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# Racialized Assimilation of Asian Americans

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## Keywords

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## Abstract

Because of the generally high socioeconomic attainments and high intermarriage rates of Asian Americans, it has been suggested that Asian Americans are reaching parity with whites and are assimilating to mainstream American society. However, other research shows the continued significance of race for Asian Americans regardless of their socioeconomic status and levels of acculturation. This article provides a review of recent research on socioeconomic attainment and intermarriage among Asian Americans as well as an overview of research on less studied but increasingly important indicators: residential outcomes, political participation, and mental health. We argue that Asian Americans are assimilating but in ways that differ from their European predecessors. In this process, racial/ethnic boundaries between Asians and whites may be solidified rather than dissolved, thus maintaining the significance of race for Asian Americans. We suggest that a racialized assimilation framework may best characterize the experiences of contemporary Asian Americans.

## INTRODUCTION

As the fastest growing group of immigrants in the United States today, Asian Americans are increasingly the focus of research and popular media. The 2012 Pew Research Center report titled *The Rise of Asian Americans* stated that "Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated, and fastest growing racial group in the United States" and that they "are more satisfied with their lives, finances, and the direction of the country, and they place more value than other Americans do on marriage, parenthood, hard work and career success" (Pew Res. Cent. 2012, pp. v, 1). This report was met with much criticism from Asian American individuals, scholars, and organizations, many of whom argued that the report reinforced the model minority stereotype of Asians. Similar controversies surrounded Chua's book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Chua 2011) and her subsequent book with Jed Rubenfeld, *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America* (Chua & Rubenfeld 2014), both of which touted the high achievements and cultural practices of Chinese Americans and other Asian groups. Most recently, a *New York Times* op-ed by Nicholas Kristof titled "The Asian Advantage" began with the question, "Why are Asian-Americans so successful in America?" (Kristof 2015).

Consistent with these popular accounts, many scholars have consistently viewed the social standing of Asian Americans with remarkable optimism. Asian Americans have been viewed as the flag bearers of new assimilation theory, achieving trajectories considered most proximate to the assimilation of European groups in the past (Alba & Nee 2003). Additionally, they have been viewed as key beneficiaries of America's ever-increasing diversity due to the continuing erosion of some racial boundaries during the twenty-first century. Rather than being relegated as racialized minorities, Asian Americans appear to be approaching "near white" status as continued acculturation and contact facilitate successful incorporation into American society, leading to a blurring of the Asian/white divide and a strengthening of the black/nonblack divide (Lee & Bean 2010). Indeed, even according to views more sympathetic to the continued reality of racialization and discrimination for nonwhite groups, most Asian Americans have achieved status as "honorary whites" in the changing racial hierarchy of the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2004, p. 932).

Such conclusions on the state of contemporary Asian American groups are not without empirical support. Asian Americans are quickly acculturating—by the second generation, only 7% are fluently bilingual, and the vast majority prefers to speak English (Portes & Hao 1998)—and the high educational and occupational attainments of Asian Americans have been thought to provide the strongest evidence of their successful incorporation (Alba & Nee 2003, Bonilla-Silva 2004, Sakamoto et al. 2009, Xie & Goyette 2004). Similarly, intermarriage has historically represented a key barometer of social distance, and the high rate of intermarriage between Asians and whites is another outcome in which social barriers between whites and Asians seem to be quickly dissipating (Gordon 1964, Lee & Bean 2010, Waters & Jiménez 2005). These findings have exemplified race/ethnicity's waning significance as determinants of life chances and social integration for Asian Americans. More importantly, these successes signal cultural and institutional changes more inclusive of racial/ethnic minorities, ultimately facilitating their successful incorporation in the post–civil rights era (Alba & Nee 2003).

Another body of literature challenges the idea of Asian American assimilation and increasing parity with whites and continues to emphasize the racialization of Asian Americans as model minorities and perpetual foreigners (Ancheta 2006, Kim 1999, Ng et al. 2007). This research is more critical, contending that the average socioeconomic success of Asian Americans is exaggerated and masks the wide variation in educational and occupational outcomes among different Asian ethnic groups (Kao & Thompson 2003, Kim 2007, Lee 1996, Ngo & Lee 2007). Moreover, the success stories of select Asian groups are not simply due to individual efforts rewarded by a system

free of racial inequality, but are in large part a result of American immigration policies that have targeted highly skilled professionals since the 1960s (Lee & Zhou 2015).

Furthermore, the persistent image of Asians as a model minority obscures the continuing racial subordination of and discrimination against Asian Americans (Ancheta 2006; Chou & Feagin 2008; Kim 1999, 2007). Despite Asian Americans' perceived socioeconomic success, studies in multiple disciplines have provided evidence that the Asian American population—including first and later generations, English and native-language-only speakers, and most ethnic groups—is perceived as not fully American, a category that is often saved for those of European descent (Danico & Ng 2004, Devos & Banaji 2005, Okihiro 1994, Tuan 1998, Xu & Lee 2013). Often as a result of this perpetual foreigner stereotype, Asians, no matter how long they have been in the United States, are perceived as unassimilable and in many cases their loyalty to the United States is questioned (Ancheta 2006; Kim 1999, 2007). Through the persistence of these stereotypical images, the resulting prejudice and discrimination, and the increased contact and interaction with the American mainstream, Asian Americans become aware of their status as racial minorities. The example of Muslim Americans—many of whom are South Asian—provides a poignant case in point. Even the casual observer may recognize that hostility toward Muslim groups climaxes in the wake of events such as the 9/11 attacks or the 2015 San Bernardino shootings, and the past decade has also seen a systematic resurgence of cultural othering that has resulted in subtle forms of discrimination against Muslim groups in employment, housing, and social interaction (Gaddis & Ghoshal 2015, Kaushal et al. 2007, Widner & Chicoine 2011)

