



Published in final edited form as:

Soc Sci Res. 2009 December 1; 38(4): 858–869. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.06.003.

Perceived Social Standing among Asian Immigrants in the U.S.: Do Reasons for Immigration Matter?

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Abstract

We investigate the association between a subjective measure of social status and the reasons for immigration among Asian immigrants in the U.S. We use data from the National Latino and Asian American Study to test several hypotheses about this association. Our analyses show the positive effect on perceived social standing of migrating for better education, the negative effect of migrating to seek employment, and the negative impact of refugee status. Migrating for family reunification can be associated with various circumstances, which lead to differing outcomes. The results suggest that the notion that immigrants arrive in the U.S. with limited resources and few skills and move slowly up the socioeconomic ladder must be reassessed in light of the complex social context and factors such as ethnicity, gender, divergent immigration paths, and a range of associated circumstances.

Keywords

Asian immigrants; reasons for immigration; perceived social standing; ethnicity; gender

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years, Asian immigrants¹ have been the most rapidly expanding group in the U.S. after Latinos (Frey, 2002). In 2000, the number of Asian immigrants reached 8.2 million

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¹There is no commonly agreed upon framework for defining and categorizing immigrants (Vernez et al., 1996). The legal definition of immigrants, i.e., permanent resident aliens, is not necessarily the same as the definition most commonly used by researchers, i.e., the foreign-born population (Ellis and Wright, 1998). For the purpose of our study, we use the broad definition of immigrants, i.e., the foreign-born population.

and accounted for 26.4% of the total immigrant population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The label “Asian American” categorizes immigrants of various national origins and their U.S.-born offspring under one racial/ethnic umbrella. In fact, there are great variations in Asians’ immigration histories and reasons for immigration, and striking disparities in their current well-being (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou and Gatewood, 2000). Some Asian groups immigrated voluntarily, while others were forced to do so by dire conditions in their native countries. Some came for education and employment; others, for family reunification; and still others, to avoid genocide, wars, and political persecution (Chan, 1991; Takeuchi and Williams, 2003). Despite the various reasons for immigration, Asian immigrants are often treated as an aggregate in public discussions and academic studies (Espiritu, 1997), which can lead to misrepresentation. Indeed, given the great heterogeneity within the Asian population, statistics for the aggregate group are unlikely to apply to any one group.

Although migration and success are generally assumed to go hand in hand, the notion that migration facilitates upward mobility is debatable (Willits et al., 1978). The classic success story begins with immigrants arriving in the U.S. with limited resources and few skills, and then charts their ascent up the socioeconomic ladder. Immigrants’ stories of material success feature the themes of hard work, motivation, and perseverance (Clark, 2003). These stories tend to depict an upward trajectory. However, the post-1965 Asian immigrant flows include groups of highly educated individuals with professional backgrounds, as well as groups with limited education and skills (Kanjanapan, 1995; Liu and Cheng, 1994). Among immigrants with significant social and human capital, various trajectories are possible. Some may experience increased success, while others may remain static or even experience a decline (Clark, 2003; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Many immigrants also find that social and economic mobility is far more elusive today than it was fifty years ago; even when jobs are plentiful, moving up the ladder is difficult (DePalma, 2005).

Determining the well-being of immigrants depends on the factors chosen to measure well-being. Many studies base their assessment on objective measures: income, education, and occupation (Lobo, 1993; Mar, 2000; Xie and Goyette, 2004). Other studies, however, maintain that subjective well-being—individuals’ own perception of their comparative health, happiness, and prosperity—is a broader indicator of immigrants’ well-being than the objective measures (Kingdon and Knight, 2006). A measure of subjective social status is likely not only to reflect current social circumstances but also to incorporate an assessment of the individuals’ backgrounds, along with their future prospects (Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). When immigrants themselves assess their achievements in the U.S., they consider their current socioeconomic status as well as its relation to their former status in their country of origin. They may also calculate their future prospects and the potential opportunities for their children (Zhou, 1995). For immigrants, the subjective measure of social status “may be a more nuanced measure of socioeconomic status than current ‘crude’ measures of education, occupation, and income” (Leu et al., 2008, p.1154).

A subjective measure of social status is also a measure of relative social status with reference to others. As noted by Singh-Manoux et al. (2003, p.1322), “the process of assigning oneself social status is likely to involve processes of social comparison (comparison of self to similar others) and reflected appraisals (self-perception is based on the way we see others perceiving us).” People from different cultural groups use different referents in their self-reported values for cross-cultural comparisons. This phenomenon has been named the “reference-group effect” (Heine et al., 2002; Peng et al., 1997). Heine et al. (2002) note that in most cross-cultural studies participants are not provided with any information regarding the reference groups against which they evaluate themselves; the reference-group effect becomes problematic when the subjective responses of individuals with different reference groups are compared. For instance, when asked about their perceived social standing in general, one respondent may

compare herself with other Chinese in China, while a second respondent may compare herself with Vietnamese in Vietnam. Accordingly, there is no common metric from which to evaluate variations in perceived standing.

In this study, we are particularly interested in how Asian immigrants assess their relative social status in comparison to others in the U.S. One important theme in migration studies is the notion that many (but not all) immigrants strive to achieve or exceed the same level of economic success as their peers in the host country. Moreover, an increasing body of research focuses on the perceptions of social standing against others in the U.S. among non-immigrants. We believe that the focus on other Americans provides a firmer conceptual anchor than more ambiguous reference groups and provides an additional point of reference to studies focusing on non-immigrants as well.

