

“I Am a Normal Asian American?”: Diverse Ways That Asian Americans Respond to an Open-Ended Question About Their Racial Identification

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Pan-ethnic labels such as “Asian” and “Asian American” are used to describe a vastly diverse group. However, the majority of those who would be described by others as Asian or Asian American do not choose to describe themselves with these terms (Ruiz et al., 2023). In this mixed method study, we used a Consensual Qualitative Research–Modified approach (Spangler et al., 2012) to inductively explore the preferred racial labels of 501 Asian American participants. The most common codes for racial self-identification were Asian (20%), Asian American (19%), Asian ethnic group (e.g., Korean; 17%), and Asian ethnic group plus American (e.g., Korean American; 11%). In addition to the racial self-identification codes, themes related to and beyond race emerged. For example, some participants elaborated on their racial and ethnic identities and specified other salient aspects (e.g., physical characteristics). Given the activist roots of the term “Asian American” (S. Sue et al., 2021) and heterogeneity within the group, we quantitatively examined if preferred racial labels were related to experiences of racism and demographic factors. While there were no demographic differences between the racial self-identification codes, there were significant differences in racism-related stress. Results from our study offer another dimension of diversity, chosen racial self-identification, which may be related to Asian Americans’ experiences with racism.

What is the public significance of this article?

We suggest offering an open-ended racial identification question, in addition to conventional checkbox approaches, on demographic forms. For clinicians, this could open a door to important conversations about how Asian American clients relate to their race. Researchers may gain relevant context about participants. Providing space for client and participant voices is more inclusive than solely offering predetermined categorical options for racially minoritized individuals to choose from.

Keywords: Asian Americans, Asians, race, identity, measurement

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Critical examination of how cultural constructs are researched is needed to improve psychological science (Causadias et al., 2023). For instance, one study found that the status quo method of using checkboxes on demographic forms to assess race is not inclusive of participants of colors’ preferred racial labels (Woolverton & Marks, 2023). For participants of Asian ancestry, pan-ethnic labels such as “Asian” and “Asian American”¹ are widely used by researchers and laypeople to describe at least 40 distinct subgroups that speak different languages and have distinct ethnic cultures (D. W. Sue et al., 2019). However, the majority of those who would be described by others as Asian or Asian American do not choose to describe themselves with these terms (Ruiz et al., 2023). Therefore, we sought to center Asian American participants’ voices in our exploration of racial self-identification on demographic forms with an open-ended format.

¹ The term “Asian American” was specifically created to unify people who have shared experiences of racialization and racism (S. Sue et al., 2021). We use the term Asian American, inclusively, to describe people of Asian ancestry, monoracial and multiracial, who live in the United States, regardless of citizenship.

The present study is situated in an Asian Americanist framework (Tseng & Lee, 2021), which emphasizes the diversity of experiences within the group and the importance of collective resistance to racism. Asian Americanist Psychology assumes that race is a social construct that was imposed to oppress people of color and promote White supremacy. Tseng and Lee described:

We critically question dominant paradigms and narratives about the Asian American experience, and seek to reconstruct, redefine, and reformulate what it means to be Asian in a society that has been historically shaped by White supremacy, colonialism, and other systems of oppression. (p. 695)

Despite being the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States, increasing 81% between 2000 and 2019 from 10.5 million to 18.9 million (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), only recently have scholars begun to focus on how Asian Americans are targeted by racism (Kim & Shah, 2020; S. Sue et al., 2021). Investigation of Asian Americans' self-racial identification is long overdue and may provide insight into Asian Americans' racial experiences, importantly, in their own words.

“Asian American” to Describe a Diverse Group that is Bonded by Racism

“Asian” and “Asian American” are pan-ethnic racial labels used to broadly describe a group that is diverse in terms of ethnic culture, phenotype, immigration history, as well as demographic factors, such as generational status, social class, and religion (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021; D. W. Sue et al., 2019). Despite appearing to be straightforward, understandings of what it means to be Asian American are contested, contextual, and evolve over time (Kibria, 1998; S. Sue et al., 2021).

Pan-Ethnic Racial Terms: Imposed Monolithically and Claimed in Solidarity

“Asian American” was coined in the late 1960s as an assertion of identity in opposition to monolithic racialization imposed by others (Lee, 2019; Okamoto & Mora, 2014; Rao, 2018). The label sought to create solidarity between ethnic groups within the Asian diaspora and to acknowledge their shared—although nuanced and unique—interconnected histories of racism, institutional discrimination, immigration patterns, and exploited labor (Rao, 2018). However, the adoption of a collective Asian American identity has been challenging, given ethnic cultural dissimilarities as well as historical tensions between Asian groups in Asia (e.g., Japanese colonization of Korea). Further, Asians in the United States have been purposefully fractured as part of divide-and-conquer tactics. For example, Chinese and Korean Americans displayed their ethnicity on buttons to avoid being mistaken as Japanese during World War II (Rao, 2018).

While pan-ethnic terms mask within-group heterogeneity (Yoo et al., 2022), they highlight the common experiences of racism directed at Asian Americans, including the model minority myth, perpetual foreigner stereotype, invisibility, unrecognized diversity, and exposure to racial discrimination (S. Sue et al., 2021). Centering race, rather than ethnic culture, also prompts resistance to racism and interrogation of White supremacy (Ifitkar & Museus, 2018).

However, people who are considered by others to be Asian American based on phenotype do not necessarily identify

themselves as Asian American (Ruiz et al., 2022; Suyemoto, 2002). Findings from the 2016 National Asian American Survey indicated that only 21% of respondents of Asian descent self-identified as Asian or Asian American (Lee et al., 2018; Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020). More recently, in a large-scale nationally representative study of Asian Americans, Ruiz et al. (2023) provided categories and asked participants which terms they use to describe themselves most often. They found that only 28% of participants selected the “Asian” (12%) or “Asian American” (16%) labels. Instead, many participants indicated using Asian ethnic labels to reflect their identity, either alone (26%, e.g., Japanese) or in combination with American (25%, e.g., Japanese American). A smaller subset of participants solely identified as American (10%) or with a specific region (6%, e.g., South Asian).

