

Article

“We Really Have to Come Together”: Understanding the Role of Solidarity in Asian American College Students’ Social Justice Activism and Advocacy

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Abstract: Structural oppression continues to be one of the most pressing problems in U.S. society, and college students have always played a major role in addressing systemic inequities. Yet, much remains to be learned about the experiences of students advocating social justice in higher education, and there is a paucity of research on Asian American students involved in such efforts. This study sought to understand how Asian American undergraduates understand the role of solidarity in social justice work. The authors analyzed interviews with Asian American students engaged in social justice activism and advocacy in the Midwest. Findings show that participants recognized interconnected realities among oppressed communities, centered solidarity in social justice work because of this recognition, and utilized intersectional approaches to integrate solidarity into social justice activism and advocacy. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Asian American; college students; social justice; activism; solidarity



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1. Introduction

Oppression refers to the ideologies and structures that dehumanize historically oppressed communities [1], and it continues to be one of the most pressing problems in U.S. society. Systemic or structural forms of oppression—including but not limited to racism, classism, patriarchy, and heterosexism—causes a wide range of harmful effects, including increased poverty and incarceration rates among communities of color [2–6]. Within postsecondary education, structural oppression perpetuates pervasive inequities in access to opportunity [7]. In response to these realities, a wide range of social justice movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, have emerged across the U.S. and its college campuses in recent years [8,9].

College students have always played a major role in challenging systemic social inequities [9]. Given this reality, it is important for institutional leaders and college educators to better comprehend the experiences of students advocating social justice and how they might better support such efforts. However, much remains to be learned about the experiences of college students advocating social justice, and there is a paucity of research on Asian American (defined here as U.S. citizens and permanent residents with ancestral roots in the continent of Asia) students engaged in efforts to advance racial equity (defined as the creation and maintenance of structures that provide equal opportunity to and equally serve diverse populations) in particular.

The current inquiry aims to address these gaps in knowledge by examining the role of solidarity in social justice activism and advocacy among Asian American undergraduates. We define social justice as efforts to disrupt and challenge existing intersecting structures of oppression to create transformative change [10,11]. This definition was also based on our participants’ understanding of social justice. In the following sections, we provide

an overview of relevant literature. In the following sections, we provide an overview of relevant literature. Then, we detail our analysis of the role of solidarity in Asian American students' efforts to advance social justice. We also discuss the implications of this analysis for future research and practice.

1.1. The Contexts of Asian American Activism and Advocacy

For over 50 years, the model minority myth has portrayed Asian Americans as monolithically high achieving and dominated the racial framing and perceptions of this group [12]. The myth rose to prominence during the Civil Rights Movement and race rebellions of the 1960s, when the popular press and social scientists began to publicize Asian American successes, giving particular attention to their educational achievements [13].

Since its ascent, this stereotype has masked the significant systemic racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities that some Asian American subgroups (e.g., Southeast Asian American and refugee populations) face in U.S. society [14,15]. Asian Americans are a diverse community, comprised of over 50 different ethnic groups with unique histories, cultures, and languages. Many East (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.) and South (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, etc.) Asian Americans voluntarily immigrated to the U.S. from relatively affluent backgrounds to seek economic prosperity and exhibit comparably high rates of educational and occupational attainment compared to other ethnic groups in this racial category [16]. In contrast, a majority of Southeast Asian American (Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese) and more recently arrived refugees (Burmese and Bhutanese) were displaced by war and fled to the U.S. to avoid political persecution and seek asylum [16,17]. These communities came to the U.S. with agrarian backgrounds and relatively few resources, and exhibit educational and occupational attainments rates that are far lower than their East and South Asian American counterparts and the nation.

The myth also obscures the ways in which racism affects diverse Asian American communities. Anti-Asian racism has a long history in the U.S. While an extensive review of historical forms of racism toward Asian Americans is beyond the scope of the current article, a few examples are warranted. One of the most often-cited examples of such racism include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S. [18,19]. Less widely understood is how this policy reflected pervasive hostile views toward Chinese immigrants at the time, which led to mob violence, massacre, lynching, and other forms of racial violence toward these communities [20]. Historical narratives also sometimes acknowledge the Gentlemen's Agreement Act of 1917 that barred Japanese immigrants and widespread mistrust and incarceration of innocent Japanese Americans during World War II as an example of racist policies toward Asian American communities [18,19]. As Southeast Asian American refugees resettled in the U.S., they often faced racism based on stereotypes that they were deviants and welfare sponges [21]. Over the last two decades, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 fueled Islamophobia and violence toward Muslim Americans, which has often been targeted at South Asian Americans [22]. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, reported to originate in China, has resulted in scapegoating Chinese Americans as the cause of the virus and widespread harassment and physical violence toward Asian Americans across U.S. society and the globe [23].

