

PART TWO: ETHNICITY

Ethnic Groups and Boundary-Crossers: A Study of Asian-White Relations in a College Dorm

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A student who lives in a dormitory of a university is not simply living there but is also involved in an intricate social environment. The student is probably away from home for the first time. Her roommate and new friends become her family, and her room becomes her home. The situation is one of closeness and intimacy for most residents and the social aspects of this living experience seem to be magnified. This study focuses upon two important aspects of dormitory life. The first aspect is the categories students use to classify their peers into groups according to their ancestry and their interests. The second aspect is the problem of conflict: what are the dynamics of interaction when these groups become involved in a dispute?

Cummings Hall

Cummings Hall (a pseudonym for the dormitory I studied) is a co-ed residence hall with a population of two hundred students, 60% male and 40% female. The hall has two co-ed floors, two all-female floors, four all-male floors, and is located near campus. Upon entering Cummings Hall each student is required to pay a \$10 social fee to be used for activities such as parties, dances, barbecues and other social events. With 200 people residing in the dormitory a total of \$2000 is collected which is then allocated for social activities. At the beginning of each school year members of Cummings Hall organize what is called an "Executive Committee," or hall government, to allocate this money. The officers are elected twice a year in a general voluntary dorm election. Officers include a President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Social Chairperson, and Representative from each floor. The President has no vote, and the other officers and representatives have one vote each. The Executive Committee meets once a week to decide on dorm policy and events, and any resident may attend these meetings to voice his opinion.

A potential area of conflict arises when the student pays the \$10 social fee, and expects that the dorm will organize and sponsor activities that s/he enjoys. Likewise, the Executive Committee which has control of allocating this money is supposed to represent his or her preferences for activities. Unfortunately people do not always enjoy the same things or share the same interests.

The population of Cummings Hall includes 102 students of Caucasian descent, 94 students of Asian descent, and 5 students with Spanish surnames or of Black

descent. In the Hall a conflict of interest exists between the two largest ethnic groups — the Whites (50.5%), and the Asians (47%). Specifically the Asian students generally prefer soul music and mixed drinks or non-alcoholic beverages at their parties. The Caucasian students favor hard rock music and "kegger," or beer, parties. The full scope of this conflict of interests is one of the topics presented in this paper.

During the period I studied Cummings Hall the composition of the Executive Committee changed from one semester to the next. At first I thought that it was this shift in power that caused a conflict between members of the two major groups in the Executive Committee: the Whites and the Asians. Later I observed that when disputes arose it was not just between students of these two groups. Both Asian and White students have allies who share the same interests but who belong to the opposite ethnic group. These allies identified with either the Whites or Asians and aided them during disputes. The residents call these people either "*Bananas*" — meaning yellow on the outside and white on the inside — or "*Eggs*" — meaning white on the outside and yellow on the inside. There were also people of both ancestries and of other ancestries who remained neutral in the disputes.

I hasten to add that the terms used in this paper such as "Asian," "White," "Egg," and "Banana," are not meant to be derogatory, whatever their usage in everyday life. I realize that such terms involve combinations of variables such as descent, ethnic affiliation, and interests, and may even border on being stereotypes. The justification of the use of these terms is that the students themselves use them in the classification of their social world.

In the sections that follow I will outline the methods I used in this study and the criteria by which students classify each other into various interest and ethnic groups. Next, I will study the relationship between these groups by examining a conflict that arose from their interaction in the Hall government. In doing so I hope to show the importance of boundary-crossers in dispute management in the Cummings Hall government.

Methods

Participant observation is a useful method of investigation. It allows the anthropologist to see the behavior of the people s/he is studying, and thus gain insights which might never be obtained through the

use of formal interviews and questionnaires. In my study I learned about the terms Banana and Egg simply by being around and by listening to conversations of the students in the dorm. Only then did I become aware that the people were divided and placed into these categories. Without participant observation I might have totally overlooked this important insight into the dormitory population — an insight crucial to understanding dispute management within the dormitory government.

I began collecting data by observing six weekly Executive Committee meetings which lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours each. I also attended three floor meetings which are held whenever a floor representative feels that it is necessary. Each of these meetings ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. I also attended two barbecues, two White parties, an Asian party, and a party intended for both. During these events I took careful notes on seating arrangements, what was said, and who talked to whom. These observations were used as the background for my study.

