Assimilation

Asian Americans have often been referred to as a “model minority” and “assimilation exemplified.” For example, the Pew Research Center report of 2012 stated that Asian Americans are models of assimilation and excel more than any other American in educational achievement, commitment toward family, hard work, and success; they’re also regarded as having higher satisfaction with finances and the U.S.

However, this assimilationist narrative of Asian Americans is problematic because it excludes the many who live in poverty and experience intense and direct racism. It also assumes that assimilation leads to full citizenship rights when Asian American history shows that this has not been the case (i.e. mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII). Assimilation has often been a contentious issue among sociologists. Robert E. Park believed that assimilation was a solution to racial differences and was inevitable. His body of thought became the foundation of U.S. sociology research on immigrants. Other scholars have “criticized the continued assumption of assimilation as a taken-for-granted process of immigrant incorporation in which the state holds a universal and implicitly benign presence.” They challenge this narrative by asking: What are Asian Americans assimilating into and what is the intent of assimilation? Is it being used as a tool of power? Sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, who was also a historian and civil rights activist in the late 1800s and early 1900s, argued that racial difference is not a problem that needs to be assimilated into something else, and that “assimilation efforts are normative measures to center whiteness as the national identity.”

Discrimination

When Asians first immigrated to the U.S. in large numbers during the mid-1800s, they were seen as outsiders. National majorities believed they had the “right to discriminate on the basis of race to keep out undesirable, ‘inassimilable’ immigrants.” Thus, laws were enacted to discriminate against Asian immigrants across various ethnic groups. They were denied naturalized citizenship and the right to own land. To prevent competition between white Americans and Asian immigrants, restrictions were placed on Asians. For example, Chinese immigrants were forced to pay a Foreign Miners’ Tax, and Filipinos and Japanese immigrants were not allowed to obtain fishing licenses or get government jobs. Also, anti-miscegenation laws prohibited Asians from marrying whites.

Although the 14th Amendment was passed in 1868, which promised constitutional protections to any person, discrimination continued. White supremacist state political leaders implemented segregationist Jim Crow laws; segregation was also legalized through U.S. Supreme Court decisions. Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) justified “separate but equal” facilities and services as constitutional, and in Gong Lum v. Rice (1927) the Supreme Court ruled that Asian Americans are “yellow” and thus would attend schools for “colored children.”
Legally based racial discrimination continued for almost 100 years, and was banned once federal civil rights legislation was established (Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights of 1965, Fair Housing Act of 1968) and formal segregation was abolished through Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. However, racial discrimination still continued and continues in a variety of contexts.

**Exclusion**

Strict ethnic stratification was dictated by Europeans ever since they first settled in the Americas. They claimed that the land was theirs by right, that it was “white man’s country,” and whiteness was determined according to one’s geographical origin, skin color, and religious faith. Thus, when Asians first immigrated to the U.S. they were excluded from full citizenship rights. Although Jews and non-Nordic Europeans were considered “lesser races” at one point in U.S. history, they were not legally excluded like the indigenous and people of African and Asian descent were.

Legal exclusion began with the Naturalization Act of 1790, which stated that only “free white” immigrants could become citizens. When the Chinese immigrated in large numbers during the Gold Rush, white Americans felt threatened, which triggered hostility and the creation of laws directed specifically at them - such as the first Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. “Once exclusion was enacted, it defined Asian Americans— first Chinese, and by extension other Asians, who were popularly identified with Chinese— as officially undesirable.” By the time the Immigration Act of 1924 was implemented, the goal of legal exclusion was reached - to bar all Asians from immigrating to the U.S. Legislators were not able to include Filipinos in this law because the Philippines was a U.S. territory at the time; however, by 1934 they limited their migration to the U.S. to 50 per year.

This “heritage of exclusion” led to the mass incarceration of Americans of Japanese descent during WWII. Since 1908, white nationalists cut off Japanese immigration and spread lies about Japanese Americans as disloyal spies who were not to be trusted. With anti-Asian racism building up throughout history, it was easy for military leaders to make the decision to forcibly remove nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans without due process.

Although legal exclusion softened after World War II, exclusion continues today in the form of such areas as media stereotyping, the glass ceiling at the workplace, housing bias, and hate crimes on the street.

**Identity**

Identity is an important term to help explain the complexity of Asian America. Asian Americans politically unite under this demographic label to combat the legacy of racial exclusion and discrimination in their history. However, “Asian American” does not fully illustrate its diversity in ethnicity, heritage, national origin, race, immigration status, and citizenship. For example: Filipinos are of mixed heritage and ethnicity and not solely Asian; Native Hawai’ians and Pacific Islanders (descendents of the original peoples of these islands) are often marginalized in discourse on Asian Americans.
There is no set agreement on who identifies as Asian American or what it means to claim an Asian American identity, which leads some scholars to state that identity divides. Because people under this umbrella term can identify themselves in many ways, intersectionality becomes a natural way for Asian Americans to align themselves with other groups fighting against oppression. This shows Asian Americans’ strength in coalition building. Further, the power of identity “is evident when we recognize that people are both individual and unique entities but ones who share a collective social identity with others and who gain political enfranchisement through coalitional networks and group identification.” Identity is a fluid and flexible concept within Asian American Studies because of the changing nature of how Asian Americans identify themselves.

Identity is also significant in how Asian Americans’ racial and ethnic consciousness has developed in history and how it continues to develop more recently. This is illustrated in how “Asian American” as an identifier came into being during the 1960s Asian American resistance movement. When Asian Americans realized the racist discrimination in their communities it sparked in them a recognition of their distinct identity separate from an assimilationist narrative.

**Resistance**

Protesting against oppression has long been a part of Asian American history. Ever since immigrants from the continent of Asia came to the U.S., they fought for their rights. They stood up for labor rights on Hawai’i plantations, California fields, and canneries and for a more inclusive education. Japanese Americans stood up against being mass incarcerated during WWII. Asian Americans protested in anti-war and anti-colonial movements, and spoke out against hate crimes. In fact, the term “Asian American” came out of the 1960s movement for Asian American Studies on college campuses when the Asian American Political Alliance formed. This was during a time when Asian American identity consciousness came to the fore as they supported the black civil rights movement, anti-war movement, and protested for equity in various Asian ethnic enclaves.

They also sought agency through “small forms of resistance...a range of responses that depart from explicit and organized protest.” Through music, spoken word, photography, literature, and performance arts, artists used expression as a way to challenge inequity and power imbalance.

An intersectional approach to resistance continues Asian Americans' legacy of forming coalitions with other disenfranchised groups. They also have the opportunity to include their perspective within issues that have typically marginalized their experiences.