Considerations When Personally Claiming “Asian American”

In a qualitative focus group study with 264 participants, a common theme was that too many different groups are lumped together under the labels “Asian American” and “Asian” (Ruiz et al., 2022). Ruiz et al., 2022 found that the umbrella terms were sometimes used out of necessity rather than an active claiming of racial identity. For example, participants from smaller ethnic groups, such as Bangladeshi and Bhutanese, reported the use of Asian because others lacked knowledge about their group. Participants noted a theme of incongruency between how they see themselves and how others see them. Echoing this finding, Ruiz et al. (2023) found that 90% of their participants reported that Asians in the United States have many different cultures, yet most participants (60%) felt seen by others as simply Asian.

Another challenge is the tendency for East Asians to be centered in understandings of “Asian” in the United States and “Asian American” (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2022). Lee and Ramakrishnan (2020) found that White, Black, Latinx, and Asian American individuals were more likely to expect Asian Americans to be of East Asian descent (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean) rather than from South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) backgrounds, despite South Asians predominantly identifying as Asian and Asian American on racial demographic forms. Conversely, Yamashita (2022) found that some Southeast Asian Americans (e.g., Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, and Vietnamese) may distance themselves from an Asian American pan-ethnic identity.

Self-identification may be shaped by dynamic individual and social-contextual factors including gender, generation, social class, age, personal experiences, language, religion, and migration histories (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Park, 2008; Ruiz et al., 2022). For example, those who are foreign born are more likely to identify with their national origin or ethnicity (Lee et al., 2018). In contrast, shared experiences of being second generation are associated with a pan-ethnic identification among college students (Park, 2008).

While demographic, social, and cultural factors shape individual and group meanings, it is unknown if identification choice may also be related to experiences of racism-related stress. While research and theory suggest that increased awareness of racism supports rejection of stereotypes and engagement in collective action (e.g., Chopra, 2021; Hwang, 2021; Tran & Curtin, 2017), other research suggests that some Asian Americans might not recognize racism directed against their group (e.g., Chou & Feagin, 2015). Chen et al. (2006) found a conformity racial identity profile

in Asian Americans, which reflects rejection of one's group and preference for Whiteness, had the lowest levels of racism-related stress, and the highest levels of color-blind racial attitudes. Therefore, we wondered if a preference to racially identify in pan-ethnic racial terms such as "Asian American" might reflect recognition of racism and experiences of racism-related stress.

In summary, the term "Asian American" was coined with social justice motivations to help facilitate allyship, collective action, and a shared political agenda in a diverse group. However, despite the unifying ambitions of an inclusive Asian American identity, not all Asians in the United States today identify with the pan-ethnic label. Many individuals of Asian descent are likely to identify with their ethnicity rather than as Asian or Asian American (Lee et al., 2018; Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2023). While various factors shape understandings of Asian and Asian American, it is unknown if identification choice may be related to experiences of racism.

Use of "Asian American" and Checkbox Approaches in Research

Meta-research, or research on how research is conducted, is particularly important when studying race, ethnicity, and other forms of culture. Cultural assumptions are embedded in investigators, institutional policies, and power imbalances (Causadias et al., 2023). The lack of clarity around notions of Asian and Asian American has implications for research and clinical practice. For example, standardized demographic forms may overlook individual meanings that shed light on a person's identity (Woolverton & Marks, 2023).

Measurements of race typically rely on a checkbox approach that provides predefined options. Such approaches lack inclusivity (Woolverton & Marks, 2023) and can obscure within group diversity. Ruiz et al. (2022) found that "Asian American" felt like a forced choice due to the lack of inclusion of participants' ethnic backgrounds on demographic forms. For example, a Nepalese woman is quoted:

When I fill out forms, I select "Asian American," and that's why I consider myself as an Asian American. [It is difficult to identify as] Nepali American [since] there are no such options in forms. That's why, Asian American is fine to me.

In addition to being experienced as inaccurate, limited categorical options for reporting race can have negative impacts on respondents. For example, multiracial adolescents experienced decreased self-esteem and motivation after responding to a forced-choice (i.e., required response) demographic questionnaire that failed to account for their multiple racial identities (Townsend et al., 2009).

Woolverton and Marks (2023) used a mixed method approach to examine an open-ended method of identification versus a checkbox approach with categories from the demographic form used by the National Institutes of Health. Their findings indicated that, while participants selected racial labels offered in checkbox approaches, their preferred self-identified racial labels were not included in checkbox categories. Existing race options in checkboxes were more likely to capture White participants' preferred labels compared with the participants of color. Based on their findings, Woolverton and Marks (2023) recommended that

researchers utilize open-ended demographic questions for rich and nuanced data about race:

Open-ended questions yielded much more than labels; unsureness, amount qualifiers, and slang terms highlight the complex and meaningful descriptions adolescents associate with their ethnicity/race and culture. For those interested in studying more nuanced markers of identity, a qualitative or mixed method will shed light on identity experiences as well as labels. (p. 71)

They also acknowledged that checkboxes should not be disavowed completely as they offer practicality with large data sets for which open-ended questions would be excessively burdensome. However, Woolverton and Marks (2023) suggested that inductive data-driven approaches can be used to derive the labels that are offered for a more externally valid and inclusive approach. Their study provides a foundation and justification for future research to explore identity on demographic forms from the perspectives of participants. An examination of how Asian Americans describe their racial identity is needed due to the diversity within the group and the complex social and cultural understandings of pan-ethnic racial terms "Asian" and "Asian American."

The Present Study

In this mixed method study, we examined how Asian Americans racially identify in their own words. We take an Asian Americanist perspective, centering race and the perspectives of diverse individuals within an overlooked racial minoritized group. Due to the historical significance of resistance to racism in defining "Asian American" and the heterogeneity within the group, we were interested in examining if there were differences in racism experiences and demographics depending on how participants racially self-identified. Therefore, following an inductive qualitative analysis, we utilized the codes in exploratory quantitative analyses to examine if there were patterns between open-ended racial self-identification and racism-related stress, gender, generational status, and ethnic group.

Method

Participants

Participants were 501 Asian American adults (male = 252, female = 243) between the ages of 18 and 67 years ($M = 30.42$, $SD = 8.55$). Most of the sample identified as monoracial ($n = 452$) and East Asian (Chinese = 113, Korean = 60, Japanese = 32). The sample was ethnically diverse, including 43 Filipinx, 65 South Asian ($n = 45$ of Asian Indian descent), and 85 Southeast Asian ($n = 39$ of Vietnamese descent) participants. The sample was predominantly second generation (i.e., born in the United States with at least one immigrant parent; $n = 221$; 44.1%) and highly educated, with 63.8 % having received a bachelor's degree or higher. The current annual household income for 49.5 % of participants was under \$50,000 per year (see Table 1).

