

I remember we were, our school, we got bused. So we paid for a bus to pick us up; I guess my parents did. And they bused us from all these different parts of [names city]. One time, there were eggs thrown at the bus by some black kids. I think this is like after the riots, maybe '66, '67, somewhere in there. And then another time, which was more dangerous, a bottle was actually thrown ... and the bus driver got very nervous about it. So he kind of stepped through, made sure all the kids were okay. Which we were, and we continued from that.

Growing up in the 1960s desegregation era, Alice and other Asian Americans were often in an in-between position as racial tensions peaked in towns and cities. Whites were resisting change in traditional segregation patterns, and blacks were protesting the segregation and lack of change. *Alice says in her interview that even as a child she did not feel animosity toward the black kids that threw things at her bus, as she understood—likely because of the Japanese American experience with white racism—some of the complexities of a racial order where whites controlled school segregation or desegregation.*

### *More Discrimination: The High School Asian Experience*

When our respondents moved from elementary and middle school to high school, the racial problems did not cease, and new types of problems arose, usually from white antagonists. They faced yet more self-esteem issues, now coupled with puberty issues. This was especially problematical for those left out of the social networks or dating process in school settings that were mostly white. In addition, the model minority stereotype was still in operation in many minds, such as in white teachers' expectations, and this put continuing and heavy pressure on Asian students.

Ann, a Vietnamese American in the Northeast, shares her struggles with self-image as she moved into high school settings:

School was really hard. I'm not gonna lie. It was, you know, I wasn't comfortable in my own skin. I really resented the fact that I was Asian, you know. When the dating phase started kicking in, I never had anyone up until my senior year of high school. And all my friends in high school, even in middle school, had boyfriends or what have you. Middle school is more like, "Let's hold hands" and stuff like that. High school, it got a little more serious, and they were dating each other for a long time. And I was always third wheel or

fifth wheel, never had a date, never had anyone, and it was a very painful. High school was very painful.

After noting her great discomfort in "her own skin" in a sea of white bodies, Ann explains with great insight and poignancy the social reality of being a young outsider in a very white space:

Well, Proactiv [acne medicine] wasn't invented by the time I hit puberty. I had a lot of acne at the time and that didn't really help at all. Also ... I was one of the faster developing girls, but also one of the least noticed throughout high school. It was hard because all the guys I always had crushes on never had a crush on me back. They always had crushes on all my other friends around me. I kept thinking after so many crushes and so many letdowns, it had to be because I was Asian. It didn't make any sense, like, why wouldn't [someone] want to be with me? I'm thin, and I'm smart, and fun. Everything was there. ... Eventually I gave up. It has to just be because I'm Asian. There's no other way to explain why I don't have a date to any dance. No one would ask me. It's always I asked them, or one of my friends would convince someone else to go with me—and that didn't ever feel good either. That was eighth grade through junior year. In junior [year] I almost didn't go to my own prom. We don't have a senior prom. We only have a junior prom. I almost didn't go because it was getting crunch time, and nobody had asked me. And at that point everyone was paired up, and I didn't know who to go with. I didn't have any other friends outside of my high school. ... Finally, one of the guys in our group was like, "Oh, Ann doesn't have anyone yet? Then I will just ask Ann if she wants to go to prom." But he ended up ditching me for another girl in the middle [of the] prom anyways, so that didn't feel good either.

While white friends had no trouble finding dates, Ann faced consolation dating, including being chosen at the last moment. Later in the interview Ann notes that in her senior year she started dating a boy whom she met at work. However, similar to being chosen as a consolation date at school dances, her boyfriend admitted that he had chosen her too out of "convenience," for his last girlfriend, also Asian American, had moved away. Ann became a logical choice because she lived nearby. In a later chapter we will discuss this problem of partnerships.

