

# 1

## Introduction

### Opening Up the Margins in the Mainstream

**HOW DOES AN INDIVIDUAL MAKE SENSE** of and handle his or her multiple, sometimes conflicting identities? When I asked how he hoped to maintain his self-defined Indian culture, Samit, a twenty-four-year-old second-generation Indian American, replied:

The biggest way is marrying an Indian. Getting involved in the community and temple and attending its cultural events. Language is a big deal. . . . There are things you can talk about with Indians that you can't talk about with others. . . . I think growing up here it's very hard; a lot of culture and attributes of being Indian are lost. Sometimes I think I'm no different than Joe Smith who lives next door.

Later in the interview he also fondly recalled a ras garba festival held at his parents' home, which involves dancing in concentric circles while clapping sticks and hands—part of a traditional religious event for Gujarati Indians:

We used to have garba at our house growing up. My [White] American friends came over and they loved it. We had a blast. It was fun teaching them how to do it and doing it with them.

These two quotes suggest the multifaceted nature of an answer to how people maintain multiple commitments. Samit feels highly Americanized yet still attached to an ethnic culture that distinguishes him from the majority, as seen in the first quote. At times he is able to bridge those parts, such as with a ras garba festival that translates well to other Americans, as seen in the second quote.

Similarly, when I asked James, a twenty-seven-year-old second-generation Korean American, what effect the model minority stereotype of Asian

Americans as diligent had on him at work as a financial advisor, he smiled and said:

That's why I wear glasses. I wear glasses because I think [that] people think "Asian American, glasses, studies hard, works hard." I wear contacts on the weekend when I am with my friends. Maybe I play the race card a little bit. Sure, why not, if people think, especially in financial advising, [that] I am good with numbers.

He works in the primary labor market, is fluent in standard English, and has the dress, accent, and other commonplace signifiers of middle-class Americans his age. Yet, contrary to popular assumptions, he does not leave his minority status at the door when he enters the workplace. Instead, he makes an effort to appear racialized. By consciously acting as a "model minority," he hopes to climb the job ladder. Like Samit, he looks for ways to bring together the various elements of himself.

These anecdotes draw attention to how people deal with contrasting identities, whether as an ethnic minority who grew up in middle-class America, a mother with a full-time career (Blair-Loy 2003), a gay man living in suburbia (Brekhus 2003), and so on. This study analyzes second-generation Korean American and Indian American professionals living in Dallas, Texas—a geographic region under-explored for Asian Americans—to investigate how they both differentiate and integrate their ethnic, racial, and American identities in daily life. I frame these professionals as the margins in (instead of versus) the mainstream in order to move away from the presumption that minorities always separate, both cognitively and in practice, their ethnic and racial identities from the majority. The term "margins in the mainstream" refers to people who are connected to yet separated from a social space, in this case the mainstream. As a result, they have multiple sets of commitments. Allowing for both tensions and associations between group identities not only captures the experiences of ethnic minorities, but also draws attention more broadly to the agency we all have in dealing with contradictory interests. Moreover, this perspective offers new insights into assessing identity development and performance, immigrant adaptation, and racialization. The study is based on in-depth interviews with almost ninety individuals as well as participant observations (see chapter 2 for research design). Informants' voices dominate in the text. I emphasize how the experiences of Korean Americans and Indian Americans overlap, while noting their particularities.

So much of the discourse on ethnicity, including fiction, autobiographical essays, and academic research, refers to American culture as modern and as

prioritizing the individual relative to a traditional and constraining immigrant heritage. This discursive dichotomy conceals the cultural conservatisms found in America, including the constraints placed on women and the rise of overt religiosity. The West is extolled at the expense of “Oriental” countries, which are criticized as pre-enlightened (Said 1978). Yet Asian Americans themselves often interpret their experiences within this framework, and denying its power would misrepresent their subjectivities and practices. “Asian” and “American” values presumably contrast with one another. The former is read as an emphasis on family, elders, and social conservatism, and the latter as a prioritization on personal autonomy and individualism (Ahn 1999; Jo 2002; Kibria 2002; Maira 2002; Min and Kim 1999).<sup>1</sup> I accept that people understand their lives within this dichotomy, but in this study I demonstrate how they also move beyond it in their expressions of their identities (Zhou and Lee 2004), signaling the constructed nature of this dualism while recognizing its felt effects.