Singh-Manoux et al. (2003) report that subjective social status reflects the cognitive averaging of standard markers of socioeconomic situation, such as education, occupation, and income. Yet, there are still discrepancies between subjective and objective socioeconomic measures: higher educational attainment, occupational status, and income level do not always translate into higher perceived social standing (Adler et al., 2000; Kingdon and Knight, 2006). Determinants of subjective social status identified in Singh-Manoux et al.'s study (2003) include satisfaction with standard of living and sense of future financial security, in addition to occupational position, education, and household income. However, "as only half the variance in subjective status was reliably predicted in this study, questions as to the other predictors of subjective status remain open to research" (Singh-Manoux et al., 2003, p.1332).

Singh-Manoux et al. (2003) further speculate that subjective social status may also be associated with factors that reflect changes in socioeconomic circumstances over time, after controlling for current education, occupation, and income status. If this is the case, what factors have an impact on how Asian immigrants perceive their social standing in the U.S.? Given the variations in immigration history among Asian immigrants, are there correlations between specific immigration paths and particular attitudes towards relative social status? More specifically, do the reasons for immigration affect perceptions of social standing? For instance, do those who immigrate for education or employment have different perceptions than those who immigrate for family reasons or to escape political persecution? Moreover, do these perceptions and associations vary by ethnicity and gender? Using data on Asian immigrants from the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS), this article focuses on perceived social standing—a subjective measure of relative social status—in the attempt to analyze Asians' divergent immigration paths and the associated outcomes. Results from our analyses are presented on the nationally representative sample of Asian immigrants from the NLAAS. We also examine the three Asian ethnic groups over sampled in the NLAAS—Chinese, Filipinos, and Vietnamese.

2. Reasons for Immigration and Perceived Social Standing

2.1 Historical Background and Reasons for Immigration

Current U.S. immigration policies are based on the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Limited immigration visas were allocated according to a preference system with seven categories: four categories for family reunification, two categories for occupational preferences, and a refugee category. The three grounds of admission—job skills, refugee status, and family ties with U.S. residents—remain the primary paths to immigrants' entry as legal permanent residents today and have shaped the composition of immigrants to the U.S. since 1965 (Yang, 1995). Accordingly, the three main reasons for migration to the U.S. that Asian immigrants cite are to find employment, to seek political refuge, and to join other family members (Lobo and Salvo, 1998).

In addition to the establishment of the U.S. immigrant preference system, the historical, socioeconomic, and political circumstances within immigrants' countries of origin also shape the various immigration streams from Asian countries. In particular, the economic developments in many Asian countries such as China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong) and the Philippines since the 1970s have generated a growing middle class who have the resources to seek educational and employment opportunities overseas. Unlike Asian immigrant laborers who came to the U.S. in the 19th and early 20th centuries, nowadays, many Asian immigrants are well-educated, urban, and highly skilled (Ong and Liu, 1994).

Asian immigrants (particularly the three ethnic groups—Chinese, Filipinos, and Vietnamese—that we examine in this study) show significant ethnic and gender differences in their reasons for immigration. Chinese and Filipinos immigrate primarily for educational and employment opportunities. Since the 1965 immigration law, the number of educated professionals and their families immigrating from China and the Philippines has steadily increased (Kanjapan, 1995; Liu et al., 1991; Lobo and Salvo, 1998; Ong and Liu, 1994). According to Xie and Goyette (2004), roughly 25% of foreign-born Chinese and Filipinos between 25 and 34 had a bachelor's degree in 1960; this percentage increased to 48% for Chinese and 47% for Filipinos in 1980, and 65% for Chinese and 43% for Filipinos in 2000. Many of these degree-holders first entered the U.S. to pursue advanced education and additional training, and then chose to stay permanently after finishing their studies (Zhou, 2000).

In contrast, Vietnamese primarily immigrated to escape war and political persecution. Refugees from Southeast Asia are the largest refugee group ever to enter the United States. Several waves of refugees have emigrated from Southeast Asia since the mid-1970s. The first wave (mostly Vietnamese) came following the U.S. military withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. The second and much larger wave began in 1978: it consisted of Chinese ethnics fleeing mistreatment in Vietnam; Vietnamese farmers, fishermen and their families; and Cambodians and Laotians from refugee camps. Later waves of Vietnamese continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, either under the Orderly Departure Program or through other immigration channels, particularly, the family reunification provision (Hing, 1993; Lobo and Salvo, 1998).

Family reunification was the cornerstone of the 1965 policy (Yang, 1995). Under this preference system, the immigration of spouses, children, and parents of adult citizens is not constrained by the quota limits. Studies have shown that women are more likely than men to move as secondary migrants for family reasons (Lichter, 1983; Maxwell, 1988). Family reunification thus ensures that the female-dominated pattern of immigration “remains constant to the present day” (Vernez, 1999, p. 1). As immigration policies prior to 1965 largely restricted the migration of women, the 1965 act helped to rebalance the gender distribution. Today, about 52.4% of Asian immigrants are women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

