

The Construction of Asian American Identities through Organizational Discourse

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1. Introduction

This paper examines how both self-ascription and ascription by others (Barth, 1969) contributes to the formation of an Asian American identity for an Asian American City Chamber of Commerce (AACC). Participants in the AACC are immigrants from twenty two different countries including countries in South Asia (e.g. India, Pakistan), East Asia (e.g. China, Korea), and Southeast Asia (e.g. Philippines, Indonesia). Members of this group have differing national, linguistic, and cultural roots and did not commonly identify with the term “Asian” before immigrating to the US (most identified according to country of origin, e.g. Korean, Indian, Filipino). Yet members participate in an Asian American-identified organization and in doing so contribute to the construction and maintenance the “Asian American” identity category.

The way that AACC members negotiate Asian American identity can best be explained by using “culture” as a metaphor to understand their organization (Carbaugh, 1986). From a cultural standpoint, an organization is defined as a “shared system of symbols and meaning, performed in speech, that constitutes and reveals a sense of work-life” (p. 90). This shared system of meaning is constituted by communication: “Communicating in a particular cultural arena is to...engage in a local community of meanings that structures a world intelligible to workers, imbues their activities with shared principles, and affirms their commonality in a particular, and common, sense” (p. 90). Furthermore, communication processes are intersubjective, in that communication involves negotiating *shared* social understanding among members of a community. An examination of AACC member practices reveals a shared system of understanding that underlies the multiple ways that members of the AACC negotiate an “Asian American” identity.

First, I provide contextual information about the AACC. I then discuss how I use discourse analysis to uncover the various meanings participants construct for the Asian American identity category. Next, I present five examples which show the various ways that Asian-American identities are constructed by AACC members. I first present two examples illustrating multiple ways that AACC members foreground an “Asian” identity for purposes of recognition in the Big City business community. I then provide an example

where AACC members downplay an “Asian” identity and instead position themselves as “multi-ethnic” during a meeting with a Hispanic identified organization. The last two examples illustrate how AACC members position the Asian identity a local, racial, culturally diverse identity.

2. The AACC

The data from this study is drawn from a larger project where I conducted ethnographic work with two chambers of commerce in what I call “Big City”, Texas: The Asian American City Chamber of Commerce (AACC) and the North City Chamber of Commerce (NCC) – a regionally identified chamber with mostly White, Big City raised organizational members. The data presented in this paper is from eight months of participant-observation of the AACC. I spent several hours per day, three to four days per week, as a participant-observer at the AACC from January-August 2014. While I spent an extensive amount of time at the organization, I was not their employee. Most staff referred to me as an “intern” whose goal was to learn about their organization. With the members’ permission, I audio and/or video recorded organizational events, speakers, committee meetings, staff meetings, and workplace interactions.

Most of my interactions (and also the ones presented in this paper) were with the five AACC staff members: Alf, the President, from the Philippines; Clara, the Director of Marketing, from Indonesia; Woo-jin, the Director of Membership, from South Korea; Grace, the Vietnamese-American Membership Assistant; and Candace, the Black-American Director of the Foundation. AACC staff members support the businesses who are members of the Chamber in two ways: by planning events that inform AACC members about opportunities for their businesses locally and internationally and by supporting policies that increase minority business participation in the local economy. Alf, the president and CEO of the AACC, explains that while the chamber does hold networking events where their member businesses can meet one another and form professional relationships, on a larger scale the AACC advocates for policies that encourage more Asian and minority business participation in the local economy.

3. The Discursive Construction of Asian American Identity

Asian American identities are constructed through the explicit mentioning of identities categories (e.g. “Asian”) and are implicitly constructed through ways of speaking that symbolically point to meanings about Asian-ness (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The primary way that participants construct meanings about their own identities and their relationships with others is through the use of forms of personal address (Fitch, 1998). Forms of personal address serve a referential function “and create and define relationships” (p. 34). For example, AACC members use “we” to reference “the chamber” and “they” and “you” to reference other social groups such as “the politicians” and “the foundation”. Members also construct relationships between these groups (e.g. “the politicians challenged us”; “we have our foundation” and “they [the foundation] have mostly Hispanics”). Overall, AACC communication practices illustrate how participants utilize forms of personal address to construct their own identities, identities of others, and relationships among different social groups.