## MAKING SENSE OF ETHNIC AND RACIAL IDENTITIES

Samit and James make sense of their backgrounds in ways that both differentiate them from and allow for association with Whites. This latter possibility breaks with the standard framing of ethnic communities—that immigrant groups’ identities only create a severance from the majority. Previous research suggests that rather than maintaining divergent identities, the second generation privileges one over others. Groups presumably either assimilate into a segment of American society while keeping a weakened symbolic ethnicity, or they remain embedded in an ethnic community (that may or may not encourage success in mainstream institutions) (Alba and Nee 2003; Child 1943; Gans 1979; Waters 1990, 1998).<sup>2</sup> Child (1943) posited three resolutions to the second generation’s internal conflict between ethnic and American interests: to assimilate and break ties with one’s ethnic community, to assert one’s ethnic culture and fortify relationships within one’s local setting, or to be “apathetic” and feel lost between cultures.<sup>3</sup> Each of these scenarios hypothesizes choosing primarily one community as the healthiest means of adaptation. If one is extremely committed to a role identity, then that identity might always be active, merging with the person to form a core part of the self (Heiss 1992). For instance, Blair-Loy (2003) finds that many career women, particularly those of earlier generations, opted not to have children because of a commitment to their professions, which seemed at odds with being a mother (see also Stryker and Macke 1978). From a different perspective, postcolonial scholars argue that the nation incorporates diversity often by essentializing immigrants as

the “Other” rather than by treating them as equal competitors for resources, which still affirms the either/or binary of identities (San Juan 2002).

Other researchers accentuate groups’ sustained ties to multiple identities, rather than a primary one—identities that lack any connection, as if they were in distinct worlds (Uba 1994).<sup>4</sup> One acts “Asian” at some times and “American” at other times, with no interaction between the roles. Even theorists who allow for ethnic lifestyles to change and emerge from one’s local environment emphasize the distance that such identities create from other groups, rather than a possible alignment of group commitments (Roosens 1989; Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976).

As fitting a margins *in* the mainstream perspective, I consider how individuals develop an ethnic identity in order to be not only distant from but also at times accepted by other Americans, with whom they also identify, as in the case of Samit. Informants noted significant tensions between their self-defined ethnic and American lifestyles, as fitting the standard dichotomous framing discussed earlier. As explained in chapter 3, they also believed that a commitment to an ethnic community would give them group pride and allow them to associate with Whites despite tensions. First-generation immigrant parents prescribed a selective assimilation, hoping that honoring cultural differences in private and selectively presenting them in public would facilitate mobility despite one’s minority status. The second generation tried to adhere to parental expectations in developing ethnic identities, although in often overlooked ways and with varying results. Actors hoped to integrate by developing salient ethnic identities, rather than preferring a “post-ethnic” America in which group differences are voluntary and secondary (Hollinger 1995).<sup>5</sup> Still, even when parts of informants’ background were accepted by others, they were not automatically embraced. When Samit invited his friends to take part in a *ras garba*, it became simply a dance in which they learned how to clack sticks and move their feet, rather than to be part of the religious significance behind it.<sup>6</sup> The majority culture’s selective tolerance of ethnic differences impacts how Korean and Indian Americans form ethnic identities and ultimately adapt.

Informants interpreted their racial minority status in a similar way, as both distinguishing them from and allowing for links to Whites. Asian Americans are racialized as foreigners (Ancheta 1998). This means that they encounter a general discrimination as non-Whites and a more specific and pronounced racial treatment as inherently Asian and un-American. How they make sense of race relative to other minorities and the majority remains in question. These

