American voting trends, and voter engagement trainings. During my fieldwork, there were 20 coalition members.

As the lead grantee of the voter engagement coalition, EASSOA also determines criteria for distributing sub-grants to coalition partners. While the coalition, as a whole, works with and represents Asians Americans in New York City, in practice, each coalition member focuses on its populations and neighborhoods of expertise (e.g. a South Asian group targeting parts of Jackson Heights in Queens). Since 2004, EASSOA has registered over 80,000 new voters<sup>62</sup>.

A major reason EASSOA staff sought to identify as an Asian American organization and work in coalition with other groups was the need for more political representation, influence, and resources. Jung, for example, noted how Asian Americans comprised almost 15% of the total population in New York City but had “only two Asian American council members out of 51 seats.” He continued, “We have zero state senate, and one state assemblyman. And oftentimes, [the] Asian American community was off the table with important agendas, such as immigration reform.” Last, he noted how Asian American-led organizations were significantly underfunded compared to others in the city.

Under these conditions, staff recognized that it was “difficult to make change” by themselves as Korean Americans. There were two interrelated reasons to develop and lead a pan-Asian coalition. First and most obvious, was low population numbers. Jenny, who had experience working on several organizational initiatives, stated explicitly,

... When we talk [to] elected officials, and the people who are in power, and the people we're trying to move... they don't give a shit if we're Korean or Chinese. They just care, is there the numbers? Is there the power? Is there a compelling enough story? We just have such a small population. It may move us, but it might not move them.

Knowing that Koreans Americans were just “a drop in the bucket” Gina, a former senior manager, explained that there was “real recognition that there is power in numbers, which is why a lot of the initiatives that we led were Asian-American.” She continued, “And that’s just a strategic move... a strategic move to make sure that we’re heard.”

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<sup>59</sup> “Coalition Principles” on a member website

<sup>60</sup> Interview with staff member with knowledge of funding for this initiative

<sup>61</sup> Relative to other states with significant Asian American populations, Asian Americans in New York State demonstrate lower voter engagement whereby 45 percent of the Asian American population was registered to vote in 2016 but only 35 percent of Asian Americans in New York State voted in the 2016 presidential election. More information at <http://aapidata.com/blog/voting-gains-gaps/>

<sup>62</sup> Based on a review of their website in June 2019

Second, Jung suggested that Korean Americans were “extremely passive” when it came to “individually coming out and advocating for themselves” – a “point of difference with Latinos,” he added. In this way, Jung believed that EASSOA needed other Asian American groups to gain a critical mass to instigate political change.

Eileen, a former staff member, offered a third view: leading a pan-Asian coalition would increase funding, which meant increasing the organizations’ power, more generally. She elaborated:

I should clarify and say it was advantageous for the funding purposes... I'm talking about the idea that they were leading the... civic engagement work... It was great money to lead it ...I think another way of framing all of this is the idea that money is power – so the fact that they were leading this and holding all the money.

Ultimately, these conversations suggest that there were multiple reasons that EASSOA staff felt compelled to co-lead a civic engagement coalition. However, simply forming a coalition to develop “one bigger identity”<sup>63</sup> alone does not translate into an organization’s ability to mobilize different constituencies and influence stakeholders.

Jenny referred to the “multiple roles” that EASSOA takes on to play to different constituents – that depending on the circumstance, the organization claimed to be a Korean American, an Asian American, and implicitly, a Chinese American organization. Jenny continued, “We kind code-switch what we are” and “what we need to be in that moment... If I'm going to an Asian American coalition, I speak on behalf of the Korean American community. If I go to an immigration meeting or a general, wider group, I will speak for the Asian American community.”

In practice, this has meant not only drawing on different ethnic organizational identities and claiming to represent different groups, but also adapting talking points to sway different constituents. Using the example of the Korean American community, Jenny stated that she would tailor her message to “bring it back to the Korean community, statistics on the Korean community.” This strategy largely stems from her experiences:

When you talk to the people and you start spouting Asian American things, they're like, “No, no, no, no.” When we create [a] script for phone ringing and door knocking and talking about Asian American power, they're like, “Eh.” No, it doesn't resonate with them... People will be like, “Okay, is there a Korean candidate?” It's still very ... “Who's the Korean guy? Who's the Chinese guy?”

These examples demonstrate how the organization strategically expands and contracts its organizational boundaries, resulting in what Jenny would describe as strategically “code switching,” to gain more political influence for constituents and for the organization, affording increased recognition, political influence, and funding for the organization. For example, Wayne, a senior manager at EASSOA, acknowledged,

In some coalition spaces, we might be the only Asian organization in the room. It gives us an opportunity to play that representative for Asian American interests

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Sally

and so, when that happens, I think it's an opportunity. [But] we have to be more cognizant when we speak. It's good... it plays well sometimes.

While wearing “multiple hats” may work to the organization’s advantage, Wayne, who took on a leadership position, also alludes to increased accountability to the communities that EASSOA claims to represent. More specifically, in its early participation with the redistricting coalition, EASSOA was criticized for lacking South Asian representation. Wayne recalled how the organization was “criticized totally unfairly” and that the critique was “just [a] smear” so that South Asian groups could delegitimize the coalition. Although one South Asian voting rights group was an early member of the coalition, the rest were comprised of East Asian organizations. Although it is unclear whether these allegations impacted the composition for the coalition, a year after, several South Asian community-based organizations had joined.

Accountability to Chinese clients was also a controversial topic among several staff members. Jenny, for example, stated,

I find a problem where we use the Chinese population numbers, we outreach to them, we want to contact them, we want to do clinics with them because it bolsters our numbers for foundations or for reports. I almost feel like we're using them, and we're trying to give them a Band-Aid but we're not actually trying to help them. It frustrates me because I understand why we're doing it, but I feel like we're using them. We're not adequately serving in that capacity.

She added that legitimately serving Chinese Americans would entail increasing service, advocacy, and organizing capacities. She continued, “We only have one Chinese staff member for all the social services and that’s just like... Come on. We don’t have any Chinese-speaking staff as an organizer. We would need organizers, we would need people who speak the language.” Another staff member, Laura, noted this inconsistency: “We see Asian American as a broadening of our identity as an organization, of our advocacy and organizing efforts. But it's limited because we have this huge Chinese immigrant population... We just have made the decision to not service them directly.” Relatedly, I found it difficult to determine if others, such as Shirley, were insinuating whether the organization was practicing a form of tokenism. She stated that the person heading the voter engagement coalition was not Korean and that “it's done strategically because she's Chinese, and the biggest block of the voter[s]... are Chinese voters.” Since 2014, the organization has consistently placed four Chinese or Taiwanese Americans to lead their civic engagement activities. Part of this strategy, however, may be related to language capacity which would facilitate the organization’s outreach efforts to different Chinese communities in New York City.

When I conducted a follow-up interview with Laura in 2017 and asked if EASSOA was continuing to serve Chinese American clients, she responded, “Yes, on paper we are,” qualifying this comment by pointing to how the organization continued to lack sufficient Chinese American support staff at the organization. While one could argue that these staff members were exaggerating about the extent to which EASSOA leadership was overlooking the needs of Chinese American clients, Wayne confirmed that there was at least some mismatch between the organization’s claims to serving Chinese Americans. More specifically, he acknowledged that most of the substantive organizational priorities – those involving organizing and advocacy – were “generated through interactions with a mostly Korean part of the community.” He also noted how initiatives (such as civic engagement) that non-Koreans took on at EASSOA were “light on the issues” – Specifically, Chinese Americans were “not driving the issue.”



Staff comments reflect what appeared to be the organization's passive role in investigating rumors that recently-arrived immigrant female nail salon workers in Chinese-owned nail salons were, as Gina described, "being abused for lack of a better word, or were more vulnerable [than Korean nail salon workers]." However, EASSOA leadership, claiming lack of expertise and organizational capacity, did not actively pursue working with Chinese-owned nail salons or with Chinese nail salon workers even as it was advocating on behalf of Korean American nail salon owners and workers during its nail salon campaign.<sup>64</sup> Gina elaborated:

And so what happened was it just ended up being really just me going to meetings and blah, blah, blah. And having conversations... like with some board members and directors... with occasional updates and check-ins with our staff [about Chinese nail salon owners and workers], but that was really all we could do, you know?

Ultimately, leadership refrained from extending itself to Chinese Americans because, for all intents and purposes, the organization was "responding to an emergency situation" for Korean American nail salon owners and workers.

Although Korean Americans continue to "drive" key issue areas and organizing activities at the organization, it is important to acknowledge that some staff believed that the organization was going through a transition period, from being a "Korean-facing" organization that was increasingly becoming pan-Asian. Even Shirley believed that EASSOA was going through "growing pains" where one saw a mismatch between organizational capacity and accountability.

### ***Initiative 2: DACA Organizing***

In 2012, EASSOA began offering legal services to help undocumented individuals apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an Obama administration executive order that offered work authorization and relief from immediate deportation to undocumented individuals who entered the US as children. Since DACA was instituted, the organization has processed over 500 initial applications, the majority belonging to Korean American clients from the New York City area. That same year, EASSOA started the DREAMer group, a support group for undocumented individuals, most of whom were clients of EASSOA. Interest and participation in the group has waxed and waned over time.

Despite minimal funding for this initiative, in 2014, EASSOA leadership pledged to ramp-up organizing activities and to build up the leadership capacity of undocumented individuals, low income Koreans, and other Asian-Americans in the New York City area so that they may "achieve their dreams... on their own."<sup>65</sup> While most interviewees deferred to the board for a

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<sup>64</sup> On May 10, 2015, *The New York Times* featured a series on labor violations in the nail salon industry in the New York City area, pointing to the exploitation of manicurists who often experience wage exploitation, abuse, ethnic and racial discrimination, and exposure to toxic chemicals that lead to serious health problems. According to the article, Korean workers were positioned at the top of a hierarchy, receiving higher pay and working in more comfortable conditions than other workers in the predominantly Korean-owned nail salon industry. Chinese workers came next, and last, Hispanics and other Asian workers who were the most vulnerable and exploited. In response, Governor Andrew Cuomo's office immediately set up emergency measures, setting up an investigation into working conditions at nail salons, threatening to shut down nail salons that were unlicensed or had owed back wages to workers, and planning to launch a multilingual education campaign to inform workers of their rights and owners of their responsibilities. In addition, the governor's office reached out to community-based organizations such as EASSOA to assist in this process. For more information, refer to: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/nyregion/at-nail-salons-in-nyc-manicurists-are-underpaid-and-unprotected.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/11/nyregion/nail-salon-workers-in-nyc-face-hazardous-chemicals.html>

<sup>65</sup> From organizational website

fuller explanation for this new approach, Gina believed that there was “a real sense” that one of the things that the organization did well was working with DREAMers. Further, two long-time staff members referred to the importance of being involved in a politically salient issue that would hopefully give the organization a platform to discuss comprehensive immigration reform. Eileen, a former staff member, offered a more skeptical view: “I just kind of felt like they were more saying that they wanted to do DACA and young adults because it's sexier, not because that's what the need is [in the Korean community].” While Eileen was dubious about the board's motivations, I found that staff were unanimous in their support of DREAMers and were generally committed to addressing the tremendous educational, economic, and social challenges that undocumented individuals continued to face. Staff were particularly concerned about creating more awareness about Asian American DREAMers in order to generate more support from both the Korean American community and the public. In fact, a common refrain among organizers was that this issue “was not only a Latino issue.”

John, who participated in organizing activities at EASSOA, stressed that it was through the DREAMer group that the organization tried to be more than “just a Korean American organization.” To demonstrate, he listed the non-Koreans in the group: “We have [a] Chinese-Peruvian and we also have a Filipino person – they're definitely not Korean.” Similar to the assumption that drives EASSOA's civic engagement activities, staff also believed that different undocumented Asian Americans needed to band together for greater recognition and political power. Going one step further, John was emphatic that it was necessary to “include people of different background[s]” to “build a bigger movement and bigger solidarity.” In this way, John ideally wanted non-Asians to join the group. This aligned with his view of being an undocumented immigrant:

...As I mentioned, my identity as an immigrant is stronger than my identity as a Korean-American or as an Asian-American... For me, that's why I'm having a hard time understanding some people's rhetoric or people's tactic as to "Oh, we only organize these kind of people..." No, I think we have to organize primarily as immigrant, that's my approach in all the organizing that I'm doing.

Ultimately, John hoped that the group would become a multi-racial forum for undocumented young adults.

This approach differed from EASSOA's senior housing campaign, which sought to address the difficulties that low income and immigrant senior citizens faced when applying for affordable senior housing in New York City. John added, “I don't think that we are particularly trying to emphasize the point that we're an Asian-American organization” among Korean American senior citizens. During my time there, EASSOA focused solely on educating and mobilizing low-income Korean American senior citizens, a demographic that is in keeping with EASSOA's history, identity, and area of expertise. Outreach was limited to Korean senior citizens who were clients of the organization, flyers and printed materials were in Korean, and all meetings were held in Korean; organizers were even mindful to offer Korean snacks to attendees.

Mike, another organizer, maintained the importance of serving and conducting outreach to undocumented Korean Americans:

We look at issues of immigration through the lens of Korean Americans. As you know, there aren't too many organizations that do this [services for Korean American DACA recipients]... So let's just say that EASSOA didn't exist. I'm

sure that they would have received help from somewhere else, but would they have received this much?... It's really hard to tailor these services and outreach to certain groups... it's important to go deeper and work with the communities that you serve... we're really sensitive to our community's needs.

For example, information gathered about (mostly Korean American) undocumented clients from its DACA campaign was shared with the Korean ethnic press to raise awareness among its base – the Korean American community – about the significant economic, educational, social, and mental health challenges that undocumented Korean and Asian Americans faced. Although an English version was available, the organizing team did not provide translated versions to other Asian American groups.