The ways that participants use forms of personal address to construct identities “reflect communal understandings of the aspects of personhood that are important enough to draw attention in a particular social structure” (Fitch, 1998, p. 34). One set of communal understandings is drawn from a general organizational culture valued by the business community. For example, the way that AACC construct Asian American identity

meets organizational goals (e.g. gaining profits, partners, community recognition), thus drawing from and reproducing an organizational culture that values meeting organizational goals over any other interactional goals. Another set of communal meanings is drawn from American common-sense understandings about racial identity. For example, by adopting the Asian-American identity category, AACC members are reproducing common-sense notions about racial categories in the United States, but when acknowledging intragroup difference (e.g. identifying groups as “Filipino”, “Cambodian”, and “Thai”), AACC members challenge these common sense notions. Overall, this analysis examines the various meanings about Asian American identity that participants construct through their communication practices and how these communication practices draw from or challenge shared systems of meaning about organizational culture or American notions of race.

1. “Hey what are you doing Asians? ...We need your votes.”

In this example, Alf, the president and CEO of the AACC, narrates tensions between the racialized label politicians use to categorize Asians and the multiple, nationally tied labels members of the Asian community use to categorize themselves. Throughout the narrative Alf alternates among different speaker roles (Koven, 2002): a narrator role, enacted when Alf tells a story, a character role, enacted when Alf uses reported speech (Tannen, 2007) to voice different personas within the story being told, and an interlocutor role, enacted when Alf stops narration and comments on the story to me, the other interlocutor in the current interaction. When Alf alternates among these differing speaker roles, he constructs his own identity, identities of Asians in the Big City community, and the identities of Texas senators.

The following excerpt is from the preliminary, open-ended interview I conducted with Alf at the beginning of my fieldwork with the AACC. For the most part, Alf spoke freely, while I occasionally interjected to ask clarifying questions. Previous to the following excerpt of talk, Alf was discussing the multiple Asian organizations started by the chamber. Then, Alf explains how the AACC was started:

- | | | | |
|-----|----|---------|--|
| (1) | 1 | Alf | We started as ah: you know (.) u::m (1.0) Asian Asian |
| | 2 | | American Voters Coalition. |
| | 3 | Natasha | Oh okay |
| | 4 | Alf | There was <u>nothing</u> (.) It's chaos (.) on their own (1.0) The |
| | 5 | | politics (.) the politicians challenged us |
| | 6 | | “Hey what are you doing Asians?” |
| | 7 | | “What Asians?” |
| | 8 | | There's no such (.) strictly speaking there's no such thing |
| | 9 | | as Asian |
| | 10 | Natasha | Yeah |
| | 11 | Alf | There's only Indian, Chinese, Pakistan, Korea, |
| | 12 | | “But those are different! You cannot!” |
| | 13 | Natasha | (hhh) So |
| | 14 | Alf | The language eh- |
| | 15 | Natasha | The politicians were who? The mayor or |
| | 16 | Alf | Senators |
| | 17 | Natasha | Senators |
| | 18 | Alf | Yeah |
| | 19 | | “hey guys (.) why don't you form themselves-yourselfes?” |
| | 20 | | We need your votes” (hhh) |

Lines 21-51 were omitted. Alf discusses details of how the Voters Coalition was started and the purpose of the organization (registering voters). Alf then returns to discussing how the chamber of commerce was started:

52 Alf So they were thinking how to get that vote. The Asian vote.
 53 So we formed the voters' coalition. It was successful. So
 54 they said, "Now it's time. You have the politics. You need
 55 business. Why don't you form (.) chamber of commerce?"
 56 So they formed the chamber of commerce.