This review seeks to reopen a dialogue on the current state of Asian American assimilation and mobility. In doing so, we reevaluate the argument that Asian Americans have reached parity with whites (Sakamoto et al. 2009). We argue that before conclusions can be made about the assimilation or racial position of Asian Americans, scholars need to examine more critically the processes, not just the outcomes, of socioeconomic mobility and intermarriage as well as the evidence in other important domains. Thus, we begin with an updated review of the most common indicators used to lay claim to the successful assimilation and reduced social distance of Asian Americans: socioeconomic attainment and intermarriage. We then expand our discussion to include several less studied indicators that carry increasing importance for a growing Asian American population: residential outcomes, political participation, and mental health. We argue that the current evidence suggests that Asian Americans are indeed assimilating but in ways that differ from their European predecessors. In this process, racial/ethnic boundaries between Asians and whites may be solidified rather than dissolved.

Our argument represents a variant of recent theories of racialized assimilation or racialized incorporation (Chaudhary 2015, Emeka & Vallejo 2011, Golash-Boza 2006, Vasquez 2011). Although most studies using this framework focus on the experiences of Latino(a) Americans and on the influence of discrimination on ethnic identity, what is important for our purposes here is that these theories view racial status as fundamental to the process of immigrant adaptation. As a result, even as contemporary immigrants successfully undertake processes of acculturation and socialization, they must confront the challenge of their nonwhite racial status, which—unlike the more soluble nature of ethnicity—persists through the years and even generations in a country fundamentally defined by the perception of race (Feagin 2000, Golash-Boza 2006, Telles & Ortiz 2008, Tuan 1998).

## SOCIOECONOMIC ATTAINMENT

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been adopted as a benchmark indicator of assimilation (Waters & Jiménez 2005). Because a thorough review of Asian American socioeconomic attainment was

published relatively recently (Sakamoto et al. 2009), we focus here on research that has been published since that time. As with that prior article, we review studies that have examined Asian Americans' earnings, returns to education, and labor market outcomes relative to native-born whites.

As Sakamoto et al. (2009) convincingly argue, the assessment of Asian Americans' socioeconomic attainment depends critically on the distinction between immigrant and native-born groups. Findings from this literature consistently show that, for the most part, any significant Asian American disadvantage persists only for foreign-born and foreign-educated workers, ultimately suggesting the achievement of labor market parity for native-born and US-educated Asian Americans (Kim & Sakamoto 2010, Zeng & Xie 2004). These findings suggest that Asian Americans pose an exception to the majority/minority paradigm—that is, the perspective that whites, as the dominant group, will have higher SES than minority groups (Eitzen et al. 2013). Indeed, having achieved socioeconomic parity with whites, Asian Americans may perhaps be better understood as a "nonminority minority," or a minority group whose high levels of achievement and accomplishment in the labor market should be acknowledged as characteristics worthy of further study in their own right (Sakamoto et al. 2009, p. 256).

Recent works, however, have challenged the general applicability of the parity thesis to a group as diverse in origins and experiences as Asian Americans (Kibria 1998, Kim 2007). In a sample of college-educated Asian American women, for example, Kim & Zhao (2014) find that all generations show a net disadvantage relative to native-born whites across indicators of unemployment, annual earnings, and number of people supervised. The examination of Southeast Asian groups also shows significant earnings deficits for men across all ethnicities (Sakamoto & Kim 2013, Takei et al. 2013). Finally, in contrast to the common focus on high-achieving Asian American groups, Kim & Sakamoto (2014) find that significant disparities in earnings exist among people with the lowest levels of education: For Asian Americans with less than a high school degree, the lowest earners earn significantly less than comparably educated native-born whites. These same earnings disadvantages exist for the most highly educated Asian Americans (BA and above), but in an inverse fashion: Among the most highly educated, those earning the highest wages still earn significantly less than their highly educated white peers (Kim & Sakamoto 2014). Collectively, these findings provide evidence for the model minority stereotype as a destructive myth that overshadows and neglects underachieving groups, while also suggesting the persistence of racial discrimination in the form of glass ceilings for high achievers (Bhatt 2013, Kao & Thompson 2003, Torres Stone et al. 2006, Woo 2000).

This literature also documents the continued salience of ethnic and group boundaries and suggests that research on Asian American socioeconomic attainment should incorporate serious consideration of the importance of ethnic niches and economic enclaves as mechanisms for socioeconomic achievement (Light & Gold 2000). Forms of employment alternative to the occupational mainstream (e.g., self-employment within the ethnic economy) have been viewed as protective pathways through which immigrants may overcome labor market disadvantages—for example, the unequal returns in wages and earnings from forms of capital identical to those of other groups (Light & Gold 2000). As a result, economic enclaves have been viewed as important resources for new and impoverished immigrants (Wilson & Portes 1980, Zhou & Logan 1989). Ethnic communities more generally may still provide important benefits that buffer Asian American groups from unequal returns and discrimination. The importance of ethnic resources may not be limited to low-capital enclave workers but may also apply to high-achieving Asian American groups attempting to secure socioeconomic gains, advances, and fair treatment in mainstream occupations and industries (Dhingra 2012, Kim & Sakamoto 2014, Lee 2013).

