The New Faces of Assimilation:
“‘Koomar,’ what kind of name is that, like five O’s and two U’s?” Although this lewd joke left thousands of viewers chortling in the summer of 2004, many Asian Americans frequently experience this ridicule concerning their name, its origin and spelling. When asked to think of the most sociologically riveting movie concerning assimilation, the *Harold and Kumar* film series is definitely not the first to come to mind. The stoner comedy series generally tends to attract a white, male audience but was considered the hit of the summer among Asians because of its underlying messages about the commonly misinterpreted experience of immigrant assimilation. Sociologically defined, assimilation is a process used to explain how immigrants and their children acclimate to their new American environment. However, because assimilation is an all-encompassing term, heterogeneous immigrant experiences are often flattened, discrediting the unique experiences that different ethnic groups and even generations can undergo. *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* focuses on the journey of two second-generation Asian Americans who embark on a classical American road trip to search for and consume White Castle burgers. Of course their road trip (albeit a short one) is an outcome of getting high. Along the way, they run into many obstacles that make them question and eventually redefine their ethnic identities as they transform from confused Asian Americans to confident Americans with proud Asian backgrounds. Their voyages of personal discovery take different paths that subtly highlight the heterogeneity of assimilation experiences particularly among second generation Asian Americans.

*Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* highlights the obstacles faced by second-generation Asian American immigrants¹, who are often overlooked in assimilation experiences. While in most U.S. feature films, Asian Americans are used as cultural tools for comic relief,

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¹ In this film, the term *Asian-American* is used as a broad term that encompasses the two distinct ethnicities
here they are the center of the narrative but still provide humor (Davé, 111). This is made clear even in the trailers where the cast members are introduced as “that Asian guy from American Pie and that Indian guy from Van Wilder” signifying the shift in roles the audience should expect to see despite being directed by the “white guy Danny Leiner” (Harold and Kumar). The film was considered a sleeper hit of summer 2004 that grossed over $18 million in the box office and garnered even more success when it came out on DVD. This success continued with its two sequels. The main demographic reached were white males ages 17-24, similar to that of the movies the actors, John Cho and Kal Penn, previously acted in (Davé, 114). Although often misinterpreted as having no significance because of its classification as a stoner movie, Harold and Kumar infuses a new meaning to the idea of a typical American movie “bromance” (Gillota, 965). It draws in a large Asian American audience because its two protagonists challenge common representations of American minorities as the easy manipulated computer nerds or doctors with thick accents.

Harold Lee and Kumar Patel, after facing a long day of bullying at work and stereotyping in a medical school interview gone wrong, decide to get high and achieve the ultimate American dream of eating White Castle burgers to placate their severe case of their immigrant angst (and a bad case of the munchies). During what turns out to be a long journey to White Castle, their run-ins include a not-so-innocent study session of an Asian Society on Princeton’s campus, a not-so perfect set of British sisters, and a not-so intimidating group of extreme bullies, all of whom defy common stereotypes. It is during these encounters that Harold and Kumar discover who they are as Asian Americans and what that term means to them as individuals rather than in conformance to social stereotypes of being the gullible computer guy or their family expectations of becoming a doctor. As they repeatedly encounter experiences that defy common misconceptions on their
adventure, they begin to realize they can dictate how their Asian American identity plays a role in their daily lives. Kumar can become a doctor whether it conforms to racial stereotypes or not, and Harold does not have to be manipulated by the tough white guys at work. This challenges the pre-conceived notion of filial influence (also known as the infamous tiger mothers) having sole control over second-generation Asian American identity; identity is a choice. The success of the film revealed that people were willing to explore this new version of American comedy, which brilliantly challenged racial and cultural stereotypes.

Very boldly, the director decided to utilize the same approach in the sequel satirizing American society post 9/11 (Gillota, 971). Here, Harold and Kumar are mistaken as terrorists from the Middle East and North Korea and moved to Guantanamo Bay. Redefining the faces of American comedy has led to outcomes well beyond the movies as actor Kal Penn was offered a position of associate director of the White House Office of Public Engagement in President Obama’s administration. Kal Penn, with a degree in sociology and film from UCLA, was a direct connection with the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities revealing the real impact of the film on immigrant America.