Ann also reports difficulties with students and teachers in the classroom because of their model minority expectations, which signaled that they did not recognize her as the distinctive and well-rounded individual she was. Although she was rarely recognized for her significant involvement in important

extracurricular activities, people did associate her with academic excellence. While performing well in school made her feel like an outsider, she worked hard for academic success as a defensive mechanism. She explains thus:

It was just the little things like, even my teachers sometimes, when you think about in high school or even in college we get pinned as "model minorities." I hid behind my books because I was so frustrated with the fact that I was almost ashamed of being an Asian female because nobody, barely anyone besides my close knit friends, I didn't feel like anyone really recognized me. As a result I studied a lot, and even the teachers would turn to me. My classmates would turn to me, "Oh, of course Ann knows the answer to that question," or "Ann wants to answer this question." ... Teachers were shocked when I got below an 80 on a quiz or something like that, or if I got less than a certain grade. They were like, "What's going on?" I don't think they understood that it was hard. I felt that like from then on there would be these high expectations of me and I had to meet them because it's a small school; teachers talk. ... From 8th grade and on, it was just these high expectations, and I felt kind of pressured to meet those standards. It was parental pressure too, to get the good grades and to do well in school.

As a rare Asian American female there, Ann was invisible and nonexistent to white peers. Although hard work in academic subjects helped Ann to cope with social isolation, high expectations sometimes made her the unwanted center of attention:

It was a science course, and the teacher said something, made a comment. We were doing a quiz or something, or we were all just goofing around, and we weren't paying attention necessarily. And she wouldn't let us move on, or go to the next class or something weird, something really bizarre. She said that we couldn't move on until someone gets this answer right. When she said that, everyone turned to me. Lo and behold, I actually didn't have the right answer for once in my life. Actually, one of the girls that you would almost least expect to get the answer right, got it right. That was huge. ... It raised awareness with me when everyone turned their heads to me, that they all expected me to get, to pull everyone through, grade wise. That was the hugest moment that I can recollect right off the top of my head.

Once again, Ann's classmates expected her to bail them out. This incident still sticks out in her mind and indicates the immense pressure that Asian American students feel in school settings where they are the special "model students."

In spite of her high-level academic success, Ann, like many other Asian Americans, paid a price for coping thus. She offers this poignant note:

The students in my class would start saying things. I remember freshman-year English. We all had to write a huge paper. And one girl was so mad and upset by her grade on that paper, and she just started asking people what they got for grades, like out loud and I didn't want to share, but she saw my paper and she said, "Oh, of course you got a 90, that's no surprise." Where she got something like a 70 or 75 or something. Those are all with the cool kids, or popular kids that didn't excel in school, but everyone knew their names. And whereas the smart kids, the ones known as the nerdy people that are seen as bookworms, were stereotyped. I got pinned on.

By performing well, she reinforced the model stereotype in the minds of teachers and students and got mistreatment from the "cool" white students who were academically weaker. Teachers paid special attention to her issues when they were academically centered, but when she was being brutalized and called racist terms, they typically dismissed her pain and concern.

Ann felt then, and feels now, unrecognized for yet other important accomplishments:

Like when my peers didn't recognize me. ... I played a lot of volleyball, and I did some tennis. You know, even though I was cocaptain one year, they didn't "see" me. The school didn't recognize me as the cocaptain. They didn't even know. They didn't even recognize that I even played volleyball, whereas my cocaptain, who was the girl-next-door type of look, every guy wants to date her, every girl wants to be her—she was my best friend at that time—got all the attention for the volleyball team. In that sense, I wasn't recognized by anything except for, I'm the honors-track kind of girl. It wasn't until senior [year] that people really saw me as a volleyball player. OK, now the team is doing really well, after four years, then they started recognizing everyone on the team, actually. ... I don't even think my teachers recognized that I played volleyball, sadly, until senior year of high school.

