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Who counts as Asian

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ABSTRACT

We introduce a novel test of *racial assignment* that has significant implications for how racial categories are popularly understood, even among the populations for whom they purportedly apply. We test whether the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of Asian corresponds with Americans' understanding of the category, and find a disjuncture between those groups the U.S. government assign as Asian, and those that Americans include in the category. For White, Black, Latino, and most Asian Americans, the default for Asian is East Asian. While South Asians – such as Indians and Pakistanis – classify themselves as Asian, other Americans are significantly less likely to do so, reflecting patterns of “*South Asian exclusion*” and “*racial assignment incongruity*”. College-educated, younger Americans, however, are more inclusive in who counts as Asian, indicating that despite the cultural lag, the social norms of racial assignment are mutable. We discuss how disjunctures in racial assignment bias narratives of Asian Americans.

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KEYWORDS Racial assignment; racial classification; Asian Americans; immigration; race; census

Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest growing group in the United States, increasing from only 1 per cent of U.S. population in 1970 to over 6 per cent today (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). By 2060, demographers project that the number of Asian Americans will reach 49 million, or 12 per cent of the U.S. population (Colby and Ortman 2015; Pew Research Center 2015). Accompanying the rapid growth of Asian Americans is their unprecedented diversity, with immigration fuelling both trends. In 1970, Asian immigrants hailed primarily from East Asian countries like China, Japan, and Korea, but today, East Asians account for only 36 per cent of the U.S. Asian population. Driving both the growth and diversity are South Asians, who have doubled their share of the U.S. Asian population from 13 per cent in 1990 to 27 per cent today (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). The new face of immigration is Asian, but Asian is a

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catch-all category that masks tremendous diversity in national origin. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Asian as a racial category that includes individuals whose origins include the Far East, Southeast Asia, or South Asia, but it is unclear whether this official assignment matches Americans' understanding of who counts as Asian.

We introduce a novel diagnostic of *racial assignment* that has significant implications for how racial categories such as Asian are popularly understood, especially for populations for whom they purportedly apply. Based on analyses of the 2016 National Asian American Survey, we find a gap between the government assignment of the Asian category and Americans' understanding of it—what we refer to as the “*disjuncture between in-group and out-group racial assignment*”. For White, Black, Latino, and most Asian Americans, the default for Asian is East Asian. While South Asians classify Indians and Pakistanis as Asian, other Americans, including Asian Americans, are significantly less likely to do so, reflecting a unique pattern of “*South Asian exclusion*”. However, college-educated and younger Americans are more inclusive in their racial assignment, indicating that despite the cultural lag, the social norms of who counts as Asian are mutable.

While disjunctures in racial assignment are not unique to the U.S. Asian population, we focus on Asian Americans as an illustrative example in our analyses since the two thirds are foreign-born, a figure that increases to four-fifths among Asian adults (Lee, Ramakrishnan, and Wong 2018). Because the majority are immigrants or the children of immigrants, the norms of racial assignment are not as clearly established by the general public nor by Asian Americans themselves as they are for other U.S. racial groups like Whites and Blacks (Lee and Bean 2010). We conclude by discussing the implications of disjunctures in racial assignment for narratives of Asian Americans' outcomes, experiences, and attitudes, and offering a way forward towards the democratization of racial assignment.

Defining “Asian”

According to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Asian is a racial category alongside White, Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Currently, Hispanic or Latino is not considered a race, but, rather, an ethnicity. In 1997, the *Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity* defined Asian as a “person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” (U.S. Office of Management and Budget 1997). The national origin groups subsumed under the Asian rubric do not share a common language, culture, religion, or history of immigration to

the United States (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2014; Omi and Winant 1994; Park 2008). What Asians Americans do share, however, is a common history of exclusion from White racial status and U.S. citizenship (Lew-Williams 2018; Ngai 2004). Until the Civil War, only White immigrants were eligible for citizenship, with the right to naturalize extended to Blacks beginning in 1870 (Haney-Lopez 1996).

Immigrants from China were explicitly excluded from the right to naturalize with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. While Congress did not pass a similar ban on Japanese immigrants, they barred them from citizenship nevertheless (Lee 2015). In the 1922 U.S. Supreme Court case *Ozawa v. United States*, Ozawa argued that he should be granted the right to naturalize because his skin tone was lighter than those of many White immigrants who were granted the privilege. In essence, Ozawa argued that his light skin tone should qualify him as a White person, and, therefore make him eligible for citizenship. The Court disagreed with Ozawa's reasoning, noting that "the test afforded by the mere colour of the skin of each individual is impracticable, as that differs greatly among persons of the same race, even among Anglo-Saxons, ranging by imperceptible gradations from the fair blond to the swarthy brunette, the latter being darker than many of the lighter hued persons of the brown or yellow races. Hence to adopt the colour test alone would result in a confused overlapping of races and a gradual merging of one into the other, without any practical line of separation." In short, the court established that light-skinned Japanese immigrants were not considered White, and thus were ineligible for naturalization.

In a ruling a few months later in 1923 (*United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*), the U.S. Supreme Court clarified that Asians, including South Asians, are not White, despite the argument from the "science of ethnology" that East Indians are Caucasian. In this case, the Court ruled that popular as well as Congressional understandings of "Caucasian" and "free White persons" did not include Indians. Instead, the Court classified Indians as part of the "Asiatic stock," thereby making them ineligible for naturalization. By contrast, Iranians, Armenians, and other immigrants from the Middle East and Central Asia were not similarly prevented from acquiring U.S. citizenship because the federal government classified those immigrants as White. Thus, while the official U.S. racial classification of Asian bears some resemblance to world geography, its legal weight carries over from nearly two centuries of exclusion from Whiteness and U.S. citizenship.