Another method I used was the interview. My first interviews were with students of Asian descent who had just gained office in the previously exclusively White Executive Committee. These people became key informants and helped me a great deal in defining and characterizing the different identity groups, and by suggesting to me the people who could be defined as belonging to each group.

While interviewing I began to get some feedback from Executive Committee members who wanted to tell me their ideas about identity group definitions and the conflicts between such groups. They also gave me examples of people who fit the different categories. Next I went to people selected by my informants as belonging to particular groups. I asked them also about their definitions of the categories I had been given, and what they considered themselves. I questioned 41 people, and again, after doing so, more people volunteered information.

The only real difficulty I had in carrying out this study was the disbelief of the students in the Executive Committee that I was doing it as a serious project. Once they realized this, my study became much more difficult and led to some hostility toward me. But the more I persisted, the more my unwilling informants realized, I suppose, that I was going to stay with it. Many informants became very helpful — some even became key informants — while others still resented my intrusion. I spent approximately 10 hours a week for 8 weeks on this project, observing and interviewing, plus a few hours more on the weeks that parties were held.

Group Classification.

In *Primitive Classification* Durkheim and Mauss state that classifications are developed in the context of social life. They further state that the object of classification is to help people understand their social and

natural environment. For example, classification of people brings about a better understanding of one's place and the place of others in the social system. As I started my study I discovered that the categories in which an individual student placed himself and others has a great deal to do with social relationships in dorm life.

In order to understand relationships among individuals or groups, one must first understand the categories in which people place themselves and each other. In this study, then, one must understand what is meant by the terms *Asian*, *White*, *Banana*, *Egg*, and *Neutral*. In trying to understand what these terms mean from the students' point of view I asked the same questions that Durkheim and Mauss asked about the people they studied: "How do they perceive themselves?" "How do they perceive the world around them?" The answers that I received in Cummers Hall clearly indicated how these categories are defined and used by the students in the dorm. Each category will be described below, in relation to seven characteristics: 1) ancestry; 2) the strength or weakness of family ties; 3) types of friends; 4) musical preferences; 5) party preferences; 6) study habits; and 7) type of high school.

In answering these questions, I had to rely on interviews. My two most valuable informants helped me map out a set of characteristics from each identity group which agreed closely with the characteristics cited by the 40 other people I interviewed. The group descriptions below are essentially composite lists of characteristics given by my informants in the interviews.

Asians

Asians are students of Asian descent. One outstanding characteristic of Asians is that they generally come from a close-knit family that is still important to them during college. One informant explained to me that this closeness in the family is a carry-over from the close family relationships generally found in Asian peasant societies. The twenty students that I talked to who identified with the Asian group came from San Francisco and went home almost every weekend. Another important characteristic of the twenty Asians that I interviewed was that eighteen are either first generation (having been born in another country), or second generation (their parents being born in another country) Americans.

The possible relationship between recent immigration to the United States and strong family ties was expressed to me by another informant. He said:

Having come from Hong Kong and not speaking English, I obviously stayed closer to my family and to my culture. I think that most first and second generation Asians feel close to their families and their culture.

Asians as a whole prefer soul music. They do not care too much for serious drinking parties and prefer mixed drinks rather than beer. Their friends are

mostly Asian. The Asian group is thought of as being studious. The majority of them are majoring or planning to major in the sciences. In fact, many people named this as an additional characteristic of an Asian. An Asian informant added that most Asians decide to go into the sciences and engineering field because it is known to be more open to minorities than business or education. Not having to be fluent in English was another reason that he cited for the number of Asians in the science field.

Whites

Whites are students of Caucasian descent. They can be characterized as having generally weaker family ties than the Asians. My key White informant commented that the Whites are more representative of the American cultural norm of independence. An "American" child (usually White) is expected to become independent of his parents at an earlier age than in most cultures. "The American Dream is to become a success by yourself, not with your family's help," she added.

Whites' musical preference is rock music, and they have predominantly White friends. They are also characterized as being more interested in parties, rather than studying. All of the fifteen students that I interviewed who identified with the White group had smoked or smoke marijuana. Whites, as a group, also enjoy drinking parties, especially "kegger" beer parties. My key informant from this group claims that beer is an old American tradition. As an example she cited the stereotype of the working class father sitting in front of the T.V. watching a football game with a beer in his hand. She told me:

The White kids are more likely to see beer drinking in their homes than mixed drinks, and many acquire a taste for it at an early age. I think the Asians don't see that as much in their homes.

