

If the shoe doesn't fit

Daily Californian: University of California - Berkeley

February 27, 2020 Thursday

University Wire

Copyright 2020 UWIRE via U-Wire All Rights Reserved

Section: OPINION; Pg. 1

Length: 886 words

Body

How many words does it take to describe you? A sentence? Perhaps a paragraph?

Could you tell your story in two words?

There are two words that aim to categorize the actions, behavior and experiences of almost 21 million people in the United States: Asian American. If you believe the statistics, Asian Americans are the "most successful" minority group in the United States. Fifty-four percent of Asian Americans have bachelor's degrees or higher compared to 36% of white Americans, and the Asian American median household income was \$77,900 in 2014 compared to \$77,100 for white Americans.

The numbers don't add up when you take a look at Asia, however. Asia is a massive continent that includes a diverse group of people all the way from Korea to Sri Lanka. Between East Asians, South Asians and Southeast Asians, wide disparities exist in factors such as level of education, median income and even neighborhoods. This failure to accurately portray the diversity in the Asian American community amounts to not only policy failure but also a resounding surge in stereotypes, which is unfortunate, to say the least, given that the term Asian American was used to fight stereotypes.

The term can be traced back to two UC Berkeley students, Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, who created the Asian American Political Alliance in 1968 to bring together Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino students - creating a Pan-Asian identity. This organization was inspired by the Black Power movement and Vietnam War protests.

After the death of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was mistaken for Japanese and then killed by enraged auto workers who saw competition with Japan as a threat, the Asian community rallied around the term and marched all over the country to demand justice for Chin. Asian Americans had finally and emphatically seized the political spotlight and demanded change at a time when most white Americans weren't even aware that there was a large Asian population in the United States.

The term Asian American has been powerful in uniting Asian minority groups, but who does this alliance ultimately benefit? The economic and educational dominance displayed by Chinese, Indians and other East Asian groups has effectively masked the inequality latent in the Asian American community. A lawsuit claiming that Asian Americans are being discriminated against in college admissions due to affirmative action gained major traction in courts in 2019, but the case was ultimately dismissed.

A major factor that didn't make it into the debate was whether some Asian American groups required more assistance than others to make up for generational wealth and education disparities. The poorest Asian Americans

If the shoe doesn't fit

- among groups such as Bangladeshis, Hmong, Burmese, and Cambodians - have a massive difference in access to good schools compared to Indians and East Asians. This lack of access to education leads to higher poverty rates in this group, and even forms a school-to-prison pipeline that similarly affects other minority groups.

Using the phrase Asian American has effectively traded in one stereotype for another. The Asian community has gone from being exoticized in racist caricatures to mythicized as a monolithic model minority. It's time we stop collecting data about ethnic groups using widely imprecise terms. How can government policies work to correct systemic inequalities if the government doesn't really know who lives in a community?

What works for the successful Korean community will probably not be as useful to the struggling Nepalese community. In order to tackle these problems, we have to agree on accurate categorization that correctly reflects the communities we live in. That means making the census more inclusive not only to the Asian community but to other groups, as well. To this day, there is no Middle Eastern check box on the census(not even the 2020 one!). People of Middle Eastern and North African descent are forced to write "OTHER" or "White" on government forms, even though they are socioeconomically and culturally different.

What message does this send? Not only is the government collecting inaccurate data that fuels inequality, but our society is also culturally excluding people for not belonging to a handful of made-up categories. In a time when anti-immigrant sentiment is at an all-time high and fears of coronavirus have driven racist behavior, we have to show Americans of all stripes that no one should be excluded from the American dream because of where they come from.

It's a feeling that I and so many other people face all the time. What do you do when your ethnicity doesn't make the cut? If I went up to my mom and proclaimed that I was proudly Asian American, she'd promptly say, "No you're not, you're Indian - stop talking so much during dinner."

And she'd be right. I don't identify as Asian American. And, at least in my experience, it doesn't seem like many other people I know do either. When was the last time you heard someone say "I'm Asian American" instead of "I'm Chinese" or "I'm Pakistani"?

It's like they say; if the shoe fits, wear it. And if it doesn't? Maybe it's time to get a new one.

Nishi Rahman writes the Thursday column on cultural and political diversity as a second-generation American.

Affirmative Action, Asian American, census, Chinese, Hmong, Indian, Model Minority

Load-Date: April 16, 2020