Racial assignment

Racial assignment in the United States entails more than legal, elite definitions of racial categories (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). It also involves racial self-identification (how an individual identifies herself) and observed race (how

an individual is identified by another), which do not always correspond (Massey 2009; Mora 2014; Roth 2018). The mismatch is consequential since most measures of racial identification rely on self-identification, and fail to consider how observed race may affect an individual's outcomes, experiences, and attitudes. Given the racial identification mismatch, Roth (2018) calls for more attention to the measurement of observed race, and also a distinction between individual and group analyses. Individual-level analyses of observed race focus on how an individual's race is identified by another individual (typically an interviewer or census enumerator), whereas group-level analyses of observed race focus on societal norms of racial classification. Roth's framework underscores the importance of understanding how race "works" in everyday interactions, and not simply how individuals self-identify.

We extend Roth's (2018) group-level analytical framework by introducing a novel test of "*racial assignment*" that grounds racial identity more solidly in the realm of classification than identification. As we elaborate below, racial assignment involves processes that include individual identification as well as group assignment. As our conceptual framework indicates in Figure 1, a key distinction is whether individuals or groups are the focus of analyses.

Studies of racial identity have largely focused on individuals as the objects of reference, relying on measures such as *enumerated race* (as was the practice by the U.S. Census Bureau prior to 1960, and continues today in some types of administrative data such as police records as described by Saperstein and Penner [2012]), *self-identified race* (as has been the norm in government and private survey data collections since 1960), and *observed race* (by members of society as laid out by Roth [2018]). Scant attention has been given to the measurement of racial identity with *groups* as the object of reference, that is, racial assignment.

While self-identification indicates the extent to which an individual identifies with a particular racial category, *in-group assignment* captures her evaluations or beliefs of where her group fits into a societal or governmental rubric of racial classification. Relatedly, while observed race involves the extent to

		<i>Classifying Agent</i>		
		<i>Self</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Government</i>
<i>Object of Classification</i>	<i>Individual Identification</i>	Self-identification	Observed identification	Enumerated identification
	<i>Group Assignment</i>	In-group assignment	Out-group assignment	Official group assignment

Figure 1. Typology of Racial Classification.

which other individuals perceive someone as belonging to one racial group or another, *out-group assignment* captures the evaluations of out-group members of where a particular group fits into societal or governmental rubrics of racial classification. Finally, we note the distinction between enumerated identification and *official group assignment*. The former captures the extent to which government agencies obtain individual racial data using methods such as enumeration and imputation, while the latter focuses on the work of government agencies in defining a finite number of racial categories, and determining rules for aggregation and re-classification.

Official group assignment sheds light on an important, yet little-known, aspect of racial classification in the United States today: the way that the U.S. Census Bureau and other government agencies re-classify detailed national origin data furnished by respondents to map onto the five main official U.S. racial categories (Prewitt 2013). The Census Bureau relies on input from social science experts as well as community organizations regarding not only the potential changes to racial categories, but also with respect to reclassifying open-ended and detailed national origin responses to aggregate up to the five OMB racial categories for publication and data dissemination. While the general public has an opportunity to weigh in on potential changes to racial categorization via public comments to the Federal Register, the process of determining how respondent-furnished categories are aggregated and reported remains an elite, expert-driven endeavour.

Relying solely on elite opinion can be problematic. Elites, including social science experts, may not fully understand the disjuncture between in-group racial assignment by new immigrant groups who must decide how they fit into U.S. categories, out-group racial assignment by members of other immigrant groups who purportedly belong to the same U.S. racial category, as well as out-group assignment by other racial groups. The disjuncture may be especially pronounced for new immigrant groups from Asia and Latin America who hail from countries with varied legal, historical, and societal norms governing the rules of racial classification, some of which differ from U.S. norms (Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow 2014; Foner, Deaux, and Donato 2018; Mora 2014; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Telles and Paschel 2014; Wimmer 2013).

Thus, racial assignment is a multipronged, potentially fraught process that involves how governments define racial categories and assign groups to those categories, how immigrant and national origin groups understand and assign themselves into racial categories, and how out-groups understand and assign immigrant and national origin groups to the same racial categories. Past qualitative studies provide glimpses into disjunctures in racial group assignment. For example, East Asians in the United States are less likely to racially assign Indians, Pakistanis, and Filipinos as Asian, leading some South and Southeast Asians to feel excluded from the Asian category (Ocampo 2016; Shankar and Srikanth 1998).

These qualitative studies reveal the tension in who counts as Asian ranging from official government classification, to racial self-identification by South Asians and Filipinos, to out-group assignment into the category by other U.S. Asian groups. While illuminating, these findings have not been validated using large, nationally representative samples of the U.S. Asian population, nor have they been tested with respect to out-group racial assignment by non-Asian groups such as Whites, Blacks, and Latinos, who comprise the majority of Americans. Drawing on the 2016 National Asian American Survey—a groundbreaking nationally representative survey of the U.S. Asian population that also includes sizeable samples of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics—we address this empirical void. We assess who Americans, including Asian Americans, count as Asian, and which groups they exclude from the categorical fold.

