

Some Perspectives on the Status of Asian-Americans in the Early 21st Century¹

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When I was approached to write this think piece on the status of Asian-Americans, I decided to take the “think piece” part of the request literally. That is to say, I decided to avoid studiously conducting a formal review of the literature on Asian-Americans as they pertain to the core mission of DBASSE (at least as I understand it), but rather to cobble together insights and perspectives for issues that further work by DBASSE on this population might take on. This was partly an act of self-defense, being constrained by time. But it is also the case that data and information on Asian-Americans, compared to other ethnic group categories (Hispanic/Latino and African-American) commonly used in social science and education data sets, is indeed quite sparse, and so any review would be spotty in terms of coverage.

Important Subcategories under one label: Asian-American

Perhaps the most obvious but important point to note about Asian-Americans is its diversity. Geographic categories (East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian) are a start, but they mask important differences of subgroups and subgroups within subgroups – e.g., “Chinese” is an unacceptably large category and needs to be understood with respect to regional differences (e.g., Mandarin and Cantonese), Southeast Asian includes Vietnamese and Hmong, the latter of which is a preliterate society. As one indication, the *Ethnologue*, a relatively comprehensive compendium of the world’s languages, lists 55 official languages recognized in China (and a total of 235 living languages), 22 official languages recognized in India. Even a relatively linguistically homogeneous country such as Afghanistan has two important official languages: Pashto and Farsi. Another important distinction relates to the historical reasons for immigration from the different source regions: refugee vs. voluntary immigrants.

Many years ago, the concept of “model minority” was introduced in the popular discourse. This was during a time when it was noticed that Asian-Americans seemed overrepresented in selective schools, winning prestigious science awards and scholarships, and correlated with a time when the Japanese and Korean economies were booming while American-made cars were exploding on impact. If they are succeeding so well in the United States, what can we learn from their successes for other minority groups that are not faring as well? (There are more negative ways of phrasing this question to perpetuate a deficit model for Hispanic/Latino populations which have been used). But is the model minority concept valid across the subcategories?

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Researching the question of subcategories would be difficult on a number of grounds, especially that of small sample size in any national sampling study. Asians and Pacific Islanders, for example, number 12.5 million in 2002, just 4.4 percent of the population². Given the large diversity within this relatively small population, any attempt to look at subgroup differences would be thwarted by small sample sizes, and would have to be addressed through oversampling or a targeted study. As a research subject population, Asian-Americans due to size and substantial subgroup diversity probably have more in common with the native American category than with the larger minority group categories.

Stereotyping

Most Asian-Americans have interesting personal stories about being stereotyped into the model minority mold. I am a social scientist, but I am impressed by the frequency with which I am thought to be in science or engineering at professional functions; at Frye's Electronics, I am asked technical questions about computers; and even in situations where people know my status as a social scientist, I am asked if I am a statistician.

Reverse stereotypes hold as well. I am assumed not to be a good writer. Being a writer with a relatively high self-concept, I have not taken it personally, but I am amused whenever I am complimented excessively on how well I write. But the stereotype that is out there is that Asian-Americans are not terribly good or effective writers. Does this present a situation of stereotype threat (in Claude Steele's sense of the term) any time Asian-Americans venture out into high stakes writing situations?

Poverty and Health

It is estimated that 10-14 percent of Asian-Americans live in poverty³, a higher percentage than an 8 percent estimate for non-Hispanic Whites. Poverty is furthermore concentrated within Southeast Asian, Filipino, and Pacific Islander subgroups. The dynamics of poverty in this population and its relationship to social opportunity would be important to understand, especially in relation to other minority groups.⁴

A related issue is access to health care and health insurance.⁵ According to the 2000 Census data, 21% of Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders were uninsured, compared to 14% for non-Hispanic Whites.⁶ Within this population, the uninsured

² Current Population Survey, March 2002, U. S. Census Bureau. The Asian and Pacific Islander Population in the United States: March 2002.