The model minority myth also exemplifies how the racialization of different communities of color in the U.S. are profoundly interrelated [13]. During the Civil Rights Movement, conservatives weaponized overgeneralizations of Asian American success to discount arguments that structural racism was the cause of the economic and educational inequalities faced by other people of color and blame these communities [24]. In this way, Asian Americans have been exploited to shift the responsibility for racial inequalities and the burden of addressing them onto the shoulders of other communities of color, thereby reinforcing White supremacy [25].

This racial exploitation of Asian Americans within U.S. racial politics can and sometimes does fuel competition among communities of color and inhibit cross-racial solidarity.

For example, the model minority myth can make it more difficult to recognize anti-Asian racism [26], leading to the exclusion of Asian Americans from social justice agendas and discourses [25,27]. It is also important to note that, as Asian Americans highlight the injustices that they face to justify their inclusion in racial justice agendas and discourses, they can run the risk of equating their struggles with those of other communities and obscuring the unique ways in which different populations experience racism [28]. As a result of these dynamics, Asian Americans and other communities of color can view each other as competitors rather than as coalition partners in social justice work [29–31]. These challenges might partly explain why many Asian Americans have historically emphasized the need to cultivate solidarity in their social justice efforts [32].

1.2. The Role of Solidarity in Asian American Activism and Advocacy

Asian American communities have long histories of fighting for social justice [33–36]. For example, in the 1950s, Asian Americans, such as Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz, played an instrumental role in farm labor organizing [37]. Similarly, Asian American civil rights leaders, such as Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs, played key roles in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the racial justice movements that sprang from it [33].

These examples also underscore the reality that Asian Americans have been a part of interracial coalitions within some of the most significant social movements in history [26,32]. Moreover, Fujino and Rodriguez [26] have argued that the Asian American Movement of the 1960s and 1970s “as a whole insisted on solidarity-making as a strategy for fighting white supremacy and racial capitalism” (p. 113). Certainly, Asian Americans’ emphasis on solidarity is unmistakably manifest in some of the most notable histories of Asian American activism and advocacy. For example, in 1965, Philip Vera Cruz and other Filipino American labor activists led the Delano Grape Strike, which united Filipino and Mexican migrant workers who demanded pay increases and better work conditions. The strike attracted national and international support, which led to the birth of the United Farm Workers Union, which was built on Filipino–Mexican solidarity.

Today, many Asian American community organizations advance contemporary social justice agendas. Organizations, such as Asian Americans Advancing Justice [38], advocate for Asian American civil rights broadly. Other groups are designed to address specific educational, political, and environmental inequities within the Asian American community or advocate with specific subgroups within Asian America. For instance, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network supports Asian American communities surrounded by uncontrolled toxic waste sites in the San Francisco Bay Area and helps them advocate to improve urban redevelopment plans and resist harmful environmental policies [39], while the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center [40] advocates for and with Southeast Asian American refugee communities who face unique challenges and inequities [41,42].

Many Asian Americans continue to mobilize in solidarity with other groups to help address racial injustices primarily affecting other minoritized communities. As two salient examples, #AsiansforBlackLives has provided ongoing support for the Black Lives Matter movement and Tsuru for Solidarity has continuously advocated against immigrant concentration camps at the U.S.–Mexico border [30].

Solidarity and the collective action that results from it are generally assumed to be important elements of social justice movements and research sheds some light on the factors that influence intergroup solidarity [43–47]. Empirical evidence indicates that a strong racial consciousness might make it more likely that individuals and groups cultivate intergroup solidarity to challenge the systems that harm their communities [46,47]. Existing scholarship also suggests that perceived shared suffering, which can be characterized by minoritized groups experiencing similar forms of mistreatment or disempowerment, can lead to stronger intergroup empathy and coalitions [43–47]. For example, Cortland et al. conducted a series of five experiments with Asian American, Black, and Latinx groups, as well as White women and found that both blatant and subtle connections to shared experiences of discrimination led to more positive intergroup attitudes and relations.

However, scholars and activists also assert the need to refrain from obscuring unique racialized experiences of different communities of color and equating the racism that they experience [48]. These perspectives highlight the value of linking political consciousness and interpersonal empathy with knowledge of the specificity and incommensurability of different group experiences.