Materials

This study was part of a larger project that examined internalized racism and Asian American mental health. Relevant measures for the present study are described.

Table 1
Demographics by Identification Code

Demographic	Full sample (n = 495)		Asian (n = 90)		Asian American (n = 86)		Asian ethnic group (n = 75)		Asian ethnic plus American (n = 49)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender										
Female	243	49.1	46	51.7	45	52.3	36	48.6	24	49.0
Male	252	50.9	43	48.3	41	47.7	38	51.4	25	51.0
Generation status										
1st	87	18.2	15	17.2	5	5.9	15	20.8	3	6.4
1.5	91	19.0	19	21.8	17	20.0	19	26.4	15	31.9
2nd	221	46.2	39	44.8	45	52.9	28	38.9	21	44.7
3rd+	79	16.5	14	16.1	18	21.2	10	13.9	8	17.0
Adoption status										
Adopted	56	11.5	14	15.9	8	9.3	10	13.5	8	16.3
Not adopted	432	88.5	74	84.1	78	90.7	64	86.5	41	83.7
Race										
Monoracial	452	91.7	89	98.9	79	92.9	74	98.7	46	93.9
Multiracial	41	8.3	1	1.1	6	7.1	1	1.3	3	6.1
Ethnic group										
East Asian	239	48.2	45	50.0	39	45.3	45	60.0	36	73.5
South Asian	65	13.1	14	15.6	6	7.0	7	9.3	1	2.0
Filipino/ <i>alx</i>	43	8.7	3	3.3	6	7.0	9	12.0	5	10.2
Southeast Asian	85	17.1	17	18.9	16	18.6	12	16.0	6	12.2
Other	64	12.9	11	12.2	19	22.1	2	2.7	1	2.0

Note. First generation was defined as people who were born outside the United States and immigrated after the age of 5; 1.5 generation were people who immigrated to the United States at age 5 or younger; second generation were people born in the United States who had at least one immigrant parent; third generation plus were people born in the United States and whose parents were both also born in the United States.

UMass Boston Comprehensive Demographic Questionnaire, Revised

In addition to questions commonly found on demographic forms, the UMass Boston Comprehensive Demographic Questionnaire (Suyemoto et al., 2016 as cited in Wadsworth et al., 2016) inquires about nuanced information regarding race and ethnicity (e.g., cultural affiliation, neighborhood racial composition, perceptions of the participant's race) and other areas through both open-ended and close-ended questions.

The Racial and Ethnic Background section of the questionnaire is introduced with:

We're interested in getting a complete picture of your racial and ethnic background. Because this information can be so complex, we are going to ask you several questions about your race and ethnicity to get as complete a picture as possible.

Then, race is explicitly defined:

Racial categories are based on visible attributes (often skin or eye color and certain facial and bodily features) and self-identification. These groupings have social meanings that affect how people see themselves and are seen and treated by others. Race is not the same as ethnicity or culture.

The introduction and definition are immediately followed by the open-ended question about race that was analyzed in this study, "**In your own words, what is/are your racial identification(s)?**"

After the open-ended race question, on the same screen, participants were asked to indicate their race in a check-all-that-apply format. The prompt stated, "Although the categories listed below may not represent your full identity or use the language you

prefer, for the purpose of this survey, please indicate which group below most accurately describes your racial identification (check all that apply)." The options for this question included: Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous; Asian/Asian American; Black, Latinx/Hispanic (Non-White), Middle Eastern/North African (Non-White), Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, White, Multiracial (please specify); and Not listed (please specify).

Asian American Racism-Related Stress Inventory

The Asian American Racism Related Stress Inventory (AARRSI; Liang et al., 2004) measures stress from direct and indirect exposure to racism for Asian Americans. Twenty-nine items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*this event never happened to me or someone I know*) to 5 (*this event happened and I was extremely stressed*). Participants completed all three subscales of the AARRSI: Sociohistorical Racism (e.g., "You learn that, while immigration quotas on Asian peoples were severely restricted until the latter half of the 1900s, quotas for European immigrants were not"), General Racism (e.g., "Someone tells you that they heard that there is a gene that makes Asians smart"), and Perpetual Foreigner Racism (e.g., "Someone you do not know speaks slow and loud at you"). The AARRSI has shown good internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$) in a sample that included diverse Asian ethnicities (Liang et al., 2004) and demonstrated good internal reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .96$).

Procedure

Most participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk ($n = 313$) via the research platform TurkPrime (<https://TurkPrime.com>;

Litman et al., 2017). Amazon Mechanical Turk is a crowdsourcing internet marketplace that has been increasingly used by social scientists over the past 2 decades. It has been shown to be a useful and reliable data collection tool (Buhrmester et al., 2018; Hauser & Schwartz, 2016). Other participants were recruited through flyers, emails, and classroom announcements at an urban commuter university in the northeast ($n = 33$) and online announcements on listservs, social media groups, websites, and blogs frequented by Asian Americans ($n = 75$). Recruitment materials specified that we were seeking Asian Americans or people who identify with an Asian ethnic group. Upon completion of a 30–45-min online survey, participants either received \$5 compensation, \$5 donated to a social justice organization, research credit, or entrance into a raffle for a \$100 gift card. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and data were collected between February and April 2017.

Philosophy of Science and Analysis

Responses to the open-ended racial demographic item were analyzed by a team of four coders using the qualitative method Consensual Qualitative Research–Modified (CQR-M; Spangler et al., 2012). CQR-M was adapted from Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill et al., 1997). It is designed to be used with relatively brief qualitative data from a large sample (Spangler et al., 2012). Both CQR and CQR-M rely on the consensus process, which requires that the research team agrees on the meaning of the text. “To attain consensus, the CQR process demands that the team members discuss disagreements and feelings, which requires that team members have strong interpersonal skills as well as like and respect each other” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 4). In contrast to an interrater reliability approach, CQR-M assumes that a team of researchers with diverse perspectives is better suited than individuals alone to understand the meaning of participants’ words, which can be nuanced and ambiguous (Spangler et al., 2012).