Data and methods

The 2016 National Asian American Survey

To examine patterns of racial assignment of the U.S. Asian population, we draw on analyses of the 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), a large, nationally representative telephone survey of the U.S. Asian population (Ramakrishnan et al. 2018). Conducted between November 10, 2016 and March 2, 2017, the survey includes 4,393 adult respondents who report their ancestry or at least one parent's ancestry from countries in Asia. Also included in the survey are sizeable samples of Latinos, Whites, Blacks, and Pacific Islanders, thereby allowing for both intra-group comparisons among Asians as well as inter-group comparisons between Asians and other U.S. racial groups. The 2016 NAAS is a ten-module survey that covers a broad array of questions about the social and political attitudes and experiences of Asian Americans, including questions about racial and ethnic identity, inter-group relations, experiences with discrimination, political behaviour, civic engagement, vote choice, and policy attitudes.

Unlike other surveys of the U.S. Asian population that focus on only a few large Asian groups, the 2016 NAAS reflects the diversity of the U.S. Asian population, and includes sizeable samples of ten Asian groups: Chinese (475); Indian (504); Filipino (505); Korean (499); Vietnamese (501); Japanese (517); Pakistani (320); Bangladeshi (320); Hmong (351); and Cambodian (401). Also included in the survey are five non-Asian groups: Hispanics/Latinos (1126); non-Hispanic Whites (408); non-Hispanic Blacks (401); and Pacific Islanders (120).

While the number and diversity of Asian national origin groups included in the 2016 NAAS is significant, also notable is the number of languages in which the survey was offered to the respondents. In addition to English and Spanish, the

2016 NAAS was offered in ten Asian languages: Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hindi, Tagalog, Japanese, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian. This is critical for data validity since 80 per cent of the adult U.S. Asian population is foreign-born, 74 per cent speak a language other than English at home, and 35 per cent are limited in English language proficiency—defined as those who report that they speak English “less than very well” and speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). Hence, providing the option to complete the survey in a language other than English generates a more reliable sample, and avoids biasing the sample toward native-born, English-proficient, younger, and more highly educated Asians.

The 2016 NAAS broadly reflects the diversity of the Asian adult population in the United States. As Table 1 shows, the proportion of foreign-born respondents in the NAAS sample (76 per cent) is similar to the foreign-born share in the American Community Survey (79 per cent). Males account for a greater share of respondents in the 2016 NAAS than in the general Asian American adult population (53 per cent versus 46 per cent, respectively), and the proportion of respondents with more than a high school degree is lower in the 2016 NAAS Asian sample than in the Asian American adult population (65 per cent versus 71 per cent, respectively).

In Table 2, we include sample characteristics of the White, Black, and Latino respondents who participated in the 2016 National Asian American Survey. All of the results that we present in this paper are based on post-stratification weights,

Table 1. Sample characteristics of Asian American respondents in the 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS).

	NAAS Asian adults	ACS Asian adults		NAAS Asian adults	ACS Asian adults
Bangladeshi	7%	1%	California	34%	33%
Cambodian	9%	2%	New York	11%	10%
Chinese	11%	24%	Texas	4%	7%
Filipino	12%	17%	New Jersey	3%	5%
Hmong	8%	1%	Other states	48%	45%
Indian	11%	20%			
Japanese	12%	6%			
Korean	11%	10%			
Pakistani	7%	2%			
Vietnamese	11%	10%			
Other Asian	–	8%			
Foreign born	76%	79%			
Native born	24%	21%			
Less than HS	18%	13%			
High School or GED	17%	16%			
More than High School	65%	71%			
Male	53%	46%			
Female	47%	54%			

The 2016 NAAS sample is weighted, using a raking procedure, to reflect the distribution of race and Asian detailed origin by each of the following dimensions: state of residence, gender, nativity, citizenship status, and educational attainment.

Table 2. Sample Characteristics of White, Black, Latino respondents in the 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS).

	NAAS White	ACS White	NAAS Black	ACS Black	NAAS Latino	ACS Latino
Foreign born	8%	5%	5%	11%	60%	49%
Native born	92%	95%	95%	89%	40%	51%
Less than HS	6%	9%	9%	16%	28%	33%
High School or GED	17%	29%	22%	32%	25%	28%
More than High School	77%	63%	68%	52%	47%	39%
Male	44%	49%	41%	46%	42%	50%
Female	56%	51%	59%	54%	58%	50%
California	15%	8%	28%	6%	40%	27%
Texas	6%	6%	4%	8%	8%	19%
Florida	7%	6%	8%	8%	7%	10%
New York	6%	6%	7%	8%	6%	7%
Other states	65%	74%	53%	70%	39%	37%

The 2016 NAAS sample is weighted, using a raking procedure, to reflect the distribution of race and Asian detailed origin by each of the following dimensions: state of residence, gender, nativity, citizenship status, and educational attainment.

using a raking procedure, to reflect the ACS population distribution of race and Asian ethnicity by each of the following dimensions: state of residence, gender, age, nativity, citizenship status, and educational attainment.

Measuring racial assignment

The 2016 NAAS advances a novel operationalization and measure of racial assignment by asking a new question to all survey respondents: *“Now I am going to read you a list of different groups. After I say each one, please tell me if you think the group is very likely to be Asian or Asian American, somewhat likely, or not likely to be Asian or Asian American.”* The respondents were then read a list of groups in randomized order—Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, Filipino, Pakistani, and Arabs or Middle Eastern people—and asked each time how they evaluate the likelihood of the reference group being Asian or Asian American. The inclusion of a non-Asian group (“Arabs or Middle Eastern people”) among the categories serves as useful comparative reference to ascertain whether respondents are as likely to exclude some Asian groups from the relevant Census category as they are to exclude Arabs or Middle Easterners.

