Moving Forward: Asian Americans in the Discourse of Race and Social Problems

Yoonsun Choi
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Yoonsun Choi: yoonsun@uchicago.edu

"Asians don't count." I often hear this in discussions about whether Asian Americans are a legitimate racial and ethnic minority in the United States. Typical justifications for not counting Asian Americans are that they are too small in numbers and they are doing just fine and may in fact be doing better than whites. But as the papers in this special issue of Race and Social Problems reveal, these assumptions are simply not true.

Asian Americans are, first, no longer demographically ignorable. Asian Americans in the United States are fastest growing population, and their numbers are projected to double by 2050, reaching nearly 10 % of the US total population. Further, the popular "model minority" stereotype is not valid. More than two decades of research has firmly refuted the proposition, and yet it persists, with harmful consequences. The myth serves to exclude Asian Americans in the critical discourse on race and related social problems, including racial inequality, discrimination, and structural barriers that affect individuals and families. As a result, Asian Americans remain unrecognized, understudied, and underserved.

This special issue is another attempt to include Asian Americans in the discussion of race and social problems. Although, in our roles as educators, researchers, scholars, policy makers, or service providers, we must continue to disprove these false notions and misunderstandings, it is also time we move beyond the debate to more meaningful next steps. Most important, the unique racial and cultural positions and experiences of Asian Americans can significantly advance the theory of race, ethnicity, and culture. Each racial-ethnic minority group is affected differently by our racialized contemporary society, and each group's experience distinctively showcases the perpetuation of white privileges.

This issue intentionally called for papers with a broader focus to achieve both depth and breadth of the underdeveloped areas of research on Asian Americans. The goal was for each paper to serve as a springboard to the next step in that particular line of research. The papers vary in topics, target age groups, academic disciplines, geographic areas, and data sets, sampling methods, and analytic strategies used. Each paper contributes and adds uniquely to the literature.

Some of the papers, for example, provide new information on unrecognized challenges and illustrate just how vast the unmet needs are, as well as further challenge us to think of the next steps to addressing those needs. For example, Karen Kim and her colleagues show that even though cancer is the leading cause of death among Asian American women, the rates of cancer screening among Asian immigrant women in Chicago are less than two-thirds of the national screening rates. Conventional predictors of the screening behaviors, socioeconomic status (SES), did not explain these low rates.

The elderly are the focus of Yunju Nam's contribution. Using national data from the American Community Survey, she demonstrates that although Asian immigrant elderly may seem to fare better economically than other racial-ethnic minority groups, they are doing

worse than their white and native-born counterparts. It still remains to be seen whether Asian immigrant elderly can achieve parity as native-born Asian Americans did, given the large gap between the two and the bleak prospect for the current economy.

Ariane Ling and her colleagues' work calls attention to Asian American families who are markedly marginalized, e.g., those who are undocumented, work multiple jobs for extremely low wages, live in extremely crowded and subpar conditions, or have experienced a unique back-and-forth migration. These characteristics are not typically recognized identifiers of Asian Americans. These especially vulnerable groups are likely to be further marginalized within their own group, excluded from ethnic resources that contributors Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou identify (discussed below). Indeed, the model minority myth blankets their dire needs.

Other papers in this issue improve the complexity and nuance of concepts previously thought to be understood. Nam, for example, adds a measure of assets in assessing economic conditions of elderly, I and my colleagues explicitly test cultural orientations as a dual and multi-domain process, and Ling and her colleagues bring the voice of service providers into the conversation when assessing needs of Asian American youth and families.

Likewise, Lee and Zhou enhance the lens on culture in underscoring the role of ethnic capital and ethnic resources, illustrating how culture and ethnicity can produce both tangible and intangible resources for the children of poor and less-educated Asian immigrants. The authors also show how the strict and racialized frame of success alienates those who do not fit it, which likely contributes to the poor mental health and low self-esteem among Asian American youth, even when they are doing well from a conventional perspective. Also adding nuance, Hyeouk Chris Hahm and her colleagues address this very question of poor mental health, specifically self-harming behaviors and suicidality among Asian American women. They provide a vivid picture of complex family dynamics that may lead to self-damaging behaviors. The authors identify "disempowering parenting styles" that are characterized as abusive, burdening, culturally disjointed, disengaged, and gender prescriptive (ABCDG parenting) as a possible etiology of self-harm and suicidality among these women. These findings intersect with a "fractured identity" from juggling different cultural demands, often in the midst of ABCDG parenting.

Parents also struggle with their roles. As much as it is challenging for youth to balance the sometimes conflicting cultural demands, Asian American parents also struggle with the vexing question of how much to promote their culture of origin and racial-ethnic identity in the family. I and my team investigate how racial-ethnic socialization influences cultural orientations among youth, which in turn influences their mental health. We find that proficiency in one's native language most notably reduces depressive symptoms, but English language proficiency has a similarly protective effect, implying a benefit of bilingualism. In other words, while maintaining cultural heritage may be important and protective among Asian American youth, it is equally important to be competent in the mainstream culture and language competency can be enhanced by active cultural socialization in the family. Wen Han also investigates the buffering effect of language use on the impact of school mobility among young children in kindergarten and elementary school and corroborates the benefits of bilingualism.

The findings in this special issue collectively reveal that conventional theoretical models do not seem to work well with Asian Americans. For example, existing SES indicators (measured by education, income, or occupation) are not predictive of the cancer screening behaviors among Asian American women or academic achievement and career trajectories of poor Asian American children. High mobility in childhood is thought to compromise

academic performance and increase internalizing and externalizing problems, but as Han finds, this is not the case for children of Asian origin.

These unexpected, sometimes paradoxical, patterns beg the question of why. In fact, these unique and unconventional findings are opportunities to advance our knowledge. For example, by investigating the unexpectedly high and positive academic and career performance among poor Vietnamese immigrant children, Lee and Zhou advance our understanding of culture from static and intrinsic to specific frames through which culture operates and how those frames support both tangible and intangible resources, thus increasing the sophistication and specificity of our understanding of culture.

It is important and useful to establish baseline information on Asian Americans as an aggregate. However, given the great variety among Asian Americans in countries of origin, reasons and patterns of immigration, SES, and cultures including languages, research should focus on subgroups for scientific rigor and advancement. Such a focus can create important opportunities to examine interesting questions. For example, as Lee and Zhou show, Chinese and Vietnamese Americans are dissimilar in their SES backgrounds but converge on child educational outcomes. This unique pattern points to a role for cultural frames, ethnic capital, and ethnicity as resources.

Asian Americans should no longer be an invisible ghost in our discussion of race and social problems. Active and purposeful inclusion of diverse racial-ethnic groups such as Asian Americans and Latin Americans in discussions of race not only responds to the actual demographics of contemporary American society, but also advances theory, policy, and services to fit the ever more diverse and changing, but still racialized, society. The dichotomy of black/white in discourse on race is simply no longer effective in understanding this diverse society. Globalization brings another set of challenges to the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and culture. At individual level, for example, continuous contacts and opportunities with one's country of origin that globalization allows raises questions of one's allegiance and loyalty, politically, economically, and culturally. These challenges are only bound to increase and further complicate the already complex issue of race and social problems. We simply can no longer afford *not to count* Asian Americans any longer.