*Harold and Kumar* aims to reveal the nuances of assimilation, an explanation of the acclimation experience that is typically oversimplified to encompass all types of immigrants. Assimilation is commonly defined as a process by which a person develops social and psychological characteristics of the group he/she moves into. This definition of assimilation tends to fit an antiquated idea of European immigration from the early twentieth century and does not necessarily reflect the experiences of the waves of immigrants who arrived in the United States after the liberalization of immigration in 1965. Classical assimilation theory is based on the presumption that complete integration into the new community was needed for any
means of upward social mobility. It was easy and good for all immigrants (Alba, Nee, 22). This was based on the cultural hierarchy of Anglo-Saxon Protestants and also the idea that if better integrated, more windows of opportunity would open up allowing full access to America’s social structure. If unable to assimilate, immigrants were guaranteed to slide into poverty and the underclass (Greenman, Xie, 113). This definition for assimilation is too basic and outdated to account for immigrant experiences of today, but it was the predominant model of explanation used to interpret and explain immigrant experiences in the United States. Assimilation, as conceptualized, was a universalizing concept that flattens the immigrant experience that only had positive results. However, the theories behind achieving success changed entirely for children of the immigrants, a caveat that is often lost when it comes to the public’s understanding of assimilation. Even in the early twentieth century, it was understood that “the long run implications of immigration were primarily determined not by what happens to the immigrants themselves, but by the outcomes of their children” (Greenman, Xie 118). Therefore, the upbringing and welfare of the children was of utmost importance through the integration into the host society, specifically denoted more appropriately as acculturation rather than assimilation.

This challenge of balancing a dual identity as an outsider trying to fit in creates multiple outcomes depending on the individual, an idea that is heavily explored in Harold and Kumar as the two protagonists alternatively choose to either reject or accept the ethnic identity they are assigned by society. The film explores the contemporary theories of acculturation that consider the external factors that affect various ethnic groups differently. Acculturation differs in meaning from assimilation because it accounts for several causal factors affecting the person’s actions rather than an arbitrary term for an acclimating process that only considers positive outcomes (Greenman, Xie, 114). It is important to account for the various factors a child may face because
there are so many responses as a result of the child’s sense of belonging (or lack thereof). In some instances, children of immigrants feel a real separation from the American community, “When you grow up doing certain things, eating certain things, and thinking in certain ways, you never really realize that these things that seem second nature and mundane, are considered foreign by peers” (Hacein-Bey). Children who feel this way rely on filial support rather than their surrounding ethnic community as a means for achieving success. Others feel separated from their parents birthplace: “The few times that I have visited my dad's parents, I have felt really uncomfortable because they only know Japanese and I cannot communicate with them,” causing them to feel closer to the ethnic community around them rather than family (Maeda). Then there is the question of facing stereotypes, “As an Asian girl, I’m also always expected to be a genius. It isn’t too comforting whenever I ask someone for help with an assignment, only to receive an incredulous ‘I’ve never thought you would have trouble with this!’” (Choi). All these emotions and external influences create a sense of real confusion that is hard to sort out as Harold and Kumar explore on their journey to achieving the American dream, even if it is in the form of a burger.

Harold and Kumar’s expose on the multi-dimensions of second-generation assimilation in Asian Americans reveals many aspects of theories of assimilation but not all theories are relevant throughout the film. A common theory is the melting pot theory where “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world,” according to J. Crevecoeur. This theory is rooted in historical immigration experiences, which reveals its somewhat archaic ideology of remaking one universal American identity (Alba, testimonies from friends who are children of immigrants

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Nee, 25). It often seems too idealistic to cease seeing ethnic origin and consider everyone to be of a singular American race, and some certainly empathize with this sentiment: “Right now, I am okay with the fact that I don't really ‘have a culture’ or feel a sense of identity due to my race,” but social dynamics prevent that from happening. As the speaker later reveals: But what's most interesting is when I tell people that I'm Japanese, and they look at me in disbelief and tell me that I don't "look Japanese," which always makes me feel a little strange, almost as if they think they have a right to categorize my ethnicity” (Maeda). The melting pot theory fails to take into account this kind of social hierarchy among various ethno-racial groups as corroborated by Jim Sidanius (Jeffries, 24). Those second generation immigrants who may associate more with being American than wherever their parents are from are still badgered with questions about their ethnic origin, “I don’t like being asked where I am from because every single time it’s asked I have to think about how much I feel like I’m lying whenever the word “Korean” comes out of my mouth. I don’t speak Korean” (Park). Likewise, Kumar, at the end of the film, tries to explain the tensions fraught in the melting pot theory by showing there can never be a singular American identity for immigrants or children of immigrants, because of the tremendous ethno-racial hierarchies in the US. Yet, the melting pot theory is what holds the American dream up for aspiring immigrants. It is a significant contradiction.

“Our parents came to this country escaping persecution, poverty, and hunger…they were very, very, very hungry. They wanted to live in a land that treated them as equals, a land filled with hamburger strands, and not just one type of hamburger, okay, and hundreds of types with different sizes, toppings, and condiments. That land was America…Now this is about achieving what our testimonies from friends who are children of immigrants
parents set out for. This is about the pursuit of happiness. This night is about the American dream” (Harold and Kumar).

