

Immigration and the Changing Status of Asian Americans

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Abstract

Mass immigration over the past four decades has changed the racial and ethnic composition of United States by ushering in millions of Asians and Latinos whose arrival has not only challenged the traditional black-white color line, but has also changed perceptions about race. Focusing on Asian Americans, I show how contemporary immigration has changed the racial status of this group; once considered “unassimilable” and “undesirable immigrants,” Asian Americans now exhibit the highest rates of intermarriage, the lowest rates of residential segregation, and the highest median household incomes of all US racial groups. By highlighting the changing selectivity of Asian immigration after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, I illustrate how their hyper-selectivity has not only affected their patterns of incorporation, but also produced positive stereotypes of contemporary Asian Americans. This, in turn, has resulted in a social psychological process that I refer to as *stereotype promise*—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype that leads one to perform in such a way that confirms the positive stereotype, thereby enhancing performance and outcomes. By introducing research in social psychology to the fields of immigration and race, I provide a better understanding of the ways in which immigration is changing the meaning of race for Asian Americans in twenty-first century America.

INTRODUCTION

Today, race and immigration have become so inextricably linked that one can no longer talk about race without considering immigration. And correlative, one cannot understand the debates about immigration without factoring in the role of race. But exactly how have trends in contemporary immigration changed our ideas about race in the twenty-first century America, particularly for Asian Americans? Once considered “unassimilable” and “undesirable immigrants,” Asian Americans have changed their racial status so dramatically that they now have the highest rates of intermarriage, the lowest rates of residential segregation, highest educational outcomes, and the highest median household incomes of all US racial groups.

To explain the process of racial change, I highlight the changing selectivity of Asian immigration after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, and illustrate how their hyper selectivity has not only affected their patterns of incorporation, but also produced positive stereotypes of contemporary Asian Americans. This, in turn, has resulted in a social psychological process that I refer to as *stereotype promise*—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype that leads one to perform in such a way that confirms the positive stereotype, thereby enhancing performance and outcomes. By introducing research in social psychology to the fields of immigration and race, I provide a better understanding of the ways in which contemporary immigration is changing the meaning of race in twenty-first century America for Asian Americans.

IMMIGRATION AND RACE

Immigrants and their children account for about 23% of the US population, and 80% of today's newcomers hail from Latin America, Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean, creating a society that is more racially and ethnically diverse than at any point in history (Alba & Nee, 2003; Lee & Bean, 2010; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2003; U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics, 2010). In 1970, Latinos and Asians made up only 5% and 1% of the nation's population, respectively, but by 2010, their populations more than tripled close to 17% and 5.5% (Ruggles *et al.*, 2010). Latinos have surpassed Blacks as the largest minority group, and Asians have grown so rapidly that they have recently surpassed Latinos as the largest group of new immigrants to the United States (Pew Research Center, 2012). Demographers project that these populations will continue to grow so that by 2050, Latinos will make up nearly one-third of the nation's population at 29%, and Asians close to one-tenth, at 9% (Lee & Zhou, 2004; Smith & Edmonston, 1997).

Contemporary immigrants have challenged the way we define race in the United States by forcing racial categories to go beyond the traditional black-white binary that had long characterized US race relations. Less than a century ago, race was confined to two categories: "pure" whites and all others. For example, Virginia's Racial Integrity Law of 1925 defined a "white" person as one with "no race whatsoever of blood other than Caucasian," and emerged to legally ban intermarriage between whites and other groups. The statute reflected the Supreme Court rulings of *Takao Ozawa v. United States* in 1922 and the *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923, in which persons of Asian origin were not only classified as nonwhite, but were also considered members of an "unassimilable race," lacking the rights to US citizenship (Lee & Bean, 2010).

At the time, Asian Americans were largely low-skilled, low-wage manual laborers who lived in crowded ethnic enclaves. As "marginal members

of the human race," full of "filth and disease," Asian Americans were denied citizenship, denied the right to intermarry, segregated, and, in the case of Japanese Americans, interned. It was not until the passage of the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1952 that Asian Americans were allowed to become naturalized citizens. Yet despite decades of institutional discrimination and racial prejudice, the status of Asian Americans has risen dramatically.

THE HYPER-SELECTIVITY OF POST-1965 ASIAN IMMIGRATION

How is it possible that the racial status of Asian Americans—once considered unassimilable and undesirable immigrants—has changed so dramatically? The answer lies in the change in the selectivity of Asian immigration—how Asian immigrants differ from nonmigrants in their countries of origin. Those who immigrated to the United States after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act are far more highly-selected than those who migrated prior.