Alf takes the narrator and interlocutor speaker roles when he begins his narrative. The narrator role, characterized by speaking about a past event, is how Alf marks the beginning of the narrative. Alf briefly enacts the interlocutor role ("you know", line 1) to connect his telling about past events to his current interaction with me. Alf explains how "we", the AACC, started as a Voters Coalition. Alf then reverts to a time previous to the existence of the Asian American Voters Coalition. He states there was "nothing" and "chaos" because Asians were all "on their own" (line 4). Alf's use of the pronoun "they" instead of "we" indicates that while "we" are an organization, before the organization was created "they" were chaotic and unorganized. Alf also uses "we" to position himself as part of the organization and "they" to separate his own identity from the "nothing", "chaos" identities. Then Alf voices another party, the "politicians", as challenging "us" (line 5). Alf is constructing "us" and "politicians" as two separate, non-overlapping identity categories. Furthermore, by using "us", Alf brings himself directly back into the story. Whereas "they" refers to a general unidentified chaotic group, "us" includes Alf as a member of the group who was challenged by the politicians.

Alf transitions from a narrator role to a character role and voices the politicians as 1) recognizing the "chaotic" state ("what are you doing") and 2) ascribing the term Asian to the group (line 6). Alf further reifies the distinction between the "politicians" and the "Asian" by using discursive strategies that demarcate "Asians" as "us" and politicians as "you." Alf voices himself as questioning the label ("what Asians?", line 7) and then enacts an interlocutor role, stepping out of the narrative to explain to me the problem with the Asian identity category. The "Asians" referred to by the politicians are immigrants from multiple different countries in Asia. They therefore often identify according to their country of origin (line 11) and to these immigrants, "there's no such thing as Asian" (lines 8-9). "Asian" is a United States racial category that does not make sense to immigrants from different countries in Asia.

Alf then enacts a character role, voicing the politicians' reaction to Alf's concern about the singular "Asian" category: multiple different, nationally tied identities ("but those are different!") are not possible ("you cannot!", line 12). Alf later, using more reported speech, makes it clear why according to the politicians, Asians "cannot" identify according to their different nations of origin. "We" (the politicians) need "your" (Asian) votes (line 20). Here, Alf voices the politicians as positioning Asians as constituents, or potential voters, *and* encouraging constituents to adopt a racialized identity category to make it easier for politicians to have one organization (an Asian organization vs. multiple, nationally tied organizations) they can approach to gather votes.

After discussing details about how the Asian American Voters Coalition started (omitted lines), Alf returns to narrating how the chamber started. Alf takes the narrator role and reviews the politicians' reasoning for challenging Asians to form an organization: they wanted "the Asian vote" (line 52). Alf's use of political jargon (The Asian vote) further cements the positioning of Asians as a racialized constituency, positioning Asians

alongside other racial groups (e.g. the Black vote, the Hispanic vote). Alf then takes the character role and voices the politicians, “they”, as encouraging Asians to form a chamber of commerce so they can participate in a cohesive “business” community because they already successfully formed a political one (lines 54-56). The suggestion to form a chamber of commerce stems from the context of the local racialized business community, where two other racialized groups had already formed chambers of commerce: The Black Chamber and The Hispanic Chamber. Thus, politicians expected Asians to form one as well. Asians, therefore, are not only racialized as constituents who provide votes and campaign funds, but also as members of the business community.

Throughout Alf’s narrative, he voices tensions between the multiple ways people construct the “Asians” identity. Alf voices the “politicians” as 1) seeing “Asian” as a commonsense category and 2) imposing this identity category on “Asians” despite the objections of “Asians”. Members of the Asian group on the other hand, are not aware that the “Asian” identity category exists or what it might mean (e.g. “What Asians?”), and instead see national identities as more common-sense (e.g. Indian, Chinese, Pakistan, Korean). Despite the objections of members of the Asian group to the identity category “Asian”, they still form the Asian American Voters Coalition and then eventually the Asian American Chamber of Commerce. This analysis illustrates tensions between racialization and identity politics. On the one hand, this example shows how “White politicians” exert power over “Asians” by imposing a racialized identity category on them so that the “politicians” can easily access votes. On the other hand, by adopting this nonsensical identity category and using it to form organizations to gain political and economic recognition, members of the Asian group are participating in identity politics for purposes of empowerment.