2.2 Reasons for Immigration and Perceived Social Standing: Ethnic Differences

Rumbaut (1997, p. 947) points out that these historical differences among Asian immigrants may “augur differential modes of incorporation and assimilation outcomes.” Perceived social standing among Asians who immigrated to seek employment has been found to follow both upward and downward trajectories. Some immigrants find good jobs, with higher earnings and better career development than they would have achieved in their countries of origin, and enjoy a higher quality of life (Boneva and Frieze, 2001). This is particularly true for those who came to the U.S. for higher education or professional training, and who then found a job and chose to stay permanently. Studies have pointed out that higher education is a primary reason for immigration among Asians (Pang and Appleton, 2004) and that the location of higher education accounts for earning disparities among Asian male workers (Zeng and Xie, 2004). For those who were highly educated and professionally trained in their countries of origin, the lack of American educational credentials can lead to occupational drift. Many are unable to find jobs

commensurate with their qualifications and are employed in positions that require fewer skills. For example, Filipino doctors often work as nurses in the U.S. because their medical degrees are not recognized, but they may earn higher wages as nurses in the U.S. than as doctors in the Philippines (Choy, 2003). This illustrates the complexity of determining social status: higher earnings in the U.S. may not translate into higher perceived social standing.

Studies of refugees have primarily focused on those from Southeast Asia, who have significantly lower levels of education, higher rates of unemployment, and lower household incomes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Xie and Goyette, 2004). They suffer from the traumatic experience of displacement even after permanent settlement in the U.S., and from disparities in socioeconomic status and access to health and human services (Abe-Kim et al., 2007; Marshall et al., 2005; U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Because of these disadvantages, Vietnamese refugees, as well as other Asians who have come to the U.S. to avoid political persecution, are likely to have lower perceptions of social standing than non-refugee immigrants.

For Asians who immigrate to join other family members, existing family networks can enhance perceived socioeconomic well-being by buffering emotional and financial shocks and providing employment opportunities (Baker and Benjamin, 1997; Blau et al., 2003; Sanders et al., 2002; Wilson, 2003). While many Chinese, Filipino, and other Asian ethnic groups immigrate for family reunification, Menjiver (1997, p.9) notes that the dependence on family networks is particularly characteristic of the Vietnamese: “family-based resources provide the Vietnamese with a sense of continuity that in many ways helps them deal with the instabilities of a traumatic migration experience.”

2.3 Reasons for Immigration and Perceived Social Standing: Gender Differences

Research on immigration and gender has demonstrated that male and female immigrants typically immigrate for different reasons and have different backgrounds (in terms of factors such as education and marital status). Moreover, the costs and benefits associated with these factors are different for women and men (Pedraza, 1991). According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (1999, p. 9), gender is “a key constitutive element of immigration”: it affects many immigrant experiences, including immigration paths, settlement patterns, and well-being in both public and private domains. Analysts of the effects of gender differences on immigration note that women are more likely to move as secondary immigrants for purposes of family reunification and hypothesize that this will result in gender disparities in socioeconomic well-being (Lichter, 1983; Maxwell, 1988; Espiritu, 1999).

Zhou (2000) has documented the deterioration of the relative social status of many highly educated professional Chinese women after their immigration to the U.S. This decline often occurs because these women face considerable obstacles “in order to have a career of their own, even a much less prestigious one” (p. 456). Some women encounter difficulties in securing jobs that correspond with their qualifications; some are constrained by U.S. visa policies for legal dependants in their pursuit of further education or permanent employment;² and some face obstacles arising from their husbands’ patriarchal assumption of superiority, which can emerge after the husbands obtain professional, well-paid employment.

²U.S. visa policies set constraints on education and employment for legal dependants. According to U.S. immigration law, legal dependants of international students or professionals holding F-2 or H-4 visas are not allowed to work or go to school while residing in the U.S. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2007). If such legal dependants want to go to school or find a job, they must either change their own visa status or wait for their spouses to receive green cards for the rest of the family. Women may wait years for their husbands to receive the green cards; during this time, their career stagnates. Women who accompany their husbands during immigration, as well as those who immigrate several years after their husbands as legal dependants, often face delays in their education and in finding legal, permanent employment in the U.S. (Kalita, 2005; Zhou, 2000).

While the empirical literature primarily deals with immigrant women, studies also show that Asian men who immigrate to join family members are more likely to perceive that their social standing is lower in the U.S. (Espiritu, 1995; Lim, 1997; Zhou, 2000). However, these studies are anecdotal: no systematic study has been conducted to determine how often Asian men immigrate as their wives' dependants, how prevalent lower perceived social standing is among these men, and whether men's and women's experiences are different. Yet, men's perception of lower social standing is an important concern as the threats to patriarchal ideologies and men's sense of self-esteem may lead to divorce, domestic violence, and other deleterious outcomes (Espiritu, 1999; Zhou, 2000).

2.4 Research Hypotheses

Given the differences among ethnic groups in their reasons for immigration, it is likely that each group will perceive its social standing in the U.S. differently. There may be additional differences between women and men due to their reasons for immigration and the associated outcomes.

We hypothesize that the reasons for immigration will be associated with immigrants' perceived social standing and that the effects of migrating to join other family members will be differentiated by ethnicity and gender.

Specifically, we anticipate that those who migrated for better educational opportunities would report higher perceived social standing, those who migrated to seek employment would report lower perceived social standing, and refugees would perceive that their social standing was lower.

Migration for family reunification can be associated with varied circumstances (such as support from family networks or visa policy constraints as indicated above) across ethnic and gender groups. Accordingly, we expect that perceived social standing would be higher for Vietnamese who migrated to join other family members and lower for Filipinos and Chinese who migrated for the same reason. Among Filipinos and Chinese, we anticipate that men would be more likely than women to experience this negative perception.