Research on second- and higher-generation Asian Americans' self-employment indicates that although assimilation seems to be occurring, so is racialization. Examining data from the 1980 and 2000 US censuses, Valdez (2012) finds that as US-born Chinese and Koreans age, their generally higher self-employment rates converge with those of non-Hispanic whites, which Valdez suggests is indicative of assimilation to the mainstream. However, Chaudhary (2015) finds that whereas self-employment rates of second- and third-generation Asians are similar to those of whites, Asian Americans are still less likely than whites to be self-employed in medium- and high-prestige sectors. Furthermore, Dhingra (2012) observes that among immigrant and native-born Indians with viable options in the mainstream labor market, some choose to return to the motel industry due to what they perceive as glass ceilings and limited opportunities for upward mobility. Additionally, coethnic communities facilitate self-employment among the second generation. Fairchild (2009) finds that neighborhood exposure to coethnics with high levels of self-employment is positively related to choosing self-employment over wage and salary labor.

The review of Asian American socioeconomic attainment above provides an example of the theoretical nuance we argue is necessary to understand the current and future state of Asian American assimilation across socioeconomic and other important group- and individual-level outcomes. In the remainder of this review, we provide an overview of Asian Americans that acknowledges both their socioeconomic accomplishments and the relevance and reality of their continued racialization and marginalization in the United States. Throughout, we also point to the persistence of ethnic boundaries, which we view to be an important feature, rather than contradiction, of assimilation into American society.

## INTERRACIAL AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS

Asian Americans have among the highest rates of interracial marriage in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center's report on newlyweds in 2010, 28% of Asians in the United States married someone of a different race, compared to 9% of whites, 17% of blacks, and 26% of Hispanics (Wang 2012). The high rate of intermarriage among Asians, and particularly between Asians and whites, is seen as a signal of the breakdown or blurring of ethnic boundaries and is interpreted as evidence of the assimilation of Asian Americans. When examining trends in intermarriage rates over time, however, scholars have found that the rate of interracial marriage among Asian Americans has actually decreased in the past decade, particularly among foreign-born Asians (Lee & Edmonston 2005; Lee & Fernandez 1998; Qian & Lichter 2007, 2011).

The high rate of intermarriage between Asians and whites can in part be attributed to relative group size (Harris & Ono 2004); however, the evidence provided in most studies of predictors of intermarriage exhibits strong undertones of assimilation into, and parity with, the US mainstream. Asian intermarriage is related to subprocesses of acculturation; English proficiency, years in the United States, and generational status have all been shown to increase intermarriage rates (Hwang et al. 1997; Lee & Edmonston 2005; Liang & Ito 1999; Min & Kim 2009; Okamoto 2007; Qian & Lichter 2007, 2011; Qian et al. 2001). Assimilation theories also explain differences in intermarriage by ethnic groups, which are highest for long-established Japanese groups (Hwang et al. 1997, Min & Kim 2009).

Additionally, studies of individuals' marital preferences indicate decreasing social distance between Asians and whites. Herman & Campbell (2012) show that 66% of white men reported that they have married or would marry an Asian. Women have less favorable attitudes, but still 43% report that they would marry an Asian (none reported having married an Asian). Perry (2013) similarly finds that only 21% of whites said that they would not be comfortable with their daughter marrying an Asian. Furthermore, structural explanations of intermarriage like relative group

size (Blau & Schwartz 1997, Kalmijn 1998) provide strong explanatory purchase for the declining rates of Asian interracial marriage mentioned above. The continued influx of Asian immigrants after 1965 ultimately increased the marriageable pool of coethnics, thereby leading to more opportunities for endogamous relationships and marriages among both foreign-born and US-born Asians (Min & Kim 2009; Qian & Lichter 2007, 2011). Thus, although overall rates of interracial marriage with whites have declined, this appears to be the result of a rapidly growing immigrant population rather than of changes in mate selection preferences or a resurgence in social distance between whites and Asians over the past several decades (Qian & Lichter 2011).

Yet, despite the evidence provided in these studies, there has been criticism of the assimilationist perspective (Chow 2000, Song 2009). Some scholars suggest that despite high levels of intermarriage, marriage patterns still reflect distinct racial boundaries and a racial hierarchy in which whites are the dominant group. First, although third- and higher-generation Asians do outmarry at higher rates than first-generation Asians, the magnitude of these gains is diminished when compared to earlier European immigrant groups. Feliciano (2001) finds that by the third generation, Europeans displayed significantly higher intermarriage rates than third-generation Asians (and Latinos) today. In addition, increases in intermarriage from the second to the third generation were much larger for Europeans than for Asians and Latinos.

Second, the assimilation perspective suggests that marital assimilation follows structural assimilation, as higher education and occupational prestige increase contact and interaction with other groups and thus the potential for intermarriage (Lieberson & Waters 1988, Qian 1997, Qian et al. 2001). However, findings regarding the relationship between SES and intermarriage for Asians have been mixed. Whereas Qian and colleagues document a positive relationship between education and marriage to whites, and argue that this education gradient is getting stronger over time (Qian & Lichter 2007, 2011), other researchers find little to no relationship between education and intermarriage (Hwang et al. 1995, Wong 1989). There is also evidence of a negative relationship between education and intermarriage with whites, particularly among women (Hwang et al. 1997). Other studies find that the impact of education on intermarriage varies by ethnic group (Lee & Yamanaka 1990, Qian et al. 2001). In addition, some studies show no significant relationship between occupation and intermarriage and report inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between income and intermarriage (Fu 2008, Wong 1989).

Third, scholars have suggested that rates of intermarriage may not provide a complete picture, and that qualitative research may better highlight racial dynamics between individuals in interracial relationships (Telles & Sue 2009). In fact, in her qualitative study of Asian spousal preferences, Chow (2000) challenges the idea that intermarriage is an indicator of social equality between racial groups. Among US-born Asian interviewees that preferred white spouses, respondents showed high valuation of attributes associated with whites in general and with having whites as partners specifically. Notably, this was accompanied by the simultaneous devaluation of Asians of the opposite sex, who were racialized as "others" and viewed as stereotypically "Asian." In contrast, those Asians who preferred other Asians as spouses did so for reasons such as comfort or better rapport, and this preference for a common culture was related to a growing sense of racial inequality (Chow 2000, Kibria 1997). These findings showcase an unexpected paradox: An active racial hierarchy and racialization processes may actually undergird high levels of intermarriage.

