

Who is 'Asian'? A Case Study on the Absurd Inconsistencies in Racial Categorization

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Abstract

While strides in racial research have allowed social psychology to gain a greater understanding of social categorization, the field has long neglected the systematic study of the Asian racial category. This gap in social psychological literature has thus far been addressed by studies which either tackle specific Asian American issues, or by empirical research that focuses on specific Asian populations (i.e. East Asians). A review of the history of racial social constructionism in the U.S. — coupled with social scientific perspectives on racial categorization — uncovers the erratic nature of the Asian racial category, including why researchers often overlook South- and Southeast Asians as potential populations of interest. The current state of literature suggests that a shift from studying racial categories to investigating phenotypic cues or ethnic identities may prove to be more a methodologically sound endeavor which adds greater external validity to empirical research.

Who is 'Asian'? A Case Study on the Absurd Inconsistencies in Racial Categorization

“Who is Asian?” is a simple question with a complex answer. Under behavioral research and U.S. public policy, Asians are not simply ‘individuals who inhabit the continent of Asia’. Instead, ‘Asian’ is used to define a *racial*¹ category of people whose ancestry can be traced to “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. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2021). Despite the caveats² attached to this seemingly clear and succinct definition, it may be construed as problematic on two counts. First, there is no global consensus on which nations constitute ‘Asian’ countries, so the categorization of individuals as ‘Asian’ – be it academic (Abrams, 2019;), political (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019), or popular press (Dacus, 2018; Schiavenza, 2016) – depends heavily on the research or organization’s interpretation of the term. Second, operational definitions of the ‘Asian’ racial category are often broad and include heterogeneous subgroups, whose behaviors, cultures, and phenotypical features are not well-suited to constitute a single category.

In this paper, I aim to provide a critical examination of how current research studies report findings about ‘Asians’ as a racial category. Specifically, I look at the interpretation of ‘Asians’ in social psychological terms: as either a category with a common, immutable essence; or as a socially constructed group of ethnicities. I then discuss how prototype theory may explain the discrepancies in how Asians are theoretically defined vs. how the Asian ‘race’ is depicted in empirical research.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I define racial categorization as the classification of individuals based on skin color and other phenotypical properties such as body shape or hair style (adapted from Machery & Faucher, 2005).

² The U.S. Census Bureau acknowledges that the racial categories included in their survey aim to reflect social definitions in the U.S. and are “not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Lastly, implications of the trends in Asian categorization in research are discussed, along with its broader impact of on the way social psychology defines and collects data on racial identity.

How might we define 'Asian'?

The idea of Asia, and in turn of Asian, are historically arbitrary. 'Asia' was originally invented by ancient Greeks to refer to all land which lay east of the Aegean Sea, making all those who lived beyond this geographical marker an 'Asian' (Lewis & Wigen, 1997). Over millennia, this definition changed repeatedly and drastically. The modern American idea of 'Asian' is influenced by the Ritterian notion of conflating geographic continents with racial categorization: Ritter (1822) posited "Europe as the land of white people, Africa that of black people, Asia of yellow people, and America of red people", and the influence of this idea can be seen in the definition of 'Asian' endorsed by the U.S. Census Bureau. In contrast, other White-majority Anglo-sphere countries have moved away from the idea of using *racial* identity to categorize people. The New Zealand government's Census definition of 'Asian', although similar to the American definition in its geographical bounds ("people with origins in the Asian continent from Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the east and from China in the north to Indonesia in the south"), is considered to be a variable sampling the 'ethnicity' or cultural group that the respondent has a sense of belonging to (Stats NZ, 2018). Similarly, the Canadian Census survey does not include any questions on racial identity, instead asking respondents to fill in their ethnic, cultural or national ancestry (Statistics Canada, 2021). Additionally, respondents are asked to indicate whether they belong to any visible minority groups³, including 'Chinese', 'Filipino', 'West Asian', 'South Asian' and 'Southeast Asian' as options (Statistics Canada, 2016). These groupings are constructed to reflect Canadians' responses to origin/ancestry questions, and do not define 'Asian'