Another way in which EASSOA focused on Korean Americans was to avoid asking questions about sexual orientation to process DACA applications. Shirley explained,

The fellowship that I have, I have a separate intake that I have to do with our clients, and give data reporting back to the fellowship, since they're the ones that are paying my salary. One of the questions on the intake is to see if our clients identify as LGBTQ. Once [EASSOA] saw that intake, they pushed back on it ... to let them know... that question will make our community members [Korean Americans] feel uncomfortable. So I actually am excused from asking that question.

While John and Mike appear to, at an individual level, emphasize different constituencies, this does not appear to create conflict and may perhaps be synergistic. Application processes, though tailored to Korean Americans, may extend to non-Koreans without putting their applications at risk. At the same time, branding the DREAMer group as Asian American does not appear to lessen the organization's focus on Korean Americans.

Part of why these boundaries appear fluid may be due to English language capacity among members, many of whom mostly grew up in the US. John believed that English language capacity facilitated the group's ability "to forge this one identity" regardless of "whether you're Filipino or whether you're Chinese..." This dynamic differed on the civic engagement side, where EASSOA staff often interacted with individuals who entered the US as adults with limited language capacity.

With regards to recruitment, staff who identified as undocumented used their identities as undocumented Korean and Asian American in their efforts to recruit future DREAMer group members. Consequently, Shirley, an undocumented staff member shares her status as an organizing tactic and "is the first one making the first pitch to these clients and community members" to try to encourage attendance. However, it is also important to note that Shirley believed that using her identity as an undocumented Korean American were beneficial for other reasons; for example, she believed that her shared legal status put her clients at ease ("I see how relieved they look") and gave clients a sense of hope that someone who was undocumented could be working in a legal capacity. Further, she was confident that her clients were "receptive" when she was representing them. Consequently, she took the lead on processing all DACA applications at EASSOA.

Despite the organization's ability to shift between different ethnic and pan-ethnic identities and staff members' use of their own identities as undocumented Korean and Asian Americans to gain trust and encourage participation in the group, organizers continued to face

recruitment challenges. John added, “In terms of organizing, it just didn't pan out.” A major factor that appeared to thwart more effective recruitment was lack of organizational resources dedicated to organizing and mobilizing DREAMers despite the organization’s professed goals.

Eunice, a member of the group observed, “...EASSOA would be like, ‘This is our DREAMers of the future blah, blah, blah’ and yet there's no official funding for our group.” This lack of dedicated funding also irked Shirley:

There aren't any previous successful tactics for us that we can use as a template, and of course we have the organizing work directly started by Latinx undocumented youth, but all of them have to be adjusted for our own circumstances in the Korean community... It's also hard because I myself am not an organizer. I've had no training in organizing.

In other words, staff lacked access to resources and trainers who would facilitate developing and adapting existing organizing models. Cheryl, another member of the group, also noted the limited number of undocumented staff (a total of two) at EASSOA. Consequently, she concluded that EASSOA’s goals of cultivating leadership capacities among undocumented individuals rang hollow. She added, “It's not even that they're using undocumented people to talk to people at the top, it's more like they're using undocumented people to get funding, to have other people talk to people at the top.”

In addition to these organizational challenges, staff acknowledged that many undocumented Asian Americans may feel shameful about their status, express fear of exposure, and experience financial hardship which may keep them from attending DREAMer group meetings. However, Shirley believed that a key deterrent to Korean and Asian Americans “coming out” stemmed from the various forms of privilege they experienced (e.g., overstaying a visa, which carries different legal penalties and consequences than crossing a border). Further, she pointed to how Asian Americans could “hide” that they were undocumented because of their racial privilege. She continued,

When I tell people I'm undocumented, they're shocked because of the way that I speak and the way that I dress. Versus if I had darker skin, I don't think it would shock people that much. Or if I had a Hispanic accent, it wouldn't shock people that much... it allows us to effectively stay in the closet for longer or forever, because no one really assumes us to be undocumented. Yeah, so there's no pressure to own up to this identity that no one assumes that you have.

As a result, she acknowledged the difficulty in “...trying to balance recognizing that privilege” and encouraging Korean and Asian Americans to become politically active.

Moving beyond the Asian American community, existing members have also experienced challenges in their attempts to work with Latinx undocumented youth and at the national level. Shirley recounted there being “a lot of tension” with regards to the lack of Asian American representation at United We Dream, the nation’s largest immigrant youth-led organization that focuses on advocating for undocumented youth and families. While attending a United We Dream conference in 2016, Eunice recalled:

We all had a problem because there was zero Asian-American representation among the candidates [for the board], so we made a ruckus, we didn't vote for anyone. We told everyone to their face: “We're not voting. Why is there no

representation?" There were a lot of issues brought up at that congress because there were situations where somebody would be speaking in Spanish, but there would be no post-interpretation in English. Whereas when someone spoke in English sometimes there would be people who translated into Spanish. I think for us as the Asian American DREAMer Group, we knew that Asian Americans are obviously under-represented or just a smaller population, but I think that's when everybody [in the group] had a real wake-up call... and that was a big motivating factor there. To get more involved, wanting to promote our group.

At the same time, Shirley acknowledged how difficult it was to demand greater representation given low Asian American turnout in United We Dream events. She continued, "When it's out of three thousand people at a rally, ten of them are Asian, it's hard for us to be like, 'Well why are you forgetting about us?'" This represents yet another difficulty facing DREAMer group members: negotiating between the desire to increase the visibility and voice of undocumented Asian Americans yet working in allyship with other communities of color.

### **Findings II: Boundary Maintenance**

While members of the DREAMer Group strove to recruit new members, secure more resources for their group, and increase awareness of and representation for undocumented Asian Americans, it appeared that group members were also circumscribing participation from others at EASSOA based on identity.

Laura, for instance, described how her participation and input in the DREAMer Group was limited because she was not undocumented. She recalled members pointing to how she had a "huge amount of privilege" because she was a citizen and that she "should not take up that much space" at meetings. She continued:

I've believed in collective power like, "Yeah, let's talk about these issues, let's build a plan, let's talk with one another and let's enlighten each other." ...And a lot of people have told me... "It's probably not your place to be so upfront about this stuff."...Other people who are undocumented who were also part of the group...When I've just casually mentioned it, like, "Hey we should talk about these things, we should talk about class, we should talk about sexism, we should talk about these things - at the very least let's just talk about it so it's in our conscious minds."...They're like, "Nah, maybe you're not the person who should be saying these things."

Although she was not undocumented, Laura felt passionate about immigration reform and DACA because these issues affected her life and those of her family members. She explained:

I have cousins who are undocumented. For me, that was really jarring to realize that. My life took a completely different turn. I got a full ride to a prestigious university. They obviously weren't able to apply knowing that they wouldn't get financial aid. Just the day to day is so different. With that has come a tremendous amount of guilt. I feel this burden of responsibility to speak on behalf of...As a person who is not fearing for my persecution or being deported, I feel like I have this burden of working on the issues.

Similarly, Jenny, from the civic engagement team, believed that her identity as a privileged Taiwanese American prevented her from being a part of the organizing team:

- Jenny: I feel like from my past two years here... my identity is like what it is not. I am not Korean. I am not low-income. I am not undocumented. I am not from the city, I am from the suburbs. I'm a Taiwanese American girl from the suburbs ... It's hard being here because I've been told, "Oh, you don't understand, because you're not undocumented. Oh, you don't get it because you're not Korean..." I've heard that from the beginning to now. Or like, "I'm not privileged like you." I've heard that many, many times here.
- Interviewer: Why is it so important...?
- Jenny: I've been told you can't organize unless self-interest is involved. You can't organize a community that's not your community and stuff like that.
- Interviewer: Do you believe that?
- Jenny: No, because I've had outside organizing training.

While Jenny's identity as a privileged Taiwanese American may be antithetical to the identities that organizational staff typically uphold, one could argue that the organization could have developed opportunities for Jenny to use her cultural competency and organizing skills to grow the organization's organizing capacity for its Chinese American constituents, or at the least, generate strategies to adapt Latinx organizing models for undocumented Asian Americans. Instead, Jenny was relegated to the civic engagement team. These accounts suggest that staff members informally set boundaries over one another's participation and input in programs based on perceptions of identity.

I observed several factors that contributed to this informal organizational practice. For example, several individuals described the importance of having staff be representative of the population that EASSOA advocated for and served, due to the assumption that such individuals would "have a stake in the organization." John, who was undocumented, was convinced that he would feel "less passionate" about working on issues such as voter engagement because it did not affect him in the same way as being undocumented (in addition to not being able to vote).

Further, staff members claimed expertise based on their identity. Mike, for example, stated that he was "really proud" to be first generation and to serve this demographic. As a first-generation immigrant, he believed he could "easily identify" with other first generation immigrants and their experience. Further, he could more effectively address inequalities resulting from being foreign-born. Similarly, Wayne recalled discussing leadership development with current and former undocumented staff:

They were able to talk about what their group would want to do or what that population [would want]... They had that perspective. Yeah, I think if everyone that was a staff at that organization came from that background, that'd be great, fantastic. But, not everything lines up. I came from a middle/working class background...My status is fine. I don't relate to everything....People like John and other staff, they've come into contact, with now, hundreds of undocumented folks. Then, undocumented folks will share with other undocumented folks at a level and depth, which they won't with other people. I think because of that, yes, that's why it's powerful. It's not just a textbook understanding of this issue.

Similar to Mike, Wayne assumed that he lacked “that perspective” based on his background and identity. In effect, his having a “textbook understanding of this issue” would render him ineffective at fully understanding the needs of undocumented individuals (for program development) and connecting with them (gaining trust and creating recruitment opportunities); in other words, he cannot “relate to everything.” Further, having staff members share “that background” confers a level of legitimacy for the organization. For all of these reasons, this kind of organizational representation is “powerful.”

This line of thinking extended to staff outside of the organizing team. Sally, a part of the legal team, doubted her own ability to “know what is actually best for the client” given that she had “never had to experience being in that socioeconomic class [lower class].” While she acknowledged that a mismatch between service population and staff is a widespread phenomenon in the nonprofit industry, Sally’s comment contributes to an overall concern over representation at EASSOA that guides staffing practices and program development.

In a similar vein, a few staff members such as Shirley doubted leadership’s ability to successfully oversee programs given their backgrounds, (lack of) experience, and perceived identity:

I don't want to say the issue that I have with this organization – because I think it's across all non-profits – but where we are pretending that we are way more grass roots than we actually are. You know what I mean? Our executive director is not an immigrant, he does not speak Korean. He has his background in [education deleted], I believe. He's not an organizer...But from what I know, an effective organizing nonprofit should have an organizer at its head.

Similarly, Laura admitted feeling “uneasy” that leadership did not “have direct experience doing direct services.” This contributed to a “knowledge gap” among leaders and constituents.

Board members also worried about board composition. Wayne recalled a conversation he had with the board president who considered making changes to the board so that it would be more reflective of EASSOA’s advocacy and service population:

He did say, "Well, I think we don't want the board to become so different from the people that we serve." To get a board that's just a bunch of people that can write big checks, that might make it more difficult for the board to relate to the community... He, himself, was like, "Yeah, it's not like before. I have an apartment now. [I] actually bought a new car, recently. Yeah, it's very different for me. I lead a middle-class life now."

In addition, funder expectations may have contributed to this practice. When I spoke to an officer from a foundation that funded EASSOA’s organizing activities, the interview participant explained how his foundation looked “to find evidence of community-based leadership.” He explained:

We also want to be sure that the solutions and reform that may be... advanced and proposed is something that the community really wants and it’s something that the community actually is striving for, rather than more of a top-down approach...We want to look into the leadership to see who’s involved, represented, to kind of get a sense of their background and the work.

In effect, he believed that it was “critical” to see evidence that funded organizations were representative of the communities that they served and whether they engaged in practices to “elevate that leadership of that community.”

Based on my limited time at the organization, I am unable to comprehensively explain why staff engaged in this practice. In fact, some individuals may not have realized the extent to which staff were engaging in this practice. At the least, both funder expectations and staff members’ strong commitment to representation (based on the belief that real-life experience was invaluable to help staff connect with constituents and contribute to programs) drive this practice. In the process, staff claimed legitimacy and expertise or conferred it to others who could be described as “from the community,” establishing clear boundaries within organizational contexts about who was able to actively engage with and represent different constituents at EASSOA.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

All EASSOA staff believed that the organization was, at its core, a Korean American organization and most staff emphasized the organization’s focus on serving disadvantaged Korean Americans – those who were low-income, immigrant, undocumented, and Limited English Proficient (LEP). For example, the organization’s focus on disadvantaged Korean Americans has translated to its efforts to limit its social services to low-income individuals and families. In addition, the organization engaged in an affordable senior housing campaign that targeted low-income Korean American senior citizens. However, staff also believed that the organization was increasingly becoming an Asian American organization based on its activities. Several individuals also described the organization as one with an immigrant identity while a few also described the organization as progressive.

Each organizational initiative presented here represents a broadening (to varying degrees) of organizational boundaries and identities to include Asian Americans and other immigrant groups. Concurrently, staff strategically present different facets of the organization’s identity as they participate in various initiatives. These actions may be influenced by several factors, including, but not limited to, demographic change, funding opportunities and/or funder expectations, staff identities, organizational history, desire for increased political power and recognition, and political environment. At the same time, staff members’ emphasis on different values and identities may propel organizational action (e.g., differences in John’s and Mike’s approaches to serving and mobilizing DACA recipients).