Bananas and Eggs

Bananas and Eggs are more complicated categories to define. People who identified with the White group pointed out Eggs to me, and the Asians could point out Bananas (they used the term in a derogatory manner). These two categories include those people who belong to one group by descent and ancestry, but have crossed boundaries in many of their preferences and attitudes.

When I talked to fifteen of the people who had been identified as Bananas or Eggs I discovered that — while none of them considered themselves members of groups just because of ancestry — fourteen of them said that they considered themselves neutral. It was very interesting to me that the students in the dorm agreed that these fifteen informants were either Bananas or Eggs, even though the informants did not think of themselves in this way. It was also interesting that these fifteen informants were able to suggest other residents to me that they thought were Bananas or Eggs.

In describing the characteristics of these supposed types, Bananas are students who are of Asian descent but who identify with the interests of the White group. Bananas are characterized as coming from homes with weaker family ties than most of their Asian peers. Many informants attributed this either to family problems or to the fact of their being three or more generations in this country. Unlike the other Asians, Bananas are characterized as the partying type. They have predominantly White friends, enjoy rock music, and use both drugs and alcoholic beverages. In addition, all of the people classified as Bananas had attended the same high school in San Francisco.

Eggs are people of Caucasian descent who have interests similar to the Asian students. These students appeared to have the weakest family ties of all the students interviewed. Like the White category, these people have been raised to be independent, but unlike them, they all have had family problems. Of the eight Eggs interviewed, four are from broken homes, two had left home before the legal adult age of eighteen, and the other two had what they considered to be serious family problems. Eggs generally preferred soul music and, even more than the Asians, they were against the use of dope and having drinking parties. Their friends were mostly Asians and, in addition, the Eggs tended to be characterized as studious.

An important finding was that the Eggs had all attended what they considered to be a predominantly Asian high school in San Francisco — the same high school mentioned above, which all the Bananas had attended. Oddly enough, people of Asian descent consider it to be a White high school, while students of Caucasian descent consider it to be an Asian high school. In actuality, enrollment figures for the school show that the population is 48% Caucasian, 42% Asian, and 10% other. In other words, the two groups are almost equal, though both are in the minority. The only way that I can explain this phenomenon is that in a large high school such as the one considered here, groups tend to segregate themselves and then view things only from their own point of view.

I found, in the course of my interviews, that there are more people classified as Bananas than Eggs in this dorm. I estimated that there were some thirty Bananas, while I am relatively sure that the eight people classified as Eggs were the only such people in the dorm. I think that this can be explained by the fact that people from ethnic minorities are more likely to assimilate to the dominant group (which in America is the White), than for the opposite to occur.

Neutrals

The last category is the *Neutrals*. As a whole the classification of this group is vague since it doesn't have many unifying characteristics. In fact, all one can say about the Neutrals is that they don't fit into any of the other categories perfectly. Some may have Asian

oriented interests, while others, more White. Those identified as Neutral considered themselves Neutral when I talked to them. The Neutrals, as a whole, are characterized as having weaker family ties. Their circle of friends is varied, but they tend to have close friends among all students. They have no particular music preferences, and, similarly, their high school background is not relevant. The small number of Black descent or those with Spanish surnames belong to this group.

Analysis

The relationship between these categories in the minds of my informants and their manifestation in behavior are very interesting to examine. There is a definite line drawn between the Asian-Egg categories on one hand, and the White-Banana categories on the other. In watching the interaction between persons assigned to these categories, any observer would notice the invisible boundaries drawn by the groups in action. One good example of this is the seating arrangements at mealtime. The persons classified as belonging to different categories are always segregated. In fact, within the dorm as a whole there is little communication between the two main groups. Whites and Asians do not interact in social situations and there are always conflicts on the floors of the dorm where both reside. Those classified as Neutrals, however, seem more integrated into the social life of the dorm. They can often be seen moving from table (group) to table (group) during mealtimes.

The major conclusion that I would like to draw at this point is the difference between the cultural system and the social system of the dorm. In the cultural system of the students I have shown that classification of the social world is broken down into five categories: White, Asian, Egg, Banana, and Neutral. On the level of the social system there are actually only two *groups* – the Whites and the Asians — which are opposed to each other, and to which the other categories of people attach themselves.

Now that I have presented a basic description of the different identity groups in the dormitory, including the criteria for their classification and the characteristics of the students included in each group, I would like to focus on the behavior of these groups. I will begin by presenting a chart showing the composition of the Hall Government during the period under consideration.