1.3. Asian American Activism and Advocacy in College

Existing evidence suggests that Asian American involvement in social justice leads to a range of positive college outcomes, such as stronger identity development, greater critical agency, and enhanced capacity to realize their desires to give back to their communities and society [49,50]. For example, Ryoo and Ho studied the experiences of 10 undergraduate activists and highlighted the ways in which activism allowed students to develop a greater consciousness of racial oppression [51]. Despite the value of Asian American college students engaging in social justice activism and advocacy, only a handful of empirical studies examine their involvement in such activities [51–53].

Yet, Asian American students have historically played a salient role in advancing equity on college and university campuses [35,35,36,36,53,54]. Since the Third World Liberation Front, Asian American students have mobilized on campuses across the country to advocate for Asian American studies and Asian American cultural centers [53,54].

Today, Asian American college students continue to engage in social justice activism and advocacy in many forms [27,49,52,55–58]. Asian American students have regularly mobilized with other racially minoritized communities to demand their campuses take diversity and equity more seriously and organized to establish more culturally relevant education on their campuses [36,53]. In addition, many Asian American college students across the nation continuously advocate social justice through involvement in ethnic studies programs, cultural centers, and ethnic student organizations that allow them to engage in research and service to give back to their communities [27,49,52,55–60]. Thus, utilizing a critical paradigm allowed us to explicitly unearth how systemic oppression fuels the need to cultivate solidarity in social justice work and the ways in which students sought to foster greater solidarity to advance their social justice agendas.

1.4. Recruitment and Participant Sample

The current inquiry is part of a larger investigation into the experiences of Asian American college students who engage in social justice activism and advocacy in the Midwest region of the U.S. The study included Asian American undergraduates who report being engaged in social justice efforts. Participants were recruited in collaboration with the Midwest Asian American Student Union (MAASU), which is a regional association of Asian American student unions from 25 campuses in the Midwest. MAASU was an ideal partner for the current examination because it hosts an annual conference for Asian American college student leaders, which (1) offers sessions focused on how oppression and social justice impact Asian American communities, (2) is designed by undergraduate Asian American students, and (3) brings together a large network of Asian American student leaders annually.

In spring of 2017, we invited students who registered for MAASU's annual convention to complete a screening questionnaire. The survey included items about whether students engage in social justice, their demographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, class), and their views about oppression and social justice. The oppression and social justice Likert-scaled questions, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), included 18 items such as "Historically, in the U.S., racism has been one reason that people of color have been less likely to have access to the most qualified medical professionals compared to Whites" and "I am motivated to advocate for historically marginalized communities." Roughly 300 Asian American college students completed the screening questionnaire and were asked if they would be willing to participate in an individual face-to-face interview.

We purposefully sampled for intensity and variation to select approximately a dozen participants from the students who indicated they would be interested in participating in an interview [61]. Intensity sampling refers to the process of acquiring participants who are most likely to provide in-depth insights into the phenomena under study, and sampling for maximum variation denotes seeking a diverse sample so study findings can be transferable across different subgroups within the population participating in the study.

To achieve sampling intensity, we utilized responses to the oppression and justice survey items to select participants most likely to have in-depth knowledge of the topic. We summed scores from the 18 Likert-scale items to construct a composite social justice orientation score, and those who scored in the top 10% of the sample were deemed potential participants. To achieve maximum variation in sampling, we selected participants reporting diverse demographic characteristics across gender, ethnicity, and major. Utilizing this process, we selected and emailed a dozen potential participants to invite them to participate in an interview at the 2017 MAASU conference, and 11 students replied. For those who replied, we scheduled a 60-minute individual, face-to-face interview during the annual convention.

All participants identified as cisgender, and women were overrepresented in the sample compared to men (with eight and three students in these categories, respectively). In terms of ethnicity, the sample included students who identified as Afghan, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Hmong, Korean, Vietnamese, and multiracial Asian Americans. All participants were roughly traditional college age. One interviewee was 23-years-old and all other participants were between the ages of 19 and 21. A majority of students reported combined parental income of USD 40,000 to USD 60,000, while two of them reported parental income greater and one reported parental income lower than this range.

All students attended public, predominantly White, four-year research universities. Participants reported a variety of majors, such as biological systems engineering, comparative culture and politics, education, international relations, psychology, political science, public health, public policy, public management and leadership, and sociology.