While all respondents participated in the out-group racial assignment of these Asian groups, Asian respondents participated in both out-group and in-group racial assignment. For example, Chinese respondents were asked whether they believed that Chinese are likely or unlikely to be Asian or Asian American, and were also asked the same of Indians and other Asian groups. Indian respondents were asked whether they believed that Indians are likely or unlikely to be Asian or Asian American, and were asked the same about Chinese, and so on. These survey responses allow us, for the first time, to determine which Asian groups identify as Asian and also which

groups are racially assigned as Asian, by both Asians and non-Asians. In addition, our research allows us not only to test whether racial assignment by the survey respondents matches that of the U.S. Census, but also to identify the points of disjuncture in racial assignment.

Our novel diagnostic of racial assignment thus provides a multifaceted assessment of racial classification, including not only how individuals classify their own national origin group, but also how those groups are classified by others, including those who purportedly share the same official racial category. For example, it is possible that even though South Asians may be just as likely as other Asian groups to claim that Indians and Pakistanis are Asian, they may be significantly less likely to be *racially assigned* as Asian by Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and even by other Asians like Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans.

Predictors of racial classification

In addition to assessing the extent to which the U.S. government classification of “Asian” corresponds with the ways in which the survey respondents assign groups into the Asian category, we also analyze the factors that predict congruity in racial assignment. We hypothesize that *education, age, nativity, and length of stay* in the United States, as well as *race and national origin of the respondent* will be significant predictors of racial assignment.

First, we predict that more highly educated Americans would be more likely to adopt the definition of Asian provided by the U.S. Census Bureau since they would be more likely to have learned about the definition, and also come in contact with a more diverse group of Asian Americans in college and the workplace (Pettigrew 1998).

Second, we hypothesize that younger Americans would be more likely to adopt the official definition of Asian compared to older Americans since the former are more likely to grow up in more diverse contexts (Lee and Bean 2010). Consequently, younger Americans may be more likely to learn about and come into contact with a wider breadth of Asian Americans in schools, neighbourhoods, and workplaces, thereby resulting in a broader, more inclusive cognitive construction of Asian.

Third, among Asian Americans more specifically, we hypothesize that both length of stay in the United States and nativity would be significant predictors of congruence between out-group assignment and official government assignment. Among foreign-born Asians, we predict that those who have lived in the United States for a longer period of time would be more likely to adopt an inclusive construction of Asian compared to more recent immigrant arrivals since length of time in the U.S. host society would make them increasingly more aware of the broad contours of the Asian racial category. In addition, we expect that nativity would play a significant role, with racial assignment by U.S.-born Asians to be more congruous with official U.S.

government racial classifications than the racial assignment by foreign-born Asians. These hypotheses are grounded in the vast literature on immigrant and second-generation integration, where immigrant attitudes and behaviours change by nativity and length of time in the United States (Jiménez 2010; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Lee and Zhou 2015; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Wong et al. 2011).

Finally, given the historical legacy of early waves of Asian migration in shaping popular understandings of U.S. racial categories, we expect that East Asian groups will be more likely to be racially assigned as Asian than Filipinos and South Asians, both by Asians and non-Asians alike. Moreover, based on prior literature, we expect that East Asians will be less likely to racially assign Filipinos, Indians, and Pakistanis as Asian (Ocampo 2016; Okamoto 2014; Shankar and Srikanth 1998). Hence, we predict to find significant differences in the racial assignment of South Asians by non-Asians and by Asian Americans alike.

Results

Who counts as Asian

Based on the analyses of the 2016 National Asian American Survey, we find evidence of four main findings. First, the default for Asian is East Asian. As Figure 2 shows, over three quarters of respondents assign Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans as Asian or Asian American (81, 80, and 78 per cent, respectively). A slightly lower proportion of survey respondents assign Filipinos to the Asian or Asian American category (70 per cent), but this difference is not statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level. By contrast,

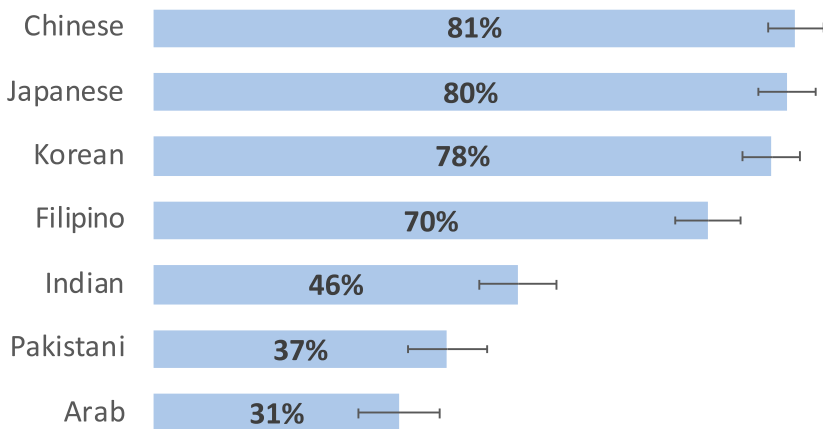


Figure 2. Proportion of respondents indicating that the reference category is likely to be Asian or Asian American. Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey, population-weighted estimates with 95% confidence intervals.

respondents are significantly less likely to assign Indians and Pakistanis into the Asian or Asian American category (46 and 37 per cent, respectively). Indeed, for Pakistanis, the low proportion of respondents who racially assign Pakistanis as Asian is statistically indistinguishable from the proportion who classify Arabs or Middle Easterners as Asian.