2. “Community Development” and “International work”

While the previous example illustrates how AACC members learned about and eventually adopted their post-migration “Asian” identity category, the following analyses focus on the multiple ways AACC members negotiate what it means to be an “Asian” organization. This next example shows how the president of the AACC, Alf, uses multiple, conflicting constructions of Asian identity in his construction of the AACC as a successful organization. This excerpt is from the AACC’s annual meeting, held once a year, and attended by Big City’s large corporations, local government officials, AACC members, and AACC board members. Thus, Alf’s speech represents how the AACC publicly constructs Asian-ness as being relevant to their organizational identity.

- (2) 1 Alf We continue to support the initiatives and projects in the Asian
2 trade district. This is our part of our community development
3 work. (*referring to PowerPoint*) There you go, there’s the Asian
4 trade district there. We also support initiatives on international
5 work by hosting delegations. We had several delegations last year
6 from Vietnam (.) from China (.) Russia (.) from Mexico (.) and of
7 course (.) from Korea.

Alf starts by using the identity category “we” to reference the AACC and then characterizes the AACC as “supporting” the “Asian trade district” (lines 1-2). The “Asian trade district” is a local community of mostly Korean-owned businesses. Despite its mostly Korean affiliation, this business community was designated as the *Asian Trade District* by Big City in 1999. Here, Alf is invoking essentialist notions by constructing Asian as a singular racialized category and constructing a ‘natural’ relationship between

the *Asian* chamber and the *Asian* trade district. Furthermore, Alf positions the activity of “supporting” the “Asian trade district” as the chamber’s “community development work” (lines 2-3). One function of chambers of commerce is to support the economic development of the local community. Therefore, in constructing the AACC as doing “community development work”, Alf is illustrating how the AACC utilizes racial identification (Asian businesses supporting Asian businesses) to fulfill its organizational goals as a chamber of commerce that serves to develop the local community.

Alf then uses the identity category “we”, again referencing the AACC, and this time constructs “we” as an identity that does “international work” (line 4-5). Alf clarifies that the chamber does international work by “hosting delegations” (line 5). A “delegation” is a group of business people who visit Big City with the purpose of seeing whether they would like to start a business in Big City or invest in existing Big City business projects. Therefore, by hosting delegations, the AACC fulfills its organizational goal to support the economic development of Big City. The reason the AACC has connections to delegations is because of its “international” connections. Some of the countries Alf lists are countries popularly thought of as “Asian” (e.g. Vietnam, China, and Korea), and the AACC does have members who are recent immigrants from these “Asian” countries. Thus, Alf is acknowledging intra-Asian difference, emphasizing that the “Asian” identity is actually composed of multiple different nationalities. Furthermore, Alf frames these connections not as “Asian” but as “international”. The “international” identity of the chamber gives the organization access not only to other “Asian” countries but to non-Asian countries as well (e.g. Russia and Mexico) (lines 6-7).

Overall, Alf constructs the Asian identity category in two seemingly conflicting ways: as a singular homogenous racial category tied to the local “community” and as an “international” identity tied to multiple differing countries. Even though these ways of constructing Asian identity seem to conflict with one another, when examining identity construction through the lens of organizational practices and goals, this analysis illustrates how the AACC uses the Asian identity as a resource for accomplishing organizational goals. Alf uses knowledge of how outsiders perceive the “Asian” identity (as a homogenous race) and knowledge about intra-Asian diversity to construct the Asian identity in a way that helps the AACC to support the economic development of the Big City area. Thus, the Asian identity is ultimately used as a resource to publicly construct the AACC as a successful organization.

3. “We’re not Asian primarily”

In contrast to previous excerpt, this example illustrates how AACC members downplay their Asian identity rather than foregrounding it. The following example is an audio-recorded excerpt from a meeting between the AACC and Univisión, a Hispanic radio and television broadcasting company. The AACC wants to partner with Univisión so Univisión can advertise for the AACC’s main event, the Asian Festival, on their Spanish-language radio stations. In another conversation, Clara describes the Asian Festival as family friendly and located downtown (where many Hispanics live), and she explains that advertising the festival on Hispanic radio will help increase attendance at the Asian festival. Thus, the purpose of this meeting was to establish a business partnership between AACC and Univisión.