While nearly all immigrants to the United States are more highly educated than their counterparts who have not immigrated, Asian immigrants are the most highly selected (Feliciano, 2005). For example, 27% of adults between the ages 25 and 64 in South Korea and 25% in Japan have a Bachelor's degree or more, but nearly 70% of comparably aged recent immigrants from Korea and Japan are college-educated (Pew Research Center, 2012). This means that Korean and Japanese immigrants in the United States are nearly three times more likely to have a college degree than their national origin counterparts who did not immigrate.

Not only are contemporary Asian immigrants more highly educated than their fellow ethnics who stayed behind, but they are more highly educated than other US immigrant groups and more highly educated than the general US population. More than three-fifths (61%) of Asian immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 who have immigrated in recent years have at least a Bachelor's degree—more than double the national average for the US population overall at 28% (Pew Research Center, 2012). Contemporary Asian immigrants on average are hyper-selected, that is, they exhibit a dual type of positive selectivity. Not only are they more likely to have graduated from college than their counterparts who did not migrate, but they are also more likely to have graduated from college than US population (Lee & Zhou, 2014).

Given the high human capital of Asian immigrants, stereotypes of Asian Americans (and Asians more generally) tend to be overwhelmingly positive: Asians value education, work hard, are entrepreneurial, and hold strong family values—attributes that explain their exceptional academic and occupational outcomes (Murray, 2012). Too often, these attributes are framed as stemming from Asian culture. Yet by failing to recognize that

Asian immigrants in the United States are only a slice—and an exceptionally hyper-selected slice—of the Asian population easily leads to the specious argument that there is something essential about Asian culture that promotes exceptional outcomes. In methodological terms: to make generalizations about all Asians based only on the hyper-selected group of Asian immigrants in the United States is sampling on the dependent variable.

However, the hyper-selectivity of Asian immigration helps to explain the persistence of racial, ethnic, and cultural stereotypes of Asian Americans, even amidst disconfirming evidence. Obviously, not all Asian Americans are highly-educated and have high median household incomes. For example, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong immigrants have lower levels of educational attainment than the US average, and each of these groups, as well as Chinese and Koreans, has higher poverty rates than the US national average. Given the heterogeneity within the Asian racial category and the evidence that not all Asian Americans have exceptional outcomes, why do positive stereotypes of Asian Americans persist?

Research in social psychology helps to shed light on this vexing question. Studies have shown that people are more likely to notice and remember events and experiences that confirm their expectations, and to discount or ignore those that disconfirm them (Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999; Ridgeway, 2011). In addition, because there are visible examples that confirm the stereotype, the disconfirming evidence can be easily cognitively dismissed as the exception (Hewstone, 1994). Yet regardless of the validity of a stereotype, social psychological studies have also shown that the mere existence of a stereotype can affect an individual's performance, even if one does not subscribe to the stereotype (Steele, 1999).

IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: STEREOTYPE THREAT AND STEREOTYPE PROMISE

While immigration research has been informed by a number of social science disciplines—including sociology, political science, anthropology, economics, and demography—social psychology has been curiously absent.¹ An interdisciplinary field, immigration can benefit from research in social psychology, and in particular, the body of studies that has shown how group-based stereotypes can affect an individual's performance.

This vein of research has been spear-headed by Claude Steele and his colleagues whose studies have shown that the threat or fear of performing in a

1. For a fuller elaboration on the useful intersection between immigration and social psychology, refer to the Russell Sage Foundation's working group on Cultural Contact and Immigration. Retrieved from <http://www.russellsage.org/research/cultural-contact/working-group-cultural-contact-and-immigration>.

way would inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype of one's group can depress an individual's performance—what they refer to as *stereotype threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Through various experiments, they have shown that stereotype threat decreases the performance of high-achieving African American students on difficult verbal tests as well as accomplished female math students on difficult math tests when these tests are presented as a measure of ability. Steele and his colleagues have also shown that performance improves for both groups when the “threat” is lifted, that is, when the tests are presented as problem-solving exercises rather than a measure of ability.

Further developing this line of research, Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) have found that Asian American female students who are strong in math performed better on a math test when researchers cued their ethnic identity, and performed worse when they cued their gender compared to the control group. Their point is that test performance is both malleable and susceptible to implicit cues—what they refer to as *stereotype susceptibility*.