3. Methods

3.1 Data and Sample

Our data come from the landmark National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS). The NLAAS is the first survey of mental health, service use, and social conditions among several Asian ethnic groups (Abe-Kim et al., 2007; Takeuchi et al., 2007). It uses a national sampling frame to select interview respondents. The NLAAS Asian sample is drawn from all Asian American adults who reside in households in the 48 coterminous U.S. states, Alaska, Hawaii, and Washington D.C. It includes a core sample that is nationally representative of the Asian American adult population and the NLAAS High-Density (HD) supplemental sample, which is taken from geographic areas with greater than five per cent residential density for three groups of interest: Vietnamese, Filipino, and Chinese. The Asian sample also includes secondary respondents (i.e., those belonging to households in which one eligible member had already been interviewed). The combined NLAAS core and HD sample, when properly weighted, provides a representative sample of the entire national Asian American adult population (Alegria et al., 2004; Heeringa et al., 2004).

The NLAAS includes 2,095 Asian American adults belonging to four ethnic groups: 520 Vietnamese, 508 Filipinos, 600 Chinese, and 467 "other Asians" (comprising 107 Japanese, 141 Asian Indians, 81 Koreans, and 138 "others"). Approximately 78% of the respondents are immigrants. The survey was conducted between May 2002 and November 2003. The

questionnaire was translated into Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. Each interview was conducted in the language preferred by the respondent (Pennell et al., 2004).

This study analyzes Asian immigrant respondents in the NLAAS survey. The total sample size was 1,639, comprising 502 Vietnamese, 349 Filipinos, 473 Chinese, and 315 “other Asians.” The sample consisted of 868 women and 771 men. In our analyses, we first used our entire sample and then stratified our findings by ethnic group to achieve separate findings for Vietnamese, Filipinos, and Chinese. The “other Asians” group is too heterogeneous to identify shared characteristics or make meaningful comparisons.

3.2 Measures

We evaluated Asian immigrants’ perceived social standing employing the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000). Prior studies have used this measure and analyzed its link with adult physical and mental health outcomes, controlling for objective measures of socioeconomic status (Franzini and Fernandez-Esquer, 2006; Hu et al., 2005; Nicklett and Burgard, 2009; Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). In the NLAAS survey, respondents were asked to rank their socioeconomic status relative to other people in the U.S. using a ladder as a graphic representation of social position:

Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States. At the **top** of the ladder are the people who are the best off—those who have the most money, the most education and the most respected jobs. At the **bottom** are the people who are the worst off—who have the least money, least education, and the least respected jobs or no job. The higher up you are on the ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom. What is the number to the right of the rung where you think you stand at this time in your life, relative to other people in the United States?

The respondents used the rungs of the ladder to identify their relative social standing with reference to other people in the U.S. based on their assessment of income, education, and occupation/work status. Zero was “at the bottom” and 10 was “at the top.” The measure was coded as a continuous variable, perceived social standing, ranging from 0 to 10.

As our analyses focused on migrants, reasons for immigration were key variables. Respondents were asked how important (very, somewhat, not at all) each of the following reasons for immigration was to them and their families: to find employment or a job, to join other family members, to improve their children’s prospects, to improve their living conditions or those of their family and pursue better opportunities, to escape the political situation in their country of origin, to escape persecution for political reasons, to seek medical attention, to pursue better educational opportunities, and to avoid marital or family problems.³ We focused on four of the most commonly reported reasons: to find employment, to join family members, to seek political refuge, and to pursue further education. These four variables were dichotomously coded, with “1” indicating “very important.”⁴

³These options are not mutually exclusive as people come to the U.S. for multiple reasons, but these reasons do not have the same level of importance. For instance, many respondents (about 24%) in the NLAAS indicated that they migrated to the U.S. for all of the following reasons: to find employment, to seek better educational opportunities, to join other family members, and to seek refuge from political persecution. A majority of the respondents (nearly 70%) also cited the following reasons as very important: to improve their children’s prospects, to improve their lives, and to look for better opportunities. Our analyses focused on the four reasons that apply directly to the first-generation Asian immigrants. We address the issue of migrating for the betterment of children when discussing the study limitations and future research directions.

⁴We also tried to take into account the level of importance that the respondent indicated when answering these questions. The difference between a “very” important reason and a “somewhat” or “not at all” important reason led to the most significant differences in the associations with perceived social standing. The difference between a reason being “somewhat” and “not at all” important did not affect these associations.

In the analyses, we controlled for three objective measures of socioeconomic status: education, occupation, and household income. Education was coded into three categories: less than high school graduate, high school graduate and some college, and college graduate and above. Occupation was dichotomously coded with “1” indicating “professional or managerial.” Instead of using the measure of total household income directly, we calculated the household income-to-needs ratio, which took into account the total household income in the past 12 months,⁵ the household size, and the household composition.

Other immigration-related factors we controlled in our analysis included citizenship and English proficiency. Citizenship reflects both citizenship status and the approximate length of residence in the U.S. An immigrant must have lived in the U.S. for the past five years as a Permanent Resident without leaving the U.S. for trips of six months or longer before applying for naturalized citizenship. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2009), over 90% of applicants fall into this category. The variable was dichotomously coded with “1” indicating “naturalized U.S. citizen.” English proficiency was a continuous measure ranging from 1 to 4, with “1” indicating “poor” and “4” indicating “excellent” spoken English. English proficiency is a form of human capital and is associated with successful adjustment to life in the U.S. (Espenshade and Fu, 1997).