Hill et al. (2005) described CQR as “predominantly constructivist, with some post-positivist elements” (p. 197). Ontologically, we assumed the social constructivist view that there are multiple truths. At the same time, we incorporated a flavor of postpositivism through the consensus process in which “... team members are working to co-construct a ‘truth’ as they seek to represent the data as faith-fully as possible through integrating multiple perspectives” (Stahl et al., 2012, p. 26) and the exploratory quantitative analyses with the inductively derived racial identity codes. We thought that CQR-M, an inductive method suited for exploring unexpected ideas in large data sets (Spangler et al., 2012), best aligned with an Asian Americanist perspective. We sought to build on Ruiz et al.’s (2023) study, in which they provided predetermined categories for participants. By using CQR-M, we centered the voices of participants rather than imposing the research team’s ideas.

Coding Team and Reflexivity

The coding team consisted of four members who identify as Asian American. We are diverse in terms of our Asian American experiences, professional stages and research areas, and geographic locations. Three of the members are monoracial and transracially adopted. One member is multiracial. Three of the members are professors, two of whom focus on Asian American research and one of whom focuses on social cognition and bias. The third member is

currently a clinical psychology doctoral graduate student. One member is situated in the Northeast, two are currently in the Midwest, and one is bicoastal.

The function of the research team is to help one another stay as true to the data as possible. In addition to the consensus process during coding, this is achieved through an in-depth discussion of team members’ expectations and biases before data analysis. To practice reflexivity, prior to coding, the team discussed our positionalities, experiences related to race, what it means to be Asian American, assumptions about data, potential blind spots, and how we would manage disagreement and consensus building. We individually answered the open-ended racial demographic question that participants were given and discussed our answers as a group. While outside auditors are not required for CQR-M, we wanted to incorporate more perspectives to check our analysis. The auditing team consisted of two members, a multiethnic (Japanese and Indian) counseling psychology graduate student in New York City and a transracially adopted clinician who practices and trains graduate students in the Pacific Northwest.

Coding Process

Coding was an inductive and iterative process of individual coding, group discussion, and group coding. We individually reviewed all the responses to the open-ended question. In our initial individual reviews, we noted what stood out to us and potential themes that existed in the data. We then met as a group to discuss our observations. We observed that some participants gave straightforward answers about their racial identification, while others added context that was sometimes outside of what the research team considers to be race. The team agreed that this was meaningful and should be captured in our codebook. We also observed and integrated the ways in which participants responded. For example, answering the open-ended question by writing “Asian American” versus “*I am Asian American*.”

Prior to the next meeting, we individually coded a subset of 30 participants. We discussed our individual coding and looked for similarities and unique perspectives across the team. Throughout the consensus process, we discussed potential codes and multiple meanings until we reached an agreement on a preliminary codebook. Over the course of the next five meetings, we coded together as a group, continuously discussing and refining our codebook. The resulting outcome was a codebook with four primary categories and codes within each category.

Results

We were interested in understanding how Asian Americans racially identify when given the option to respond with an open-ended format. The inductive approach made space for the unexpected. See Table 2 for a summary of categories, codes, and counts.

Category 1: Identification

Identification captures participants’ direct response to the question, “In your own words, what is/are your racial identification(s)?” This category was focused on content. Every participant was coded into one of the 9 inductively derived codes in the Identification category. Codes are mutually exclusive, meaning each participant was only coded as one of the 9 codes within Identification.

Table 2

Qualitative Results From Open-Ended Question About Racial Identification

Category name	Code	Frequency (%)
Identification	Asian	90 (20.2)
	Asian American	86 (19.3)
	Asian ethnic group	75 (16.9)
	Asian ethnic group plus American	49 (11.0)
	More than one race, ethnicity, and/or region	38 (8.5)
	Regional category	17 (3.8)
	Multiracial identity	5 (1.1)
	American	4 (0.9)
	Other responses not captured	81 (18.2)
	Elaborated	34 (6.8)
Response style	Explicitly claimed	31 (6.2)
Specifics	Physical characteristics	80 (16)
	Ethnic or racial group/identity	15 (3.0)
	Quantities or parts	13 (2.6)
	Place	8 (1.6)
	Perceptions of people	8 (1.6)
	Other experiences/identities	8 (1.6)
	Adoptee status	6 (1.2)
	Ancestry, parents, and lineage	6 (1.2)
	“What is race?”	42 (8.4)
Did not answer the question	Other	4 (0.8)

Note. Code frequencies in the Identification category represent mutually exclusive responses. Codes in the remaining categories were not mutually exclusive, which means participant responses may be counted in one or more codes within the categories (or none).

We found that, while most described their race as Asian ($n = 90$) or Asian American ($n = 86$), the majority of participants (60.5%) answered the question about race in ways that went beyond these two codes. Notably, participants' interpretations and reports of their racial group membership often deviated from race to include ethnic, national, and regional identities, as well as other aspects of experience such as physical characteristics.

Asian

The answer “Asian” was the most frequent response ($n = 90$; 20.2%) within the Identification category. Of these 90 participants, 85 of them (94%) simply stated Asian. Five participants stated Asian and then elaborated further so were also coded in Categories 2 (Response Style) and/or 3 (Specifics).

Asian American

This was the next most frequent code, written by 86 participants (19.3%). Of these individuals, the majority said “Asian American” (unhyphenated), while 10 used the hyphenated “Asian-American”. Similar to the *Asian* code, the majority of participants ($n = 75$; 87%) solely stated “Asian American” (or “Asian-American”) in their open-ended responses. Eleven participants were also coded in Category 2 (Response Style) and/or Category 3 (Specifics).

Asian Ethnic Group

It was also relatively common for participants to answer the question about race in terms of a specific Asian ethnic group ($n = 75$;

16.9%). Ethnic groups included: Chinese ($n = 27$), Korean ($n = 19$), Filipino ($n = 9$), Indian ($n = 6$), Japanese ($n = 3$), Bengali ($n = 1$), Hmong ($n = 1$), Indonesian ($n = 1$), Taiwanese ($n = 1$), and Vietnamese ($n = 7$). Of these 75 participants, 11 (15%) were also coded in Category 2 (Response Style) and/or Category 3 (Specifics).