EASSOA’s civic engagement activities emphasize outreach to and advocacy on behalf of Asian Americans, going beyond Korean American constituencies with recognition that the Korean American community was a “drop in the bucket” with regards to small population size and lack of political influence. As the lead of a pan-Asian coalition, staff are able to incorporate other Asian American groups to collectively make claims for more political representation and incorporation. In this capacity, EASSOA staff appeal to different constituents by employing different ethnic and racial identities and scripts – in coalition settings, staff may claim to be and/or to represent Korean and/or Asian Americans; among constituents, staff will tailor their message to appeal to Chinese American or Korean American voters. Consequently, EASSOA has been able to register over 80,000 (as of 2019) new Asian American voters and inform individuals about voting rights and candidates’ positions. More generally, EASSOA encourages Asian Americans’ political awareness, engagement, and influence.



On an organizational level, this strategy has enabled EASSOA to claim a larger constituency, appeal to different group members who may not be inclined to subscribe to the idea of seeking political power collectively as Asian Americans, receive more funding for civic engagement activities (which then translates to increased power over coalition members as EASSOA establishes various criteria for sub-grantees), and finally, represent different constituencies in various coalition settings, potentially increasing its visibility to other key community stakeholders.

At the same time, while EASSOA claims to represent Asian Americans in the New York City area, particularly around issues on civic engagement, one could argue that it is primarily through its coalition partners that the organization claims to (indirectly) engage with the broader Asian American community. In fact, EASSOA appears to devote the majority of its organizational capacity to focusing on the needs of Korean Americans; consequently, Chinese Americans were “not driving the issue.” In some cases, EASSOA leadership appears to *purposefully* limit the organization’s capacity to both serve and advocate on behalf of Chinese American clients, particularly those who may be disadvantaged and vulnerable. In turn, some staff expressed concern about the organization’s lack of accountability and potentially, what could be interpreted (or misinterpreted) as a form of tokenism in organizational staffing practices.

The DREAMer group represents EASSOA’s efforts to engage with various undocumented communities, consisting of (primarily) Korean Americans, but also Asian Americans and other communities of color. John, an organizer, actively promotes the group as Asian American and as one that focuses on undocumented immigrants. In fact, John hoped that the DREAMer group would one day be a multiracial venue for undocumented immigrant youth and young adults, further expanding the boundaries for group membership at EASSOA.

Although it is not exactly clear why EASSOA leadership chose to focus on the leadership development of undocumented Korean and Asian Americans, one could at least credit the organization and the DREAMer group for bringing attention to the challenges and needs of undocumented Asian Americans – that being undocumented “was not only a Latino issue.” Further, the DREAMer group has enabled a small but vocal group of Asian American DACA recipients – individuals shut out from formal means of political participation – to be politically active around issues that directly concern them. Last, EASSOA is able to engage in a politically salient issue and this involvement may confer a degree of legitimacy as a “progressive” organization that seeks to empower disadvantaged communities. While some services are tailored to Korean Americans, this appears unproblematic as boundaries between Korean and Asian American DACA beneficiaries appear fluid in this case.

At the same time, group members experience significant hurdles in recruiting new members. Several factors contribute to recruitment challenges, such as racial privilege experienced by undocumented Asian Americans and group history. Further, lack of dedicated organizational resources appears to hamper organizational members from developing effective recruitment strategies that would not only appeal to undocumented Asian Americans but would also facilitate mobilization on a cross-racial basis. Given their experiences, however, some DREAMer group members suspect that EASSOA leadership is insincere in its desire to cultivate the leadership of DREAMers and that the organization is “using undocumented people” to gain more funding from donors and more legitimacy as a “progressive” and politically relevant organization.

Overall, I present two main observations in this chapter. The first focuses on the relationship between the uses of organizational identity and constituent outcomes. More specifically, EASSOA's strategy of deploying different organizational identities confers flexibility in how staff are able to advocate for and appeal to different constituencies whose identities and interests may not always overlap – an historically vexing problem for Asian American groups (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2014). Seen in another light, one could say that this strategy offers a way for the organization to “manage” – at least in a superficial level – increasing diversity in organizational contexts.

This strategic deployment of different organizational identities appears to be associated with several benefits which include increased funding, power over coalition partners, political influence, and potentially, more recognition as an organization. In the best case, these organizational gains would ideally, and often do, translate to gains for Korean and Asian Americans. However, these practices also appear to be associated with uneven resource allocation, accountability, representation, mobilization, and/or service to certain subgroup members. At times, the organization may even be considered to be opportunistic as it manipulates different identities to try to achieve “wins” for the organization and constituents (broadly defined). In the worst case, the organization may exacerbate inequalities among different constituents, potentially maintaining second-class constituencies within the organization. This then impedes the organization's ability to encourage “incorporation” in all of its forms.

Second, the flexibility conferred through the different uses of identity at EASSOA may be associated with staff members' apparent *inflexibility* with regards to the extent to which they may actively participate in programs. In other words, staff maintain relatively fixed internal boundaries based on their perceptions of one another's identities and assumed expertise and legitimacy based these identities. These practices may yield positive outcomes such as the leadership development of individuals who may otherwise have fewer opportunities to exercise leadership in formal settings (e.g., undocumented individuals). This would further increase the organization's legitimacy as an organization and potentially fulfill the expectations of other stakeholders and partners (e.g., foundations). In the worst case, this informal practice may stifle collective decision-making that could possibly yield creative approaches to organizing and advocacy, promote a level of resentment among staff who feel that their perspectives are not valued because of who they are as opposed to what they can do, and potentially (and inadvertently) promote practices that tokenize individuals within organizations.

## **Chapter 5: South Asian Women's Empowerment (SAWE)**

### **Organizational Background**

South Asian Women's Empowerment (SAWE) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization located in an area of New York City that is experiencing an increase in its Bangladeshi population. From 2000 to 2015, the population of Bangladeshis in the US increased over 200%, from 57,000 to 188,000, with the majority living in the New York metropolitan area (77,000),<sup>66</sup> mostly in Queens.<sup>67</sup>

#### ***History***

SAWE was started by Joanna Marr, an academic researcher who specializes in South Asian immigrant communities, and her colleague. Initially, the two received a major research grant in 2007 to conduct a study that accounted for cultural differences in depression treatment for South Asian women. Joanna and her colleague then decided to form a social services organization in 2008 to serve immigrant women in their study site based on overwhelming requests for more services in the area. Over time, this organization formalized to become SAWE.

#### ***Mission and Areas of Focus***

SAWE's mission, according to its website,<sup>68</sup> "transforms the lives of South Asian immigrant women by improving physical and mental health, expanding economic opportunities and building a collective voice for change." During the time of my fieldwork, SAWE had two main areas of focus: 1) health services and 2) economic empowerment, advocacy, and organizing.

The organization's health programs featured two main initiatives while I was there: a breast screening program and a children's nutrition and dental intervention program. The breast screening program focused on educating participants about breast cancer prevention and encouraged them and their friends to get free mammograms. The children's nutrition and dental program was part of a major research initiative funded by a national health research institute. For this project, case workers from SAWE visited the homes of (mostly) Bangladeshi mothers to instruct them on healthy infant feeding practices and to encourage oral hygiene practices for their children. The executive director oversaw the program.

Economic empowerment programs included offering English language instruction and running training programs for instituting a childcare cooperative and a catering business. Advocacy activities included participation in coalitions advancing South Asian civil rights and increasing funding for Asian American nonprofits in New York City. SAWE also partnered with organizations such as the Urban Justice Center, a social justice advocacy organization in New York City, and the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs to gain policy information and receive support on various programmatic initiatives. Last, SAWE launched its first organizing initiative, which I will refer to as the "women's empowerment program," or WEP, to train and empower a select group of SAWE participants.

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<sup>66</sup> Pew Social Trends. 2017. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/fact-sheet/asian-americans-bangladeshis-in-the-u-s/> Accessed November 2018.

<sup>67</sup> National Council of Asian Pacific Islander Physicians. 2016. [http://ncapip.org/resources/Publications-NCAPIP/Bangladeshi-American-factsheet\\_v2.pdf](http://ncapip.org/resources/Publications-NCAPIP/Bangladeshi-American-factsheet_v2.pdf) Accessed November 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Reviewed September 2018

For all programs, organizational staff use two key strategies for recruitment, training, and treatment. The first consists of utilizing women's social networks. More specifically, SAWE often recruits participants by tapping into existing participants' social networks. SAWE also encourages women to develop new networks and in this process, promotes leadership development while helping women overcome isolation. The second strategy consists of offering incentives, usually in the form of free MetroCards (to access New York City public transportation) or cash stipends, depending on the program and individuals' level of involvement. Cash stipends are also seen as a means to encourage participants' financial standing in their families and to increase their sense of efficacy.

### **Constituents**

SAWE's constituents represent a particular disadvantaged segment of the South Asian population in New York City. They are disadvantaged in two ways: as vulnerable immigrant Bangladeshi women and second, as a part of a larger, overlooked community in New York City.

To begin, staff often described constituents as married women from rural villages in Bangladesh, relatively recently arrived (less than 10 years, but some have been in the US over 10 years), low income, Limited English Proficient (LEP), and with limited formal education. Given the multiple ways in which participants were disadvantaged, Huma noted how "their life gets turned upside down for little things that... others with more resources could manage."

Women were also depicted as experiencing isolation and depression. Because many entered the US through the diversity immigrant visa program (also known as the green card lottery), a program that seeks to diversify the immigrant population in the US, Joanna believed that many women were "without a major, big social family network" and were therefore "considerably at a loss" and "traumatized by a whole bunch of aspects of the immigrant experience." Further, while there was variation among households as to how much women and men adhered to traditional gender roles, staff often stated that significant parenting and household duties impeded women's ability to leave their homes. These factors, as well as limited English proficiency and lack of familiarity with the city contributed to their isolation.

More generally, SAWE clients were a part of a growing but overlooked community in New York City. According to Huma, this community was not just "severely underserved" but was also relatively unknown as a burgeoning immigrant community in this part of the city. She noted that in social service and advocacy circles, "people don't talk about this community" and consequently, "there are so many services that are lacking." For example, a volunteer at SAWE who organized a health fair described how the event was initially conceived as a means to offer simple health education and services (blood pressure and diabetes checks), but morphed into a health education event for local Bangladeshi families and children:

We approached a local middle school on [street name deleted] asking if we could use their auditorium as a venue... They were actually really desperate because they didn't have a health teacher, and they asked us to somehow help the recently immigrated Bangladeshi students in the ESL classes. A lot of them just had tons of health issues, just like, stuff like lice and like their parents didn't know that it needed to be treated, and were getting picked on for having body odor and shit like that, it's just crazy. And like, menstrual problems with some of the girls...and not getting medical care.

This volunteer's experience points to the dearth of support systems and resources available to SAWE constituents. Consequently, Huma often felt compelled to stress the needs of this

particular community in different coalition settings and/or with other local and citywide stakeholders.

Efforts to draw attention to this community became more urgent after the 2016 presidential election as SAWE staff increasingly heard of incidents of racially-motivated hate crimes and harassment in the neighborhood. This aligns with increases of reports of hate crimes against South Asians, particularly those who are Muslim,<sup>69</sup> in New York City and in the US.

### ***Leadership, Staffing, and Turnover***

During my fieldwork, there were seven full time staff members and one volunteer. The organization also hired an organizing consultant, Jenna, who came in on a weekly basis. During this time, Joanna Marr split her time between SAWE and her academic institution.

When I began, two full time staff members oversaw operations. Huma, the Director of Advocacy and Economic Empowerment, oversaw all advocacy, organizing, and economic empowerment programs and worked with two staff members, Tina and Selena, who split their time between health programming and advocacy and economic empowerment programs. The other director (who left the organization shortly after I started) managed all health initiatives. She managed two staff members who focused solely on health programs. One staff member worked directly with Joanna on an ongoing study about children's oral hygiene and worked independently.

Most staff members identified as being from the surrounding neighborhood and spoke Bengali<sup>70</sup> with varying levels of proficiency with the exception of Joanna and Huma. However, both had a working knowledge of Bengali and understood conversations that took place at SAWE. SAWE staff exhibited varying levels of English proficiency, with the executive director and 1.5 and second-generation staff members being the most proficient.

Prior to my participation, the organization had gone through a round of staffing changes. For example, Joanna became more hands-on in the management of the organization after its managing director left. Joanna increased her time at the organization to approximately four times a week, for several hours at a time. Further, within a week of my participation, Joanna asked the director of health initiatives to leave the organization. When I completed my field work and tried to conduct follow up interviews, I found out that the majority of staff with whom I had worked had also left.

### ***Board***

There are currently six board members, the majority of whom work in the corporate sector. The board is responsible for general oversight of the organization and fundraising. During my fieldwork, staff did not appear to engage frequently with board members and were described as being on "the periphery." However, staff appeared to respect board members and believed that they were invested in the well-being of South Asian communities and SAWE

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<sup>69</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/increase-in-hate-crimes-against-south-asians-disheartening-fbi-report/articleshow/61651942.cms>  
<https://www.newsweek.com/new-york-attack-muslim-hate-crimes-698408>  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/man-arrested-fatal-stabbing-bangladeshi-woman-some-called-hate-crime-n642956>  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/man-arraigned-double-killing-imam-associate-near-new-york-mosque-n632081>

<sup>70</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term "Bengali" and "Bangla" interchangeably.

participants. Rashidsa, one of the few individuals who spoke about the board described them as “like the successful South Asian model minorities that we want to be one day.”