We also controlled for three measures of demographic characteristics. Age was a continuous measure, referring to the respondent’s age at the time of the interview. Marital status was dichotomously coded, with “1” indicating “married or cohabiting at the time of the interview” and “0” indicating “never married, widowed, separated, or divorced.” Marital status is associated with people’s perceived social status, particularly for women. According to Baxter (1994), married women’s perceived social status is influenced by their husbands’ socioeconomic status, as well as their own level of education, occupation, and earnings. Region of residence was used as a control for regional variations in economic development and living standards. It was coded as either living in the West at the time of the interview or living elsewhere in the U.S. (i.e., the South, Midwest, or Northeast).

3.3 Analytic Plan

We first examined the differences between genders and across ethnicities in the respondents’ rating of their position on the ladder representing perceived social standing in the U.S. and then compared the ratings with objective measures of socioeconomic status. We then estimated multivariate regressions to discover the associations between reasons for immigration and perceived social standing. The dependent variable in the multivariate analysis was perceived social standing in the U.S. Education, occupation, and household income-to-needs ratio were included in the model estimation to control for objective socioeconomic status. Other control variables included citizenship, English proficiency, age, marital status, and region of residence. We first estimated the models by gender for all Asian immigrants. We then ran separate models for Vietnamese, Filipinos, and Chinese.

Survey design effects (stratum, cluster, and individual weight) were taken into account throughout the analyses to make the weighted sample represent the target national population. We used the Stata 9.2 “svy” (“survey”) commands to allow for estimation of standard errors in the presence of stratification and clustering. The weighted maximum-likelihood method was

⁵Household income in the past 12 months is the sum of personal earnings, spouse’s/partner’s personal earnings, personal earnings of all other family members, family household income from Social Security Retirement benefits, family household income from government assistance programs, and family household income from other sources. Missing personal earnings and spouse’s/partner’s personal earnings were estimated using the hotdeck method in Stata and taking into account the following factors: ethnicity, household composition, region, age, education, and work status. This imputed household income was used to calculate the household income-to-needs ratio. We tried using the original household income variable without imputations in the model estimations. There was no significant difference in the regression results.

used to estimate the parameters, from which the coefficients, standard errors, probability levels, and Wald F statistics were calculated.

4. Results

4.1 Perceived Social Standing vs. Objective Socioeconomic Status

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of perceived social standing and the three objective measures of socioeconomic status (education, occupation, and household income-to-needs ratio) among Asian immigrants by ethnicity and gender. The means of Asian immigrants' perceived social standing in the U.S. (5.85 for all Asian immigrant women and 5.67 for all Asian immigrant men) indicate that, on average, Asian immigrants locate themselves solidly in the middle of the socioeconomic ladder.

Asian immigrants' perceived social standing varies according to ethnic group. Filipinos perceive the highest level of social standing in the U.S. (6.34 for women and 5.97 for men), and Vietnamese, the lowest (5.23 for women and 4.87 for men). Yet, these ethnic differences in perceived social standing do not necessarily conform to the differences in their objective socioeconomic characteristics. When comparing Vietnamese to Chinese and Filipinos, the objective and subjective characteristics are aligned, that is, the Vietnamese reported the lowest social standing and had the lowest level of income-to-needs ratio and, proportionally, the fewest members who were professionals or college graduates. When comparing Filipinos to Chinese, however, objective and subjective characteristics were not aligned. For example, Filipino men reported higher subjective standing than Chinese men, though the two groups had similar income-to-needs ratios. Similar inconsistencies between subjective standing and objective characteristics were seen in the responses of Filipino and Chinese women.

There were no statistically significant gender differences, but some qualitative patterns emerged. Among Vietnamese and Filipinos, women ranked their social standing more highly than men: for example, Vietnamese women reported a level of 5.23, compared to 4.87 for Vietnamese men. Among the Chinese, men and women were qualitatively equivalent. The objective and subjective characteristics were not aligned across gender groups. Women reported lower objective socioeconomic status in comparison to men, but perceived either a higher or an equivalent level of relative social standing.

4.2 Ethnic and Gender Differences in Reasons for Immigration

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of Asian immigrants' reasons for immigration, other immigration-related factors, and demographic characteristics.

Reasons for immigration differ according to ethnicity and gender. Filipinos are significantly more likely to immigrate to pursue employment than Vietnamese and Chinese. More than 80% of Filipino men and 75% of Filipino women immigrated to find work in the U.S., whereas only about 50% of Vietnamese and Chinese men and 60% of Vietnamese and Chinese women came to seek employment. Vietnamese are significantly more likely to immigrate as refugees escaping war or political persecution than Filipinos and Chinese. More than half of the Vietnamese came to the U.S. for political reasons. In contrast, only about 5% of Filipinos and 16% of Chinese came to the U.S. for political reasons. Women are significantly more likely than men to have immigrated to join other family members among all Asians and in each ethnic group. Roughly 74% of Vietnamese women, 70% of Filipina women, and 63% of Chinese women came to join other family members. Approximately 58% of Vietnamese men, 56% of Filipino men, and 49% of Chinese men immigrated for family reunification.

Other notable differences according to ethnicity and gender appear in English proficiency: Filipinos speak English with greater proficiency than Vietnamese and Chinese, and Asian men have higher levels of English proficiency than Asian women except among Filipinos.