³ The Canadian government defines 'visible minority' as a non-Aboriginal person who is 'non-white in color', or 'non-Caucasian in race' (Statistics Canada, 2021).

in the context of racial identity. Instead, they group ethnocultural categories⁴ that claim their origins in parts of Asia. Finally, the UK's Census surveys respondents' ethnicity, with specific self-identification options for proportionally large ethnic subgroups (such as Irish, Indians, Pakistanis, Caribbean, etc.) under broader 'ethnic'⁵ groups such as 'White', 'Asian/British Asian', 'Black/African/Caribbean/Black British', etc. (UK Office for National Statistics, 2012).

These variations in defining 'Asian' as a racial category are symptomatic of a larger issue – the inconsistent ways in which we systemically categorize individuals reveal multiple ideas of what constitutes racial identity, and, in turn, who is categorized as Asian. Racial (or ethnic) categories in censorial data are user-defined – that is, data from government census inform the organization these categories in a manner which is consistent with the way individuals within each country choose to self-categorize (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2021; Stats NZ, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2016). This implies that self-categorizing ethnoracial groups in different countries have not been shaped by some form of automatic racial categorization, but their own contextual ideas of racial phenotypicality (Sen & Wasow, 2016) or ancestry (Halberstadt et al., 2011; Ho et al., 2011). This implies that the interpretation of who is 'Asian' is dependent on people's lay beliefs about racial groups. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the American Census definition of 'Asian' as the racial category under scrutiny. The primary reason for choosing this definition is that social psychological research on race is overwhelmingly colored by American participants' interpretations of racial categories, as 70% of social psychological journal authors,

⁴ The term 'race' is used to differentiate between people who identify as Caucasian and non-Caucasians, and this information derived from variables from variables called "Population group of person", "Place of origin of person", and "Ethnic origin of person" (Statistics Canada, 2021).

⁵ The UK census describes 'White', 'Black', or 'Asian' as ethnic groups, not racial groups. This is similar to the tendency of social psychologists who use the terms race and ethnicity interchangeably, or to refer to the same social category (e.g. Becares & Priest, 2015). However, this is not a common position in other social sciences such as linguistics or anthropology. Typically, race is seen as the classification of individuals into mutually exclusive based on phenotype, social history, and social perceptions (Bobo, 2001). In contrast, ethnicity is viewed as a classification of members into groups which share some common cultural aspect (Garcia, 2020).

and samples recruited for empirical experiments are American (Cheon et al., 2020; Rad et al., 2018; Arnett, 2008).

In turn, the conclusions drawn from these studies shape the direction of social psychological scholarship, affecting our perceptions of salient social categories (is race vs ethnicity more useful to study?), our knowledge of group prototypes (who is the prototypic Asian?), and our choice of stimuli (when studying Asians, do we present visuals/vignettes of only East Asians, or is it worth it to test our hypotheses using stimuli about Southeast Asians and South Asians?).

Theories of Race

People operate under one of two lay theories of race: essentialism or social constructionism. Race essentialism is typically popular among evolutionary psychologists and posits that racial categorization has deeply rooted biological underpinnings that are considered intrinsic and immutable (Gil-White, 2001; Hirschfeld, 1996; Haslam et al., 2000). On the other hand, social constructionism argues that racial categories are cultural artifacts which serve human perceivers' motive to group individuals in order to better organize the world around them (Hochman, 2013, 2019; Jackson, 2017; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Smedley, 2019). Although many social scientists may assume that constructionism has become the standard academic approach (Sen & Wasow, 2016), research suggests otherwise. A 2011 sociological survey of faculty in anthropology and biology departments across public and private universities in northeastern U.S. found that anthropology faculty members from prestigious universities were the only group whose majority was likely to define race as socially constructed (Morning 2011, figure 8, p. 182). Among biology faculty, race as a social construct was endorsed by a minority of the sample (<15% of the sample from state universities and <40% of the Ivy League faculty). In the same vein, 65% of college students defined race solely as biologically determined. Alarming,