### ***Funding, Research, and Sustainability***

Based on an analysis of its tax returns, SAWE has experienced slow but consistent growth. In 2013, SAWE’s revenues amounted to \$194,071 and has slowly increased to \$264,810 in 2014, \$266,293 in 2015, and \$316,528 in 2016.<sup>71</sup>

SAWE is unique in my sample because of its dependence on research funding. In this way, the organization appears to have a dual purpose as both a service organization and research entity. According to Joanna, a key reason she wanted to offer services was her desire to give back to this community since she had been able to benefit professionally from working with this community. She stated, “I’ve been doing research with South Asian women...since 1990 [when] I started my project [dissertation]. And... I felt that I had gotten pretty far ahead in life with this research... and I just felt like I haven’t really done anything.” However, she also admitted to seeing the organization as a means “to do all kinds of... small-scale projects” that related to her research. In fact, one volunteer believed that one of the organization’s constituents included academic research interests because of what appeared to be SAWE’s dual focus. It is important to note that SAWE’s approach to research emphasizes community input through participatory action research (PAR), a research methodology that includes the perspectives and input of the communities in which research is conducted. While this methodology aligns with Joanna’s research interests, it also confers a level of legitimacy for SAWE as a community-based organization that uses “culturally competent”<sup>72</sup> approaches to address the needs of its constituents.

This research and funding model has been the basis for the organization’s most well-known project, a mental health program that takes into consideration the social and cultural contexts of South Asian women suffering from depression and isolation. The initiative furthered Joanna’s academic career while also increasing the organization’s visibility as a community resource for Bangladeshi women in the neighborhood. Despite the fact that funding for this program ended years ago, staff reported that there was still demand for such services in the community.

At SAWE, I found a similar pattern for programs that were former research initiatives but were no longer funded despite continued demand among constituents. A volunteer with whom I spoke suspected that “some programs that were not inherently providing data... [that] didn’t have any research value were ended.” She continued, “Because research is a funding source... if you don’t have funds for it, what can you do?” Others offered similar perspectives. Jenna, a consultant at SAWE, suggested that there was a fundamental “tension” in the organization between its common practice of seeking research grants for short-term initiatives versus the long-term service needs of constituents. Although “research was the dominant task” before, she believed that SAWE’s new organizing initiative marked a turn for the organization. Consequently, she predicted that SAWE would have to reassess its priorities. She added, “Is it going to be research? Is it going to be service? Is it going to be organizing and campaign work?”

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<sup>71</sup> Accessed from GuideStar

<sup>72</sup> By “cultural competency,” I mean “understanding the core needs of your target audience and designing services and materials to meet those needs strategically.”  
<https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-training/tpp-and-paf-resources/cultural-competence/index.html>

It can be all of it. But, how do they all interact with each other?" Ultimately, this was something that the organization would "have to figure out right now."

While there was dedicated (but often short-term) funding for health programs, economic empowerment programs were usually funded by a combination of discretionary funding from the city council and foundation sources. Given this funding structure, Huma acknowledged that financial resources were a concern, especially for programs in her portfolio. However, rather than blame lack of funding for her programs, she insisted that there was a lack of dedicated staff and organizational resources for economic empowerment at SAWE. Tina, a 1.5 generation staff member, also observed that there was a propensity in the organization to focus on health projects. She continued,

I feel like economic empowerment, advocacy, they're on the back bench. Our health programs are the star of the show, and that's why they're more structured than the other programs, which I don't think is right. If we are in our mission, saying that we are empowering women, creating collective voice for change, then why do our [economic empowerment] programs not have structures? Why are we not structuring them?

Part of the problem may have stemmed from poor budget management as there was a rotating door of bookkeepers at SAWE and Joanna's inexperience with managing an organization. Alternatively, I wondered how, if at all, Joanna's health-focused research interests and reliance on research funding contributed to this scenario.

## **Findings**

### ***Different Organizational Identities and Narratives at SAWE***

At SAWE, I encountered inconsistencies between what I will describe as external versus internal narratives and identities at SAWE.<sup>73</sup> To begin, staff usually described SAWE as an organization dedicated to serving and empowering South Asian women. However, the majority of SAWE's participants are comprised of a specific segment of the Bangladeshi American population. Consequently, there were times when staff and volunteers tried to highlight the needs for this specific community. For example, during an advocacy day at city hall, Selina, a first-generation staff member, stressed how SAWE represented the "Bangladeshi community people." More specifically, Selina differentiated herself and the organization from other South Asian groups because she did not want to be mistaken as Indian. She stated, "We are wearing the hijab, we are going to mosques. We are not safe. So [I say] I'm Bengali and Muslim too."

Given these dynamics, I asked why staff often described the organization as South Asian. One staff member, Tina, explained that from a client's perspective, the organization would be considered as a Bangladeshi organization; however, because not all staff were Bangladeshi (one case worker identified as Indian and Huma identified as Pakistani American), the organization could be considered South Asian. Alternatively, Rashida, a younger staff member who has grown up in the US, described how it was important to be inclusive of the non-Bangladeshi clients that she did have: "I have a few clients that are Pakistani, for example. And I've worked so closely with them. I feel like they should be included in this."

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<sup>73</sup> Tina (fluent in both English and Bangla) usually translated meetings or discussions in real-time for me. Conversations with 1.5 and second generation staff and affiliates were often held in English.

Most often, staff defaulted to an explanation of how the organization would eventually expand to become a city-wide South Asian organization. Joanna envisioned “setting up shop in [borough name deleted] and, for example, [neighborhood name deleted] or some of the other areas” with large South Asian populations, including New Jersey. However, she accounted for resource and cultural challenges associated with expansion: “We’d need a lot more money...We’d have to look towards \$1 million dollars [for a budget]...to really do that successfully and we’re only at like \$400,000 now.” Further, she acknowledged how cultural differences could be a challenge for staff. She continued, “Our frontline staff...they’re not generally very bilingual. So I could see that creating quite a lot of organizational issues in terms of staff communication and cohesion.” All of this suggests that SAWE will remain an organization primarily serving and being comprised of Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi Americans; however, identifying as a South Asian organization conveys how staff envision the organization’s future and its potential.

Another way in which I observed a mismatch between external and internal narratives related to what I will broadly call narratives of oppression and disadvantage. According to its website,<sup>74</sup> SAWE describes South Asian immigrants in New York City as a disadvantaged group suffering from “low wages, wage theft, overcrowded and substandard housing, low English literacy, and lack of health care benefits.” Women, in particular, are described as being at a disadvantage because they have “few chances to further their education or enter the job market...” and will potentially “never escape the narrow world of home, city block, and corner grocery store.” Consequently, there is “an epidemic of depression and other health problems” where over 70% of women surveyed were overweight or obese and 25% reported “significant depressive symptoms.” These problems were exacerbated in elderly women, “many of whom spend decades of their lives isolated in the homes of busy adult children.” Similarly, research articles published under Joanna’s supervision present South Asian women, and more specifically, Bangladeshi immigrant women as disempowered and under the scrutiny of husbands and other family members. For instance, in a published study on nutrition and dental health, mothers in the study “did not have control over decision making about their children’s health and feeding. Most participants consulted at length with their husbands, parents, and in-laws.”<sup>75</sup>

A second-generation SAWE staff member believed that there was an element of truth to these accounts. After working at SAWE, she “realized that it’s not uncommon for women to not even leave the house, because their husbands say, ‘No. This is your job. You stay home. You take care of the kids. Cook. Clean. That’s it.’” She further recalled a time when staff asked participants in a cooperative childcare program to bring documentation for tax purposes. She stated, “And almost all of them brought them... but one; because I had spoken to her husband, and told him, ‘This is all confidential. We just need to see your income to see if you qualify for this certain thing.’ And he was like, ‘No. I don’t trust her. I don’t trust you guys.’” These kinds of comments, however, were rare. Mostly, I found that staff described Bangladeshi husbands in a positive light. For example, Joanna described how in some South Asian communities, one was “dealing with some of the worst husbands in the universe” – that one was “dealing with abusers and that stuff, and you’re dealing with these very, very unhappy families where the husbands are violent.” However, she believed that SAWE did not “get the women – the women whose husbands are not supportive and are creating a lot of misery...We don’t actually see them...” In fact, she wondered if this was because SAWE primarily served Bangladeshis – “Maybe

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<sup>74</sup> Accessed November 2018, under “Who We Serve”

<sup>75</sup> Study from 2014



Bengalis are different,” She suggested. Contrary to the external narrative described above, Joanna has found that “husbands [at SAWE] are so supportive and nice mostly.”

Huma agreed, stating that SAWE served a “very specific group of women” who “already have a certain amount of mobility or they’re in a place where... they can leave home and actually come to SAWE on a regular basis and be involved in this programing.” Selina, a full-time staff member who worked closely with community members, was adamant that men, such as her husband, were helpful to their wives: “...My husband working in the house too” and generally, she saw “no problem” with men and women “helping together.” However, she did mention that men often did not like their wives working “on the outside” because husbands typically assumed that women’s priority should be taking care of children and household duties, which was also the case with her husband. Despite this, she continued to work at SAWE because she believed working would enable her to be a more informed parent and wife: “I didn’t like that [staying home] because if I work, I understand more thing, maybe I am smarter than another people too. That’s why I’m working outside...” In this way, Joanna was convinced that usually, a “mildly discouraging” husband could “be talked into” his wife participating at SAWE.

In addition, Rashida thought that constituents were changing. She noted, “We have all sorts of different women now. A lot of women work now.” She also described a new and growing constituency at SAWE: “Like, we have younger women coming.” She claimed, “We’re having less, from what I can understand, depressed women, and more women who are coming to seek help to further their future” by attending college. However, Huma noted that this growing client base of “recently arrived late high school, early college-age immigrant women that have trouble navigating the [educational] system” were “not represented” as Joanna rarely talked about this population in public and there were no formal programs to support younger clients.

When I mentioned being confused by these competing narratives and how leadership presented the organization as, for lack of a better term, a savior to oppressed women, Huma also acknowledged, “I don’t fully understand that either.... I’m kind of confused too.” In turn, Huma believed that this internal-external differentiation could be related to how Joanna wanted to frame the organization to external stakeholders such as funders. Huma posited that the narrative of “oppression, like ‘the women are oppressed’ part is really, really highlighted sometimes,” particularly for white stakeholders. She continued, “So with white - I think this is a circle of friends that Joanna kind of has... The way that I’ve heard them talk, for example at fundraisers, how they’re just so impressed that she’s saving these oppressed women.”

In fact, she noted how this narrative shifted in the context of “the immediate surrounding South Asian community” in which case, SAWE was framed as “a service organization: ‘We can help you with these services.’” In addition, “with a more high-income South Asian community, more professional, people who are not in the immediate geographic vicinity,” Huma thought there was “a little bit of a savior narrative to it: ‘By hiring [program name excluded] to cater your event, you support low income immigrant women in getting job readiness skills and having access to the job market.’” She added, “...It’s more about: ‘But look at what you’re supporting in your own community’ and I think there’s a little bit of savioriness to it too but it’s also about sort of giving back [and] supporting your community.” Rashida agreed:

I feel like, most of the time, we portray ourselves as saviors for these women, who really need to be saved, from either bad home situations, or a lack of resources, no English. And maybe I don’t really completely agree with the way we portray; but, that’s what I think certain people want to see. Maybe like white people. Especially with fundraising, I guess it’s an important thing. Because you

have to touch a nerve in their heart, of course. But, I guess the sob story works better than saying, "These are great women. They know what they're doing. Maybe not all the way, but we're just helping them along."

In this section, I show how not all staff agreed with the way men and women were portrayed to those outside of the organization and I found it difficult to decipher why. Huma and Rashida suggested that a savior narrative could potentially facilitate SAWE's access to funding and other resources. However, staff unanimously agreed on the real need to focus on this socioeconomically vulnerable community, especially with increasing accounts of hate crimes committed against community members. In addition, I consistently heard about instances of bullying in public schools, where participants' children were mistreated by their peers for being Muslim immigrants.

### *Other Identities*

While external stakeholders may have perceived SAWE as a South Asian organization dedicated to rescuing oppressed women, Joanna also noted how the organization could also be perceived differently among different organizational partners. For example, Joanna explained that funders that support SAWE's health education program would see SAWE "as a kind of a health organization" while others that work with SAWE on immigration and advocacy initiatives would consider SAWE as an advocacy partner. For a big research-based funder, SAWE could be seen as an organization driven by "empirical, scientific, and community-based" research on hard-to-reach South Asian communities. In addition, Joanna discussed how her engagement with different organizational partners differed. She stated,

If I'm talking to South Asian doctors, I'm talking about some amazing health work we're doing. I'm talking to South Asian potential donors, and I'm talking about, oh, the needs of this current immigrant community as opposed to other possible targets for charitable donations, which are more typical in the wealthy South Asian communities... I mean, when I'm with our [name of Asian American organization deleted], there are lots of South Asian groups there and we're all just talking about Asians. So it just really depends.

Ultimately, Joanna not only acknowledged that there may be variation in how different organizational partners viewed SAWE, but she actively accentuated different activities that the organization was engaged in with each partner, potentially reinforcing their perspectives.

### *Asian American Identity*

Joanna also noted how SAWE was a part of a pan-Asian coalition, but staff usually lacked identification with Asian American identity on an individual and organizational level. For example, when I asked Selina about the organization's work with Asian American groups, she could not answer and deferred to other staff who would be more knowledgeable about the subject. Similarly, Rashida had heard about SAWE's engagement with a pan-Asian coalition but was uncertain about the details: "We are part of the [name withheld]?" When I answered affirmatively, she continued to ask for more clarity: "So, we're part of that. And that's [part of name deleted]?...I'm sorry, I'm butchering the name."

Even though Rashida was educated in the US and identified as Bangladeshi American, she expressed several reasons for hesitating to identify as Asian American. Despite what she believed to be similarities between the two groups "in values," she stressed socioeconomic differences. She depicted East Asians as model minorities – "high achieving, and living in better [suburban] neighborhoods" and "moving up the ladder." She further described East Asians as

"honorary white" but added, "We don't think of it as a bad thing. We're happy that our Asian fellows are getting there. We want to get there, too...At least in SAWE, and people I talk to, my peers...East Asians do better than *our* Bangladeshi Americans."