4.3 Associations between Reasons for Immigration and Perceived Social Standing

Table 3 presents the multivariate regression results on the associations between reasons for immigration and perceived social standing for each ethnic and gender group. The regression results demonstrate that perceived social standing is closely associated with objective measures of socioeconomic status, particularly education and household income-to-needs ratio.

The results also indicate that reasons for immigration are associated with perceived social standing and that these associations differ across Asian ethnic and gender groups. Our hypothesis that those who immigrate for educational reasons would report higher perceived social standing was partially supported by the results. The coefficients were positive across all groups, but statistically significant only for Filipina and Vietnamese women. Stronger support was provided for our hypothesis that male participants migrating to find employment generally perceived lower social standing than those not migrating for employment. This association was statistically significant for all Asian men and likely driven by Chinese men. However, migrating for employment did not appear to be a significant correlate of social standing among Asian women in the aggregate or for any of the subgroups. The results provided qualified support for our hypothesis that migrating to seek political refuge is associated with lower perceived social standing in the U.S. The coefficients were negative for all groups, but significant only for women in the aggregate and for Chinese women.

Finally, the results are consistent with our hypothesis that the effect of migrating to join other family members on perceived social standing is positive and significant for Vietnamese, and negative and not significant for Filipinos and Chinese. However, our hypothesis that among Chinese and Filipinos, men would be more likely than women to experience disadvantages if they migrated to join other family members was not verified. The coefficients on migrating to join other family members were not significantly different for women and men among Chinese or Filipinos according to Chow tests.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

While recent immigration research has primarily focused on objective measures of socioeconomic well-being (e.g., education, occupation, and income), we investigated Asian immigrants' perceived social standing in the U.S.—a measure that, it is argued, is more encompassing, reflecting not only immigrants' current social circumstances but also their assessment of the past and of their future prospects (Adler et al., 2000; Kingdon and Knight, 2006; Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). Our descriptive results indicate that, on the one hand, Asian immigrants on average locate themselves solidly in the middle of the socioeconomic ladder in the U.S. On the other hand, there are variations in perceived social standing according to ethnic and gender groups, and the patterns of differences are not consistent with those in the objective measures of socioeconomic status. We further considered the effects of divergent immigration paths on perceived social standing among Asian immigrants. We found evidence for our hypotheses of the positive effect of migrating for education opportunities, the negative effect of migrating to seek employment, and the negative impact of refugee status. Moreover, the same immigration path (e.g., migrating to join other family members) can be associated with various circumstances that lead to differing outcomes. For Vietnamese, the support offered by family networks accounts for the positive association between migrating to join other family members and perceived social standing. This is not the case for Filipinos and Chinese who migrated to join other family members: they are more likely to encounter difficulties in securing jobs that correspond with their qualifications or to be discouraged by U.S. visa policies from

pursuing further education or permanent employment. Our results therefore suggest that perceived social standing, as a measure of subjective social status, reflects both a consideration of objective factors—education, occupation, and income—and an assessment of other factors relating to past experiences and future prospects, such as educational returns, career advancement, political status, and family networks.

Our analysis also presents a complex picture of how Asian immigrants evaluate their immigration decision and subjective well-being in the U.S. We found no common pattern in immigration paths or associated outcomes among Asian immigrants, either within or across ethnic and gender groups. The heterogeneities among post-1965 Asian immigrants make their experiences difficult to describe or interpret using any one conventional theoretical framework. The sentimental notion that immigrants arrive in the U.S. with no money or skills, persevere, and slowly move up the socioeconomic ladder must be reassessed in light of the complex social context and other factors such as ethnicity, gender, divergent immigration paths, and various associated circumstances. New theoretical models of immigration should include both a historical and a contemporary context in which to evaluate objective and subjective aspects of well-being, reasons for immigration, and the effects of gender and ethnicity. Empirically, researchers should consider disaggregating data by ethnic and gender groups and pursuing other measures than purely objective ones that tell only part of the story.

This study represents a first step in the process of understanding how Asian immigrants perceive their social standing in comparison to others in the U.S. and offers an insight into how this particular measure of subjective social status actually incorporates an assessment of their past experience and future prospects. As we conclude, the limitations of this study must be noted, along with our suggestions for future research.

The NLAAS is the first nationally representative survey of mental health and social conditions among Asian ethnic groups. However, despite its historical significance in capturing the Asian American experience, the dataset has relatively small samples for each ethnic and gender group. The cell sizes may not be large enough to generate reliable estimates in certain analyses. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing from these results. Additionally, many of the associations studied were not statistically significant, and small samples may have led to an underpowered analysis. Moreover, as the data are not longitudinal, we cannot ascertain causal relations among variables. Although immigration occurred prior to the survey, the survey questions were retrospective and memory biases may have affected the responses. That said, the NLAAS is the only nationally representative study that includes measures of perceived social standing and indications of the context of migration.

Our measure of relative social status is based on individual perceptions. It has often been maintained that perceptions themselves are important because things that are perceived to be real are “real in their consequences” (W.I. Thomas, 1928). People’s interpretation of their subjective social status can influence their self-awareness, mood, and feelings of control (Aneshensel, 1992; Goodman et al., 2001; Goodman et al., 2003). Studies have also demonstrated the importance of perceived social standing as a critical determinant for adult physical and mental health outcomes, even after controlling for objective measures of socioeconomic status (Adler et al., 2000; Franzini and Fernandez-Esquer, 2006; Hu et al., 2005; Nicklett and Burgard, 2009; Ostrove et al., 2000; Singh-Manoux et al., 2003; Wilkinson, 1999). Nonetheless, it would be very useful if future research compared perceived social standing with other measures of social standing, such as normalized rankings in earnings.