1.5. Data Collection

Qualitative research is strengthened when the researchers enter the worlds of their participants [62,63]. At the MAASU annual meeting, Asian American undergraduates reflect on and engage in critical analysis and dialogue related to social justice activism and advocacy. We conducted a single, semi-structured, 60-minute, face-to-face, individual interview with each participant at the annual conference. Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

We asked participant to complete a consent form and one-page demographic profile form at the beginning of each interview. Consistent with semi-structured interview processes, interviews involved questions, such as the following, that sought to elicit students' stories about how they advance social justice work and the role of solidarity in these efforts: What, if any, role do diverse coalitions play in your social justice activism and advocacy? What, if any, barriers are there to working across racial lines? How, if at all, have you navigated these challenges?

We also recorded critical areas that emerged in the interviews and probed into those areas so participants could elaborate on their responses. In addition, if future participants did not discuss these key topics organically, we asked about them explicitly in future interviews. Participants were invited to contact us if they had any additional insights after the interview.

1.6. Data Analysis

We loaded transcriptions into and organized in the Dedoose[®] online software program for analyzing qualitative research data. We analyzed data in three phases [62,63]. In Phase I, we utilized *line-by-line coding* to detect initial codes. During this initial phase, we reviewed each transcript multiple times, and coded salient ideas and experiences related

to solidarity in social justice work (e.g., “shared struggles” and “facilitating dialogue”). In Phase II, we deployed *focused coding*, which involved clustering closely conceptually connected codes (e.g., “solidarity as necessary” and “solidarity as a goal”) to generate focused codes (e.g., “advocating greater solidarity in social justice”). The focused codes represent the most salient themes in the data, and are consistent with the overarching findings of the analysis. In Phase III, we employed *axial coding* to deductively specify the most salient properties of each focused code. To execute this process, we produced a code report for each focused code (e.g., “utilizing intersectional approaches”) and coded it to clarify the most salient properties of it (e.g., “showing up for other communities” and “coalitions and collaboration”). The theme properties resulting from this axial coding process are congruent with the finding subthemes.

Throughout the entire data analysis process, we utilized researcher memos to record thoughts, make comparisons between emerging codes and new data, and elucidate the connections across data points. For example, in Phase I, we used memos to capture our initial thoughts about emerging salient codes, relationships among them, and biases that might influence our perceptions of these codes and relationships. In subsequent phases, we utilized memos to look for data that deviated from the emerging themes and refine them accordingly. Finally, we employed memos to help clarify emerging connections among themes in the data. For example, memos were used to understand connections among initial codes and develop focused codes in Phase II and clarify relationships between focused codes and axial codes (key properties) in Phase III of the analysis.

1.7. Researcher Positionalities

All three authors identify as Asian American. We grew up in different regions of the U.S. but share experiences that heavily shape the analysis conducted herein. We all observed the negative effects of the model minority myth over the course of our lives, including the ways in which it promotes beliefs in meritocracy among Asian American communities and is used to justify the dismissal of Asian American issues in conversations about race and racial justice throughout society. In addition, our collective perspectives about oppression and social justice are heavily shaped by our relationships and collaborations with diverse activists and advocates. These connections have helped us develop deeper understandings of the experiences of diverse communities, the challenges that sometimes emerge when collaborating across difference, and the vital role of solidarity in social justice efforts.

While the importance that we place on the role of solidarity in social justice work drove us to conduct this inquiry, our knowledge of the complexities of working to cultivate solidarity in social justice efforts also informed the analysis. For example, we have previously observed the ways in which members of one racial group can highlight the challenges that it faces while dismissing the racial challenges encountered by another community. As a result, we were intentional about considering the ways in which diverse communities might perceive emergent themes. For example, when participants talked about the interconnected struggles of Asian Americans and other minoritized communities, we explicitly examined whether they might be minimizing the unique struggles of Black or Indigenous communities. Engaging this awareness maximized the likelihood that we accurately represented participants’ perspectives.

1.8. Quality Assurance and Limitations

We used three main methods to maximize credibility of the analysis and findings [64]. First, as mentioned, data from interview transcripts, field notes, and memos were triangulated throughout phases of the analysis process. This triangulation helped us cross-check and verify emerging interpretations from the interviews.