In addition, she noted racial differences. Although she had taken a class on migration in college and recalled that East Asians and South Asians were "all under that same category," she instinctively didn't "think about brown people" as being Asian American. Jenna, an organizer and consultant at SAWE went further: "Black people have a specific experience in America. What I mean is to call attention to the colorism. Because if you look at most Bangladeshi people, phenotypically, we're super dark a lot." Others such as Selena added that religion and religious discrimination were significant markers of difference. She stated, "Maybe Muslim is problem, that's why hijab is a problem too."

Besides Joanna, Huma appeared to be most aware of SAWE's participation in Asian American initiatives and its membership in a pan-Asian coalition. However, she too acknowledged that she had "never identified as Asian." Although she added that "there is representation of South Asians..." in coalition settings, "it is still mostly...dominated by East Asians." She added, "I'm not saying it's an injustice in any type of way, I'm just saying that's how I've understood 'Asian' to be for a very long time. That is what I have seen." This may explain why Huma and Joanna continued to be members of a pan-Asian coalition that sought to highlight different member perspectives in their advocacy.

Still other SAWE staff were unclear as to how to interpret "Asian American." For example, when I asked Tina, a 1.5 generation staff member who had extensive experience living in Bangladesh, "How would you define Asian American?" She answered, "That is such a vague question. Dammit, Haegi!" In other instances, both Tina and Selina appeared to use the term "Asian" to refer to specific populations; during a casual conversation, Tanya described someone as being "so Asian" in relation to the person's favorite food, mangoes. On a separate occasion, when I asked Selina to define "Asian," she limited the description to Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians, and individuals with Arab ancestry.

Despite these varied perspectives of who and/or what constituted "Asian" and "Asian American," Rashida offered a practical outlook: "Asian American - that's anything, I guess. When it comes to your advantage, you will take on that characteristic, or whatever the name we're being boxed into." Similar to external narratives of oppressed women, Rashida surmised that taking on an Asian American identity, when appropriate, could bring additional resources for the organization. In fact, the only time I heard staff refer to pan-Asian coalition activities was in reference to funding and support services (e.g., parent advocacy trainings offered by the pan-Asian coalition).

In sum, organizational identities at SAWE appear to be used flexibly and deployed in different ways to external stakeholders. Staff point to how the organization is often portrayed as a South Asian organization dedicated to uplifting oppressed and disadvantaged immigrant women. In some cases, the organization may also be seen as a health services organization, an advocacy organization, a research organization, and in some cases, as an Asian American organization, but mostly through coalition affiliation. However, not all staff may be equally aware, in agreement, or aligned with these different descriptions or facets of SAWE's organizational identities.

This flexibility contrasts with the specific needs of participants at SAWE given that the majority of participants represent a specific demographic within the South Asian and

Bangladeshi American populations. I use the example of a childcare cooperative (an economic empowerment program) to demonstrate how not adequately tailoring the program to the needs of this community contributed to lack of implementation.

### ***Initiative 1: The Childcare Cooperative***

SAWE's childcare cooperative (or "co-op") represents an opportunity for SAWE to address "unemployment while empowering women as entrepreneurs and co-op members."<sup>76</sup> Through this program, individuals participated in trainings to receive certifications useful for childcare providers (e.g., CPR training).

A first iteration of the program began prior to 2016; however, participation waned over time and the cooperative was never fully established. Huma was responsible for restarting the program in 2016. Although SAWE had dedicated funding from a New York City agency and partnered with another nonprofit that offered assistance in forming cooperatives, as of 2017, the co-op had yet to be incubated and participation had decreased from 16 to six members. Not surprisingly, both Huma and Joanna pointed to several challenges to running the program.

While Huma acknowledged that it was a "good moment to tap into" cooperatives because there was "a lot of movement in New York City" and "throughout the country" on issues related to domestic work and childcare, she questioned the effectiveness of SAWE's existing model. For example, staff recruited participants for training as they were simultaneously forming a co-op. Afterwards, staff would try to find jobs for participants. Instead, Huma believed that SAWE could train individuals, offer extensive English language instruction, connect them to jobs, and then introduce the idea of developing a co-op. Ultimately, she believed that it was only after spending time as a childcare provider that participants could weigh the pros and cons of forming a cooperative and be more committed to the program.

Part of the challenge of finding jobs related to lack of demand among local Bangladeshis – an issue that Huma and Joanna had not anticipated. According to Huma, even if there were Bangladeshi families that could afford the cost of outsourcing childcare, she suspected that most Bangladeshi parents preferred having family members taking care of their children. Both Huma and Joanna agreed that while there could be South Asian families interested in supporting the worker's cooperative, they were probably not Bengali-speaking; in retrospect, Joanna believed that women who spoke Hindustani would find work most easily because the language combined both Hindi and Urdu. Consequently, Huma stressed the need for women to be more proficient in English, which would expand their options for finding work. Alternatively, she thought that SAWE could launch an aggressive marketing campaign to try to create demand in the community. However, Joanna believed that wealthy Bangladeshi immigrants were "not interested in paying higher prices for babysitters in order to... contribute to a social justice oriented workers' cooperative." She also insinuated that because there was "a lot of abuse of domestic workers among these first-generation South Asian immigrants," workers' rights would not be a major concern among first-generation Bangladeshis.

Training was also a problem. In the early days of the program, Huma recalled how she had not adequately adapted existing training models for SAWE participants. For example, when she first began, she relied on a curriculum developed by a nonprofit that was working with Latino immigrants in Brooklyn. Huma stated, "It's a different population and the way that they had worked – maybe it wasn't wise of me to just pull one session out of the whole curricula and plug it into ours." For instance, on a module on governance and management, Huma asked how

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<sup>76</sup> Accessed from website on November 2018.

participants generally thought about governance and decision making. In retrospect, she would have asked questions related to women's daily lives. She continued,

I would have added more examples of like, "Who makes decisions in your household? How are decisions made in your household?" I did do some of that later on, but when I first did it, I didn't have that understanding to adapt it in that way... It would be like bringing it back to the household, which is where I think – that's what they have the most understanding of.

Huma offered another example: "We were talking about personal values and...I couldn't get anything out... I asked the question in English, someone translated for me, people didn't understand it." Eventually, she "restructured the question as, 'What makes a good mother? What makes a good X role that people are familiar with?' This allowed for "a more fruitful conversation." These examples also point to two interrelated issues involving 1) cultural competency and idiosyncrasies inherent to language and 2) differences in world views between American-educated staff and participants.

Because these were strategies that Huma developed over time, her timeline for trainings became protracted; for example, one planned session on governance expanded into four. These challenges contributed to capacity constraints and her feeling "so unmotivated" and overwhelmed as she was the only person overseeing all economic empowerment initiatives. She admitted, "I think the co-op has been the most challenging part for me...I just stopped working on it for the last couple of months." During a follow-up interview after Huma left the organization, she reflected on her work with the co-op:

I think because I'm not there anymore and not working on it, it's a little less of a blow to my ego to say that this is not working...I've definitely thought it plenty of times. I've not said it out loud until just now...It doesn't work. These women don't speak English. You don't have enough of a Bengali-speaking market to place these women in, to get them like \$18 an hour childcare gigs.

Huma ultimately believed that SAWE was letting down women who were desperately in need of work. She continued,

I don't think it's fair to the women... I feel so bad that I've been working with these women for a year and I have not been able to get them jobs. They need jobs. That's it... Before talking to them about co-ownership and what it means for women to co-own a business as the first Bangladeshi South Asian immigrant co-op... they need financial security.

While capacity constraints played a role in the program's outcome, it appears as if a failure to sufficiently adapt training models exacerbated existing capacity constraints at SAWE. This contributed to protracted training schedules and more resources being directed to the program. Further, lack of consideration about demand among Bangladeshi families in the area and participants' limited language capacity represent major oversights, suggesting a lack of expertise (at least initially) about this population and about program management, more generally. These findings also suggest a mismatch between SAWE's deployment of being a South Asian organization (where one assumes to find multiple programs for multiple South Asian groups) and the specificity with which staff must structure programs to accommodate this segment of the Bangladeshi community.

Compared to the flexibility with which staff, particularly Joanna, deploys organizational identity, such outcomes may have contributed to why staff members consistently evaluated one another on their cultural competency and expertise on this community. I use the example of the Women's Empowerment Program (WEP) to demonstrate how these practices appeared to be prevalent throughout the organization and I argue that these dynamics represent informal boundary practices within SAWE as staff demarcated their own or one another's limitations with language and cultural expertise.

### ***Initiative 2: The Women's Empowerment Program (WEP)***

The Women's Empowerment Program (WEP) represented SAWE's first attempt at grassroots organizing. While SAWE periodically engaged in advocacy campaigns with other organizations, this initiative fulfilled a long-term goal for Joanna whereby women would take initiative to make change in their lives and in their community. The initiative consisted of two phases – the first comprised of participants working with staff to create and implement a survey that would inform a community needs assessment. The survey touched on various topics including, but not limited to, hate crimes in the neighborhood, housing, and domestic abuse. This first phase culminated into a community forum where participants shared results with organizational and community members.

Key issues from the assessment then informed the second phase of the initiative – forming the women's empowerment groups. The second phase consisted of recruiting a select group of women (seven to 10 members) who had worked on the survey and had a track record of consistently participating in SAWE events. These women would recruit others from their social networks to create their own women's empowerment groups and lead weekly discussions centered on their experiences and challenges of living in their neighborhood. Eventually, each women's group would identify a community project (a third phase of WEP).

#### *The Team*

Huma worked with two other staff members (Tina and Selena) and a consultant, Jenna. Jenna offered input into programmatic content, co-facilitated trainings with Huma, Tina, and Selena, and acted as a general source of support and information on organizing.

I joined the team as Huma began to develop the second phase of WEP. Because I was unfamiliar with the day-to-day experiences of the participants and could not communicate directly with them, my primary role, at least initially, was to be a sounding board for Huma as she developed the curriculum (e.g., What kind of ice breaker should we introduce given the goals of the session?)

#### *The Curriculum*

Half of the curriculum consisted of training participants on how to lead and facilitate their own groups and the other half consisted of inviting guest speakers to discuss concerns previously voiced by the participants and in the survey (e.g., hate crimes and bullying in schools). This educational component was included so that each group leader would be able to speak with some level of confidence about issues that would likely be raised in each group.

Both Huma and Jenna envisioned the program to be, in Jenna's words, "like... a crock pot" where leadership development happened over time, as a "first step to get women comfortable doing this work in an environment and in a language that they're really comfortable in" instead of pushing them to go "to City Hall and being on the steps to rally." Based on her experiences with other programs such as the co-op, Huma believed that this approach was necessary as many participants often had little to no experience of being in leadership positions.

### *Judging Expertise and Cultural Competency for External Partners*

For one session, the team invited a guest speaker from a New York City government agency to discuss immigrants' rights and resources available in the city. Several SAWE staff members were well-acquainted with the guest speaker as she identified as a community organizer and was actively engaged in issues and events related to the Bangladeshi and South Asian communities in the city.

Despite the goals for the session, the guest speaker spent most of the time listening to participants' perspectives that ranged from safety in the community to women's health. While this may have been useful to her, she offered little in the way of information. This dynamic may have been partially driven by her difficulty in facilitating the conversation. For example, when she asked the group, "Where can we find solutions to hear our voice? Where can you get support?" One participant interjected by describing how social norms were different in the US and as an example, described how US-born Bangladeshis did not want to marry their cousins. The conversation continued, with some members trying to address the speaker's prompts while others shared perspectives that were tangentially related. With the few minutes remaining, the speaker offered a folder with flyers on resources for New York City immigrants, mostly in English.

During our team debrief, Tina informed me that prior to the meeting, the guest speaker admitted to never having facilitated a conversation with Bangladeshi immigrants. Selina also informed me that on several occasions during the session, she had tried to rephrase the guest speaker's questions as her "American Bangla" may have made it difficult for some of the participants to understand her. At one point, Tina recalled that Selina interrupted the guest speaker, stating, "Let me explain this in the way that I need to." These observations stand in contrast to the speaker's claims about her own legitimacy and expertise on this community – in a follow up interview, Huma informed me that the guest speaker had expressed frustration over a disagreement she had with Joanna over a suggestion that SAWE participants could co-host an event with her agency. Huma recalled, she "was very pissed off, like, 'I was born, I live in this community, I am of this community and you're telling me that you don't think that's what the community needs?'"

Although Tina and Selina did not explicitly criticize the guest speaker during our debrief, their comments raised doubts about the guest speaker's capacity to effectively work with, understand the needs of, and represent Bangladeshi immigrants in New York City.

### *Judging Expertise and Cultural Competency Among Staff*

Several staff members, particularly those who were 1.5 and second generation, wondered how their work could be impacted by cultural differences with participants. Huma, for example, suggested that there was "a little bit of a tension because... even though a lot of the staff is South Asian, we're very westernized."

These concerns were often brought up with regards to communication with participations. For instance, during a debriefing session, Jenna wondered aloud if her own acculturation and language limitations made it difficult for participants to understand her because many English terms and phrases did not translate fluidly into Bangla. Further, Tina, a staff member who was often the point person for translations, explained that there were levels of formality inherent to Bengali that could prove challenging for American-born Bangladeshis. For instance, depending on with whom one spoke, levels of formality changed. She stated, "Staff to staff, it's a little relaxed yet formal. Staff to community members, and community members to staff, it will be more formal. Community members to community members, it's just very informal."