Although the reference group was specified in our measure of perceived social standing, the reference-group effect remains a concern. However, the effect may not play a role in ethnic differences. Our results indicate that Filipinos have the highest relative perceived social

standing, followed by Chinese: Vietnamese have the lowest. This ranking is consistent with objective measures. There was one interesting gender difference. For women, the objective and subjective characteristics of social status are not aligned: women report lower objective socioeconomic status but higher perceived social standing. Our analyses show that women are more likely than men to perceive higher relative social standing across ethnic groups while controlling for objective measures of socioeconomic well-being and other factors. This finding is consistent with other research showing that men are more likely to derive their sense of class location and class identity from their occupational roles, whereas women are more likely to derive their class status with regards to other factors, such as husband and family situations (Baxter, 1994). Future studies are needed to investigate the gender differences among Asian immigrants when assessing their relative social standing.

Our results also indicate that the associations between migrating to join other family members vary by ethnicity as predicted; however, the hypothesized gender differences among Filipinos and Chinese were not confirmed. Thus, the disadvantages experienced by some Asian men who immigrated for family reunification, as documented in existing ethnographic studies (Espiritu, 1995; Lim, 1997; Zhou, 2000), may not be a common phenomenon. Nonetheless, gender is an important factor throughout the immigration process (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999; Pedraza, 1991). Our results show that gender differences are evident in the associations between migrating to seek employment and perceived social standing: men who immigrate for employment perceived a drop in social standing, but this was not true for women. More research is needed to explore other possible factors (e.g., family structure, discrimination, and the reference-group effect) that may moderate or confound the potential gender differences in immigration paths and associated outcomes.

While we focused on the perceived social standing among Asian immigrants (the foreign-born) in this study, the socioeconomic well-being of, and the potential opportunities for, children of immigrants (the U.S.-born) are also important factors that influence decisions to immigrate and perceptions of achievement. When evaluating their immigration decision, immigrants calculate the potential opportunities for their children. In many cases, immigrants believe that the following generation will have more opportunities to move up the socioeconomic ladder (Sung, 1987; Zhou, 1995). They often place their children's interests before their own: immigration is worthwhile because it betters the lives of their children even if their own experience did not meet their expectations (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Our data provide some support for these speculations. A majority of Asian immigrants came to the U.S. to better their children's prospects: about 87% of Vietnamese and Filipinos and 74% of Chinese report that improving their children's prospects was a very important reason for their migration. If we compare the perceived social standing of Asian immigrants and that of the U.S.-born, we find that the U.S.-born are more likely to believe that they have a higher social standing (6.26 for women and 6.38 for men, as opposed to 5.85 for women and 5.67 for men among immigrants). These differences are particularly significant among Vietnamese and Chinese. These preliminary results are consistent with research findings on second-generation immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Data on perceived social standing prior to immigration would enable us to make clearer comparisons in the case of immigrants. Future research should also explore the extent to which children's actual well-being is associated with parents' perception of success and whether perceived social standing among children of immigrants would still be qualified by factors such as ethnicity, gender, and parents' reasons for immigration.

Acknowledgments

The National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (grants U01 MH62209 and U01 MH62207), with additional support from the Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research at the National Institute of Health, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. We thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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Table 1
Perceived Social Standing vs Objective Measures of Socioeconomic Status (Education, Occupation, and Income) Among Asian Immigrants, by Ethnicity and Gender: National Latino and Asian American Study, 2002–2003

	All Asians		Vietnamese		Filipino		Chinese	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Perceived Social Standing in the US (mean, 0-low, 10-high) ^{a,b,c,d,f}	5.67 (0.13)	5.85 (0.09)	4.87 (0.19)	5.23 (0.24)	5.97 (0.14)	6.34 (0.12)	5.42 (0.15)	5.40 (0.18)
Objective Measures of Socioeconomic Status								
Education (%) ^{b,c,d,e; A,B,D}								
Less than high school graduate	15.6%	19.6%	23.9%	41.0%	11.7%	15.6%	19.5%	22.1%
High school graduate and some college	35.0%	41.0%	45.6%	40.8%	47.3%	47.5%	27.6%	39.9%
College graduate and above	49.4%	39.4%	30.5%	18.2%	41.0%	36.9%	52.8%	38.0%
Occupation (% , professional/managerial) ^{b,d,e; A,D}	34.5%	26.0%	13.5%	8.3%	23.8%	29.8%	43.2%	26.5%
Household Income-to-Needs Ratio (mean) ^{a,b,d,e; A,D}	5.85	5.18	3.83	3.35	6.46	5.81	6.54	5.24
Sample N	771	868	236	266	154	195	221	252

Notes.

Survey design effects (stratum, cluster, and individual weight) were taken into account in the estimations. Standard errors in parentheses.

^a Difference between Vietnamese and Filipino men significant at $p < 0.05$.

^b Difference between Vietnamese and Chinese men significant at $p < 0.05$.

^c Difference between Filipino and Chinese men significant at $p < 0.05$.