second-generation professionals' class status does not erase the effects of race but instead alters them in a way that suits the needs of the state and capitalism (Omi and Winant 1994; Small 1999). For instance, middle-class-specific stereotypes include the model minority, who is passive and lacking social skills but who contributes to the economy, and the "yellow peril," whose hyper-feminine sexuality (for both women and men) and accomplishments construct one as a foreigner who threatens the nation's purity, safety, and prosperity during times of economic decline and war (Fong 1998). Asian Americans' ethnic background (including religion or food preferences) also becomes racialized, that is, evaluated not based on its merits but on members' racial status. Emphasis within this perspective falls on deconstructing essentialist depictions of Asians and Asian Americans, such as that of the "Easterner" not only as different from the enlightened "Westerner," but as his or her inferior opposite (Okimoto 1994; Said 1978). Other research examines individual and institutional discrimination within the social structure, along with actors' resistance to it (Collins-Lowry 1997; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Such standard framing of minorities and immigrants is necessary in order to draw attention to injustices and group agency. In all the chapters, but especially chapters 3 and 4, I explain participants' general critique of discrimination from their perspective as supposed non-White foreigners, discrimination that includes instances of cultural intolerance, property damage, and physical threats.

Still, this critique of racism is not the total sum of Korean and Indian Americans' identities as racialized communities within the mainstream. As explained in chapter 4, contrary to common assumptions regarding U.S.-born minorities, actors did not embrace a pan-ethnic or person-of-color identity or develop a reactive ethnicity of themselves as "real minorities."<sup>7</sup> Indian Americans in particular had weak pan-ethnic and even South Asian ties. This is despite the fact that both ethnic groups live in supposedly one of the more racist states of the country.<sup>8</sup> These college-educated professionals did not claim to be beyond the effects of racism but instead made sense of the racialized image of potential invaders in ways that connected them to the majority, in particular to other immigrants, and kept them distinct from other minorities. In this way Asian Americans, rather than identifying themselves as either marginal or mainstream, can critique Whites for racism while still maintaining camaraderie with them.<sup>9</sup> This in turn has implications for other minorities and class groups. Overall, informants made sense of both their ethnicity and

race in ways designed to encourage their integration into mainstream society *as* ethnic minorities, not despite that status. I pay particular attention to the question of whether their efforts likely lead to an equal status with Whites or perpetuate stratifications.

## PERFORMING IDENTITIES IN CULTURAL SPACES

Understanding the ethnic and racial identity formations of the second generation explains only half of how individuals handle their status as margins in the mainstream. I now turn to how they deal with their commitments to their dissimilar ethnic, racial, and American identities in daily life. How do Asian Americans decide which identity to act on and in which manner as they encounter racial, class, gender, religious, and other hierarchies, and as they cross distinct contexts? For instance, do women and men go out of their way to act “American” at work, or do they allow themselves to express an ethnic identity? Do they accept parents’ expectations of how to act in the home sphere, and if so, how easy is it to fulfill those expectations? Do they support an ethnic community but engage in leisure activities, such as drinking, in order to appear “American”? Although much has been written on multiculturalism from the perspectives of philosophy, history, politics, and cultural studies, how individuals embody multicultural lives remains underexplored. To understand how groups perform their identities, we must appreciate two factors: the influence of a cultural space on people’s behaviors, and how that influence in turn impacts their commitment to multiple, at times contrasting, interests.

People do not present any identity they wish or in any way that they please. Everyday actions occur within cultural spaces, which I refer to as domains, and must be contextualized. Little attention has been paid to the effects of domains, including one’s office, home, leisure activities, and civic associations, on identity choices (Brekhus 2003). Recent research on culture and cognition argues that the culture of a place itself, apart from the particular actors within it, shapes how people think of themselves and process information (Cerulo 2002; DiMaggio 1997; Zerubavel 1993). Individuals make sense of the same stimuli differently based on the setting, even when the same persons are present across them (Lave 1988; Resnick 1991). More research is necessary on the effects of context on individuals’ self-expressions (Hall and Okazaki 2002). As Douglas (1986) argues, institutions “think” for us, telling us how to make sense of items and events within them. Regardless of one’s personal inclinations, a cultural schema impacts which self-conceptions and skills we consider

most appropriate in that context. How people decide how to act depends, then, not only on others in the interaction, but also on the cultural code, or implicit cultural rules, of each domain (Swidler 2001).<sup>10</sup> Though there are subtle differences between the terms code, schema, frame, and script, I use them to refer to people's mental image of a setting's expected mode of behavior (Fiske and Taylor 1984).