Further, she added, “We will not speak a certain way, we should not. There are ways that you introduce topics and start discussions.” To avoid being misunderstood, Jenna considered having Selina, a first-generation staff member, take the lead on asking questions while she could emphasize key points during discussions.

Rashida echoed these concerns and as a result, often sought Selina’s advice to overcome potential misunderstandings between herself and participants:

I try to think from their perspective a lot of time. Because I realize I'm Bangladeshi-American, whereas, they will say that, "I'm just Bangladeshi." They have grown up in a completely different environment, totally thinking differently; even though they're also changing their way of thinking, I'm also trying to understand their way of thinking from before... That's why I have Selina [and another front-line staff member]. They're the community health workers, and they're their [participants'] peers. So, that's why I always will go to them, and I'll be like, "So, why are they thinking like this?" [They will say] "Oh, but you've got to understand, they want to be home when their husband is home. They don't want to come after a certain time.... We're like, "Okay. Now, I understand."

This was more difficult for Huma, who spoke Urdu but continued to learn Bengali through interaction with participants:

I sometimes question my own effectiveness and my ability to understand the community... I mean, I have a certain amount of understanding because of the South Asian culture and there's some similarities but also, it's drastically different in a lot of ways. Sometimes I question how much more effective I could be if I could've built relationships with women in a different way if I spoke their language.

In these examples, staff not only express their concerns over language and acculturation, but also gauge who, among staff, is most able to effectively communicate with and understand participants. This process may be interpreted as setting “soft” boundaries to demarcate levels of cultural competency and expertise between different staff. This then allows appropriate staff to intervene (e.g., offer translation) or for staff members to seek help from others at SAWE.

### *Judging Capability Among Participants*

I also observed how staff struggled to gauge whether participants were ready to discuss certain topics and/or engage in certain activities. For example, when participants were presenting their survey findings from the first phase of WEP, Huma and Jenna decided to limit attendance at the community forum to SAWE staff, friends, and family members. During a debriefing session, however, participants questioned why the event had limited attendance and why there were no elected officials present. Jenna acknowledged, “That was interesting, because we had thought that maybe, since this was their first time presenting, we didn't want to have too much people there. But, they actually wanted to have a lot more people there.” In this way, staff may purposely circumscribe participants’ experiences at SAWE, potentially underestimating their abilities and ambitions.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Due to language barriers and issues of confidentiality, I was unable to interview participants. However, as I previously noted, a staff member was available to translate participant input during WEP sessions.



These considerations also translated to when and how staff decided to introduce “high level” concepts to participants, assuming boundaries (based on education and exposure to leadership opportunities) existed between the two. Prior to one session, Huma and I had several long and in-depth conversations about if and when to introduce the topic of power, thinking of various ways to ground the idea in everyday examples. At one point, we debated whether we should use the word at all. However, when we did, participants appeared to have little difficulty in grasping this concept, whereby one participant explained how different forms of power manifested in different contexts – that power varied by time, place, and person. After the meeting, Huma and I agreed that our fears may have been overblown.

### *Going Beyond Expertise and Cultural Competency: Judging Leadership and Questioning Legitimacy*

While staff generally appeared to be vigilant on one another’s cultural competency, when I spoke to staff about Joanna, several staff members, particularly those who were younger<sup>78</sup>, explicitly voiced negative views about the executive director.

Part of their criticism was based on Joanna’s management style (Joanna also appeared to be self-conscious about this topic given her background as an academic and she admitted to reading guides on improving management capacity.) However, younger staff were most critical when discussing her racial identity; concerns related to expertise and cultural competency quickly escalated to include questions of legitimacy, trust, and motivation.

Staff were critical for several reasons. For Rashida, Joanna’s leadership signified a history of South Asians’ subordination by whites:

I guess, when we see white, we're just like, “That's a white person.” And sometimes, we just, out of habit, of... decades of being a part of this kind of system, of where they were ruling over us... I mean, I wasn't there for that. But, even growing up where everything is at the standard of white people, in an American society... I guess there is something to be said about Joanna being the executive director of a completely almost South Asian organization. So, I guess that it kind of just makes us feel like, “Oh, she is our boss now even though everyone else is South Asian.”

In a slightly different vein, Jenna noted how Joanna’s racial identity impacted the perspectives of individuals *outside* of the organization:

...When people see who's doing the work, they're all South Asian women, predominately... The board is predominately South Asian. The ED, who's driving the organization is white. So, some South Asian individuals, especially when I'm like, “Oh you should work with SAWE, they have job openings,” express reluctance to work... They don't want to work in an organization where it's like basically, like, a white woman dominating.

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<sup>78</sup> I was able to communicate and gain the trust of younger staff more effectively. When I spoke directly to the two older staff members (first generation immigrant), they usually described the dynamics of the organization in a positive light. However, younger staff members would then inform me (in casual conversations) of having conversations with older staff who expressed negative views and experiences at SAWE. For this reason, I specify that younger staff were most likely to convey negative comments about Joanna.

Not surprisingly, Rashida contemplated what it would be like to have a South Asian executive director: “Wouldn't it be great?” Further, she believed that having a South Asian leader would be a source of “pride for my community,” particularly since she had yet to see nonprofit leaders who were South Asian.

Huma offered a slightly different perspective, incorporating class. For example, she described Joanna's socioeconomic status and privilege as factors that further distanced leadership and staff:

She's definitely upper middle class. She was like, born and raised in Connecticut... and out of context, these could be like, “This is just someone who had all these things happen [to her],” but I think in her context, it really speaks to her privilege... She went to Harvard. She, I think for a while, just did religious studies and then traveled through India. Now she lives in [a gentrified part of New York City] and owns a brownstone, like a beautiful brownstone in [neighborhood name deleted], sends her kids to a really expensive prep school... She has a lot of privilege.

Despite recognizing that South Asians could also “be biased and prejudiced and classist,” and stating that “skinfolk” could “eat kinfolk,” she still maintained a hierarchy of trust where she would be “more skeptical” of upper class South Asians than she was of working class or poor South Asians, but that she would be “*way more* skeptical of the upper middle class white woman” and would probably be “a little bit more lenient towards South Asian folks for fucking up...rather than white folk.” Even after acknowledging that she was exhibiting bias and that her perspectives were “based in emotion,” Huma still had “hope for kinship” and “understanding” based on the assumption that South Asians would share “similar experiences.” In this way, she would give someone of South Asian descent the “benefit of the doubt,” perhaps even “trust their leadership a little bit more.”

The idea of shared experience based on common identity also resonated with Tina, who explicitly questioned Joanna's motivations for being a part of the organization. She stated,

I'll be really honest with you...I know why I'm in this, I know why many of the other staff members are in it, I don't know why our executive director is in it. I've asked her and she says that she wants to see a change, she wants to help, she wants to empower these women. Like I said, if you don't have a personal connection to it, I just don't see ... I don't know *why* she is passionate for this kind of work, not being a South Asian. I've been trying to figure this out for so long.

Going further, Tina believed that one had to directly experience some of the disadvantages of being part of a South Asian immigrant community in the US to legitimately understand and advocate on behalf of this community: “You don't understand what it feels like until you have...been discriminated against.” She added, “I can't completely be an advocate for you if I don't understand you...It's difficult to say... ‘I'm not South Asian, but I understand what you're going through.’”

At the same time, Rashida acknowledged how Joanna was “really invested in this community, and has tried so much to understand, learn, and get to be part of it.” She continued, “She does understand a lot of words, and things. She dresses up in Bengali outfits. When we went to her house at Christmas, she prepared the dishes, halal food ...It's someone trying to really get to know someone's culture...I give props to that.” However, she believed that there

was still “a veil that's probably going to always be there, and certain things that she probably ingrained in herself.” More specifically, she recalled moments where she was offended by Joanna’s comments about participants. She continued, “Certain times...I've taken offense to it, but I don't say it out loud. But, it's all in jokes that she says [about the participants].”

I also found that several staff members had their own anecdotes about how Joanna assumed that members of the local Bangladeshi community were poor, uneducated, lacked agency, and depending on the participant, potentially untrustworthy. I personally did not encounter Joanna making such comments but at the least, one can say that several staff members suspected that Joanna held negative views about this particular Bangladeshi community. These suspicions further distanced staff and Joanna given that many staff strongly identified with participants. Rashida, for instance, stated, “These women are like my mother; my mother also falls into this category. And I also am part of this community. So, what does that really say? I mean, somewhere, you [Joanna] still think there is a lag between you and us.”

It is important to note, though, that Joanna also critical of staff members’ expertise and cultural competency. For instance, she suggested that part of the difficulty in successfully instituting economic empowerment programs stemmed from staff member’s taking their own acculturation for granted and not fully realizing the learning needs of participants. She stated, “One of the issues is our staff. I don't think our staff necessarily understand, as I didn't before either, how hard it is to learn English. It's just very difficult.” Further, Joanna questioned Jenna and Huma’s approach to leadership development and empowerment for the WEP program. While Jenna believed that “anyone” could “do a campaign” and that “capacity building” was “unusual,” Joanna thought differently: “I mean, to me, it's the opposite. That's obvious that we can do that [capacity building for participants], but the campaign is what's not obvious. And... I don't know.”

These concerns came to the fore in WEP given that the program was funded through a short-term grant and Joanna was eager to demonstrate that certain milestone had been met to generate more funder interest. This countered Huma and Jenna’s desires to have program slowly build up women’s leadership capacity – to have women “feel leadership.”

### ***What about gender identity?***

Given that I was working in an organization dedicated to South Asian *women’s* empowerment, I found it somewhat surprising that most of the staff that I spoke to rarely mentioned how gender could be an overarching identity for the organization. In other words, rather than focusing on race and class differences between leadership, staff, and participants, I wondered if a strong gender identity could help to unify staff at SAWE.

Joanna was the only staff member who spoke explicitly about how women’s economic empowerment could address issues of gender inequality in the Bangladeshi community; she believed that “patriarchy kinda starts to crumble away when you could really use the housewife's income.” She further distinguished between a “hard” and “soft” patriarchy that existed in South Asian communities – “soft patriarchy” being prevalent in the Bangladeshi community, and causing participants to lack a sense of efficacy and initiative. According to her logic, if SAWE could inspire women to take initiative, then husbands would eventually be more supportive of their wives.

However, Joanna acknowledged how most staff focused on the “community-centered and community-based side of it [programming and services]...” and would focus less on “the

science and empirical” aspects of the organization, “and maybe a little less on the feminist.” She explained,

I just feel like our staff, not everybody, but there are different groups. Our staff come from...cohorts, different generations, and I think some things matter more to some than others. And I think that when I hear staff talk about what we do and what's really unique and special about us, I hear a lot of emphasis on serving the community and meeting community needs, which I definitely think is important. I don't hear so much about some of the other stuff. And I don't really hear much from our staff about a feminist organization.

### **Short term outcomes**

As soon as the second phase of WEP began, various management and staffing issues plagued the initiative. To begin, Joanna asked Huma to leave the organization, and Huma eventually asked me to complete the remainder of the curriculum. I completed the project with guidance and input from the remainder of the team and stayed on at SAWE until August 2017.<sup>79</sup>

When I asked Huma why she was asked to leave SAWE, she explained, not surprisingly, that she had a difficult working relationship with Joanna and that over time, she had lost trust in Joanna's leadership for reasons that I have outlined in this chapter.

In October 2017, I revisited SAWE to observe and follow up on the program. During my visit, I learned that several participants had misunderstood the goal of the women's groups. Instead of seeing themselves as facilitators and leaders who would help develop a grassroots community project with the support of their group members, many participants believed that they were group leaders who needed to educate women on topics that we discussed at SAWE. Tina also expressed concern about staff workloads and suggested that she would consider leaving the organization.

Almost a year later, I conducted a follow up interview with Rashida, who had also recently left SAWE. She informed me that both Tina and Selina had left and that Jenna was largely responsible for running the program. When I asked why Tina and Selina had both left, Rashida believed that Tina felt overwhelmed and overworked and that Selina had expressed not being appreciated and respected at the organization. Given that the core staff managing WEP had left, Jenna described the program as being, at best, “slow-going.”<sup>80</sup>

I also learned that the organization had hired a general manager as well as an assistant manager. While Joanna was still the executive director of the organization, her day-to-day management of the organization had decreased and she mainly oversaw her current research initiative. Though it is not exactly clear what prompted these changes, Rashida suggested that the board of directors eventually became involved with issues related to staff turnover and management. As of June 2019, based on my review of SAWE's website, Joanna was no longer the executive director and was instead described as “co-founder” and the former general and assistant managers had been promoted to executive and assistant directors, respectively.

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<sup>79</sup> The portions that I completed were meant to be adapted for staff needs. During my follow up visit, I observed how Jenna used the curriculum more as a source of inspiration than a training module; for example, she skipped over a large segment that I wrote on agenda setting which I thought would be helpful for participants who would eventually lead their own groups. However, Jenna thought that participants would be more receptive to discussing this topic as a group instead of going through with the exercise.

<sup>80</sup> Based on email correspondence.

## Discussion and Conclusion

SAWE's core constituency consists of a very specific demographic: relatively recently arrived, poor, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) Bangladeshi women from the local neighborhood. This population is further disadvantaged because most participants are Muslim and increasingly fear for their safety with growing anti-Muslim sentiment within and outside of their neighborhood. SAWE participants also belong to a rapidly expanding, yet little known Bangladeshi community in a part of New York City that lacks needed services for community members. Consequently, Huma, a former staff member, felt compelled to emphasize the needs of this community in larger coalition and policy settings.