^d Difference between Vietnamese and Filipina women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^e Difference between Vietnamese and Chinese women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^f Difference between Filipina and Chinese women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^A Difference between Asian men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^B Difference between Vietnamese men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^C Difference between Filipino men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^D Difference between Chinese men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 2
 Descriptive Statistics on Reasons for Immigration, Other Immigration-Related Factors, and Demographic Characteristics Among Asian Immigrants, by Ethnicity and Gender: National Latino and Asian American Study, 2002–2003

	All Asians		Vietnamese		Filipino		Chinese	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Reasons for Immigration (not mutually exclusive)								
To Seek Better Education (% , very important) <i>a,c,d</i>	65.0%	66.8%	77.5%	79.2%	55.0%	61.4%	70.8%	69.3%
To Find Employment (% , very important) <i>a,c,d,f; B,C</i>	62.1%	60.2%	51.3%	61.5%	82.6%	75.3%	54.1%	59.2%
To Seek Political Refuge (% , very important) <i>a,b,c,d,e,f; A</i>	20.0%	15.5%	53.5%	46.7%	5.5%	4.9%	17.8%	14.1%
To Join Other Family Members (% , very important) <i>b,e; A,B,C,D</i>	47.4%	55.6%	58.3%	73.6%	55.6%	69.2%	48.6%	62.7%
Other Immigration-Related Factors								
Citizenship (% , naturalized US citizen) <i>b</i>	58.1%	61.4%	72.9%	68.6%	63.2%	67.4%	59.2%	57.2%
English Proficiency (mean, 1–poor, 4–excellent) <i>a,b,c,d,e,f; A,B,D</i>	2.76	2.58	2.17	1.91	3.12	3.06	2.53	2.21
Demographic Characteristics								
Age (mean) <i>c</i>	41.6	42.9	41.4	42.6	45.4	45.5	41.3	43.1
Marital Status (% , married/cohabitating) <i>a,c; B,C</i>	73.4%	74.3%	68.8%	77.1%	84.2%	74.0%	72.1%	69.9%
Region of Residence (% , West)	63.2%	63.9%	60.6%	64.0%	76.6%	74.8%	65.9%	68.4%
Sample N	771	868	236	266	154	195	221	252

Notes.

Survey design effects (stratum, cluster, and individual weight) were taken into account in the estimations.

^a Difference between Vietnamese and Filipino men significant at $p < 0.05$.

^b Difference between Vietnamese and Chinese men significant at $p < 0.05$.

^c Difference between Filipino and Chinese men significant at $p < 0.05$.

^d Difference between Vietnamese and Filipina women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^e Difference between Vietnamese and Chinese women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^f Difference between Filipina and Chinese women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^A Difference between Asian men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

^B Difference between Vietnamese men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

C Difference between Filipino men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

D Difference between Chinese men and women significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3
 Associations between Reasons for Immigration and Perceived Social Standing Controlling Objective Socioeconomic Status Among Asian Immigrants, by Ethnicity and Gender: National Latino and Asian American Study, 2002–2003

	All Asians		Vietnamese		Filipino		Chinese	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Objective Socioeconomic Status								
Education								
Less than high school graduate (reference group)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
High school graduate and some college	0.138 (0.209)	0.326 (0.315)	-0.033 (0.596)	-0.387 (0.270)	0.340 (0.440)	1.335** (0.476)	0.298 (0.376)	0.784* (0.380)
College graduate and above	0.516* (0.206)	0.582* (0.260)	0.668 (0.558)	0.786+ (0.419)	0.234 (0.446)	1.143* (0.462)	0.844 (0.566)	0.532 (0.460)
Occupation (professional/managerial)	0.295 (0.217)	-0.178 (0.199)	0.358 (0.337)	-0.184 (0.424)	0.774** (0.247)	-0.195 (0.275)	-0.296 (0.323)	-0.094 (0.292)
Household Income-to-Needs Ratio	0.025+ (0.014)	0.064** (0.015)	0.077* (0.034)	0.047 (0.040)	0.018 (0.015)	0.053* (0.023)	0.026 (0.020)	0.104** (0.020)
Reasons for Immigration								
To Seek Better Education (very important)	0.246 (0.168)	0.121 (0.200)	0.675 (0.499)	0.630* (0.284)	-0.194 (0.358)	0.602* (0.238)	0.392 (0.328)	0.051 (0.301)
To Find Employment (very important)	-0.323** (0.117)	0.034 (0.150)	0.336 (0.293)	0.050 (0.254)	-0.160 (0.245)	-0.278 (0.322)	-0.385+ (0.217)	-0.110 (0.211)
To Seek Political Refuge (very important)	-0.262 (0.224)	-1.081** (0.194)	-0.044 (0.367)	-0.335 (0.288)	0.017 (0.435)	-0.726+ (0.389)	-0.208 (0.346)	-0.906* (0.382)
To Join Other Family Members (very important)	0.301 (0.207)	-0.149 (0.179)	0.706* (0.305)	0.257 (0.361)	-0.027 (0.221)	-0.104 (0.409)	-0.294 (0.295)	-0.387 (0.311)
Sample N	771	868	236	266	154	195	221	252
R²	0.312	0.271	0.404	0.333	0.176	0.267	0.397	0.416
Wald F Statistics	79.82(16.33)	12.74(16.33)	17.62(13.28)	15.39(13.27)	18.30(13.28)	25.07(13.27)	31.68(13.30)	31.08(13.32)

Notes. Other variables controlled in the model estimations include other immigration-related factors (years in the US, English proficiency), demographic characteristics (age, marital status, region of residence), and ethnicity (only in the models for all Asians). Survey design effects (stratum, cluster, and individual weight) were taken into account in the model estimations.

Standard errors in parentheses;

** p<0.01,

* p<0.05,

+ p<0.1.