³ Ibid, p. 6 cites a Census Bureau estimate from 2001; higher estimates drawing from a variety of sources, such as the Department of Health and Human Services Asian American and Pacific Islander Initiative (www.omhrc.gov/OMH/Asian%20Americans/3rdpgasian/overview.htm) show higher estimates perhaps because it includes the Pacific Islander subgroup.

⁴ I would like to thank Don Nakanishi for pointing this out.

⁵ http://www.apiahf.org/policy/healthaccess/200104brief_ahrq.htm

⁶ Mill, R. J. Health Insurance Coverage: 2000. Washington, DC: U. S. Census Bureau, 2001.

percentages were: Korean: 34%; Southeast Asian: 27%; South Asian: 21%; Chinese: 20%; Filipino: 20%; Japanese: 13%. This is most likely related to recency of immigration, in that the rate of uninsured was 17% for those holding citizenship, and falls to 8% for 3rd generation individuals. Understanding further the issues underlying access to insurance would be an important research priority.

An important factor relating to the quality of care has to do with access to interpreters. Even as I sat down to finish this paper this morning (October 30, 2005), an article appeared in the *New York Times* with a byline from Merced (where I live), which caught my attention:

MERCED, Calif., Oct. 29 (AP) – Suffering from a variety of ailments but unable to communicate with her doctor, Ker Moua, a Laotian refugee, recently enlisted her 12-year-old son as her medical interpreter.

The boy, Jue, was the liaison between his mother, who speaks only Hmong, and the doctor who diagnosed a prolapsed uterus, a result of bearing 14 children. Ms. Moua began taking her medication in the doses her son described, but soon felt so dizzy she could not get out of bed for two days. Jue had mistranslated the doctor's orders, leading his mother to take the wrong dosage. (New York Times, October 30, 2005)

Children translating for their parents is quite common in immigrant families, often because that is the only alternative, but it can lead to problems such as this story. In many hospitals, interpretation is provided by other staff who happen to speak the language (especially Spanish) but they are not necessarily trained for specialized terminology nor for the privacy and cultural sensitivities required. Issues of culture and health have been an important area of research in recent years, but issues specific to Asian-Americans are infrequent, even more so in the area of mental health.⁷

Political Participation and Leadership

One review that I will refer to is one conducted by Don Nakanishi in an earlier NAS publication⁸. The paper reports a complex picture of rates of voter participation among Asian-Americans showing cohort differences and patterns of political affiliation that differ across subgroups (for example, Japanese-Americans are decidedly Democrats, Chinese-Americans are equally Democrats and Republicans). He articulates the following view:

...that immigrants and refugees must often undergo a prolonged and multifaceted process of social adaptation and learning before fully participating in their newly

⁷ Sue, S., & Consolacion, T. (2003). Clinical psychology issues among Asian/Pacific Islander Americans. In J.S. Mio, & G.Y. Iwamasa (Eds.). *Culturally diverse mental health: The challenge of research and resistance*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

⁸ Don T. Nakanishi, The Asian Pacific American Population. In N. Smelser, W. Julius Wilson, F. Mitchell (Eds.) *American Becoming: Racial Trends and their Consequences*, Vol. 1. National Academy Press, 2001.

adopted country. To become actively involved in American electoral politics, and to become politically acculturated, may be one of the most complex, lengthy, and least understood learning experiences. Foreign-born Asians and Pacific Islanders, like other groups of immigrants (Gittleman, 1982), largely acquired their core political values, attitudes, and behavioral orientations in sociopolitical systems that were different in a variety of ways from that of the United States. Some of their countries of origin did not have universal suffrage, others were dominated by a single political party (which made voting nearly inconsequential), and still others were in extreme political upheaval as a result of civil war or international conflict. Indeed, one of the major reasons why many Asian and Pacific Islander refugees left their homelands was to escape horrendous political situations. As a result, previously learned lessons and orientations toward government and political activities may not be easily supplanted or supplemented. ... Learning about and, more important, becoming actively involved in politics “American style” through registering to vote and voting in elections, probably takes place through a range of personal and group experiences that go beyond citizenship classes, and evolve over time and in conjunction with other aspects of acculturating to American life and society. (pp. 188-189)

These observations point to important prospects for the study of political identity and participation as an important avenue into the systematic study of citizenship. This would be an important area that combines the multidisciplinary perspectives from political philosophy and the social sciences of geography, political science, psychology and sociology. This is not a matter of mere interest to academics. It should have the keen interest of political consultants eager to understand not just the voting patterns, but political contributions patterns, of the Asian-American population.