Despite the specificity of SAWE's constituency, staff often described the organization as South Asian. Further, Joanna, SAWE's executive director, actively framed the organization in different ways depending on context and with different organizational partners. In rare circumstances, the organization sought affiliation with Asian American groups through a pan-Asian coalition. However, staff generally did not identify as Asian American for reasons that included (but were not limited to) racial and religious identity and differences in socioeconomic status between East Asians and Bangladeshis. If anything, Asian American identity appeared to bring more confusion to staff as different individuals held onto varying conceptions of what it meant to be "Asian" and "Asian American."

I also observed a mismatch between how participants were depicted to external stakeholders and internal understandings of participants. Externally, constituents were described as vulnerable and susceptible to abuse and isolation; several staff members noted that at times, SAWE was presented as a "savior" to oppressed South Asian women. While staff maintained that participants experienced multiple forms of disadvantage (low socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency, limited education, vulnerable to anti-Muslim sentiment, etc.), they typically framed participants in a positive light; in fact, South Asian staff identified as being a part of the same community. In addition, Joanna believed that SAWE did not "get the women... whose husbands are not supportive," instead suggesting that participants' husbands were "so supportive and nice, mostly."

In sum, staff (particularly Joanna) deploy organizational identities in a flexible manner. At the same time, I observed a mismatch between internal and external understanding of participants. Staff may identify the organization as South Asian to account for non-Bangladeshis at SAWE and to signal to stakeholders that ideally, the organization would expand to include other South Asian groups. Other strategies may be tied to efforts to appeal to a broader base of supporters and to secure more funding and other resources from different organizational partners.

However, these flexible uses of organizational identity may belie the manner in which staff need to adapt existing service and organizing models for specific communities. I offer the example of the childcare cooperative that failed to launch, partly due to a lack of expertise about the childcare preferences of Bangladeshis in the neighborhood and failure to (initially) adapt existing training models and programs to constituent needs. In other words, staff needed to account for the very specific circumstances and constraints of program participants. Despite securing funding for the initiative, these oversights exacerbated existing capacity issues and SAWE was unable to secure jobs for participants who had very limited job options.

Further, I observed how South Asian staff consistently assessed one another's cultural competency and expertise of the community, amounting to an informal practice of boundary

maintenance within the organization. I argue that these practices served a practical purpose at SAWE: different staff members could fill in gaps in language and cultural understandings given the diversity of staff members (not all were Bengali-speaking, younger staff members were educated in the US and “westernized,” etc.). Using the example of the Women’s Empowerment Program (WEP), I demonstrate how this happened between staff, external partners, and participants.

However, considerations of cultural competency and expertise shifted to questions related to trust, motivation, and legitimacy as staff, particularly those who were younger, questioned Joanna’s leadership based on their depiction of her as a privileged white woman. In other words, boundaries that could be described as permeable – or to use Richard Alba’s (2005) terminology, “blurry” – between South Asian staff and affiliates became hardened (or “bright”) with Joanna. More specifically, staff often believed that one had to be South Asian and share common experiences (e.g., discrimination) to legitimately lead an organization of South Asian women, be able to empathize with organizational constituents who represented an underserved segment of the South Asian population, and effectively advocate on their behalf. Staff concerns may have also been exacerbated by staff members’ concerns that Joanna held negative views about this particular community, Joanna’s management style, the ways in which she framed the organization and its constituents to white donors, and more generally, a history of South Asian colonial rule. In addition, it may also be worth asking how, if at all, Joanna’s role as a white researcher on South Asian communities influenced staff member’s critiques. For all of these reasons, Joanna’s race and socioeconomic background mattered to staff. Further, these factors may have influenced how boundaries remained fairly “blurry” among South Asian staff but became “bright” between South Asian staff and Joanna.

Yet it would be unfair to simply dismiss Joanna’s contributions (however imperfect they may be). One obvious contribution is her founding the organization. While community members have, and continue to press for more resources and services for this little-known community, Joanna and her colleague established the organization with hopes that it would inspire a future generation of leaders (in addition to facilitating access for research on South Asian immigrant communities). Further, despite cutting programs that continue to be in demand among community members (e.g., mental health program), one could argue that those who had joined benefitted from participation. Last, one wonders to what extent her lack of management experience impacted her oversight of the organization as well as how she chose to deploy various identities to potential funders and supporters given the precarious nature of funding for nonprofits, and changing demographics and political conditions, more generally.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion**

In this study, I examine three different types of Asian American organizations in New York City. Although these organizations differ in multiple ways (e.g., varying levels of attachment with Asian American identity, history, location in the city, constituency, size and organizational capacity, and programmatic and advocacy expertise), they also share a struggle regarding issues of organizational sustainability in the midst of demographic, political, and economic change.

By engaging in various levels of service and advocacy, these nonprofits strive to improve the lives of constituents, particularly those who are disadvantaged, and seek to mitigate uncertainties within their environments. I find three cross cutting themes in the experiences of these organizations: 1) flexible identity deployment and its “mixed” programmatic and advocacy outcomes, 2) boundary maintenance within organizations, and 3) claims of disadvantage relative to other groups.

### ***I. Flexible Organizational Identities and “Mixed” Outcomes***

The three organizations that I study deploy various organizational identities in different contexts and their organizational boundaries expand and/or contract in conjunction with these practices. Although organizations may independently deploy certain identities, organizations may also claim identities based on coalition affiliation. While organizations engage in these practices to obtain benefits for both the organization and constituents, I find that there are advantages and disadvantages associated with this practice.

Benefits are interdependent and include the ability to claim larger and/or multiple constituencies in various advocacy settings, increasing the organization’s visibility and influence, appealing to a larger base of stakeholders, and facilitating access to funding. In EASSOA’s case, benefits generated through their pan-Asian coalition also translated to having more power over other organizations within the coalition as EASSOA could set civic engagement goals targeting Asian Americans in New York City. One could also see how identity deployment could serve as a way for an organization to quickly “shift gears” in response to changes in their environment (e.g., unanticipated political outcomes, funding cuts, etc.).

At the same time, there may be disadvantages associated with this practice. Perhaps most obviously, these practices may lead to circumstances where organizational capacities are additionally constrained, leaving staff ill-equipped to take on more clients or adequately address the needs of all constituents. In turn, this may leave some constituents equally or more vulnerable. Relatedly, staff may question leadership’s judgement and doubt the organization’s ability to carry out ambitious social justice goals, leading to lower staff morale and trust. Though I did not spend much time discussing staff turnover in this research, one could argue that low morale and trust would contribute to staff members’ decisions to leave an organization, further inhibiting organizational capacity.

### ***II. Intraorganizational Boundary Maintenance***

Simultaneously, I found boundary maintenance practices within these organizations. This occurred most prevalently at EASSOA and SAWE.

At EASSOA, staff maintained social boundaries within organizations based on identity. In an environment where “code-switching” at the organizational level was, for all intents and purposes, encouraged, staff perceptions of one another’s identity appeared to be a proxy for expertise and legitimacy. Ideally, this practice may be used to empower staff and affiliates

representing disadvantaged subgroups or groups with little representation; however, this practice may also be disempowering when staff members' participation in programs are limited or discouraged if their (perceived) identities do not neatly map onto intended constituencies for specific programs.

At SAWE, South Asian staff operated in an environment where organizational identities and "external" narratives did not perfectly match up to "internal" understandings of SAWE's core constituency. Concurrently, South Asian staff exhibited vigilance in gauging levels of cultural competency and expertise among one another and boundaries remained fluid as staff members tried to accommodate and compensate for one another's lack of language proficiency and expertise. However, boundaries hardened as staff considered lack of descriptive representation at the executive director level. In particular, they questioned why a white upper middle class woman was leading a South Asian American organization and staff questioned the executive director's motives and her legitimacy to lead and represent SAWE.

In these cases, staff members' efforts to maintain boundaries within organizations seemed to be associated with organizational identity deployment practices whereby these practices may act as a counterweight to flexible uses of identity for external stakeholders. In some cases, external pressures from funders and other stakeholders may have pushed these organizations to have representative staff "from the community" to directly engage with community concerns.

Although I did not observe this exact behavior at APAT, and it is worth asking how its structure as a membership organization may relate to a lack of overt boundary maintenance practices within the organization. In other words, APAT staff did not have to interface with clients on a regular basis or develop and sustain multiple direct services programs. But one could argue that staff members' unwavering commitment to inclusion could also be broadly interpreted as an effort to keep organizational boundaries aligned with their perception of a legitimate APA nonprofit – an inclusive one.

### **III. Disadvantage**

A final theme that cuts across all of my cases pertains to claims of disadvantage. For APAT and EASSOA, perceptions of disadvantage may act as a key driver pushing these organizations to deploy different organizational identities to obtain material and symbolic resources, and to reach parity with other groups.

Out of my three cases, I observed the most references to organizational disadvantage at APAT. Staff members' claims of disadvantage often revolved around concerns over advocating for disadvantaged APAs, disadvantages related to long-term organizational sustainability (especially in comparison to west coast-based APA organizations, "mainstream" organizations, and other communities of color-led organizations in New York City), and finally, lack of political representation and influence. In the broadest sense, staff members perceived that APAs were an "afterthought" to policy makers in legislative and nonprofit contexts at the city-wide level as well as among various communities of color. This dynamic may partly result from the model minority myth, demographic characteristics, and an historical lack of Asian American advocacy in New York City.

At an organizational level, these dynamics further exacerbate challenges to organizational viability as APA nonprofits may receive inadequate levels of city funding and more generally, have little power to influence how public policies may impact vulnerable APA constituents. In effect, disadvantages at the group and organizational levels, in conjunction with



lack of political representation and influence are mutually constitutive and compounding so that advocates may feel a general sense of disadvantage.

Not surprisingly, APAT staff portrayed their organization and others serving APAs as experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage at the organizational level. Further, some staff members such as Don implied that APA organizations were *more* disadvantaged than those serving other racial groups – that as an APA-led organization, “You’re always seen as a minority.” Staff from member organizations also exhibited similar perspectives and tendencies to compare their organizations (and relatedly, constituencies) with other APA groups.

In EASSOA’s case, staff often discussed the need to coalesce with other Asian American groups to achieve equal rights and political representation and influence. For example, staff members such as Helen framed Asian Americans as a disadvantaged group because group members continued to experience discrimination as “the other” in a white-dominated society, and under certain circumstances, lacked equal rights and economic opportunities. Most often, staff cited lack of political representation and influence as a key motivator. To demonstrate disparities with regards to political influence and mobilization capacity, staff such as Jung often compared Korean and Asian Americans to Latinos. Alternatively, others like Shirley cited how undocumented Asian Americans experienced more privilege than undocumented Latinos; at the same time, she explained how Asian Americans’ relative privilege presented its own set of organizing challenges (as opposed to Latinx organizers who had established organizing models to work with). In this way, John’s persistent refrain that being undocumented “was not only a Latino issue” points to the reality that undocumented status affects people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds and that this awareness should encourage more collective action. Yet this comment could be seen as his way of drawing more attention to Asian Americans and the disadvantages that they face. In fact, my participation in their “DREAMer campaign” was to help raise awareness about this group and this group only.

At SAWE, staff believed that participants represented a particularly vulnerable segment of the South Asian community for two reasons. First, most constituents were relatively recently arrived women who were poor, lacked English proficiency and access to jobs, and increasingly felt threatened because they were Muslim and hijabis<sup>81</sup>. Second, they belonged to a growing, but relatively unknown Bangladeshi community in New York City. Consequently, in coalition spaces, Huma felt compelled to draw attention, first and foremost, to the needs of SAWE constituents; similar to the other cases in this study, more recognition in policy-making arenas would, ideally, translate to increased resources and political support for this community.

While I mostly focus on organizations, I also observed how boundaries defining individual, organization, and constituency sometimes blurred as all three were, depending on the situation, inextricably linked – individuals who worked at these nonprofits often considered themselves to be a part of the communities they served and advocated for.

### ***Ambivalence in Social Justice-Oriented Asian American Advocacy and Politics***

Most organizational staff and affiliates in my study expressed a strong commitment to supporting social justice goals and engaging in multiracial coalition work to accomplish these goals. Besides increased political power resulting from multiracial coalition work, individuals also stressed the importance of promoting racial equality, acknowledging how Asian Americans have benefitted from the legacy of civil rights activism. In this way, many staff members (especially at APAT and EASSOA) saw themselves as social justice advocates and/or activists.

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<sup>81</sup> Someone who wears a hijab

At the same time, as described above, these individuals often believed that they were in an uneven political playing field and at a disadvantage compared to the very groups that they aspired to partner with. In addition, staff members navigated thorny terrain around issues of representation. Though not the original emphasis of this research project, it is also important to mention how social justice-oriented staff members often advocated on behalf of constituents and organizational affiliates whose political views could be antithetical to their own values and the values of their organization.

For example, at APAT, staff members described board members as “conservative” as they directed staff to withhold organizational support (versus individual support) for black victims of police brutality. At EASSOA, a staff member noted how low-income senior citizens resisted supporting organizing efforts for DREAMers given their belief that DREAMers were “illegal.” At SAWE, I observed how several participants associated theft and violence (based on anti-Muslim sentiment) with black and Latino men from the neighborhood.

These dynamics contribute to an ambivalent political position as advocates and social service providers often work in a context of political conservatism and antiblackness in their communities, potentially impacting the degree to which they may support progressive political initiatives and work in allyship with other racial groups. In fact, one could argue that social justice-oriented advocates and social service providers may run the risk of illegitimately representing constituent interests. In fact, some interview participants admitted that this disconnect existed and that they operated without the full knowledge of community members. This then raises the uncomfortable question of whether they are abusing their power as community advocates.

Finally, though I did not personally observe this in my fieldwork, it is worth exploring to what extent antiblackness exists within organizational contexts. For example, one interview participant from a partner organization acknowledged his own struggles with internalized antiblackness: “...Growing up as a second-generation person, it's really hard to escape that antiblackness...I live in a community, I live with parents who... are very suspicious... And very, very quickly, I have internalized that [antiblackness] and it's been a struggle trying to get that internalization out.”