Interviewees put in concerted efforts to conform to the cultural frame of a setting (Goffman 1974). For example, Sangeeta, a twenty-three-year-old Indian American woman, said she engaged in "silly" practices in the home that she felt obligated to do given its cultural code, which is to create an atmosphere reminiscent of one's own upbringing, as explained in chapter 6:

In my little apartment I have a little area, and I do my thing in the morning and . . . at night I do my prayers. And I feel bad if I don't, like I am neglecting something, and it is all mental. It's kind of silly. I don't know what I am doing, but I still need to do it to fulfill my own desire. A lot of it is based on how I was raised; it is pretty much a family tradition. It is a family tradition not related to God, but to the house.

Even though she lived on her own, she felt the "need to fulfill" a desire attached to the notion of her "house." Understanding the effects of space explains why people engaged in emotional reactions and practices that did not feel natural. Informants similarly made an effort to fit the codes of civil society, the leisure sphere, and the workplace. In chapters 5–7, I elaborate on each location's cultural frame, and on how participants went out of their way to observe them.

The cultural schemas also shaped how individuals dealt with commitments to multiple identities, such as whether to express one's "American" lifestyle at home or marginal interests in the public sphere. The dominant perspective on identity management allows individuals to maintain contrasting roles, which are compartmentalized in separate spheres. As individuals we can incorporate numerous symbols and competing value sets (DiMaggio 1997; Swidler 2001; Hurh and Kim 1984).<sup>11</sup> Current literature actually celebrates the biculturalism of both the first and second generation as the healthiest way to adapt (Buriel 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). For instance, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that maintaining strong connections to one's private community offers support as young people go through school (see also Gibson 1988; Zhou and Bankston 1997). The notion that groups choose a different identity as they cross distinct realms is supported by both theoretical work in social psychology (Alexander and Wiley 1992; Stryker 1992; Tajfel and Turner 1986)<sup>12</sup> and cultural

sociology.<sup>13</sup> Empirical work on ethnic identities (Maira 2002; Saenz and Aguirre 1991), pan-ethnicity (Cornell 1988), and the experience of minorities in the workplace (Anderson 1999a; Bell 1990) indicates the same.<sup>14</sup> According to these studies, ethnic minorities supposedly act “American” or “pan-ethnic” in mainstream, public spheres and “ethnic” or “racial” in marginal, private ones. Individuals’ agency is seen in their ability to switch between identities as context dictates, which can be emotionally challenging (Danico 2004). People bring together various identities when those identities are defined as comparable (Brekhus 2003; Nippert-Eng 1996).

Contrary to this widespread assumption, though, we do not always compartmentalize contradictory identities in discrete spaces or times (Danna-Lynch 2004). In chapters 5–7 I explain the tensions that interviewees encountered within various locations between their identities and then stress how they dealt with those tensions. It is too simplistic to say that people feel or perform only one identity at a time. I look for how actors displayed multiple roles rather than always switch between them.<sup>15</sup> As already noted, James conveys a racial identity in his workplace. It is true that interviewees commonly went out of their way to perform one identity at a time as expected within a domain, such as Sangeeta’s attempt to act traditionally religious at home. But rather than *only* segregate identities in discrete spheres, actors also pursued multiple, competing interests within each space, even at times through what I refer to as a “lived hybridity.” That is, they engaged in practices and decision-making processes that brought together elements of their ethnic, racial, and American lifestyles, at times simultaneously, to form a distinctive way of being.<sup>16</sup> The current academic use of cultural hybridity concentrates on cultural products, such as music or films, or on liminal spaces and events (Zhou and Lee 2004). These are separate from people’s everyday experiences, which supposedly remain within static categories segregated in distinct spheres. Such presumed segregation in turn makes hybrid products and spaces so emotionally resonant (Maira 2002).<sup>17</sup> I apply the lens of hybridity to daily life. Even Sangeeta expressed “American” interests in the home in deciding whether to work outside the home when she has children. She resolved this dilemma by finding a way to maintain a self-defined gendered, ethnic lifestyle and simultaneously identify as an American feminist despite its felt contradictions, discussed in chapter 6. Although Samit carried out an ethnic and religious festival in the home sphere, he did so in a way that made non-Indians feel welcome. Participants struggled to express their multiple interests as they moved through the domains of work, home, leisure, and civil society.