Second, we conducted member-checks. Specifically, we sent an email to each participant, inviting them to provide feedback on the emergent interpretations. We encouraged participants to point out any areas in which they felt the themes diverged from their ex-

perience. We also reassured them that their feedback was heavily valued and would be incorporated into the analysis to maximize the likelihood that they would feel their time and energy would not go to waste. No respondents suggested changes to the findings. Third, we engaged in constant reflexivity and sought discrepant data (e.g., evidence that emerging themes were not reflective of some participants' experiences) throughout the analysis process to challenge any potential biases that might be shaping the data analysis. As a result of this process, we only report themes that manifested in at least two-thirds of participant narratives.

Despite efforts to maximize credibility, originality, and usefulness of our findings, the current investigation has limitations that are important to note. First, the current study only included 11 undergraduates who were enrolled in public, predominantly White, four-year institutions in the Midwest, and the findings therefore might not reflect the experiences of Asian American students in other regions or enrolled in other types of colleges and universities (e.g., regions and institutions in which the population is comprised of a greater percentage of Asian Americans). In addition, given that our sample consisted of MAASU attendees who scored high on our social justice scale, it is possible that these participants are more likely to recognize the impacts of oppression compared to other Asian American undergraduates within the greater Midwest region. Moreover, the MAASU context and interview questions centered on the "Asian American" experience might also have prompted participants to focus more on their racial identities and racialized experiences and less on other aspects of their identities in their interview responses. Finally, we conducted single individual interviews with each participant, and did not follow students longitudinally. A longitudinal design might have allowed students to reflect on the role of solidarity in their social justice work over a longer timeframe and provide different insights than those produced herein.

2. Results

Three themes emerged from the current analysis and described the role that solidarity played in participants' social justice activism and advocacy. First, Asian Americans participants demonstrated a *recognition of interconnected realities*, including intersecting struggles and futures, among oppressed people and their allies. Second, the interviewees discussed how this recognition contributed to their *centering solidarity* in social justice work. Finally, recognition of interconnected realities and centering solidarity led participants to *utilize an intersectional approach* to social justice activism and advocacy.

Before moving forward, some caveats are warranted. First, while these themes are presented separately, they are not mutually exclusive. Participants often discussed multiple findings simultaneously, which reflects the fact that they are inextricably intertwined. Second, while our findings focus on how Asian American students understand the role of solidarity in their social justice work, we do not intend to paint a romanticized view of solidarity or suggest that this solidarity always "works." Systemic racial dynamics can and often do pit communities of color against each other, potentially fueling competition, causing tension, and eroding solidarity. Our primary purpose, however, was to understand and delineate how student activists make sense of the role of solidarity in their work despite these existing challenges.

2.1. Recognizing Interlocked Realities

When talking about solidarity and social justice work, several participants highlighted the recognition of interlocked realities among historically oppressed communities. There were two aspects of this recognition, which included an awareness of the interconnected nature of struggles and shared futurities among these communities.

First, while participants recognized that systemic oppression has a varied impact on different marginalized communities, several of them noted that any form of systemic violence negatively affects broader society. Aurna emphasized these points as she discussed her efforts to advocate racial equity on her campus in the following remarks:

With student government, when you bring up something, they're like, "Oh, she's only caring about one group of people," or "She's just an angry Asian woman," or "She's just an angry minority." You know? So, that's definitely something. I'm trying to get them to understand, it's like, "No. Our problems affect the world around us." So, that's why I really advocate for #BlackLivesMatter.

In this response, Aurna notes how her advocacy is sometimes misinterpreted as being only in the interest of a singular community or only benefitting people of color. While Aurna does advocate to address issues typically associated with a specific community, such as advocating against anti-Black state violence, she also sees such forms of violence as harmful to all communities to varying degrees. Her remarks also demonstrate the ways in which she sought to educate other people about these intersections.

Participants viewed this awareness of the shared nature of struggles with injustice as an important factor in social justice activists and advocates being able to work together across differences. Eva stressed these points in the following comments:

I think growing up as an Asian American, dealing with our struggles, and realizing that other people had those struggles too . . . If we're able to work together, or at least have someone push forward and realize that we all have these issues, then we can relate to each other and we can work together. And, I guess that made me feel passionate about speaking out for not just Asian Americans, but other people too.

Second, and related to participants' views about shared struggle, interviewees underscored their perspectives that communities of color have shared futurities or destinies. In responding to a question about what would help facilitate progress in social justice movements, Ronnie underscored this point as he discussed how the progress of #BlackLivesMatter was important for advancing movements for Asian American racial justice:

I think it's been this decade really that the #BlackLivesMatter movement has gained the momentum that it has. You know, it's difficult to see that the attitude that people have towards it has not changed at all. You know people still look at it as a radical and violent protest, you know? People still see it as fruitless and useless and such, so it's disheartening to see that. If that movement can't gain any momentum, then how is any other fledgling movement supposed to gain momentum? So, I think seeing some progress will encourage people to be more open to supporting other movements like the movements we're seeing within the Asian American community that many would like to start initiating.