Fourth, intermarriage rates are gendered, with the odds of intermarriage being much higher for Asian American women than for Asian American men, except in the case of Asian Indians (Hwang et al. 1997, Liang & Ito 1999, Min & Kim 2009). There is also an income premium for Asian husbands married to white wives, which does not exist among other outmarried husbands (Fu 2008). Furthermore, it is important to note that intermarriage rates cannot speak to racial/ethnic preferences for romantic relationships more generally. Asian men are the least likely group to be

in a romantic relationship (Balistreri et al. 2015), and in studies of Internet dating, white women exclude Asian men the most compared to men of other racial/ethnic groups (Feliciano et al. 2009, Lin & Lundquist 2013, Robnett & Feliciano 2011). In fact, both white men and white women excluded Asian Indians just as much as they excluded blacks. In sum, these studies provide evidence of an enduring racial hierarchy, at least among men.

Last, research on interethnic marriages indicates that intermarriage between Asians of different ethnic groups is becoming more common (Lee & Fernandez 1998). As in the case of interracial marriage with whites, interethnic marriage is higher among Asians born in the United States compared to Asian immigrants and those who arrived to the United States at an earlier age (Okamoto 2007, Qian et al. 2001). This can be explained by the breakdown of language barriers and increased contact between different Asian groups. However, Kibria's (1997) interviews with second-generation Asian Americans also demonstrated the relevance of a sense of shared Asian American culture (among East Asians at least). Thus, as Qian and colleagues argue, the assimilation of Asian Americans takes the form not only of integration with whites through interracial marriage, but also of integration into Asian American panethnicity through interethnic marriage (see also Okamoto 2007). If this continues to increase, boundaries of "Asian American-ness" may endure (Kibria 1997).

## RESIDENTIAL OUTCOMES

Overall, most research indicates that Asians remain the least segregated of the major racial/ethnic groups, with segregation levels remaining stable or slightly increasing since 1980 (Hall et al. 2010, Iceland 2004, Iceland et al. 2014, Logan & Zhang 2013, Xie & Goyette 2004). In general, researchers have largely explained these trends through the framework of the classic spatial assimilation model, which predicts increased integration and suburbanization for immigrant groups with socioeconomic and acculturation gains (Charles 2003, Logan & Alba 1995, Logan et al. 1996, Massey 1985). Accordingly, for these groups, and especially for Asian residents, research has shown a strong connection of the residential outcomes of integration and suburban residency with income, educational attainment, labor market status, and home ownership (Alba & Logan 1993, Alba et al. 1999, Denton & Massey 1988, Iceland & Wilkes 2006, Logan et al. 1996, Massey & Denton 1987, White et al. 1993). Upwardly mobile Asian Americans have also successfully attained residence in suburban neighborhoods with racial compositions that are comparable to those of white middle-class neighborhoods, a pattern that is absent for middle-class black residents (Charles 2003, Logan et al. 1996).

Consistent with most of the research in this area, Iceland & Scopilliti (2008) find that the increase in residential segregation of Asian Americans is robustly explained by immigration and foreign-born-related factors. Specifically, levels of segregation from white residents decline significantly for Asian residents after controlling for immigration-related factors, such as English language ability, home ownership, and length of stay in the United States (Iceland & Scopilliti 2008). The implications of these findings are thus crucial to understanding the residential outcomes for an Asian American population that has grown significantly but remains predominantly foreign born in composition. In contrast to the declining levels of segregation in the 1970s (when pioneering immigrants distributed themselves widely in smaller communities), increases in Asian/white segregation today likely reflect the effects of earlier migrant networks that facilitate chain migration—and residential concentration—to these same areas (Massey 1985, 2001; Price & Singer 2008).

Collectively, the established role of social mobility and continued acculturation of Asian Americans in furthering residential gains has proven to be an example of the classic spatial

assimilation model, and of assimilation theory more generally (Alba & Nee 2003). Having successfully leveraged class and status gains into residence in quality suburban neighborhoods—and with Asian immigrants increasingly bypassing urban enclaves altogether—Asian Americans appear to have taken a key step toward entering the US mainstream (Alba & Nee 2003; Gordon 1964; Li 1998, 2009). Thus, although a limited number of enclaves may persist, Asian Americans ultimately appear poised to complete trajectories of structural assimilation, as residence alongside majority groups creates further opportunities for interaction and familiarity with US culture and society (Alba & Nee 2003, Gordon 1964).

Nevertheless, a few caveats challenge the general consensus on the theoretical and empirical findings described above. Specifically, a closer examination of the literature on locational attainment and ethnic communities suggests that for Asian Americans, the fundamental mechanisms of spatial assimilation are not coupled with residential outcomes in a clear linear fashion. For example, research has documented the weakening link between suburbanization and acculturation; in contrast to prior immigrant groups, Hispanic and Asian immigrants who have yet to assimilate linguistically still attain residence in suburban neighborhoods (Alba et al. 1999, Logan et al. 2002). Furthermore, market position and residential outcomes have shown evidence of decoupling, as several studies document an inverse association between SES and integration with white residents (Hall 2013, Iceland & Wilkes 2006, Logan et al. 2002). Additionally, the few studies that compare segregation patterns between foreign-born and US-born Asians indicate that foreign-born Asians tend to live in neighborhoods with slightly fewer white residents (Alba & Logan 1993, White et al. 1993) and are more highly segregated than their native-born counterparts (Iceland & Scopilliti 2008). However, the native-born advantage appears to be weakening over time, and nativity status generally explains less of Asian American residential outcomes than it does for Latino groups (Alba et al. 1999, Iceland & Scopilliti 2008, White et al. 1993).