As can be seen from the chart, the first semester officers are all White. All officers had opponents from the other factions except for the President and the Secretary. This could be attributed to the fact that the voluntary voting happened to take place on a Friday when most of the Asian students were at home. The floor representatives were also predominantly White. The second floor had an Asian representative because it is populated mainly by Asians. The third floor was

represented by a Neutral. The fourth and fifth floors were each represented by a Banana — these floors being made up of White students for the most part. The Eighth floor switched from a White to an Asian representative when the White representative quit. When I asked the people on this floor about this change, they explained to me that the Asian was the only one who wanted the job.

The chart also shows that, during the second semester, things began to change. More people were running for office, and, for the first time, some Asian students won offices. An Egg was also added to the floor representatives. Perhaps this was because the elections during the second semester were held on a Wednesday and more Asian students had a chance to vote. It is also possible that the Asians felt that there was a greater need for the representation of their interests. For example, one of the Asian Vice Presidents who was elected during the second semester said that she was tired of paying for something and not getting anything.

We knew that Asians really wanted someone to speak up on the spending of their money too. I guess we were right because we won.

An Asian woman, who became the new secretary, also felt that the Asians needed better representation in the Executive Committee. She had attended many of the meetings during the first semester and was laughed at when she suggested an all soul-music dance.

I thought that if I ran and won an office, at least I'd have a vote and they certainly couldn't laugh at that.

An unsuccessful Asian candidate for President added that he agreed that the Asians' and the Eggs' interests should be served as well as those of the Whites and the Bananas. He said:

There are just as many of us as there are of them and the others (i.e., the Neutrals) don't care.

The Chart also shows that the Floor Representatives during the second semester were again mostly White. The only exceptions to this were a Banana on the fifth floor, a Neutral on the third floor, and an Egg on the first floor. This change was not of much importance in that Floor Representatives do not have much effect upon the decisions of the Executive Committee. In the next section I will describe a particular dispute that came up before the Executive Committee during the second semester. I will show the pivotal role that boundary-crossers played in this dispute in the Cummers Hall government, and argue that it was the involvement of boundary-crossers that brought about change.

A potential conflict of interest was already present before the second semester Executive Committee was elected. For example, there were always problems caused by the playing of loud music that one or the

FIG. 1

INVOLVEMENT IN GOVERNMENT

		1 ST SEMESTER	OPPONENTS IN ELECTION	2 ND SEMESTER	OPPONENTS IN ELECTION
PRESIDENT		△W	—	△W △W △W	△W △A △A △W △W △W
VICE-PRES.		○W	△A ○W	○A ○A ○A ○N	△B ○B ○W
SECRETARY		○W	—	○A	—
TREASURER		△W	△A ○E	△W	△A ○E
SOCIAL CHAIRMAN		△W △W △W	○W △A △A ○B	△B △W △W	△A
FLOOR REPS.			NOT KNOWN		NOT KNOWN
△W	8	△W △A		△W	
COED W	7	△W	"	○W	"
△W	6	△W	"	△W	"
COED W	5	△B	"	△B	"
○W	4	○B	"	○W	"
○A	3	○N	"	○N	"
△A	2	△A	"	△W	"
△A	1	△W	"	△E	"

△ - Male A - Asian B - Banana N - Neutral / - Dropped out
 ○ - Female W - White E - Egg — - No opponent

other group did not like. Beer parties on the floors were always too noisy and they interfered with the study time of the Asian students.

When members of the second semester Executive Committee were elected, the conflict began to emerge into the open. The dorm's main lounge, where meetings are held, became a battlefield for the differences between the Asian-Egg group and the White-Banana group. The meeting I am about to describe and analyze is in no way representative of all the dorm meetings, but it does effectively illustrate the dynamics of the conflict between these two groups.

One incident occurred when the annual boat dance was being planned. The Executive Committee was supposed to choose a band at this particular meeting. Early in the day an announcement was posted on the bulletin board that persons interested in voicing their opinions about a band should come to the meeting that night. Knowing that every band selected before had been a rock band, the Asian Executive Officers — along with a Neutral Vice-President, a Neutral Floor Representative, and an Egg Floor Representative — gathered up a number of Asian, Egg, and Neutral

students who would attend the meeting to speak up in favor of a soul band. Getting word of this the White officers — along with all the rest of the Floor Representatives — gathered up a number of Whites and Bananas to speak up in favor of a rock band. It was almost a race to see who could get the most people on each side.