Ronnie's comments underscore his belief that social justice movements are not only connected by their goals to address larger intersecting struggles, but also that the success of one movement shapes the possibilities for others.

A focus on shared struggle can potentially lead some people to make false equivalences and mask differences in racial realities. Participants were careful not to equate the racial struggles of different marginalized communities. Instead, several of them explicitly acknowledged the unique struggles of other communities of color. They also attempted to avoid detracting from advocacy for other communities and resist comparisons and competition. Shannon, for example, shared the following remarks:

I hate it when we have to talk about race as a hierarchy. So and so has the most struggle, and then you get the least struggle . . . I'm not trying to argue that I struggle more than you do. It's not about that. You have to understand. What I'm going through, I'm not trying to compare it to you. We might go through different things but at the end of the day we have the same enemy—oppression.

Thus, while participants talked about injustice being a common enemy, they acknowledged the different forms of violence that it enacts on various communities of color and avoided making direct comparisons that might inhibit social justice work.

2.2. Centering Solidarity in Social Justice

The recognition of shared struggles and futures led many participants to intentionally center solidarity in their social justice activism and advocacy. They centered solidarity in their social justice work in two ways, including assuming that solidarity was a critical element of social justice agendas and designating coalition-building as a vital goal of social justice work.

First, several participants assumed that solidarity was necessary to advance justice objectives. As a result, solidarity was viewed as integral to their activism and advocacy. Ronnie shared this viewpoint, highlighting the belief that support for interracial solidarity is a necessity for anyone who is passionate about social justice:

You know, it was never explicitly stated. It was almost implied that, if you were passionate about social justice in some way, then you were supportive of these coalitions . . . The broader goal did not really involve our identity in that moment, but fighting against the injustice that affected our identity regardless of what that was.

Ronnie acknowledges that identities are important in understanding the ways in which racism operates, the conditions of different communities of color, and how these various groups are affected, but underscored that interracial solidarity allowed activists and advocates to focus on all groups working together to eradicate injustices.

Second, given that participants talked about solidarity as an automatic necessity, it is not surprising that several of them also explicitly discussed cultivating coalitions as an explicit goal of their social justice work. Allison's comments illustrate this point:

Maybe someday all the groups can work together. People say that it might not be possible for all of us to work together—start with one group at a time. Then, as time goes on, we'll be able to have everyone together. Create solidarity between the groups. That's like one of our main goals that we're striving for too.

The primary strategy that students utilized to cultivate solidarity was facilitating dialogues about intersections between struggles and possibilities. Allison continued to talk about how she and her peers invest energies in facilitating dialogues to foster understanding across diverse groups, which was vital to achieving this goal:

I went to a retreat . . . It was essentially a retreat for all the marginalized students per say or all the marginalized groups. Essentially, we talk about solidarity and what that means for us. We also really touch on how, at the end of the day, the problem we face is not like an Asian problem or a Black problem. It's like a problem we all face, and we can't just do things by ourselves. We really have to come together and fight these social injustices that we see whether on campus or out of campus. That's like a big thing we're working on.

Allison's remarks illustrate how advocating solidarity and building coalitions in social justice activism and advocacy was an ongoing project for participants.

It is worth noting that interviewees also talked about competition undermining solidarity and coalitions. Thus, advancing their solidarity goals required resisting such divisive competition. Eva underscored these points as she shared the following perspective:

I think it'd be great if we realize that we all share many of the same experiences, and that we're not here to compete against each other, and that if we stand united, we can really overcome adversity...I'm Vietnamese and Vietnamese people and the Black community rely on each other, but there's a lot of barriers in between. So, then, I want us to just reach out to other organizations, attend their meetings, listen to them, and then let them know that we understand them, and that we're here to support them, and that we're not just all going to be separated just because we're a different organization on campus.

Eva's comments also demonstrate how her views about the importance of solidarity informed what she thought were valuable intersectional approaches to social justice.

2.3. Utilizing Intersectional Approaches

Participants' assumptions about the importance of solidarity and their designation of coalition formation as a key objective in their social justice work partly contributed to their utilization of the intersectional approach is to social justice activism and advocacy. There were two primary ways that they utilized such intersectional approaches. They included showing up for other communities and identity groups advocating for justice.