Second, when we examine differences in out-group racial assignment among the survey respondents, we find that Asians, on average, are more inclusive than non-Asians in their racial assignment of all Asian groups (see Table 3). This is especially evident in the case of Filipinos: 86 per cent of Asians consider Filipinos to be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to be Asian, while only about two-thirds of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos claim the same. In fact, Asians are, on average, no more likely to exclude Filipinos from the Asian category than they are to exclude Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese—a finding that runs counter to recent qualitative research that underscores Filipinos’ exclusion from the Asian category by East Asians (Ocampo 2016).

Differences emerge, however, when we restrict Asian racial assignment to those who specify that a group is “very likely” to be Asian. As Table 4 shows, only 62 per cent of Asians report that Filipinos are “very likely” to be Asian. This rate is significantly lower than those who claim the same about Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans: 72, 68, 67 per cent, respectively. In sum, respondents are

Table 3. Proportion of respondents indicating that the reference category is likely (“very likely” or “somewhat likely”) to be Asian or Asian American.

	All	White	Black	Latino	Asian
Chinese	81%	83%	72%	75%	89%
Japanese	80%	83%	71%	74%	86%
Korean	78%	80%	69%	73%	87%
Filipino	70%	70%	68%	68%	86%
Indian	46%*	44%*	46%*	44%*	74%*
Pakistani	37%*	37%*	32%*	33%*	57%*
Arab	31%*	29%*	31%*	35%*	38%*

Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey, population-weighted estimates.

*Indicates statistically significant differences from every East Asian reference category (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) at the 95% confidence level or higher.

Table 4. Proportion of respondents indicating that the reference category is “very likely” to be Asian or Asian American.

	All	White	Black	Latino	Asian
Chinese	62%	66%	50%	53%	72%
Japanese	60%	64%	49%	51%	68%
Korean	56%	59%	47%	48%	67%
Filipino	42%	43%	36%	38%*	62%*
Indian	24%*	23%*	22%*	20%*	49%*
Pakistani	19%*	20%*	12%*	12%*	34%*
Arab	13%*	13%*	10%*	12%*	15%*

Source: 2016 Asian American Survey, population-weighted estimates.

*Indicates statistically significant differences from every East Asian reference category (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) at the 95% confidence level or higher.

significantly more likely to report that East Asians are both “very likely” and “likely” to be Asian compared to other Asian groups.

The exclusion of Filipinos from the Asian category, however, pales in comparison to the exclusion of South Asian groups like Indians and Pakistanis. As [Table 3](#) shows, only 46 per cent of Blacks, 44 per cent of Whites, and 44 per cent of Latinos consider Indians “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to be Asian. These proportions are even lower in the case of Pakistanis, with only 37 per cent of Whites, 33 per cent of Latinos, and 32 per cent of Blacks assigning Pakistanis to the Asian or Asian American category.

While Asians are more likely than Whites, Blacks, and Latinos to assign Indians and Pakistanis as Asian, their assignment of Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos as Asian is significantly higher than their assignment of South Asian groups. This is especially evident in [Table 4](#), which shows that among Asian respondents, only 49 and 34 per cent consider Indians and Pakistanis, respectively, to be “very likely” to be Asian.

South Asian exclusion

Racial assignment entails not only inclusion into a category, but also exclusion from it. To measure of exclusion, we report the percentage who claim that a group is “not likely” to be Asian or Asian American, which we show in [Table 5](#). Most glaring is the exclusion of Indians and Pakistanis from assignment into the Asian category. Here, it is worth placing their exclusion into perspective: Asians are three times as likely to exclude Indians and five times as likely to exclude Pakistanis as they are to exclude Chinese from the Asian category.

The differences between Asians and non-Asians are not the result of Asian groups classifying themselves in the analyses. Even when we exclude the relevant respondent group from the analyses (i.e. Filipinos classifying Filipinos, Pakistanis classifying Pakistanis, and so on), we find that non-Asian respondents remain more likely to exclude Filipinos, Indians, and Pakistanis from the Asian racial category. Critically, the pattern of South Asian exclusion

Table 5. Proportion of respondents indicating that the reference category is “not likely” to be Asian or Asian American.

	All	White	Black	Latino	Asian
Chinese	6%	5%	11%	9%	5%
Japanese	7%	6%	11%	8%	7%
Korean	8%	7%	11%	11%	6%
Filipino	15%*	15%*	17%	15%	6%
Indian	38%*	43%*	35%*	35%*	15%*
Pakistani	44%*	47%*	45%*	42%*	27%*
Arab	52%*	57%*	48%*	44%*	45%*

Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey, population-weighted estimates.

*Indicates statistically significant differences from every East Asian reference category (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) at the 95% confidence level or higher.

persists regardless of the way that we measure Asian racial assignment (as “very likely” to be Asian, “not likely,” and so on).

Presenting only averages for patterns of racial assignment among Asians masks tremendous differences among them, which is our third main point. Exploiting the national origin diversity of the 2016 NAAS, we disaggregate the data for Asians, and find notable differences between East Asians and Southeast Asians on the one hand and South Asians on the other. As [Table 6](#) shows, the majority of all Asian groups classify East Asian groups (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans) as “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to be Asian or Asian American. While Koreans, Japanese, and Hmong are slightly less likely to report the same of Filipinos, the differences are not statistically significant.

By contrast, significant differences emerge on the racial assignment of South Asians: East Asians and Southeast Asians are less likely to racially assign South Asians as Asian or Asian American, with the exclusion of Pakistanis being particularly acute. By contrast, both Indians and Pakistanis are “very likely” to classify South Asian groups as Asian. This finding points to the incongruity in racial assignment among South Asians; while Indians and Pakistanis racially assign themselves as Asian, they are not assigned as such by other Asian groups.