How interviewees handled their various roles depended, in turn, on the cultural scripts of a space. James illustrates a lived hybridity by acting on a racialized image of “Asian” in a way that concurrently promoted an employee identity in the white-collar workplace. He used the prop of a pair of eye-glasses to demonstrate that he is a *model* minority (Goffman 1959), enabling him to suit the cultural and financial goals of his workplace, as discussed in chapter 5. Rarely did actors consider violating domain codes by, for instance, wearing ethnic attire in the corporate workplace, which would appear too foreign and disrupt employee unity. Actors stayed within other domain codes as they brought together diverse sets of interests. In civil society the expectation is that organizations connect people who otherwise would not interact (Alexander and Smith 1993). Informants enjoyed bonding with co-ethnics in their organizations, but they went about their activities in a manner that still conformed to the schema of civil society. This shaped, for instance, the kinds of conversations members had relative to those in which they engaged in the leisure sphere, which had a different set of cultural expectations, as elaborated in chapter 7. In the home sphere informants found ways to express their Americanized interests when making key decisions, such as whether to move away from parents, whom to marry, whether (for women) to stay at home when children were born, and other issues. They accomplished this in ways that supported the home-domain schema of a semitransitional ethnic lifestyle, as explained in chapter 6. In these ways they could affirm an ethnic solidarity across multiple spheres and still appear as proper workers, moral families, and full cultural citizens, instead of as dangerous or inept outsiders.

So we see that by adopting a margins-in-the-mainstream perspective, second-generation immigrants have multiple identities that they define as both in tension and as in dialogue, not just the former. Similarly, they act on their multiple lifestyles by at times embracing one over another but at other times bringing them together even when they feel as if they contradict.

## ASSESSING ADAPTATION, UNCOVERING STRATIFICATION

The fact that second-generation Asian Americans can make sense of and enact their identities in a combined, not only segregated, manner offers additional means of assessing immigrant adaptation and considering stratification, elaborated upon in chapter 8. Dominant adaptation theories, such as assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964), segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993), reactive ethnicity (Bean and Stevens 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), and pan-ethnicity (Cornell 1988; Espiritu 1992) allow for individuals to

have multiple roles but assume that people separate both what their identities mean and where they are performed. Individuals supposedly define their lifestyles in competition with one another, and so a preference for one category means an aversion toward another. For instance, prioritizing a pan-ethnic or ethnic identity rather than an American one suggests a resistance or even hostility toward Whites. Conversely, acting “American” presumably signals a lack of interest in an ethnic or pan-ethnic identity, even if done more as a racial strategy to not seem foreign. But, as seen for Samit and James, this inherent resistance is not always the case. We first must understand how actors interpret their identity categories in ways that both contrast one another and allow for dialogue. Their interpretations, explained in chapters 3 and 4, indicate whom they feel close to and distant from, and so how they begin to adapt.

Following this reconsideration of identity meanings, it is important to investigate the assumption, seen in chapters 5–7, that people segregate where they perform their identities. As mentioned earlier, ethnic minorities supposedly adopt a mainstream role in public and a marginal one in private. According to prevailing theories, the more one does so, one furthers one’s integration because one acts like everyone else in public institutions and is treated accordingly. Conversely, the more one experiences one’s ethnicity and/or race at work, in leisure spaces, or in civil society, the stronger the pluralism. But if we allow groups to express multiple identities within a single sphere in daily life, we start to question this assumption, and so theories of adaptation change too. James, for instance, fits in at work as an ethnic employee and is likely rewarded by his employers for acting “Asian” to the extent that he brings in more profits. Similarly, civil society and the leisure sphere may endorse multicultural themes, in which ethnicity and race are selectively welcomed.<sup>18</sup> To what extent “mainstream” spaces even exist, in which ethnicity and race have little relevance, remains in doubt (Waldinger 2003).

Actors may not only express unexpected identities in ways that clearly suit the domain code but also in ways that are not anticipated and are even controversial, but without disrupting the domain schema. It is difficult to negotiate implicit rules of conduct, yet this becomes possible when one is highly motivated (DiMaggio 1997; Heiss 1992). For instance, one may speak a foreign language at a workplace despite its clear preference for English. He or she could violate the code by using the language unabashedly and so draw explicit ethnic boundaries from others, or could actually fit within the schema if this was done strategically so as not to disturb workplace expectations.<sup>19</sup> Similarly,