Her cocaptain was white and thus received much favorable attention from other students and adults. Notice the implicit power illustrated in this example. Once again whites got to decide what accomplishments would be rewarded and for which racial groups. This is a commonly reported experience for Asian Americans of all ages, this being ignored or not seen—a type of social *invisibility*



generated by racial difference that has long been reported by African Americans as well.<sup>7</sup>

In his interview, Josh, of Chinese descent, indicates that he grew up in the North. Initially he said that he had not experienced any racial mistreatment. However, when talking in more detail about his life, he contradicted this overview comment. He recalls racial stereotyping and taunting by white members of his high school baseball team, including painful experiences with them mocking his Chinese name with the word “dong” (slang for penis):

I guess if there was any point where I was mistreated, where I got kind of annoyed with it, was when I was in high school. . . . I probably played baseball for three years, and my friends—I guess they were my friends, yeah, they were my friends—would take my baseball hat and draw penises on my hat because, like, it was the whole Dong thing. And actually, most of the time I didn't mind it. But eventually, after a while it just kind of like, they would escalate things, thinking they were funny. And . . . I know they weren't trying to be mean to me; like, they were just having fun. And so they would like, draw a penis on the underbelly of the hat. . . . And then, like, it would eventually move on to other things like notebooks, or it would be someone, like, use White-Out to draw a giant phallic symbol. And I would take a lot of it in stride. I didn't think it was a big deal. But sometimes it was like, that's enough. I think I definitely at one point said something. And I think at one point I maybe even, like—not physically assaulted somebody but maybe like, put them in a headlock and then told them to stop it. But other than that, I've never actually said, “Stop it.”

Josh refrained from saying anything to his teammates about their racist hazing until pushed to his limit. He views his teammates as not trying to be mean, yet in fact they were. The mocking and teasing use of his name involved common white stereotypes pointing out the “foreign” character of his Asian name and visage—and probably white stereotypes of weak Asian male sexuality. Josh initially demonstrates uncertainty over whether the perpetrators were “friends,” but then asserts that they in fact were. This demonstrates a poignant aspect of the reality of those who are not white in this society: They often have a complex relationship with whites, wanting to gain their friendship and approval even at the cost of humiliation. Josh did his best to control his anger but still remembers the teasing. We see his pain in his strong if belated reactions and sense it in his narrative voice.

In addition, Josh reports that his family never openly discussed discriminatory incidents they faced. Thus, not until some years later did he hear a story from his sister about a racist incident involving her:

My sister when she was in high school . . . would work on yearbook staff, and some parent's little kids would call her like a “Chink.” I was shocked when I heard the story later because I've never heard of anyone being called a Chink, like, among my friends. I always considered that word, that like it's a funny word in the sense that it's an awkward word today. In the sense that I don't feel any particular like negative stigma with it because I've never experienced negative stigma. . . . When my sister was telling me the story, I didn't think anyone actually used that word. . . . So she mentioned it one day a while back and I remember thinking like, ha! Apparently, it wasn't like an adult. It was some kid calling her “Chink.” I think he was younger, could have been a year younger than junior high. I think she was kind of like me. She didn't take it to heart at all, but I think she was like shocked because it even came out of this kid's mouth, number one. This kid was younger, way younger. And number two, . . . our family has never, like we never associated the word “Chink” with negative. It just came out of nowhere. So we were kind of like, what? People say that? That's weird. I think she was offended, I mean, I guess I would be offended in a weird way but I wouldn't be like angry. She wasn't either.

Josh indicates a certain disbelief on the part of himself and his sister that such a thing could occur. In his interview he said that he had never been associated with a negative racial stigma, yet at the same time he reported racial harassment targeting his name and other racist incidents faced by his family. Seemingly, he thinks “Chink” is rarely used, although numerous other respondents indicated that they hear it frequently. **Noteworthy is that Josh's sister never confronted the parent or the child about the epithet and did not share the incident with family until years later.** Typically, silence about oppression hurts the individual and also prevents the development of a collective memory of oppression. It teaches whites that if they call Asian Americans racial slurs, they will not suffer any negative responses or consequences for such actions.