The racial exclusion of South Asians by both East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Koreans) and Southeast Asians (Cambodians, Filipinos, Hmong, and Vietnamese) as Asian is especially apparent in [Table 7](#), which denotes the percentage of respondents who report that Indians and Pakistanis are “not likely” to be Asian or Asian American. For example, 30 per cent of Hmong, 27 per cent of Japanese, and 22 per cent of Filipino respondents exclude Indians from their classification as Asian. The exclusion of Pakistanis is even higher: 38 per cent of Japanese, 36 per cent of Filipinos, and 36 per cent of Koreans do not classify Pakistanis as Asian.

In sum, unlike East Asians and Southeast Asians, South Asians (Indian, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis) are inclusive in their racial assignment of Asian national origin groups. Not only do they classify Indians and Pakistanis as Asian or Asian American, but they do so on par with their assignment of Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos to the Asian or Asian American category. By stark contrast, East and Southeast Asians are significantly less likely to racially assign Indians and Pakistanis as Asian, regardless of how we measure racial assignment, in spite of the fact that these groups racially assign themselves as Asian.

Racial assignment congruity and incongruity

Our findings reveal glaring differences between in-group and out-group racial assignment among all Asian groups except East Asians, which is our fourth main point. Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans experience *racial assignment*

Table 6. Proportion of Asian respondents indicating that the reference category is likely (“very likely” or “somewhat likely”) to be Asian or Asian American.

Reference category	Bangladeshi	Cambodian	Chinese	Filipino	Hmong	Indian	Japanese	Korean	Pakistani	Vietnamese
Chinese	87%	92%	95%	84%	90%	91%	88%	80%	93%	79%
Japanese	85%	89%	89%	84%	86%	86%	93%	73%	91%	84%
Korean	83%	88%	88%	83%	87%	88%	88%	83%	92%	81%
Filipino	83%	85%	86%	93%	71%	88%	81%	76%	91%	79%
Indian	86%	76%*	66%*	67%*	55%*	94%	62%*	70%	93%	72%*
Pakistani	74%	64%*	51%*	51%*	41%*	82%	45%*	41%*	92%	40%*
Arab	52%*	64%*	23%*	45%*	37%*	53%*	27%*	34%*	71%*	26%*

Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey, population-weighted estimates.

*Indicates statistically significant differences from every East Asian reference category (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) at the 95% confidence level or higher.

Table 7. Proportion of Asian respondents indicating that the reference category is “not likely” to be Asian or Asian American.

Reference category	Bangladeshi	Cambodian	Chinese	Filipino	Hmong	Indian	Japanese	Korean	Pakistani	Vietnamese
Chinese	5%	4%	2%	9%	5%	5%	5%	11%	2%	3%
Japanese	3%	5%	5%	9%	6%	8%	3%	18%	5%	0.4%
Korean	4%	5%	3%	9%	6%	6%	7%	12%	3%	0.2%
Filipino	4%	8%	6%	3%	7%	6%	12%	12%	5%	1%
Indian	4%	17%*	20%*	22%*	30%*	3%	27%*	18%	5%	8%
Pakistani	8%	23%*	32%*	36%*	30%*	13%	38%*	36%*	6%	26%*
Arab	31%*	23%*	57%*	41%*	35%*	40%*	59%*	49%*	25%*	41%*

Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey, population-weighted estimates.

*Indicates statistically significant differences from every East Asian reference category (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) at the 95% confidence level or higher.

congruity; they perceive themselves as Asian, and are also perceived as Asian by non-Asian and Asian out-groups alike. By contrast, South Asians experience *racial assignment incongruity*; they perceive themselves as Asian, but other groups are significantly less likely to perceive Indians and Pakistanis as Asian, including other Asians.

Filipinos fall in between: while Asians largely racially assign Filipinos as Asian, Whites, Blacks, and Latinos are comparatively less likely to do so. This distinction regarding the racial assignment of Filipinos is meaningful: the source of racial assignment incongruity for South Asians is from both Asians and non-Asians, whereas the source for Filipinos is predominantly from non-Asians only (i.e. Whites, Blacks, and Latinos). Regardless of the source, however, racial assignment incongruity is consequential because research has shown that it is associated with low identity salience, a thinning of racial identity, and even heightened stress (Campbell and Troyer 2007; Vargas and Stainback 2015).

Also noteworthy is that the U.S. government has, for decades, assigned Indians and Pakistanis as Asian, just as it has for Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and others from East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. There is no incongruence between the official government classification of Indians and Pakistanis and their *in-group racial assignment* as Asian: Indians and Pakistanis are just as likely as other Asian groups to classify members of their ethnic group (and each other) as Asian or Asian American. A significant disjuncture emerges, however, between the official racial assignment and the *out-group racial assignment* of Indians and Pakistanis as Asian.

Predictors of racial assignment

We now turn to the factors that predict congruence between out-group racial assignment and the official U.S. government classification of Asians. In our multivariate analysis, we employ ordered logistic models that predict whether respondents classify a particular group as “very likely,” “somewhat likely,” or “not likely” to be Asian. We interpret “don’t know” as reflecting respondents’ uncertainty about whether a particular reference group is Asian or not, and thus place them in an intermediate category between “somewhat likely” and “not likely.” Our findings are robust even when we exclude “don’t know” responses from the analysis.