- (3) 1 Alf We’re basically:: (.) we’re not Asian (1.0) um (.) primarily=
 2 Cesar =exclusively
 3 Alf Yeah (.) because we have our foundation the ____ center

- 4 Cesar Mhmm
 5 Alf the-they have mostly Hispanics
 6 Cesar Oh really
 7 Alf [Yeah that's why Univision
 8 Clara [See like if you see me and Alf (2.0) we're also with the
 9 foundation (.) so
 10 Cesar [mmm
 11 Alf And in mult-they call it multi-ethnic because instead of call-
 12 Cesar ((inaudible))
 13 Alf Instead of calling little Asia
 14 Cesar which would make (.) my day now
 15 Alf We would call it multi-ethnic because we have more
 16 Hispanics
 17 Cesar mhmm
 18 Clara mhmm
 19 Alf And African-American, an:d what Asian and then Russians
 20 an:d hehe
 21 Clara Eastern Europeans=
 22 Alf =Eastern Europeans
 23 Clara And Africans yup

Alf starts by using the form of address “we” to signify the AACC and states that “we” are “not Asian primarily” (line 1), and Cesar, the Univisión representative, adds “exclusively” (line 2). Here, both Alf and Cesar display their shared knowledge about relationships among different racial groups: organizations that identify as one ethnic group mostly work with members of that ethnic group. This is why Alf explicitly emphasizes that “Asian” is not the AACC’s “primary” identity and Cesar adds his understanding that the AACC does not “exclusively” deal with Asians. Alf then provides further clarification to prove his claim that the Asian chamber is not primarily Asian. Alf cites “our foundation” (line 3). The AACC is a non-profit organization and has started a multi-ethnic foundation which focuses on helping members of minority groups to start a business. Although the multi-ethnic foundation and the chamber are two separate organizations, they do share staff members.

Alf states that “our foundation” has “mostly Hispanics” (line 5). Here, Alf is using the pronoun “our” to connect the “Asian” chamber to the “foundation” and to the “Hispanic” identity. Alf uses the “Hispanic” identity to connect to, Univisión, a Hispanic identified company. Cesar expresses surprise at this assertion (“Oh really”, line 6), to which Alf replies with emphasis “Yeah” (line 7) and continues by stating “that’s why Univisión” before he is interrupted by Clara. Univisión and the AACC used to work together in the past, but due to changes in leadership in both organizations, the relationship between the organizations dissolved. Alf’s statement is alluding to previous discussion in this meeting about how and why Univisión and the AACC stopped working with one another. Alf, therefore, is reminding Cesar that Univisión has worked with the AACC in the past and that this business relationship makes sense because of the AACC’s connection to “Hispanics” through “our foundation”. Clara adds to the connection between the AACC and “Hispanics” by emphasizing that both Clara and Alf work with the foundation in addition to the Chamber (lines 8-9). Alf then re-emphasizes that the foundation is purposefully categorized as “multi-ethnic” instead of “little Asia” because of their connection with “Hispanics” (lines 11-16). Then Alf and Clara collaborate in adding the other ethnicities that mark the foundation as “multi-ethnic” (lines 19-23).

In this excerpt, “Asian” is talked about as a United States racial category and positioned alongside other racial categories such as “Hispanic” and “African American”. Alf downplays the “Asian” identity as being relevant to AACC business practices and instead cites the AACC “multi-ethnic” foundation to expand the AACC’s professional network. Since the AACC is “multi-ethnic”, it can work with the Hispanic-identified Univisión. However, at the same time that Alf denies that being “Asian” identified marks the AACC as working primarily with “Asians”, Alf constructs Univisión as a “Hispanic” company that primarily works with “Hispanics”. Thus, in one sense, Alf denies racial identity as a prominent factor for conducting business, and in another sense, he foregrounds the Hispanic identity as a connection to a Hispanic company. Overall, Alf strategically incorporates racial and ethnic identities when characterizing the AACC, the foundation, and Univisión in order to meet the AACC’s organizational goal to build a professional relationship with Univisión.