Several participants talked about the importance of showing up for other communities, including other identity-based student organizations, that were advocating for social justice causes. In the following comments, for example, Shannon highlights her emphasis on supporting a diverse array of communities and agendas on her campus:

So, there is a rally in a public place on our campus about the known ban on immigration policy issue. So, the Asian American student organization was there to show support. I think, overall, we value showing our support for organizations that are not necessarily Asian American, like the Black, the Native American, and the Latino Student Union, as well as the Muslim Student Association. We try to show our support and go to events where they try to educate people about their identities. I think showing your support physically is important.

In this comment, Shannon recognized that showing up to support other communities is mutually beneficial. As the comment suggests, through showing up, participants support other groups, but they also learn about those groups' identities and issues. Shannon continued to discuss the ways in which Asian American student leaders on her campus showed up to support Muslim students who protested the immigration ban:

Yeah, so we had rallies like, for example, the Muslim Immigration ban, we went to a public space where everyone walks by. So, we had different speakers for different organizations. The Muslim Student Association, they organized that that rally, and they invited us to speak because this was also an issue that affected Asian Americans. So, rallies like that. When you know this is an issue and it affects your community, but it also affects others, you can find others to come speak at the rally. So, the Muslim Student Association spoke. They also invited us, and we spoke. We also made signs. We did chants like "Build Bridges. Not Walls."

Participants' remarks illuminated the reality that systemic violence harming one community explicitly can also harm other minoritized communities. In this case, while the immigration ban was primarily targeted at Muslim communities, it affected Muslim Asian Americans and many non-Muslim other people of color.

Second, participants highlighted the important role of mutual collaboration in advancing their social justice efforts. As the following remarks illustrate, Aurna described the ways in which different groups housed under the umbrella of the multicultural center had forged coalitions and worked together regularly on her campus:

Like I said, within the Multicultural Center, we collaborate on events with the Latinx community, the Black community, the queer community, the international community, the Women's Resource Center to encourage women empowerment. So, we do a lot of collaborations. It's like, the opportunity is given to us basically in our hands to collaborate. All of us support each other's events and try to go each other's events. And I'm not saying every single person does that, but there are head people in the organizations who do . . . And, the organizations themselves understand that we must stand together in solidarity.

It is worth noting that several participants also acknowledged that cultivating solidarity across groups and maintaining coalitions is complicated and described the ways in which those involved in social justice efforts can perpetuate systemic violence toward each other. For example, while recognizing the importance of such coalitions, Aurna went on to discuss the ways in which they can be challenging in the following remarks:

Individual problems have come up. For example, working with individuals in the queer community if they themselves don't understand that some of the things they're saying

are Islamophobic, or some of things they're saying are anti-Black, or anti-Latinx, or anti-Asian, you know? Or working with Asian American members or individuals, or Black individuals who are kind of homophobic. They won't say they're homophobic, but ... And they want to be able to stand in solidarity, but they're not understanding how some of the things they're saying are problematic. So, it's not the organizations that have a problem, it's just certain individuals can grow and develop more.

Aurora's remarks highlight the fact that, in general, participants did not espouse a romanticized view of our solidarity. Instead, they believed that cultivating solidarity and coalitions within social justice circles was complicated but necessary.

3. Discussion

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the current study. The first conclusion results from our review of literature. Our study underscores the value of additional research that examines the role of Asian Americans and social justice agendas and efforts in higher education. While existing stereotypes of Asian Americans suggest that they are uniformly assimilationist and apolitical [25], Asian American Studies literature documents a long history of Asian American activism in U.S. society broadly and on college campuses specifically [26,36]. Yet, only a handful of higher education scholars have examined Asian American students' engagement in social justice efforts in higher education [10,49–53]. This research provides some initial evidence regarding the factors that catalyze Asian American students' engagement in social justice agendas, as well as how these efforts lead to outcomes, such as stronger identity development, critical agency, and capacities to give back to their communities and society [10,49–53]. The current inquiry extends this literature as one of the first empirical inquiries into the *nature* of their experiences engaged in social justice efforts, and likely the first empirical analysis of the role of solidarity in their activism and advocacy.

Second, the current study underscores the central role of solidarity in Asian American college students' social justice efforts. Prior research suggests that Asian American community activists have historically prioritized cultivating solidarities with other racialized communities and insisted on solidarity-making as a political strategy [26–32]. The current investigation adds to this literature by providing some initial evidence that solidarity-building is a critical political strategy among contemporary Asian American students advocating social justice within higher education as well.