At the very least, these findings indicate that processes of residential assimilation may no longer indicate maturity into the final stages of assimilation. On a deeper level, they further suggest that rather than waning, the role of race and ethnicity may be becoming an increasingly stronger consideration for Asian Americans in the locational attainment process (Brown & Chung 2006, 2008; Logan et al. 2002). The reality of these implications is shown clearly in case studies documenting the growth of affluent Asian neighborhoods and suburban enclaves, called ethnoburbs or edge gateways in the literature (Li 1998, 2009; Price & Singer 2008). Such neighborhoods offer the amenities of middle-class suburbia yet the comforts of ethnic-owned businesses, groceries, and other utilities. More importantly, such communities have flourished in number over the past quarter century (Wen et al. 2009). Thus, rather than being outliers or exceptions, such communities may represent a continuation of the symbiotic patterns of chain migration and enclave growth that have traditionally characterized immigrant neighborhoods in the city center (Massey 1985, 2001). As a result, suburban ethnic neighborhoods may continue to emerge as a viable and growing alternative to majority white neighborhoods in the spatial attainment process (Hall 2013, Iceland & Wilkes 2006).

The spatial assimilation model may also underestimate the extent to which Asian Americans, as a nonwhite minority group, continue to face discrimination and social distance in the locational attainment process. In contrast, the place stratification model emphasizes the ways in which racial/ethnic minority groups continue to face difficulties in the pursuit of integrated neighborhoods, deterred by an assortment of individual-level (e.g., neighborhood steering; see Ross & Turner 2005) and group-level processes (e.g., white flight; see Charles 2003). Indeed, there is at least some evidence that Asian segregation levels may be driven by whites' reluctance to live proximate to immigrant neighborhoods, with levels of segregation ultimately being higher for Asians who reside in areas without established infrastructures for immigrant–native

relations. Increases in segregation during the 2000s were largest in areas with rapidly growing Asian populations, whereas declines most consistently occurred in areas with slowly growing or declining Asian populations (Hall et al. 2010). Using individual-level data, Crowder et al. (2011) also confirm that both the relative size of, and increases in, a neighborhood's immigrant population are significant predictors of white out-mobility.

Finally, in contrast to the more commonly discussed patterns of moderate to low levels of Asian/white segregation, research on the segregation of Asian groups by national origin reveals a dramatically different pattern. In disaggregating the segregation patterns of Asian residents into individual patterns of segregation by nationality, both Logan & Zhang (2013) and Iceland et al. (2014) find that, in fact, every group, with the exception of the Japanese, is more segregated from white residents than the aggregate Asian/white segregation levels would suggest. To put these findings in better perspective, a comparison with other major racial/ethnic groups reveals stark contrasts to the current consensus: Vietnamese residents have segregation levels on a par with African Americans, whereas groups with Chinese and Indian origins (the two largest nationalities) show levels of segregation on par with Hispanics (Logan & Zhang 2013). Ultimately, such works problematize the predominant practice of consolidating various national origin groups into a single Asian category, and they suggest that distinguishing among groups unveils fundamentally different outlooks for different nationalities.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The political incorporation of Asian Americans remains largely understudied, because the majority of studies examining the political behaviors of racial/ethnic minority groups has focused on African Americans, and to a lesser extent Hispanics (Lien 1997, Xu 2002). Recently, however, a growing number of works have provided new insight into both the formal and the informal political participation of Asian Americans (Lien 1997, Lien et al. 2004, Wong et al. 2011). The latter—which includes noninstitutional events such as protests and civic engagement within the community—is vital to fully understand the political incorporation of immigrant groups that may include noncitizens otherwise barred from the political arena (Ebert & Okamoto 2015, Martinez 2005). Nevertheless, we limit our discussion below to the formal political participation of Asian Americans, particularly as measured through voter registration and turnout, for several reasons. Asian immigrants display among the fastest naturalization rates relative to other immigrant groups, thus projecting as an important electorate in the future (Lien 2001). Additionally, formal political incorporation as a group represents a fundamentally important feature of assimilation, given that the political process remains the core grounds by which groups claim social membership and advance group interests. As such, differences in voting may continue to contribute to the inequality of groups along categorical grounds (Wong et al. 2011).

Traditionally, the strongest explanation for differences in political participation among racial/ethnic groups has centered on the vital importance of socioeconomic resources. According to this thesis, individuals with high levels of income, education, and other SES indicators are more likely to use these forms of capital to access and engage in the political participation process (Milbrath & Goel 1977, Verba & Nie 1972). For example, lower levels of black political participation in the post–civil rights era have largely been shown to be a function of socioeconomic deficits (Harris 1994; Milbrath & Goel 1977; Tate 1991, 1993). Likewise, socioeconomic explanations have provided strong purchase in explaining Hispanic political participation in the contemporary immigration era (DeSipio 1996).

Yet despite its relevance for black and Hispanic groups, SES resource theory has proven unable to explain the paradox of Asian American political behavior: Despite their high levels of income

and education, Asian Americans lag noticeably behind other groups in their rates of political participation (Lien et al. 2004; Uhlaner et al. 1989; Xu 2002, 2005). For example, voter registration among Asian Americans has been documented to be as low as 28%, a figure that pales in comparison to that of non-Hispanic whites and African Americans, registered at 67% and 64%, respectively. Likewise, although Asian Americans represented nearly 5% of the US population in 2000 (Barnes & Bennett 2002), exit polls showed that they made up only 2–3% of voters in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections (Wong 2005).