In the family responses to racist incidents here, we see some similarities to what has been reported in past research on how African Americans cope with racism. Some earlier studies during the legal segregation era indicated that many African Americans were encouraged, from a young age, to rigidly control their anger and rage over discriminatory incidents affecting them.<sup>8</sup> Historically,



it was very dangerous for African Americans to unleash their anger about racist attacks. In earlier decades, black parents taught their children to remain even-tempered in the face of extreme oppression, which silence demonstrably had severe effects on self-esteem and mental health—as it likely does in the case of African Americans and Asian Americans today.

In recent decades, numerous school systems have become increasingly attentive to the mental health needs of students and provided more counseling services. However, such mental health counselors may be ill-equipped to deal with students of color. School counselors with heads full of conventional racial and ethnic stereotypes can be a problem. Violet, a multiracial Asian American who is part Latino, is a member of one of the few Asian families in her city. (Her state does have numerous areas densely populated with Asian Americans.) She reports being invisible as an Asian American and that she has often been grouped by local whites with Mexican Americans. A white counselor at her high school attempted to “reach out” and help students of color by taking them for one visit (and only one) to a local community college for a tour to “inspire” them to go to college:

She gave these really condescending spiels about how minorities have a lower higher-education [attendance] rate and how she wanted to change that—single-handedly, I guess. And it's really bad. And so we were going to get to spend a whole day, we got to miss school, and it was just really horrible. I was fuming at this point because she made it sound like we didn't know how to read or write. And then I . . . told her, “Are you kidding me? This is ridiculous!” And she goes, “Oh Violet, don't worry. You're going to get a free lunch.” And I just got angry. I looked around. I knew another girl in there. She'd gotten into an Ivy League school. We couldn't believe what she was doing, our dumb counselor. So we got up, left. I was so mad. She was angry that I left and embarrassed her in front of the counselors.

One of numerous talented students in her high school, Violet resisted her white counselor's efforts, feeling insulted by the condescension. Her protests about the counselor's comments were not even taken seriously, and her counselor apparently did not realize why students might be insulted. One reason for the counselor's insensitivity may have been a racial framing of people of color. The largest group of color in Violet's city and school was Mexican American, and local whites reportedly stereotyped Mexican Americans as “lazy” and on welfare.

In Violet's view, the white counselor, although likely well meaning, showed little understanding of the structural obstacles that students of color face daily. In the interview the counselor was described as “clueless” because she appeared to believe that just one day trip to a junior college could counter the real economic and other resource barriers that kept many from considering college. Violet's view seems to be this: the counselor thought that just because they had never been inside a college, they had not thought of attending—and not primarily that they faced major institutional barriers. **In addition, such motivational efforts by white counselors and teachers eerily suggest the role of the white “savior” of people of color, one that is often showcased in major Hollywood films.**<sup>9</sup> Being overly helpful to individuals of color, treating them as though they are unable to help themselves, typically involves a condescending framing and problematic stereotypes.

#### *Yet More Discrimination: The College Experience*

As our respondents moved from elementary, middle, and high schools to college and university settings, anti-Asian discrimination did not disappear. Their white peers were mostly young adults, although the maturation process did not always result in the development of open-mindedness and nondiscriminatory treatment. The racial stereotyping and framing that respondents experienced in college were, in fact, often reminiscent of grammar school.

For example, white college students and other college-educated whites in California, home to the largest Asian American and Pacific Islander population in the United States (about five million), reportedly use stereotyped language in discussing Asian American college students and certain major state universities. Thus, common white nicknames for certain California universities belittle or express a racialized anger about large Asian American student populations there. For example, the University of California at Irvine (UCI) has been nicknamed by whites “the University of Chinese Immigrants,” and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) has been nicknamed “the University of Caucasians Lost among Asians.”<sup>10</sup> Often the West Coast is viewed by many Americans as a more accepting place for Asian Americans compared to other regions, but these barbed nicknames suggest that numerous West Coast whites are not positively oriented to the academic achievements of young Asian Californians. One need only reflect on the *lack* of any such racially oriented