Asian Ethnic Group Plus American

A total of 49 participants (11.0%) incorporated an Asian ethnic group and American in some way, for example, “Japanese American,” “Filipino American,” and “I am Cambodian-American.” Ethnic American groups included Korean American ($n = 18$), Chinese American ($n = 12$), Japanese American ($n = 8$), Filipino/a American ($n = 5$), Vietnamese American ($n = 3$), Cambodian American ($n = 2$), and Pakistani American ($n = 1$). Seven of these 49 participants (14%) were coded in Category 2 (Response Style) and/or Category 3 (Specifics).

More Than One Race, Ethnicity, and/or Region

This code was used for 38 participants' responses (8.5%). It was coded when the answer included more than one race, ethnicity, and/or region in a format that did not prioritize one over others, such as “filipino and italian.” Additionally, it captured responses that used commas (e.g., “Cambodian, Chinese, American”) or slashes (e.g., “Chinese/British”) between identities. Within this code, a sizeable 37% ($n = 14$) also were coded in Category 2 (Response Style) and/or Category 3 (Specifics).

Regional Category

Some participants ($n = 17$; 3.8%) did not identify in racial (e.g., Asian or Asian American) or ethnic group terms. Rather, they wrote a regional category such as “East Asian” and “South Asian.” This code also included participants who stated a regional category and incorporated American, for example, “Southeast Asian American.” Three of the 17 (18%) respondents had codes in Category 2 (Response Style) and/or Category 3 (Specifics).

Multiracial Identity

There were 41 multiracial participants (8%) in the sample. Five of these participants (1.1% of the total sample, 12.2% of multiracial participants) explicitly stated a multiracial identity (rather than listing multiple), such as “mixed,” “Mixed-race,” and “Mixed Race/Multiracial/Hapa.” Some elaborated on their background, “Biracial, white and East Asian” and “Mixed race (Chinese and Irish).” Two participants were coded in Category 2 (Response Style) and/or Category 3 (Specifics).

American

While it was not common, four participants (0.9%) made it clear that they identify solely as American, “I am an American,” or in a way that American is primary, “I am an American of 100% Korean descent, I think of myself as an American.” One participant stated, “My heart bleeds American blood, ever since i was born. I'll live and die an American, Always have been proud of my country.” These three, out of the four total, were also coded in Category 2 (Response Style) and/or Category 3 (Specifics).

Other Responses Not Captured

We created a code for the 81 responses (18.2%) that did not fit into any of the other codes within this category. They included answers that did not have to do with race, ethnicity, or culture. Sixty-nine of these participants described their physical characteristics (e.g., "Brown eyes, petite.") and were thus coded in the respective Specifics category. Other responses did not have to do with Asian background (e.g., "human") or were unique in relation to other codes in this category (e.g., "Aryan Asian").

Category 2: Response Style

This category includes the codes *Elaborated* and *Explicitly Claimed*. Rather than being focused on the stated content, this category captures the participants' process or way of responding. They are not mutually exclusive, meaning participants could have been coded for any number of these codes (or none) as well as coded in Categories 1 and 3. For example, the response, "I have a round face, round eyes not slanted eyes. I am Korean" was coded as *Asian ethnic group* in the Identification category. It was further coded as *Elaborated* and *Explicitly Claimed* here in the Response Style category, as well as *Physical Characteristics* in the Specifics category.

Elaborated

Thirty-four participants (6.8%) answered the open-ended question about their identification and then provided further information and context. How they elaborated varied. Some included physical descriptions, "Filipino—brown skin, dark hair, black eyes." Some talked about place and ancestry, "I am Asian American—My parents are from India and I was born in the United States." Others elaborated on their related identities, "Asian American, Mostly Chinese." Of the 34 participants coded here, 32 were also coded in the Specifics category.

Explicitly Claimed

The coding team thought it was meaningful that 31 participants (6.2%) began their open-ended response by using words like "I am ..." or "I consider ..." or "I identify as ...," rather than simply stating an identity. The identities claimed were varied, for example, "I am a South Asian American" and "I see myself as a Chinese American" and "I am Cambodian-American." One participant both claimed their identity and simultaneously expressed uncertainty: "I am a normal Asian American?"

Category 3: Specifics

This category captured the rich details that participants included in their responses. A total of 118 participants (23.6%) endorsed at least one. Participants could have been coded for any number of these codes (or none) as well as coded in Categories 1 and 2. For example, one participant wrote in response to the open-ended prompt about race: "I am an Indian, born to an Indian Father & Indian Mother. As I am originated from Asian continent, I have been called Asian. As I live in USA now, I've been classified as Asian American. That's all I know." This participant was coded as *Asian ethnic group* in the Identification category. They were also coded as

both *Elaborated* and *Explicitly Claimed* in Category 2. Given that they described their racial/ethnic identity further, as well as their parents' backgrounds, where they came from and where they live, and how others refer to and classify them, we coded them with the following in Category 3: *Ethnic or racial group/identity; Ancestry, parents, and lineage; Place; Perceptions of people; and Other experiences/identities*.

Physical Characteristics

A sizable number of participants ($n = 80$; 16%) answered by describing their physical characteristics. Some talked about their physical attributes, "I have smaller, brown eyes, a more yellow tinted skin color, and wider nose" and "brown eyes, dark brown hair, light skin." Others referred to Asian features, for example, "East Asian face, even though I am from India (people usually think I am from East Asian countries)."

Ethnic or Racial Group/Identity

Another pattern that emerged for 15 participants was elaborating on their identity with an ethnic or racial identity or group. For example, "I identify with South East Asian (Chinese Indonesian)" and "Asian American or Vietnamese." This code was only used when the code *Elaborated* in the Response Style category was also endorsed. Further, it was only coded in relation to a group or identity (e.g., "My Vietnamese background ..."), rather than when participants referred to a place (e.g., "I'm from Vietnam") or when they referred to the identities of others (e.g., "my Vietnamese father ...").