At the meeting, surprisingly enough, the different interest groups did not segregate themselves by seating arrangement in the hall. The three Co-Presidents arrived late and were greeted by a crowd of perhaps seventy-five people. The Co-President who usually heads the meeting called the session to order and asked the Social Chairpeople about a list of band names that had been drawn up for the Executive Committee to choose from. One of the Chairpeople read the list of bands (all of which played rock music), and then the President called for a vote. One of the Vice-Presidents asked if other types of bands could be suggested, specifically soul bands. The President said, "Sure but the Social Committee has already drawn up the list, and I think we should choose the band from that because they have already been auditioned." This

statement caused quite an uproar, and the fight began. The Asians, Eggs, and the Neutrals started shouting that the Whites had had rock bands at every previous boat dance, not to mention practically every dance for which a band was hired. The Asians and their allies demanded that this time the boat dance have a soul band. The Whites and the Bananas, after a long verbal battle, conceded that a committee should be named to propose a soul band for the dance.

Probably the most significant aspect of this conflict was the use of Bananas by Whites, and the use of Eggs and Neutrals by the Asians, in trying to persuade the other group to recognize their interests. Here is an example from the debate at the meeting that night:

White to Banana: "Would you please tell them that we already have bands chosen? They don't seem to understand that."

Neutral (of Caucasian descent) to the same Banana: "We all know that, but do you really think that it's fair to choose bands without the dorm having a say in it? All of us paid the social fee, you know, and we all do have a right to have what we want. I think you guys have had enough honky music for the dorm to get a little soul music, too."

The usage of these boundary-crossers in the above example suggested to me that even though the Bananas share the same interests as the Whites, the Whites thought that they could best get to the Asians through a person that has the same ethnic identity as their opponents. The same strategy applies to Asians using the Neutrals and the Eggs to fight for their cause. The two groups of the opposite persuasion — the Whites and the Asians, separated by both ethnicity and interests — could not confront each other head on. In fact, not once during the meeting did they attempt to do so. Instead, they went through mediators to get their point across. Still another example of this is that not even one of the Presidents could speak directly to the Asian group. Instead the President sent through a Banana Social Chairperson, telling her on one occasion, "Suzie, calm them down." Note also that he was fighting for, but rather spoke of the "dorm" as a whole.

It should also be pointed out that, before the second semester, the predominantly White Executive Committee always had the power to promote White interests. One should ask why the Executive Committee had backed down even though they still could mobilize the power to impose their own interests. I believe that one of the basic reasons that the White Executive Committee gave in to Asian demands for soul music was the large number of Neutrals in support of this type of music. The majority of these Neutrals were of Caucasian descent, and, as I see it, it was the overwhelming number of White faces screaming for soul music that caused the Executive Committee to back down.

After the meeting I had a series of interviews with the Neutrals to discover why they had joined the side

of the Asians. Reasons were varied: 20% liked soul music and wanted a soul band at the boat dance; 30% had Asian friends who had convinced them to attend the meeting. A total of 50% of the Neutrals who supported the side of the Asians and the Eggs did so because they became aware through the election of Asian officers to the Executive Committee that the Executive Committee had been unfair in meeting the needs and interests of the Asians. They felt that they should help the Asians on moral grounds.

In the past, dances sponsored by either group were not attended by the opposite interest group, while the Neutrals generally participated in both. Surprisingly enough, when the boat dance did take place, it was attended by both groups and went very smoothly.

Conclusion

Any classification of individuals causes divisions as well as alliances. On the level of the cultural system, the students in the dormitory are divided into *five categories*: White, Asian, Egg, Banana, and Neutral. These classifications are very important because once a student accepts them s/he tends to view the world through a fixed framework of perceptions. This in turn has an effect upon social relationships in the dormitory. On the level of the social system I found that there were only *two groups*: the Whites and the Asians, each of which had allies who belonged to other categories. The significant point here is that there are both categories of students and groups of students, and that these two levels must be distinguished. Second I discovered that the categories into which students are divided are not by any means natural categories: in this case they are not genetic, racial categories, but rather socially constructed ones.

In the dispute in the Cummers Hall government which I described above it was not just the involvement of the Asian students in the Executive Committee that brought about change, even though they may have been responsible for raising the issues. In fact, the students classified as Asian or White felt themselves to be so different that they were often not able to work things out with each other. In this situation the boundary-crossers were needed to establish communication between these two groups. In the final analysis it was also the boundary-crossers who were necessary in bringing about compromise and change in the policy of the Executive Committee of Cummers Hall.