4. “Filipino”, “Cambodian”, and “Thai”

The following example illustrates how Clara, the Director of Marketing for the AACC, uses her knowledge about intra-Asian difference and about different Asian groups living in the Big City Area to hire an Asian dance performance for a dinner event. Clara implicitly orients to the “Asian” identity category that encompasses the multiple, nationally tied identity categories that Clara explicitly mentions: Filipino, Thai, and Cambodian dancers. The following is an excerpt from a conversation I had with Clara in her office.

- | | | | |
|-----|---|---------|--|
| (4) | 1 | Clara | The Filipino dancers are <u>old</u> they’re like (.) they don’t have the |
| | 2 | | young generation dancing anymore. Alf always complains |
| | 3 | | there’s (hh) old peo(h(h))ple on stage [((laughter)) |
| | 4 | Natasha | [he he he |
| | 5 | Clara | And then (.) Cambodian and Thai is too <u>slow</u> . |
| | 6 | Natasha | mmmm |
| | 7 | Clara | But (8.0) the slow might now be a good <u>idea</u> for (.) dinner time. |

The first identity category invoked by Clara is “Filipino dancers” (line 1). She characterizes these dancers as “old”, “don’t have the young generation dancing”, and as being disliked by Alf who “complains” about “old people on stage” (lines 1-3). Thus, Filipino dancers are not a viable hire for this event because they are old and because Clara’s boss, Alf, does not approve of the dancers either. Clara then states other options: Cambodian and Thai (line 5). Clara first evaluates these identities negatively because they are “too slow” (line 5) but then changes her mind and states that “slow” dancers would be good for a dinner event (line 7). Thus, a Cambodian or Thai group is ultimately evaluated positively primarily based on what might make their dances a good fit for a dinner event (e.g. dancers are not “old” and the dance is “slow”).

Here, Clara is expanding the diversity within the “Asian” identity category. Even though she is planning the event for the “Asian” chamber, she is acknowledging national and cultural differences when considering different dance groups. Furthermore, Clara is using her knowledge about how Filipino, Cambodian, and Thai dances are performed *in Big City* when making her decision. Filipino dancing is not evaluated negatively because it is Filipino, but rather because in Big City, only old people do Filipino dances. Clara seems to be aware, however, that both Cambodian and Thai dance groups in Big City might employ younger dancers. Thus, Clara uses knowledge about what might count as “Asian” dances, different nationalities and the dances performed by these nationalities, and who

these as not meeting ideal business standards and therefore characterize their chamber communication practices as not following any particular set of rules.

My interaction with Clara and Grace illustrates how hegemonic notions about ‘good business’ enter into the evaluation of communication practices by organizational members. Clara and Grace negatively evaluate their organization’s communication practices and attribute the ‘bad’ communication practices to the organizational members’ “Asian” and “culturally diverse” identities. Their evaluation illustrates how normative business communication is popularly associated with (American) culturally homogenous groups. In addition, this analysis shows yet another way that the “Asian” identity is characterized by group members. Previously, Asian has been characterized as a homogenous racial identity or as an identity tied to multiple different countries. Both these characterizations of Asian identity have been positioned as leading to successful business practices. In this example, Clara simultaneously positions Asians as a singular racial group and as a culturally diverse, rather than a homogenous, group. When positioned this way, Asians are characterized as diverse and therefore unable to successfully communicate in their organization. Even though an Asian identity can be empowering, in this case, Clara and Grace illustrate how an Asian identity can be positioned as a hindrance to ‘good’ business communication practices.

4. Conclusions

This analysis has illustrated some of the ways that AACC members constitute an “Asian American” identity. “Asian” is characterized as a nonsensical racial identity category imposed by outsiders, as a voluntarily adopted homogeneous local Asian “community”, as an “international” identity tied to multiple countries, as not primarily “Asian” but rather “multi-ethnic”, as locally constituted of multiple different nationalities and cultures (e.g. “Filipino”, “Cambodian”, “Thai”), and as a locally based yet “culturally diverse” identity that “messes up” communication. Overall, AACC members use knowledge about how ‘others’ might perceive Asians (as a singular race) and their own knowledge about intra-Asian diversity (multiple nationalities and cultures) as resources to communicatively construct Asian identity in a way that supports a successful organizational identity. Thus, organizational goals outweigh goals for authentic ethnic representation for this particular Asian community.

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