Quantities or Parts

An interesting small trend in about 2.6% of participants ($n = 13$) was the description of race and/or ethnicity numerically, in percentages or distinct parts. Describing in parts was present in both multiracial and monoracial individuals. Six out of the 13 individuals in this code were multiracial (Asian and White) and specified, for example, "Asian American but mixed Asian and white (50–50)." Another multiracial participant was coded here due to describing themselves mathematically in the context of their physical characteristics, "I have dark brown hair, dark brown eyes, but some white features because I am a quarter white, so I am really pale looking. which is odd to see in an Asian person?" The remaining 53.8% of participants included in this code were monoracial. Monoracial participants answered this race question in terms of their multiethnic backgrounds, for example, "I identify myself as half Japanese, half American," and "7/8th Chinese 1/8 Vietnamese."

Place

Eight participants (1.6%) specified where they were born, "Full Chinese born in the U.S. with a medium nose, medium brown eyes, short black hair, thin, and tan skin color," or where they were from, "I am Asian American and White, more specifically coming from The Philippine Islands."

Perceptions of People

A salient feature for eight participants (1.6%) was how others do—or do not—perceive them. One participant succinctly described their

race as what others see, “I am considered yellow skinned.” In most responses, there was some element of misidentification on the part of others that was described. One participant started off their answer about race with the notion of confusion, “Confusing, people think I am Mexican/Hispanic, Italian, Greek, Israeli or Lithuanian.” Other participants contrasted their lived experiences with others’ perceptions, “I am white and east asian (German/Chinese) but because of my appearance, people usually assume I am neither white nor east asian. People usually assume I am south asian or middle eastern: Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Armenian etc.”

Other Experiences/Identities

In addressing a question about their race, eight participants (1.6%) brought up additional experiences that inform how they identify. These experiences were diverse, from accent, “chinese looks with lighter skin sound american”; to generational status, “Asian American. My parents are Thai and Lao, but I’m second-generation so I don’t think about it too much”; to dress, “Moderate skin tone, having kungum in face, wearing jewels, bangles and earring are compulsory”; and beyond.

Adoptee Status

In our sample of 501 participants, 56 were adopted (11.2%). Of the adopted individuals, six participants (1.2% of the total sample, 10.7% of adopted participants) integrated their identity as an adopted person. Most referenced their identity in relation to their birth and adoptive ethnic cultures, for example, “Korean-American Adoptee” and “Chinese American Adoptee.” One participant highlighted race by saying, “Transracially Adopted Asian American.”

Ancestry, Parents, and Lineage

Six participants (1.2%) talked about family in some form in their responses to the question about race. Five of the six participants in this code brought up their parents or grandparents directly, for example, “I’m born in the US but my parents are chinese,” and “I am half Chinese and half Japanese, raised by my Japanese grandmother in Honolulu, Hawaii,” while the other participant talked about their descent.

Category 4: Did Not Answer the Question

Forty-six participants (9.2%) did not answer the question in regard to their race.

“What Is Race?”

It is possible that about 8.4% of the sample ($n = 42$) misinterpreted the question. Participants provided a definition for race, instead of answering about their racial identification. Their definitions of race varied, for example, “Racial identifications are visible attributes like hair, skin, eye color” and “Racial identification is what race you feel like you fit in with. You share the same cultural characteristics as other people in the group.” Rather than offering definitions, other participants in this code talked about what race personally means to them, for example, “My birth place, the way I act and my morality,” and “My racial identification is how I look with facial hair, my skin color, as well as greetings I use with the people I identify with.” Some

participants spoke to both personal definitions and implications of race, for example, “My racial identification is defined by changes in racial or ethnic identity which occur at both the group and individual level. These are categories a society accepts and utilizes which can change over a period of time.”

Other

Four participants (0.8%) evaded the question intentionally. For example, one participant stated, “I do not really identify with race,” and another simply said “human.” This code in the category does not reflect a misunderstanding of the question. Rather, participants chose to explicitly decline identifying racially.

Exploratory Quantitative Analyses and Results

Identification Code and Racism-Related Stress

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) examined differences in racism-related stress by self-identification group. The following identification groups were large enough to compare: *Asian*, *Asian American*, *Asian ethnic group*, and *Asian ethnic group plus American*.

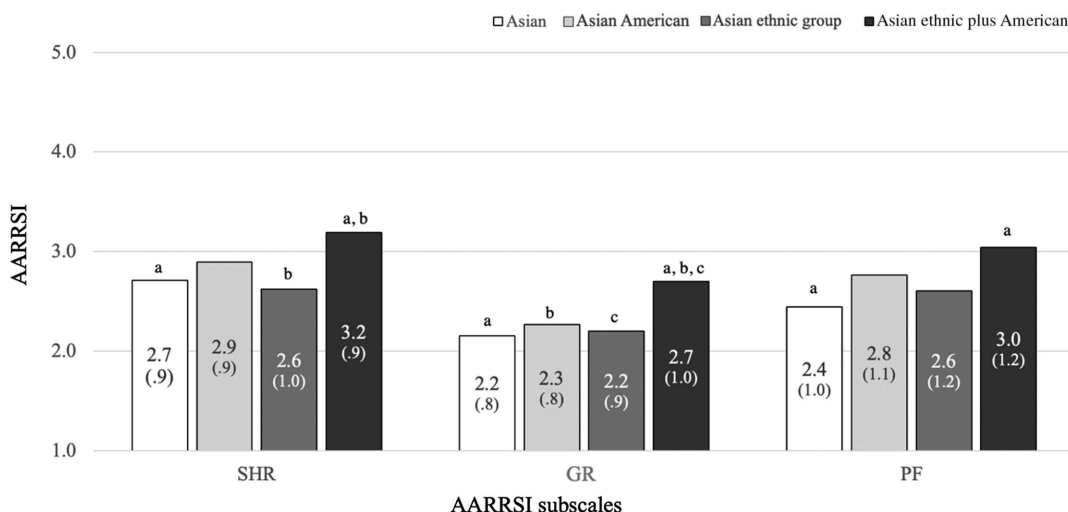
There were statistically significant differences on all subscales of the AARRSI: Sociohistorical Racism: $F(3, 296) = 4.11, p = .007$; General Racism: $F(3, 296) = 4.34, p = .005$; and Perpetual Foreigner Racism: $F(3, 296) = 3.48, p = .016$. Tukey’s honestly significant difference post hoc tests suggested that, in general, the *Asian ethnic plus American* group tended to have higher levels of racism-related stress, but specific patterns were different for each subscale. On the Sociohistorical Racism subscale, differences existed between *Asian ethnic plus American* compared to *Asian* ($p = .021$), as well as *Asian ethnic group* ($p = .007$). On the General Racism subscale, differences were between *Asian ethnic plus American* and all groups: *Asian* ($p = .004$), *Asian American* ($p = .034$), and *Asian ethnic group* ($p = .016$). Last, on the Perpetual Foreigner Racism subscale, there were only differences between *Asian ethnic plus American* and *Asian* ($p = .011$). See Figure 1.