Ultimately, research on the puzzle of Asian American political participation has attempted to move beyond traditional SES models to incorporate a consideration of other group and contextual factors. For Asian Americans, this necessarily involves a consideration of their large immigrant population. According to this view, acculturation-related effects should matter to the extent that the act of voting itself requires formal levels of English proficiency, whereas foreign-born status might directly affect political participation for immigrants who have not yet been naturalized as US citizens. Wong et al. (2011) examine these hypotheses using data from the 2008 National Asian American Survey to show that more recent immigrants and those educated abroad are less likely to participate politically at the individual level, supporting prior research that has likewise shown that immigration-related factors are significant predictors of reduced Asian American political participation (Lien 1994; Lien et al. 2001, 2004; Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong et al. 2011). More specifically, recent work suggests that these effects are strongest in stunting Asian American voter registration rather than voting turnout itself (Jang 2009, Lien et al. 2004, Xu 2005). This body of research suggests that a lack of exposure to the US political process and the absence of the instrumental skills necessary for participation may work in combination with voter registration constraints and requirements to suppress group-level patterns among Asian American voters.

Although being native born or belonging to the second generation generally increases the likelihood of voting, it is unlikely that these effects alone account for the entirety of Asian Americans' political participation deficits. Native-born advantages in political participation have been shown to plateau after the second generation, and third-generation Asian Americans are still significantly less likely to vote than native-born whites and other minority groups (Lien et al. 2004, Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001). Thus, in addition to the institutional constraints that impede voting for the foreign born, it is likely that other factors facilitate the low levels of political participation among Asian Americans writ large. For example, comparative studies have consistently found that relative to other nonwhites, Asian Americans are less likely to be contacted by political parties or to be the target of mobilization campaigns (Ramakrishnan 2005, Wong 2006). This is problematic in light of contemporary research showing that voter education and mobilization efforts can be effective tools to increase Asian voter turnout, especially when bilingual materials and staff are used (Wong 2005). In sum, future research should continue to examine contextual effects beyond immigrant socialization and acculturation that are likely key to Asian American political participation.

Among such factors, it is likely that race, ethnicity, and discrimination will continue to have a role in the formation and participation of a successful Asian American electorate moving forward. Historically, group-based models of participation have been viewed as a strategic means by which political minorities can accrue and utilize nontraditional resources to secure favorable outcomes in the political arena (Dawson 1994, Tate 1993, Verba & Nie 1972). Although a growing number of studies suggest that the great diversity among Asian national groups may problematize the formation of a politically united, panethnic Asian American front (Lien 2003, Lien et al. 2001), other research suggests that factors of group consciousness may play a role in Asian political participation, conditional on other contextual effects. For example, demographic changes that increase the concentration of Asian American voters present one potential mechanism for political incorporation at the community level, and research has confirmed that third-generation Asian

Americans are more likely to vote in states with a higher proportion of Asian Americans residents (Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001). Indeed, Asian population growth in local communities—for example, in new immigrant destinations—may facilitate political efficacy through the formation of significant ethnic populations with the ability to create social norms and in-group pressures to further group interests through political means (Jang 2009).

Asian American group consciousness may also be more likely to emerge under conditions of perceived racial discrimination and hostility from majority groups. On one hand, the social movements literature has effectively shown that Asian immigrant collective action is more commonly panethnic in form under conditions of segregation and in response to prejudice, discrimination, and violence (Okamoto 2014). On the other hand, direct or indirect experience with discrimination, hate crimes, and anti-immigrant legislation has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of political participation, including among Asian Americans (Okamoto & Ebert 2010, Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001, Wong et al. 2011). Taken together, these findings hint at the mediating role that perceptions of group threat may play in linking an Asian American panethnic identity with political participation. Future research should continue to explore whether effective group solidarity for political ends can emerge for Asian Americans under conditions of group threat (Dawson 1994, Tate 1993).

## MENTAL HEALTH

As a result of their relatively high average socioeconomic attainment and the pervasiveness of the model minority myth, Asian Americans are perceived to be well adjusted and to have good mental health. This belief is commonly held despite relatively little empirical research. In their review of racial disparities in mental health, Vega & Rumbuat (1991) stated that knowledge of the mental health of Asian Americans was not well developed and no national surveys of Asian American mental health existed. Although today the vast majority of research on Asian Americans' mental health is still conducted by psychologists, research in other disciplines has increased within the past decade, gaining momentum with the emergence of the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS), the first national survey of mental health and mental health services use among Asian Americans (Alegria et al. 2004).

Despite these recent advances, the lack of both consistently used measures and consistent outcomes has hindered the formation of a strong consensus on the state of Asian American mental health. Research using self-report inventory scales of symptoms, such as the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) or the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SAD), generally finds that Asian Americans tend to fare worse than whites in terms of their mental health. For example, Kuo's (1984) classic study of the mental health of Asian Americans in Seattle found that Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Koreans had higher CES-D scores than whites in other studies. These findings have since been confirmed in a number of studies finding that Asian Americans display higher levels of depressive symptomatology than do whites (Brown et al. 2007, Hurh & Kim 1988, Okazaki 1997, Ying 1988) and higher anxiety levels, particularly among college students (Okazaki 1997, Okazaki et al. 2002, Sue & Zane 1985).

Recent studies in public health research have measured mental disorders using standardized diagnostic interviews such as the World Health Organization Composite International Diagnostic Interview (WHO-CIDI) to assess lifetime and 12-month presence of psychiatric disorders according to the *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). These indicators tell a different story about the mental health of Asian Americans, showing that Asian Americans have the same or lower rates of depression and anxiety than whites (Gavin et al. 2010, Sue et al. 1995, Takeuchi et al. 2007). It should be noted that diagnostic measures might underestimate the mental

health problems experienced by Asians because they might not have high cross-cultural validity (Sue et al. 1995, 2012).