Consequently, I believe that some of the reluctance of advocates and social service providers to fully commit to multiracial social justice initiatives not only stems from capacity constraints, but also from challenges and tensions related to political conservatism and antiblackness within Asian American communities. More generally, these dynamics reflect a key tension in Asian American politics today – the tension between those who attribute outcomes of Asian Americans to individual efforts (ascribing to what I will describe as a “non-systems-level” view) versus those who attribute uneven outcomes for different racial groups to structural racism (or a “systems-level” view).

### ***Potential Pitfalls of Identity Deployment Practices***

Asian American advocates' use of identity deployment strategies to enter larger policy arenas and multiracial coalitions could, in theory, threaten collective action when 1) organizational staff feel compelled to draw attention to disadvantages for their respective groups vis-à-vis other groups and 2) advocates and service providers have not resolved questions of representation and antiblackness (mostly) in relation to their constituency.

I began this dissertation using the example of affirmative action in order to draw attention to the key role of that nonprofits play in this debate. On the one hand, there are groups that

portray Asian Americans as victims of discrimination in the college admissions process; in fact, these (often conservative) Asian Americans groups claim that Asian Americans are *more* disadvantaged than blacks and Latinos with regards to affirmative action. On the other, there are organizational advocates who desire to work in solidarity with other communities of color and show their support for affirmative action, claiming that Asian Americans continue to benefit from this policy (albeit outside of academia). However, they too make claims of continued discrimination against Asian Americans and highlight how some subgroups experience disadvantage similar to those of other historically marginalized racial groups in the US.

Despite the different stances that these organizations present in this debate, Claire Jean Kim (2018) points to how both camps claim disadvantage as minorities, and that these claims are problematic because they obfuscate different histories, experiences, and trajectories among different racial groups.

Her concern reflects broader critiques from Afro-pessimist theorists such as Jared Sexton who posit that those in “Left political and intellectual circles today” suffer from “people-of-color-blindness” (2010, 48) whereby individuals overlook the “significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies, actual or potential.” When allies insist “upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy,” (48) nonblack people of color overlook the specificity of black oppression that continues to this day in the US and abroad.<sup>82</sup>

This phenomenon poses problems for multiracial coalitions that seek radical and fundamental social change as our understandings of inequality must be understood in direct relation to antiblackness and black oppression. In this way, “accounting for black existence” and “simply listing it among a chain of equivalents or returning to it as an afterthought – is doomed to miss what is essential about the... truth of the political and economic system” (Sexton 2010, 48). As is, coalitions may only chip away at the surface of complex economic and social problems, ultimately failing to spur fundamental social, economic, and political change. Going further, Kim warns that current approaches may eventually weaken *existing* institutional supports designed to level racial and socioeconomic inequalities in the US given wide-spread assumptions that Asian Americans are “model minorities” who have overcome adversity in the US (unlike other racial minority groups).

From the perspective of Asian American advocacy, Poon et al. (2015) points to how existing efforts by scholars, activists, and advocates to counter the model minority myth by highlighting within-group heterogeneity and subgroup disadvantage may do more harm by inadvertently bifurcating Asian Americans into high achieving and under-achieving groups (i.e., a “deficit” framework).

Ultimately, the kinds of identity deployment practices that organizations use to address perceived disadvantage in this study may inadvertently exacerbate inequalities within and between organizations and groups as advocates may vie for who can come away with the greatest share of resources. Further, if left unresolved, issues of representation in the midst of increasing conservatism (or nationalism) and persistent racial bias in Asian American communities will weaken advocates’ and activists’ contributions in panethnic and multiracial

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<sup>82</sup> For an overview of Afro-pessimism, I referred to Weddington, George. 2019. “Political Ontology and Race Research: A Response to ‘Critical Race Theory, Afropessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives.’” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5(2):278-288 and Dumas, Michael J. 2016. “Against the Dark: Antiblackness in Education Policy and Discourse.” *Theory Into Practice* 55:11-19.

coalitions, potentially threatening the legitimacy of a coalition of which they are a part. In fact, organizational advocates acknowledged that they did not know how to or regretted not having done enough to directly counter this political trend.

### ***Where do we go from here?***

It is important to consider how organizational constraints and external events played a significant role in how the organizations in my study chose to deploy different organizational identities. Specifically, I worked with these organizations during a period of significant political change, prior to and after the 2016 presidential election. For instance, when I worked with EASSOA, organizers were strategizing on how to insert themselves in the debate over immigration reform, assuming that Hilary Clinton would become president. When I worked with APAT, Donald Trump had recently been elected as president and APAT and its member organizations held emergency meetings about potential declines in funding for health-related programs as the newly elected president attempted to dismantle the Affordable Care Act and threatened to cut funding to “sanctuary cities.” Last, I worked with SAWE after President Trump attempted to institute a Muslim ban and incidents of hate crimes were spiking throughout the nation.

It is unclear how my findings would have changed, if at all, had I conducted fieldwork during a different point in time. Given the current political environment and this administration’s negative stance on immigrant communities and communities of color, advocates in my study may, by default, move beyond a competitive and comparative mindset as they continue to engage in various forms of collective action.

In addition, advocates in New York City may also choose to use different deployment strategies given ongoing demographic transformation (e.g., increases in the voting age population among Asian Americans) and their growing expertise with policy advocacy, further strengthening their organizational legacies and efforts to fulfill ambitious social justice goals.

While these changes will, by default, inform organizational strategies, I believe that Asian American advocates, activists, and social service providers in social justice-oriented nonprofits must be proactive in resolving existing tensions within Asian American political communities that I have highlighted in this study.

In *Double Trouble: Black Mayors, Black Communities, and the Call for a Deep Democracy*, J. Phillip Thompson (2007) calls for black leaders and community members to engage in “deep pluralism” which entails more open and inclusive political debate within black communities to unveil “painful internal oppressions” in black politics (ix). As a result, community members and leaders are able to develop a more unified political agenda and build a stronger political base within black communities. Thompson also points to how engaging in deep pluralism allows individuals to become more aware of the nuances of oppression (how individuals and groups may be simultaneously oppressed but also oppressive) and develop political skills that will strengthen black communities and their participation in multiracial coalitions. Thompson elaborates on his model:

Stronger internal black democratization followed by increased civic power and the resulting experience of being able to hold black elected officials accountable for matters of substance can lead to greater black civic openness to multiracial coalition building around substantive issues. Coalition building, in turn, can lead to changes in policies and structures that promote black community progress. Progress in bringing about changed policies and structures leads to greater

internal democratization and racial deconstruction. This process becomes a virtuous cycle (2007, 259).

In essence, Thompson directs stakeholders to work from the inside-out, asserting that it is necessary for groups to engage in processes that promote “internal... democratization” prior to more active and substantive engagement with other groups. In this way, I offer two suggestions – one specific and the other broad – based on the findings in this research and I draw from Thompson’s approach.

To begin, I believe that staff must critically assess how organizational identity deployment practices relate to “internal” understandings of the organization. Specifically, I argue that the more internal understandings of organizational identity and constituency align with “external” understandings, the better. Strong alignment may be preferable because as I have shown, a mismatch between internal and external understandings of organizational identity and constituency may contribute to negative outcomes for vulnerable constituents. For new staff members, in particular, this ambiguity may hinder effective ways to structure programs and advocate for group members. More transparency could also help organizational partners, funders, and other stakeholders to develop realistic expectations for what an organization may achieve and for whom.

I am not suggesting that organizations must stay the same over time or that organizations must limit their visions of future constituencies. For example, instead of presenting itself as a South Asian women’s organization, SAWE staff could have explained that its core constituency consists of low-income Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant women and that eventually, it hopes to serve other South Asian communities; it currently maintains partnerships with other South Asian organizations at the local and national levels to be actively engaged on issues that affect South Asian women, more generally. Instead of basing organizational programming and advocacy around organizational aspirations, this example conveys what the organization currently is and what it hopes to be.

Having an open conversation among staff about identity deployment practices (and relatedly, internal boundary maintenance) may also trigger broader discussions over representation, staff and organizational values, disjunctures between constituent and organizational values, and potential ways to bridge these gaps.

More broadly, even as there is a growing conservative base among first-generation Asian Americans, nonprofit advocates must find ways to be more transparent to organizational clients and constituents (many of whom express conservative political and social views) about their own political values and the kinds of advocacy initiatives that the organization is engaged in. This is worth mentioning because many social service providers and advocates in the Chinese American community feared retribution from Peter Liang supporters for their support for Akai Gurley in New York City<sup>83</sup>. Similar to APAT’s case, many Asian American organizations withheld support for initiatives focusing on black victims of police brutality. My recommendation also applies to advocacy initiatives designed to target the needs of disadvantaged Asian American subgroups. In effect, staff must be open to explaining the organization’s advocacy goals to community members, ideally in ways to highlight common interests.

A key way for social justice-oriented Asian American social service providers to begin

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<sup>83</sup> Peter Liang was a New York City police officer who fatally shot Akai Gurley in a New York City public housing project.

addressing oppressions internal to groups would be to develop and/or tweak existing services and programs (such as English language instruction) that gives clients and constituents the opportunity to discuss and explore questions that relate to collective action, rights, and inequality (or disadvantage), particularly in reference to other communities of color to promote what several interview participants described as “systems-level” thinking. While many organizers in nonprofits already do this, if this strategy were to be implemented by organizations that have typically shied away from engaging in politics and also coordinated among Asian American coalition partners, there could be greater opportunities to encourage “systems-level” perspectives among constituents, which would, ideally, help to build solidarity among different Asian American communities as well as with other racial groups.

Increased transparency and accountability to constituents would, theoretically, put less pressure on organizations to engage in boundary maintenance practices to ensure some level of legitimacy. Further, nonprofits’ increased ability to mobilize their base would then, ideally, increase the political influence of Asian Americans and Asian American nonprofits in certain policy settings, benefitting both Asian American nonprofits as well as the different coalitions of which they are a part.

Although my analysis focuses on Asian Americans in New York City, the findings from this study are relevant to other racial groups in urban areas in the US. Like “Asian American,” “black” and “Latino” are also identities that encompass diverse subgroups and one could expect to see similar political and organizational dynamics at play within these diverse communities. Along these lines, one could also expect organizational advocates and social service providers to use identity deployment practices that I demonstrate in this study, potentially with similar outcomes.

For example, Cristina Beltrán (2010) asserts that “characterizing a subject as either ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latino’ is an exercise in opacity – the terms are so comprehensive that their explanatory power is limited.” To demonstrate, she notes that “when referring to ‘Latinos in the United States,’” it is unclear “whether the subjects under discussion are farmworkers living below the poverty line or middle-class homeowners, urban hipsters or rural evangelicals, white or black, gay or straight, Catholic or Jewish, undocumented Spanish monolinguals or fourth-generation speakers of English-only” (6).

Similar to Okamoto’s (2014) observations that panethnic identity does not result from an organic progression from monoethnic identity to panethnicity, Cristina Mora (2014) traces the history of how activists, bureaucrats, and media executives *constructed* “Hispanic” identity and that a major strategy that stakeholders used to present a unified panethnic identity was to “never precisely” define who Hispanics were. Instead, stakeholders “made broad, ambiguous references to the group’s unifying culture” and suggested that key tenants to Hispanic group membership were generic cultural characteristics such as being religious, family-focused, and hardworking. Ultimately, “ambiguity was important because it allowed stakeholders to bend the definition of Hispanic panethnicity and use the notion instrumentally – as a means to an end” (5). Mora points to the key role that organizational actors played in constructing, negotiating, and spreading Hispanic identity and how they strategically used this identity for economic and political gains.

However, Beltrán (2010) pushes against Latino advocates’ and political elites’ common practice of depicting Latinos in the US as a political “sleeping giant” for economic resources and political gain. Given the tremendous within-group heterogeneity among Latinos, she questions whether this phenomenon would ever materialize and instead asks readers to “let sleeping

giants lie.” Beltrán ultimately does not believe that Latinos, as a group, can attain a coherent and unified identity; however, she argues that there may be fleeting moments of unity among group members that can contribute to democratic decision making and increased rights for Latinos, locally and nationally.

These examples demonstrate that advocates and other stakeholders representing different racial groups are motivated by similar concerns and that within organizational advocacy contexts, we can anticipate seeing advocates and social service providers employing similar strategies to gain political influence and address group needs.

Through this study, I demonstrate how organizational identity deployment is one of several key strategies that Asian American staff use to gain access to different policy “tables” to address disadvantages that they encounter at the organizational and group levels. However, advocates and social service providers experience what I describe as “political ambivalence” in two ways. First, though advocates and social service providers in my study see themselves as social justice advocates and activists and desire to work in concert with other ethnic and racial groups, perceptions of disadvantage contribute to competitive outlooks and behaviors in coalition settings. These dynamics may then threaten multiethnic and multiracial coalitions and institutional policies designed to support historically marginalized groups. Second, Asian American advocates may risk exercising illegitimate representation as they have difficulty in bridging their own social justice values and the values of a conservative constituency.

Based on these dynamics, I suggest that it is necessary to increase transparency within social justice-oriented Asian American nonprofits, first by aligning “internal” and “external” understandings of organizational identity and second, by being more accountable to and open with constituents who may have different political perspectives. The suggestions that I offer in this study are by no means meant to be understood as a novel and comprehensive strategy to counter conservative political views among Asian Americans in New York City (and the nation) or as a foolproof model for constituent mobilization. Rather, I offer these suggestions to contribute to ongoing discussions on how Asian American advocates and social service providers may continue to push for progressive political change.

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