Third, the current inquiry demonstrates that complex contextual racial realities might shape Asian American students' focus on solidarity. Prior research highlights the reality that Asian Americans are racialized as universally "successful" minorities [25], and such stereotypes have been misused to dismiss the role of systemic racism in perpetuating pervasive racial disparities [13]. The misconception that Asian Americans are uniformly assimilationist and weaponization of such stereotypes to dismiss the impact of systemic oppression toward other communities of color poses challenges to Asian American and other racially minoritized communities building alliances [65].

Previous research suggests that an understanding that different communities of color share struggles can contribute to greater solidarity and social justice efforts [43–47], while some scholars caution against obscuring the unique struggles faced by these communities [48]. The current analysis adds to this literature by demonstrating that Asian Americans seek to strike a balance between recognizing intersecting struggles and shared futures among racially minoritized communities and avoiding obscuring the uniqueness of the ways in which different communities experience racism. Our study suggests that Asian American students' complex recognition of interlocked identities and shared futures has laid the foundation for them to center solidarity in their activism and advocacy.

Finally, the current study demonstrates that Asian American college students utilize multiple strategies to intentionally cultivate solidarity in their social justice work. Extant research suggests that solidarity plays an important role in contemporary Asian American social justice efforts [30] and delineates some factors that lead to Asian Americans inten-

tionally cultivating solidarity in social justice work [43–47]. The current study adds to this body of knowledge by analyzing *how* Asian American college students cultivate solidarity. Specifically, this analysis indicates that Asian American students adopt intersectional approaches to fostering solidarity with other racially minoritized communities, including showing up and supporting other groups and collaborating with other groups to advance racial justice efforts.

4. Implications for Research and Practice

The current study provides several implications for future research and practice. First, as mentioned, the study only included eleven Asian American students who attended predominantly White universities in the Midwest, and future research should analyze these dynamics across in other regional (e.g., the South, West, and East) and institutional (e.g., campuses with different racial compositions) contexts. Such scholarship is necessary to provide insight into the catalysts, barriers, and strategies to fostering solidarity across contexts. Examining how solidarity-building might vary across various regions or institutions might also inform knowledge about how to better facilitate discussions of solidarity amongst students across diverse environments.

As mentioned, we interviewed college students at one point in time and did not follow them longitudinally through the complex process of building coalitions and sustaining them. Knowledge about such processes, however, would be especially useful in helping educators understand the barriers that students might encounter building such coalitions and the efficacy of various strategies to effectively do so. Thus, in future studies, researchers should consider following students longitudinally as they cultivate and sustain alliances across communities.

In addition, while our sample did not allow for any meaningful analysis regarding whether solidarity plays a different role in social justice work across various Asian American subgroups, future research should investigate such potential differences. For example, many East Asian American families have been in the U.S. for generations and are more financially secure, while many Southeast Asian refugees more recently arrived with more limited exposure to English and fewer resources [16]. As a result, while the latter groups are racialized as model minorities in some contexts, they are also racialized as deviant and inferior minorities like other non-Asian American communities of color in other localized contexts [42]. This unique form of racialization could lead to different barriers for solidarity and strategies to cultivating it. Therefore, future studies should intentionally sample enough students within different ethnic groups to allow cross-group comparisons.

Regarding practice, college educators should make intentional efforts to cultivate an awareness of the unique and interlocked realities of historically oppressed communities. Both equating the racial struggles of different communities of color as the same and a lack of awareness regarding the interconnected nature of struggles might hinder interracial solidarity. Therefore, educators should consider creating programs to raise awareness not only about how racism affects different communities of color, but also the intersections between different forms of racialization and racial violence. Such opportunities would allow students to learn and understand these interlocked realities, reducing the chances of misunderstandings and unnecessary conflict among them, and creating conditions for potential solidarities to be forged.

Finally, related to the previous point, educators should create spaces specifically designed to foster solidarity. While it is important for students to recognize how oppression affects different communities, it is equally important for participants to have the opportunity to work together to strengthen interracial solidarity. For example, providing students with opportunities to have conversations about the importance of solidarity and strategies to cultivate coalitions to work towards the common goal of eliminating systems of oppression can be especially powerful. Through creating such collective spaces, educators can support students in developing the skills needed to critique and fight systemic injustice and violence together.

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