Building on this literature, I conceived of “*stereotype promise*”—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype that leads one to perform in such a way that confirms the positive stereotype, thereby enhancing performance (Lee, 2012). Stereotype promise focuses more broadly on the way in which positive stereotypes can boost performance outside of controlled test-taking environments and in real-world settings such as schools and workplaces. For example, in a study of 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese in Los Angeles, the respondents explained that their teachers and school administrators assumed Asian students—regardless of ethnicity, class, gender, or generational status—were smart, hard-working, and high-achieving. And importantly, the Chinese and Vietnamese respondents also revealed how the teachers and administrators' positive opinions of them had very real consequences (Lee & Zhou, 2014).

Teachers' positive perceptions affected the grades that Asian American students received, the extra help they were offered with their coursework and their college applications, and their likelihood of being placed into competitive programs such as GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) and into academic tracks such as advanced placement (AP) and Honors. While the positive stereotypes affected how teachers and guidance counselors treated Asian American students, they also affected the way that Asian American students perceived themselves. Even some of the most mediocre students—those who earned C's in junior high school and failed the AP exam for high school—changed their behavior once teachers placed them into the AP track and in Honor's classes. Once anointed as exceptional, bright, and deserving, these mediocre students changed their behavior; they took school more seriously, put more effort into their homework, and changed the reference group by which they measured their performance,

which resulted in straight A's and admission to top colleges.² In essence, stereotype promise affected the performance of even some of the most mediocre Asian American students, resulting in exceptional outcomes (Lee & Zhou, 2014).

Moreover, because these students' academic outcomes matched their teachers' expectations, the teachers can point to the students' stellar academic achievement as proof of their initial assessment about all Asian American students (that they are smart, high-achieving, and deserving of being placed into the most competitive academic tracks), all the while unmindful of their role in generating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948). This, in turn, leads them to favor a new cohort of Asian American students, and the cycle continues.

It is critical to underscore that while some Asian American outcomes may be exceptional, it is not because Asians are superior in some intrinsic sense or because they value achievement more than other groups. Rather, positive stereotypes of Asian Americans can change the behavior of even some of the most average performers, thereby constructing exceptional outcomes. These social psychological processes operate to give Asian Americans an advantage over their non-Asian peers, and are consequential because they occur in gateway institutions such as schools and workplaces. This is just one concrete example in which research in immigration and race has benefited from studies in social psychology.

CONCLUSION—THE CHANGING MEANING OF RACE FOR ASIAN AMERICANS

Once a dichotomous category in the United States, race has moved far beyond the black-white binary as a result of the arrival of contemporary immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. Diverse in national origins, socioeconomic background, and phenotype, today's immigrants have challenged the meaning of race and racial status for both the newcomers and members of their host society. One of the most striking changes has been the racial status of Asian Americans.

Less than a century ago, Asian Americans were considered "unassimilable" and "undesirable immigrants," who were denied citizenship, denied the right to intermarry, and confined to ethnic enclaves. Today, Asian Americans have the highest rates of intermarriage, are the most residentially

2. What sets apart stereotype promise from the *Pygmalion effect* (or the expectancy effect)—that teachers' expectations can influence students' performance—is that in Rosenthal and Jacobsen's study, teachers were told that certain students (selected at random) were "special" and had "intellectual competencies that would in due course be revealed." After 1 year of the experiment, the researchers found that a higher percentage of "special" students increased their IQ by 20 points or more compared to the control group (47% vs 19%). By contrast, our respondents' teachers were not told that the Chinese and Vietnamese students had academic potential that would bloom in due course; instead, teachers made assumptions about their academic ability based on group-based stereotypes of Asians. See Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968).

integrated, and exhibit the highest median household incomes of all US racial groups. The high selectivity of Asian immigration after 1965 has paved the way for the emergence of a new set of racial stereotypes: that of the highly-educated, hard-working, high-achieving Asian American—a far cry from their label as “marginal members of the human race” who were filled with “filth and disease.” While Asian Americans are a diverse lot, the US racialization process leads to positive based stereotypes of this heterogeneous group, and results in “stereotype promise,” which, in turn, can facilitate the incorporation of contemporary Asian immigrants and their children. As a result, racial status can change, and has changed for Asian Americans, illustrating one of the many ways in which immigration is changing the meaning of race in the twenty-first century.

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