In line with our expectations, congruence between the official assignment of Indians and Pakistanis as Asian and out-group racial assignment by the survey respondents is consistently higher among younger and more highly educated Americans. These patterns hold when we analyze the entire sample of 2016 NAAS respondents (Table 8) as well as separately for Asians and non-Asians (Tables 9 and 10, respectively). Interestingly, however, we do not find support for our hypothesis about the salience of length of stay in the United States or nativity in predicting congruence between official

Table 8. Predictors of Asian Racial Assignment, all respondents.

	Indian reference group		Pakistani reference group
Foreign born	-0.757	Foreign born	0.226
Years in US	-0.009	Years in US	0.006
Education	0.383***	Education	0.219**
Age	-0.274***	Age	-0.229**
<i>(In relation to White respondents)</i>		<i>(In relation to White respondents)</i>	
NHPI	0.415	NHPI	0.328
Black	0.012	Black	-0.304
Latino	0.071	Latino	-0.229
Bangladeshi	1.683***	Bangladeshi	1.234***
Cambodian	1.685***	Cambodian	0.947**
Chinese	1.006***	Chinese	0.665**
Filipino	0.783***	Filipino	0.445*
Hmong	0.550	Hmong	-0.084
Japanese	0.751***	Indian	1.574***
Korean	0.737***	Japanese	0.189
Pakistani	2.092***	Korean	-0.083
Vietnamese	1.327***	Vietnamese	-0.035

Results are standardized beta coefficients. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey. Population-weighted estimates using multiple imputation to account for missing data in predictor variables. Respondents who match the national origin of the reference group are excluded from the analysis.

Table 9. Predictors of Asian Racial Assignment, Asian respondents.

	Indian reference group		Pakistani reference group
(A) Asian respondent categories grouped as South Asian, East Asian, and Southeast Asian			
Foreign born	-0.077	Foreign born	0.457
Years in US	-0.002	Years in US	0.008
Education	0.292***	Education	0.316***
Age	-0.250***	Age	-0.264***
<i>(In relation to South Asian respondents)</i>		<i>(In relation to South Asian respondents)</i>	
East Asian	-0.973***	East Asian	-1.016***
Southeast Asian	-0.930***	Southeast Asian	-1.094***
(B) Asian respondent categories grouped by detailed origin			
Foreign born	0.091	Foreign born	0.474
Years in US	0.001	Years in US	0.008
Education	0.316***	Education	0.319***
Age	-0.248***	Age	-0.259***
<i>(In relation to Pakistani respondents)</i>		<i>(In relation to Indian respondents)</i>	
Bangladeshi	-0.382	Bangladeshi	-0.267
Cambodian	-0.428	Cambodian	-0.463
Chinese	-0.999***	Chinese	-0.771***
Filipino	-1.276***	Filipino	-1.03***
Hmong	-1.4***	Hmong	-1.362***
Japanese	-1.243***	Japanese	-1.239***
Korean	-1.31***	Korean	-1.518***
Vietnamese	-0.726***	Vietnamese	-1.325***

Results are standardized beta coefficients. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey. Population-weighted estimates using multiple imputation to account for missing data in predictor variables. Respondents who match the national origin of the reference group are excluded from the analysis.

Table 10. Predictors of Asian Racial Assignment, non-Asian respondents.

	Indian reference group		Pakistani reference group
Foreign born	−0.868	Foreign born	0.206
Years in US	−0.010	Years in US	0.005
Education	0.386***	Education	0.213**
Age	−0.277***	Age	−0.228**
<i>(In relation to White respondents)</i>		<i>(In relation to White respondents)</i>	
NHPI	0.421	NHPI	0.327
Black	0.011	Black	−0.308
Latino	0.077	Latino	−0.236

Results are standardized beta coefficients. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey. Population-weighted estimates using multiple imputation to account for missing data in predictor variables. Respondents who match the national origin of the reference group are excluded from the analysis.

assignment and out-group assignment of Indians and Pakistanis as Asian: U.S.-born Asians and those who have been in the United States for a longer period of time are not significantly more likely to classify Indians and Pakistanis as Asian than the foreign-born and more recently arrived.

Finally, our findings show that race and national origin of the respondents predict congruity between out-group racial assignment and official racial classification. First, Asians are more likely than non-Asians to assign South Asians into the Asian racial category, and this is especially the case when the group in question is Indian (Table 8). Second, among Asian respondents, East Asian and Southeast Asian respondents are significantly less likely than South Asian respondents to assign Indians and Pakistanis as Asian (Table 9). These findings show that racial assignment incongruity for Indians and Pakistanis remains significant even after adjusting for relevant demographic characteristics. Furthermore, the racial exclusion of Indians and Pakistanis is not driven exclusively by East Asians. Southeast Asians like Filipinos, Hmong, and Cambodians are as likely as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans to exclude Indians and Pakistanis from the Asian category.

Discussion and conclusions

Drawing on new data and analyses of the 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), we study the patterns of the racial assignment of Asian in the United States, or, more colloquially, who counts as Asian. Our analyses reveal four main findings. First, the default for Asian is still East Asian, even though the latter constitute less than a minority of the racial group. Second, Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and East and Southeast Asians are significantly less likely to racially assign South Asians (Indians and Pakistanis) as Asian. Filipinos fall in between East and South Asian groups; Filipinos are less likely to be assigned into the Asian category than East Asian groups (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans) by Whites, Blacks, and Latinos, but they are as likely to be racially assigned as Asian by other Asian groups.