Preschool

With important policy debates taking place currently about the importance of early childhood education and universal preschool access, it would seem important to ask the following questions: What would be an appropriate early developmental experience for Asian-American children? What are access patterns for programs such as Head Start?

One cannot overstate the importance of early childhood experiences -- both within the family and in experiences such as preschool programs -- as a basic foundation for social, cognitive and language development. For language minority families, this has always been a difficult issue, especially in families where the native language is the only language of the parents, yet the importance of learning English is essential to successful schooling. At the K-12 level, this issue has been played out, and hung up, on the question of “bilingual education”.

This issue of whether to emphasize the primary language or English from the very beginning threatens to be recapitulated in the realm of early childhood education. The main difference is the developmental level of the child (i.e., this is an age period when the native language is in the process of formation), and it is an age period when the parent

continues to play a much larger role than when formal schooling begins to take on more prominence. For native Spanish speakers, this issue has begun to be addressed through research. But for Asian-American children, this has not yet begun, and the issues are more complex due to the heterogeneity of native languages.

Access patterns for systematic programs, such as Head Start, point to a low rate of participation by Asian background families. In 1998, for example, the Administration for Children and Families reported the following percentages of Head Start participation by ethnicity: White: 30%, Black: 35%, Hispanic: 28%, American Indian/Alaskan Native: 3.4%, Asian: 2.1%, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 1%. The most commonly reported Asian languages were Vietnamese, Chinese (dialect unreported), Hmong, and Cambodian.⁹ It would be important to understand access patterns. Analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) also reports differential access to preschools programs (including Head Start), as follows: African-Americans: 59%; Whites: 58%; Asian-American: 47%; and Latino: 37%.¹⁰

K-12 Education

Test scores among Asian-Americans, indicated in national datasets such as NAEP, suggest support for the “model minority” model. Performance is often above Whites, and significantly above most other minority groups. Nevertheless, the relatively small size of the population makes it difficult to disaggregate by subgroup characteristics. Studies that have looked into such disaggregation suggest that while this generalization may be true amongst East Asian and South Asian populations, this is less so for Southeast Asian students, and that this may be especially the case for the Hmong whose original culture is vastly different from the formal educational culture of the United States.¹¹

The data make it especially difficult to disaggregate student success by their status as English Language Learners. Available estimates suggest that approximately 20% of Asian-American children in schools are not yet proficient in English. In addition, many Asian-American students, while proficient in English, come from homes where their native languages are spoken.

The comments made about the variety of subgroups at the beginning of this paper are especially pertinent here. In large national datasets, such as NELS 88 or ECLS or NAEP, it is extremely difficult to disaggregate across variables such as language subgroup, immigrant status, socioeconomic levels and have statistically reliable information. Careful planning of oversampling or special population studies will be needed to address the importance of these variables on school outcomes for Asian-Americans.

⁹ ACF OPRE: Celebrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Head Start. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/celeb_culture/index.html#overview

¹⁰ M. Bridges, B. Fuller, R. Rumberger and L. Tran. Preschool for California’s Children: Promising Benefits, Unequal Access. Policy Bridge, Sept. 2004. University of California, PACE and UCLMRI Policy Brief 04-3.

¹¹ H. Kim, Diversity Among Asian American High School Students. Educational Testing Service: Policy Information Center, 1997.