Identification Code and Demographics

A series of chi-square analyses explored if the demographic variables gender (male, female), generational status (first, 1.5, second, third+), and ethnic group (East Asian, South Asian, Filipinx, Southeast Asian) were more likely than expected to be represented in self-identification groups. None of the chi squares were statistically significant.

A one-way ANOVA examined age differences by self-identification group. A Levene’s test indicated significant variations in age between the identity groups. Therefore, a Welch test was used rather than a one-way ANOVA. Identity group was significantly related to age, $F(3, 141.6) = 2.97, p = .034$. A Games–Howell post hoc test, which controls for unequal variances, did not indicate any statistically significant pairwise differences. However, marginally significant Games–Howell differences existed, suggesting a trend that people who identified as *Asian American* ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.7, SD = 6.4$) were younger than people who identified as *Asian* ($M_{\text{age}} = 31.4, SD = 7.9; p = .077$) and who identified with an *Asian ethnic group* ($M_{\text{age}} = 32.0, SD = 9.5; p = .070$). There were no marginally

Figure 1
Racism-Related Stress Differences by Identification Group



Note. Letters denote significant pairwise differences within racism-related stress subscales between self-identification groups. AARRSI = Asian American Racism Related Stress Inventory; AARRSI subscales include the following: SHR = Sociohistorical Racism; GR = General Racism; PF = Perpetual Foreigner Racism.

significant trends for those who identified as *Asian ethnic plus American* ($M_{age} = 29.9$, $SD = 9.2$).

Discussion

In this study, we sought to examine how Asian Americans responded to an open-ended question about their racial identification. Rather than solely relying on a checkbox approach, we were interested in exploring participant-generated racial categories and unexpected themes. The open-ended format provided insight into relevant features that Asian Americans consider when indicating their race. We were also able to explore potential trends in racism experiences and demographics between the participant-generated racial self-identification categories.

Our study, which focused on Asian American adults, is in accordance with the results of Woolverton and Marks (2023), providing further evidence for the use of open-ended racial identification questions on demographic forms. In a separate subsequent question, all participants in this study indicated their race in a check-all-that-apply format as “Asian/Asian American.” However, when first given the opportunity to indicate racial identification with an open-ended response, 60% identified as something other than *Asian* or *Asian American*.

The use of an open-ended race question revealed ethnic groups to be an important racial identifier for about 28% of the sample, whether it was a specific *Asian ethnic group* (e.g., Japanese) or a specific *Asian ethnic group and American* (e.g., Japanese American). This is partially consistent with literature that suggests some Asian Americans are more likely to identify by national origin or ethnicity rather than by their race (Ruiz et al., 2023). The choice to identify ethnically is understandable, given the heterogeneity within the group (Yoo et al., 2022). Maybe it is helpful for some participants in communicating with others, as well

as understanding themselves, to provide a degree of specificity in communicating one’s race.

In the 2016 National Asian American Survey (Lee et al., 2018; Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020), only 21% of respondents of Asian descent self-identified as Asian or Asian American. Similarly, Ruiz et al. (2023) found that 28% of respondents of Asian descent used the “Asian” or “Asian American” labels. However, in our study, about 40% of the sample wrote in “Asian” or “Asian American.” Age may explain differences in racial self-identification, as individuals in our study tended to be younger than the general Asian American population. Indeed, those in our study who identified as Asian American were marginally younger than those who identified as Asian or those who identified with an Asian ethnic group, indicating that age may be a factor in racial self-identification. However, it is unclear if age could be a proxy for something else, such as social media use or the percentage of one’s life spent living in the United States or abroad.

Thoughtful deliberation about how we inquire about race on demographic forms is not only a matter of good science but also of inclusivity and equity (Woolverton & Marks, 2023). A sizable number of participants in our study, 8.5%, listed more than one race, ethnicity, and/or region. This makes the case for including open-ended response questions in demographic questionnaires or the option for participants to check as many boxes that apply to racial and ethnic questions. We suggest inquiring about racial identification with both methods.

Interestingly, the open-ended format demonstrated that participants’ understandings about their racial identification may extend researchers’ definitions of race to include aspects of ethnicity and beyond. Regardless of whether ethnic identity or perceptions of other people or one’s adoption status are technically outside academic understandings of race, self-identified labels like these and others were relevant for participants when making sense of their racial

identification. While it might not be feasible to include checkboxes for the myriad factors that could inform a participant's racial identification, including an open-ended response question gives participants space to express what is meaningful for them in describing their race, which is a more inclusive research practice.

Participants' Considerations in Their Racial Identification

The term "Asian American" is meant to unite a heterogeneous group of people who share a common history of oppression (Lee, 2019; Okamoto & Mora, 2014). Given that race and ethnicity are social constructs, the meaning of Asian American is also fluid and varied (Kibria, 1998; S. Sue et al., 2021), and, therefore, defining Asian American can be complicated for many Asian Americans (Suyemoto, 2002).

Asian ethnic group ties were relevant for many participants. Rather than identifying as Asian or Asian American, self-identification to a specific Asian ethnic group was often endorsed or elaborated on in the open-ended question about race. One participant, who misinterpreted the question and answered by defining race (coded in Category 4) noted, "To me, racial identification refers to the ethnic group with which an individual most closely associates. Identifying one's ethnic identity is not as simple as checking a box according to one's skin color. On the contrary, ethnic identity is a complex and multifaceted part of the development of an individual." Additionally, Notions of family (e.g., "... My parents are Thai and Lao ...") and place (e.g., "Asian—I am from Vietnam") surfaced in some responses to racial identification. Defining Asian American with these criteria potentially prompts ambiguity for Asian American international transracial adoptees who were born in an Asian country, most of whom are raised in White European American households and may or may not have a connection to their birth families. About 11% of the participants who were adopted, centered adoption in their open-ended response about race (e.g., "Korean adoptee").