Here Kumar’s words highlight the melting pot model of America in describing a general need for food regardless of birthplace that is all ‘treated as equals’. However, this idea is quickly contradicted with his description of the different types of burgers illustrating more of a pluralist perspective where diversity and distinctness is present. Kumar aims to show that no single lens or model can be used to explain America’s social structure and means of assimilation, something the melting pot theory fails in its relevance for (Gillota, 967).

Harold and Kumar’s journey to White Castle, leading to a tasty meal and self-discovery of their ethnic identity, expounds contemporary theories of acculturation. Segmented assimilation is generally considered the theory most relevant to explain contemporary immigrant experiences in the United States. Assimilation, unlike some sociological concepts, is not static in meaning and has grown to encompass wider groups of people as immigration too has evolved. Segmented assimilation is based on the idea of falling into either the lower, middle, or upper class of society based on whether immigrants identify more with the surrounding ethnic community or the family’s ethnic background and how these influences affect your success (Zhou, 975). “These divergent destinies from distinct patterns of adaptation are referred to as segmented assimilation,” as defined by Min Zhou. This theory is certainly explored in the Harold and Kumar series with the film’s character resolution. While both are of middle to upper class status, they take different paths resulting in what we assume to be future success in their career. Harold chooses to embrace the values and norms of the ethnic community he lives in, of aggressive white males, and reject conforming to the quiet worker bee Asian stereotype. Kumar, on the other hand, chooses to embrace the career trajectory his parents want for him, medical
school, something that he initially rejected because it is the stereotypical thing to do for Indian American men. However, he realizes that “my whole life I’ve just been scared of being one of those nerdy Indian guys turned doctor, but...there are far worse things than being tapped for having a natural ability in medicine” (Harold and Kumar). This allows the film to end on a good note of pursuing American ideals such as importance of the individual and freedom of choice (Gillota, 967). However, it is interesting to note that these rights do not extend to Tarik, a quiet African American professor who is unfairly arrested and is unable to leave from jail unlike Harold and Kumar, suggesting the varying degrees of racial oppression that ethnic minorities face because of the ethnic hierarchy in the United States.

The interaction between Kumar and his dad and brother epitomizes the struggle second generation immigrants find in defying stereotypes while pursuing upward mobility. This interaction is a little different from what Park describes in his book where the children of immigrants did not even think of their happiness and whether they would follow in their parent’s footsteps (Park, 111). In this instance, Kumar’s father is also a doctor pushing him up on the social mobility ladder. This allows Kumar more privilege and choice in career that others in Park’s article may not have. Such dynamics in the movie can be problematic for some because not all have the choice of refusing their parents career choice for them. Some may never have an option of a “career” but a series of dead-end jobs.

Another critique is the characters’ abilities to empathize with anyone over sexual gratification, putting a sexist spin on things. Tarik informs Harold and Kumar that despite facing all of this unfair oppression in his lifetime, he does not take it to heart because “I have a really large penis. That keeps me happy” which all of them can chuckle and bond over (Harold and Kumar). This is similar to the tactic used on pilot episode of Blackish on ABC, where the son
chooses to play in an “unmanly” (initially a point of contention) sport to get girls, which grants him acceptance from his father. However, in the case of Harold and Kumar, the sexual overtones not only serve as a means of humor for the predominantly white male audience and tactic to unite various groups to but also to disorient the viewers and disrupt their stereotypes. Tarik defies all characteristics of the stereotypical black man until the large penis is mentioned thereby creating a nebulous idea of ethnic identity. The film shows that there is no one specific way of identifying with your ethnic identity, which is what makes this film so powerful (aside from Neil Patrick Harris’ guest appearance of course) (Gillota, 967).

Often misconstrued as merely a crude stoner movie, the Harold and Kumar film series explicates the multi-dimensional second generation Asian American acculturation experience through a comedic tale of two Asian Americans’ quest for burgers. Classical assimilation theories flatten the immigrant experience based on early 20th century immigration experience that is now antiquated in theory. Harold and Kumar explore modern acculturation theories, which consider various external factors that contribute to second-generation immigrants’ path of success such as family support or influence of surrounding ethnic communities. It is easy to see the success of the films not only through its financial success but also through the impact it has had on the American Asian population through the actors’ recognition in the white house. However, more importantly, second generation children, like Rayna Rampalli and Lizzy Choi can find comfort in claiming their identities as the new Harold and Kumar.
Works Cited:


Park, Emily, Rie Maeda, Elizabeth Choi, and Camelia Hacein-Bey. "Your Experience as a Child of an Immigrant." E-mail interview. Nov. 2014.