One additional piece of information regarding Asian-Americans that deserves notice is the extent to which the variety of native languages is developed as a national linguistic resource. Currently, with the exception of a small number of two-way bilingual immersion programs, there is absence of any public effort to support and develop the variety of languages brought by immigrants. Out of 319 two-way bilingual immersion programs reported on the database kept by the Center for Applied Linguistics¹², just 10 were supporting Asian languages (4 Cantonese, 1 Mandarin, 4 Korean, 1 Japanese). While there are some surveys of community groups such as religious and ethnic organizations that support native languages (Chinese Saturday schools, for example), information to keep track of such efforts both within the public and private domain, and information to help such efforts be successful in promoting a rich linguistic knowledge base seems important, not just for matters of national security and economic competitiveness, but for cultural values as well.¹³

Higher Education

Although Asian-Americans are well-represented in the ranks of selective higher education, it should not mask the reality that Asian-Americans still face barriers and obstacles to success even after admitted from factors that have to do with their English proficiency. For example, the University of California has had a high degree of success in admitting students from Asian-American backgrounds. Yet, despite their academic ability in other areas, the students are challenged in their writing, mainly through lack of appropriate support in the development of these skills prior to college. Take the following essay written in a plea to Robin Scarcella, Director of Writing at UC Irvine from a student who was admitted into the UC campus, but was resistant to being placed in a special writing class (cited with permission from Dr. Scarcella as well as the student):

Dear Mrs. Robbin

I really not need humanity 20 writing class because since time I come to United State all my friend speak English. Until now everyone understand me and I don't need study English. I don't know Vietnam language. I speak only English. I have no communication problem with my friend in dorm. My English teacher in high school key person to teach me. My teacher explain to me that how important the book was for the student and persuaded me read many book. I get A in English through out high school and I never take ESL. I gree that some student need class but you has not made a correct decision put me in English class. Please do not makes me lose the face. I have confident in English.

This student actually turned out to be a success story, but only after some significant and targeted intervention on the part of the writing faculty at UC Irvine. But

¹² Updated May, 2005 at <http://www.cal.org/twi/directory/>

¹³ I realize that this may be bordering on a value statement, and recognize that there are political organizations that would disagree with public support for promoting bilingualism.

this essay should ring true for many faculty who have had contact with students from non-English backgrounds, and many students do not have the benefit of sympathetic writing directors who know the needs of language minority students.

It appears that there is a discrepancy between language (English) and math performance among many Asian-American students, and that this should be the subject of significant investigation. An interdisciplinary investigation of the cognitive, linguistic, and social characteristics that constitute the basis of academic English writing by students who enter higher education would be fruitful.

This issue is made particularly poignant by the fact student choice of majors, and graduate and professional study, tends towards fields away from those that require strong verbal and rhetorical skills. Taking a sample from UC Santa Cruz in 2003, for example, Asian-American representation in areas of majors was as follows: Arts, 11.5%; Engineering: 31.7%; Humanities: 6.5%; Biological Sciences: 14.7%; Social Sciences: 15.6%

This distribution is undoubtedly related to the issue of the representation of Asian-Americans among faculties in colleges and universities, who can act as important role models for students. Here, I would like to point to several graphs taken from an analysis of the status of Asian-Americans at UC Berkeley¹⁴ displaying the highly disproportionate representation of the Asian-Americans amongst faculty, especially when contrasted with the distribution of the student population. These figures are addended as an Appendix to this paper.

There are many plausible explanations for the skewed distribution of Asian-Americans across the disciplines that could be worthy. Economic opportunity surely plays a role in the high representation in the professional and technology and science areas. High math skills relative to verbal skills, especially for those with English as a second language, may be a factor. The paucity of mentors and role models may also contribute to this uneven distribution. And there are others. It is plain, however, that if one believes that faculty diversity plays an important role in the educational and career choices that students make, coming to an understanding of the uneven distribution of Asian-American faculty and then applying these findings for a better distribution should be of high priority to the leaders of those institutions, and of grave concern to its supporters and beneficiaries.

Conclusion

I have tried to raise a range of issues that might be of interest to the DBASSE mission which, if the website is in “advancing the frontiers of the behavioral and social sciences and their applications to public policy.” Many of my observations and

¹⁴ Asian Pacific Americans at Berkeley: Visibility and Marginality. Campus Advisory Committee for Asian-American Affairs and ad hoc contributors (Mark Tanouye, Chair). University of California, Berkeley. January, 2001.

assertions are unsupported or thinly supported, partly due to the paucity of data about this rapidly growing and influential population.