Third, despite their exclusion from the Asian category, both Indians and Pakistanis racially identify as Asian—pointing to the incongruity between in-group and out-group racial assignment on the part of these South Asian groups. Fourth, education and age are significant predictors of racial assignment. College-educated and younger Americans are more likely to classify Indians and Pakistanis as Asian, and these findings hold for Asian respondents, as well as White, Black, and Latino respondents. That education and age are strong predictors of racial assignment indicates that public understanding of racial categories can change through formal education about the diversity of the U.S. population, exposure to U.S. census classification, and/or intergroup contact. In essence, these predictors reveal that racial assignment is not fixed, but rather cognitively constructed (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Roth 2012; Wimmer 2013).

Our findings reveal glaring disjunctures in who counts as Asian depending on the measure: official group classification by the U.S. Census; in-group racial assignment; or out-group racial assignment. The only Asian groups for whom all three measures are congruous are East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans). The disjuncture in racial assignment points to a cultural lag in who counts as Asian, which is consequential given the rapidly changing demographic portrait of the U.S. Asian population. Since 2000, the East Asian population dropped from 43 to 36 per cent of the Asian American population, and the South Asian population increased from 19 to 27 per cent. The share of the Southeast Asian population dropped slightly from 36 to 34 per cent (U.S. Census Bureau 2015).

The cultural lag in the racial assignment of Asian has material and non-material consequences. When only some Asian groups are counted as Asian, we see and hear only selective narratives—namely those of East Asians. In turn, when narratives about East Asians serve as the proxy for narratives of all Asians, we paint an incomplete and, therefore, biased portrait of Asian Americans' experiences, outcomes, and attitudes, including experiences with discrimination, patterns of intermarriage, as well as policy attitudes and behaviour.

For example, the 2016 NAAS shows significantly higher self-reports of employment discrimination among South Asians than among East Asians, and other survey data reveal that Indians are eight times more likely than Chinese to report that they have been unfairly stopped or unfairly treated by police (NPR et al. 2017). In addition, intermarriage among native-born Asians is significantly lower for Indians (32 per cent) than for Koreans (54 per cent), Chinese (56 per cent), Filipinos (63 per cent) and Japanese (69 per cent) (Min and Kim 2009).

On party identification and vote choice, the 2016 NAAS shows that Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and Indians were the strongest supporters of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election among Asian Americans. In addition, Indians and Pakistanis tend to be significantly more likely than many other Asian

groups to self-identify as Democrat, and to hold liberal views on policy issues ranging from gun control and environmental protection to taxation and affirmative action. Chinese, by stark contrast, are exceptional in their conservative policy views on issues like affirmative action, and are the least likely Asian group to support the policy in higher education and the workplace (Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018).

As these examples illustrate, when only East Asians count as Asian, and South Asians are excluded from the categorical fold, narratives of Asian Americans' experiences, outcomes, and attitudes are not only incomplete, but also biased. Moreover, these biased narratives lend credibility to the specious argument that Asians are "honorary Whites" who do not experience discrimination, who exhibit high rates of intermarriage with Whites, and who oppose affirmative action. This logic rests on the erroneous assumption of equating Asian as only East Asian.

These findings also have important implications for how the U.S. Census Bureau considers changes to racial classification. Failing to account for the incongruence in the racial assignment of U.S. categories may have far-reaching consequences, especially for new immigrant groups like Asians and Latinos for whom the social norms of racial group assignment have not been as firmly established nor entrenched as they have for White and Black Americans. Disjunctures in racial assignment – both on the part of new immigrant groups and on the part of out-groups – indicate the U.S. Census Bureau should democratize the process of racial classification, and give the general public the opportunity to participate in racial assignment.

Democratizing racial assignment will allow the U.S. Census Bureau and social scientists to more accurately measure and analyze how race is understood and experienced in a context of increasing diversity. This can be achieved by expanding beyond the current U.S. Census Bureau practice of consulting experts on ways to aggregate national origin groups into five broad racial categories, and including input from the general public who may understand and use these categories very differently. Doing so will allow researchers to distinguish among out-group racial assignment by the general American public, in-group racial assignment by the populations for whom these categories purportedly apply, and the official assignment by government agencies on whose categories social science researchers rely to study trends and patterns of inequality.

Further research using our framework can help us better understand the gaps and tensions in racial assignment – among in-group assignment, out-group assignment, and official government assignment – not only in the United States, but also in other countries where social norms and points of disjuncture may differ. In England, for example, South Asians such as Indians and Pakistanis may be more likely to experience racial assignment congruity, whereas Chinese, a relatively more recent immigrant group to the U.K., may be more likely to experience incongruity (Office of National Statistics 2012).

In addition, multiple methods can be brought to bear to understand variations in congruence among the three. Thus, for example, in-depth interviews and experimental methods can help us better understand if the predictive power of education is due more to increased social contact among highly educated individuals or to greater knowledge gained, either about particular groups or about official government assignment schemes. Historical and institutional analyses of racial assignment could also benefit from our framework that more clearly distinguishes between racial classification that have individuals as the object of classification (racial identification), and those that have groups as the object of reference (racial assignment).

While we have used the Asian Americans as an illustrative example of what is at stake, our research has implications for other U.S. groups including Latinos/Hispanics, Middle Easterners and North Africans, and multiracial Americans. Latinos/Hispanics, Middle Easterners and North Africans racially assign themselves into distinct categories, none of which appear on the U.S. Census. As a result, most choose to racially identify as White on the U.S. census, which not only inflates the group size of the U.S. White population, but also reduces inequality between White and non-White groups. Racial assignment incongruity not only glosses over the heterogeneity of experiences, attitudes, and outcomes among U.S. racial groups, but also the diversity within them, leading to inaccurate narratives about immigrant and second-generation integration as well as the changing nature of America's colour line.

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