In addition to the mixed findings of prevalence studies, research focusing on the mechanisms explaining mental health outcomes has also failed to reach a clear consensus. To cite one example, it is generally assumed that higher SES, which is influenced by acculturation, is associated with better mental health. However, the SES gradient in mental health often found in other research on whites is not consistently found among Asian Americans. Whereas some research has found a positive association between SES and mental health (Bratter & Eschbach 2005, Harker 2001), other studies using the NLAAS have found weak or no direct effects (Gong et al. 2011, Kim et al. 2012, Lam et al. 2012). For instance, John et al. (2012) found that having less than a high school degree was associated with worse self-rated mental health, but income and occupational class were not.

Beyond socioeconomic indicators, studies employing an assimilation framework have also found an inconsistent direction of effects for key measures of acculturation, depending on the specific measures used. For example, English proficiency is consistently found to be associated with better mental health (Bratter & Eschbach 2005, Gong et al. 2011, John et al. 2012, Okazaki et al. 2002, Takeuchi et al. 2007), and general scales of acculturation have also shown an inverse relationship to psychological maladjustment (Abe & Zane 1990, Kuo 1984, Yeh 2003, Ying 1988). In contrast, indicators of generational status and years in the United States have been found to be negatively related to mental health, as studies generally find that Asian Americans born outside of the United States or who have resided stateside for shorter periods of time show better mental health and lower odds of having a mental disorder and/or anxiety than their native-born peers (Bratter & Eschbach 2005, Gong et al. 2011, Harker 2001, John et al. 2012, Mossakowski 2003, Takeuchi et al. 2007).

The varied nature of these findings suggests that acculturation may influence mental health through various mechanisms that may counteract one another (Shen & Takeuchi 2001). For instance, whereas some aspects of acculturation like English proficiency might reduce stress, acculturation may be accompanied by increased stress from discrimination and exposure to other adverse events. Indeed, discrimination has been found to have a negative impact on the mental health of racial/ethnic minorities (Kessler et al. 1999). For Asian Americans in particular, discrimination and prejudice resulting from the model minority stereotype, the perpetual foreigner image, and language discrimination may increase stress and anxiety and reduce self-esteem (Gee et al. 2007). Empirically, the evidence in support of the discrimination hypothesis is strong and clear: Perceived racial discrimination (lifetime and/or everyday discrimination) is associated with greater odds of having a depressive disorder and/or an anxiety disorder (Gee et al. 2007, Hwang & Goto 2008, John et al. 2012, Mossakowski 2003, Noh et al. 1999) as well as higher levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation (Cheng et al. 2010, Hwang & Goto 2008). More importantly, this association is independent of other sources of stress such as acculturative stress, low family cohesion, and poverty (Gee et al. 2007). In fact, acculturative stress and years in the United States are no longer significantly related to anxiety or depression after controlling for discrimination.

Acculturation may also be directly associated with the erosion of important buffers that protect Asian American mental health from the detrimental effects of prejudice and discrimination at both individual and group levels. Several studies show that individuals with strong ethnic identification and ties that fall along ethnic lines exhibit better mental health outcomes (Mossakowski 2003, Noh & Kaspar 2003), although Leu et al. (2011) find that this is not the case among Asian women. This protective influence of ethnic ties is echoed in psychological research that suggests that biculturalism and ethnic identity are positively associated with mental health among Asian Americans (Cheng et al. 2010, David et al. 2009, LaFromboise et al. 1993). At the group level,

Portes and colleagues (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Portes & Zhou 1993) also suggest that acculturating to certain aspects of US culture while maintaining ties to the ethnic community (e.g., through bilingualism, ethnic identity, etc.) can be beneficial for children of immigrants by protecting them from discrimination and providing social support. Consistent with this argument, Harker (2001) found that parental supervision, church attendance, closeness with parents, and social support are associated with lower levels of depression among immigrant youth. Thus, as with the other outcomes presented in this this review, the maintenance of ethnic ties and a strong ethnic identity may continue to serve as a response to the perceived discrimination and racialization of Asian Americans.

## CONCLUSION: THEORIZING THE RACIALIZED ASSIMILATION OF ASIAN AMERICANS

Based on our review of recent evidence on Asian American experiences and attainments in several domains, we agree with prior research that acculturation and immigrant socialization remain important forces leading to the successful incorporation of Asian Americans, a population still primarily composed of foreign-born citizens. Acculturation, as indicated by measures such as English proficiency, immigrant generation, and years spent in the United States, has strong and consistent effects. Across nearly all of the outcomes reviewed here (mental health being the exception), acculturation generally improves the life chances of Asian Americans and, in general, moves them in the direction of parity with native-born whites.

These agreements aside, we disagree with Sakamoto et al.'s (2009) overall conclusion that the socioeconomic achievements of Asian Americans reflect the declining significance of race and discrimination in the post–civil rights era. In contrast, our review has shown that processes of racialization continue to inform the status of Asian Americans today. Recent research indicates, for example, that Asian American men and women do not achieve parity in earnings, a trend that appears especially relevant for the highest achieving among these groups, as well as Southeast Asian and less educated groups. Additionally, as Kim (2007, p. 564) argues, "social class mobility for Asian Americans is not a ticket out of racial subordination." Undergirding the high rates of intermarriage for Asian Americans is the persistent reality of a gendered racial hierarchy and power dynamics that continue to devaluate Asian Americans relative to white partners. Furthermore, experiences with discrimination still remain strong predictors of increased political participation and decreased mental health.