Our study suggests that physical appearance is also a consideration, which makes sense because the construct of race is largely based on phenotype. Many participants answered the race question by describing how they look, for example, "Black shiny hair, brown 'almond' eyes, short, tan." Another participant said, "I'm just Asian looking I don't really know how else to say it, I look like an asian." However, deconstruction of this response raises questions about what it means to "look Asian" and its importance in racial identification. In the United States, people of East Asian descent have been centered in conceptualizations of Asian so the image of monolid eyes and fair skin could leave out much of the South Asian and Filipinx diasporas, as well as multiracial Asian Americans. One multiracial participant expressed their uncertainty related to appearance, "I am half white, half Chinese though I definitely appear to be caucasian. Sometimes people can tell that I am half-asian from the way my eyes are shaped, but generally people view me as being Caucasian." Perceptions of others was a theme that emerged as relevant, consistent with literature suggesting that race is something that is both claimed by oneself and ascribed by others (e.g., Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020; Tseng & Lee, 2021). Sometimes perceptions are not congruent with identity, "I think I have 'Asian' eyes. I have been mistaken for a Native American a few times, though."

Differences in Racism-Related Stress Between Self-Identification Groups

In the present study, we conducted exploratory quantitative analyses to examine potential racism-related stress differences between participants who identified as *Asian* or *Asian American* or with an *Asian ethnic group* (e.g., Nepalese) or as a combination of an *Asian ethnic group plus American* (e.g., Nepalese American). It was interesting to find differences among racism-related stress subscales, suggesting elevated levels for participants who identified with an *Asian ethnic group plus American*. The average scores for this group for each subscale were around 3. On the AARRSI 5-point Likert scale (Liang et al., 2004), a 3 represents *This event happened, and I was slightly bothered*. Other racial self-identification groups were below 3, suggesting, on average, the events did not happen, or they did and participants were not bothered (1 = *This event has never happened to me or someone I know*; 2 = *This event happened but did not bother me*).

We wonder if recognition of racism-related stress may contribute to a tendency to identify as *Asian ethnic plus American* (e.g., Vietnamese American). Many items on the Sociohistorical Racism subscale speak to learning about historical injustices, such as "You learn that Asian Americans historically were targets of racist actions," and "You notice that U.S. history books offer no information of the contributions of Asian Americans" (Liang et al., 2004). Perhaps asserting *Asian ethnic plus American* identity conveys an understanding of the injustices faced by the group. Moreover, perhaps asserting both one's ethnic group and American simultaneously is a reaction to, and helps to combat, the stereotype of Asians in the United States as a foreign homogenous group. It asserts Americanness while also distinguishing one's ethnic group experiences from that of all Asians and Asian Americans. We also wonder if other identifications, particularly *Asian* and *Asian ethnic group*, are related to less racism-related stress potentially due to downplaying or ignoring racism. This would be in line with Chen et al.'s (2006) study that demonstrated participants in the conformity identity profile had the lowest levels of racism-related stress and the highest color-blind racial attitudes. In sum, racial self-identification represents another way in which Asian Americans are diverse and it relates to their experiences with racism.

Implications

In research we seek to collect accurate and valid data about our participants. The way we ask about race on standardized forms has wide-ranging implications in multiple domains. Many policies, resources, and benefits (e.g., affirmative action, federal funding); assessments of health disparities; and other important outcomes depend on accurate counts of race (Lee et al., 2018). For self-report measures, a mutual understanding of the meaning embedded in words is required between the researcher and respondent. Inquiring about race while allowing for respondent endorsement of multiple checkboxes offers a systematic approach that is well-suited for analyzing overall trends in large data sets and reporting aggregated data. At the same time, only using checkboxes comes at the expense of potentially misunderstanding race from participants' perspectives. Our study suggests that the way we ask about race matters and, when offered the chance, Asian American respondents will elaborate on their identification in nuanced ways that are

important to them. We suggest also including an open-ended question when inquiring about racial identification. In the clinical realm, this might open the door to important conversations about race. For example, clinicians can point to differences between clients' checkbox versus open-ended responses and ask them to elaborate on the meaningfulness of what they wrote.

Given the history of "Asian American" as a term for solidarity and collective action (Lee, 2019; Okamoto & Mora, 2014), we were surprised that racism-related stress differences were centered on the *Asian ethnic plus American group*. Honoring diversity within the group by ethnically self-identifying on a question about race is not necessarily at the expense of uniting for collective action toward social justice. However, given the historical derivation of Asian American as a pan-ethnic racial group with a shared political agenda, it would be interesting for future studies to explore differences in self-identification and racial consciousness, resistance to racism, allyship with other groups of color, and collective action.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Our study was the first of its kind to analyze how Asian Americans responded to a demographic question about their racial identification when given the opportunity to use their voice and answer in an open-ended format. Results from our study offer another dimension of diversity within the group, racial self-identification, which we found has implications for better understanding racialized experiences like racism-related stress.

All participants self-selected into the study knowing that it was about Asian and Asian Americans. This might limit the generalizability of our findings. Future research might look at national samples that include Asian Americans but do not target recruitment toward them. Further, our sample primarily consisted of younger, second-generation, and East Asian individuals. Recruiting a more nationally representative sample of Asian Americans in terms of these key demographics may help disentangle meaningful trends between participant characteristics and racial self-identification. Last, the open-ended format allowed participants to use their voices, but it did not allow the research team to ask follow-up questions to understand what it means to be Asian American (or Asian, Asian ethnic group, etc.). Future qualitative research that uses in-depth interviews might inquire about participants' reasoning to identify as one thing rather than another. For example, when and why might someone prefer a label of Asian over Asian American? At what point does an Asian person in America become "Asian American" and what does this shift look like? What is the personal and political significance of differentiating between Asian American and Asian ethnic group plus American?

In sum, research on the way demographic racial identity data are collected could inform a more inclusive standard practice in psychology, particularly for groups that have been marginalized within and by academic research. Our findings highlight the advantages of adding an open-ended format to inquire about race. Allowing space for participant-driven qualitative responses provides context for researchers and more nuanced insight into the varied ways Asian Americans conceive of their racial identities. It is possible that racial self-identification is yet another way in which Asian Americans are diverse—and this way may be meaningfully related to their experiences with racism.

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