To a certain extent, recognition of the potentially uneven trajectories of assimilation has been familiar territory for race and assimilation scholars. Indeed, recent scholarship has made painstaking efforts to distance itself from the straight-line assimilation theories of the old guard and to incorporate added consideration of the more multicultural and hybridized nature of the new American mainstream (Alba & Nee 1997, 2003). Alternative theories of segmented assimilation have likewise recognized the existence of multiple pathways to immigrant incorporation and the importance of ethnic resources throughout this process (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Portes & Zhou 1993).

Nevertheless, these major theories have lacked a balanced consideration of how concurrent processes of acculturation and racialization may be simultaneously affecting the incorporation of contemporary immigrants. For example, new assimilation theorists have viewed the persistence of ethnic distinctions as increasingly rare and as an exception to the prevailing trend of assimilation (Alba & Nee 1997, 2003). Likewise, racialization as understood by segmented assimilation theory remains limited to the frames of black oppositional culture and is not discussed as relevant to those who do successfully avoid paths of downward assimilation (Golash-Boza 2006, Golash-Boza

& Darity 2008, Portes & Rumbaut 2001). Within the literature on Asian Americans specifically, contentious debates continue between those who dispute model minority views as ignorant of Asian Americans' continued marginalization (Chou & Feagin 2008; Kim 1999, 2007; Okihiro 1994; Tuan 1998) and those who hold that the model minority myth should be considered a myth in and of itself (Sakamoto et al. 2012).

Ultimately, we argue that it is time for theoretical perspectives on Asian Americans to move past binary frameworks of assimilation or racialization as mutually exclusive outcomes. Instead, the evidence we have reviewed suggests the possibility and, indeed, the likelihood that processes of assimilation and racialization are occurring simultaneously for Asian American groups today. We believe that the concept of racialized assimilation may be fruitfully expanded to include a focus on Asian Americans, thereby uniting the experiences of today's major immigrant groups through a focus on the mechanisms that brighten group boundaries. To these ends, the theory's emphasis on discrimination and its powerful effects as a predictor of nonwhite identification provides a useful starting point (Golash-Boza 2006, Golash-Boza & Darity 2008). Consideration of the Asian American experience may further enrich this insight by including a focus on how ethnic boundaries are brightened and preserved by work on both sides of this division.

As our review has shown, racial/ethnic distinctions also continue to matter not only because of factors related to discrimination, but also because of the continued salience of ethnic resources and identity. For Asian Americans, the use of ethnic resources has often been inherent in the process of socioeconomic attainment itself, and ethnic communities appear to show protective effects for both low- and high-achieving groups. Furthermore, residence alongside coethnics has emerged as a key consideration in suburban areas, where even residents in the final stages of spatial assimilation desire to live in neighborhoods retaining tangible forms of ethnicity. Rather than waning with their succession into the American mainstream, ethnicity has instead remained instrumental to, and an object of preservation for, successful incorporation into American society.

We recognize that it is difficult to assess with certainty the assimilation trajectories of Asian Americans given that the second generation is still quite young. As we have noted, there is comparatively little research on US-born Asian Americans, especially those whose parents were also born in the United States. However, the research on second-generation outcomes reviewed here indicates that race and ethnicity continue to matter in important ways, even for socioeconomically accomplished groups. A growing number of studies also hint that experiences of simultaneous assimilation and racialization affect ethnic and racial identity among US-born and US-raised Asians. Even among the acculturated, ethnic and racial identities in the form of Asian American panethnicity appear to become stronger in adulthood due to prejudice, discrimination, and the inability to be fully accepted as Americans (Kibria 2002, Min & Kim 1999, Tuan 1998). Beyond ethnic identity, future work must continue to examine whether the nonwhite status of Asian Americans affects the processes and outcomes of assimilation for second- and higher-generation Asian Americans.

In expanding the racialized assimilation perspective to include Asian Americans, we do note the important difference for outcomes of socioeconomic attainment for Latinos/Latinas and potentially the importance of such SES gains. Underachievement in education has been cited as the "linchpin of slow assimilation" among Mexican Americans, by far the largest Hispanic group in the United States today (Telles & Ortiz 2008, p. 274). More generally, it has been argued that SES among Hispanics is a strong correlate of other assimilation outcomes, including political participation, intermarriage, and self-identification as white and American (Golash-Boza & Darity 2008, Telles & Ortiz 2008). In contrast, despite Asian Americans' phenomenal accomplishments, our review has highlighted that SES fails to absolutely map their achievements in other important assimilation outcomes. The absence of a socioeconomic gradient is most glaring for political participation, but it has also been found in the domains of locational attainment, intermarriage,

and mental health. Yet, we believe that the evidence suggesting that SES gains may be decoupling from complete structural assimilation is still consistent with a racialized assimilation perspective.

Our views on the simultaneous dimensions of assimilation and racialization are not without theoretical precedent. The continued significance of race for Asian Americans has been evident in racial triangulation perspectives, which have provided insights into the paradoxical ways in which Asian Americans are both lauded and ostracized by native-born groups due to the continued significance of the model minority paradigm (Kim 1999, Xu & Lee 2013). Additionally, the stereotype content model in the social psychology literature has noted that ambivalent stereotypes characterize Asian Americans as highly competent yet endowed with extremely low levels of warmth and social desirability, which ultimately leads to individual interactions that are prejudiced in nature (Fiske et al. 2002). In agreement with these approaches, we believe that the study of Asian Americans beyond their mere socioeconomic accomplishments would move forward considerably if it paid greater attention to a racialized assimilation perspective. Embracing this opportunity not only would expand a still nascent understanding of Asian Americans but may also help illuminate the increasingly complex nature of assimilation for contemporary immigrants.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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