83% of biology majors defined race as biological but none endorsed the idea of race as a social construct (Morning 2011, table 4, p. 175). Hochschild and Sen (2015) found that scholars in the hard sciences are more likely to express enthusiasm or optimism for genetics and genomics technology than are those in the social sciences and humanities. Despite these statistics, it is undeniable that the constructed racial categories which are endorsed by social psychology may often be susceptible to essentialist interpretations. This is particularly salient in the case of the 'Asian' race. In the following sections, I will discuss the two views of race (essentialist vs. social constructionist), highlighting the fact that modern definition of 'Asian' (and indeed, any racial category) in psychology is the result of an inexact fusion of these two schools of thought.

'Asian' as an Essential Category. Psychological essentialism represents certain social categories as having "deep, hidden, and unchanging properties" (Prentice & Miller, 2007) that are intrinsic to members of a particular group (Gelman, 2003; Hirschfeld, 1996; Medin & Ortony, 1989; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Psychological essentialism is conceptualized as a representational structure with gradations of domains – that is, some domains are considered more essential (e.g. gender, race, or disability) than others (e.g. age, physique, or personality; Prentice & Miller, 2007; Haslam et al., 2000). In addition to this, essentialized categories are perceived to have certain key features (tangible or otherwise) that are *intrinsic* to the members of such a category (Medin & Ortony, 1989). In the case of racial categories, outward appearance is considered the strongest contender to be an essence placeholder (Haslam et al., 200; Medin & Ortony, 1989). Observable phenotypical differences in skin tone, hair texture, facial features, and physique are possible cues for how an individual racially self-categorizes (No et al., 2008; AhnAllen et al., 2006). Observers, too, determine an individual's racial category based on their phenotype – babies and adults have both been found to categorize people based on their facial features and skin tone (e.g. Balas et al.,

2011; Feliciano, 2015). Racial categorization based on a target's physical features is tinged with essentialist undertones – perceivers presume that members of any racial category to have some key underlying similarities. Skinner and Nicolas (2015) reported that as racial phenotypicality (of morphed target faces) increases, participants are more likely to categorize the target face as belonging to that race.

There are two key components to racial phenotypicality: skin tone (pigmentation or lightness) and facial features (i.e., structural features such as width of nose, thickness of lips, bone structure, etc.) (Nicolas & Skinner, 2017; Strom et al., 2012). Research suggests that both these components play some role in determining the perceived race of an individual. Black stimulus faces are consistently reported to be perceived as darker than both white target faces (Laeng et al., 2018; Lyngs et al., 2016) and (Chinese) Asian target faces (Chang et al., 2018). Stepanova and Strube (2012) reported that skin tone served as a more important cue than facial physiognomy when participants judged target faces under no time constraints. As time constraints became more stringent, however, skin color's importance decreased yet it remained a more important cue at extreme physiognomy levels. This fits into a larger body of work that provides evidence for the role of skin tone on our judgements of race (e.g. Balas et al., 2015; Dunham et al., 2011). Prior scholarship also provides evidence for an independent, significant effect of facial features/physiognomy (as opposed to skin tone) on judgments of racial typicality (Brooks & Gwinn, 2010; Brooks et al., 2020). Adults are more likely to depend on facial morphology when making racial categorization judgements and depend more heavily on skin tone only when target faces are ambiguous or presented upside down (Yarrow et al., 2014; Willenbockel et al., 2011).

In the case of Asians as a racial category, the idea of phenotypicality as an essence placeholder does not prosper. An examination of phenotypic features of individuals who are

categorized as 'Asians' by the US censorial definition (see section titled: "The Prototypic Asian"), shows that the essentialist argument of race would not support the current definition of 'Asian' (Ma et al., 2015). There is little research directly comparing or contrasting the phenotypic features of East Asians, Southeast Asians, and South Asians (the three major regions of Asia that are classified as 'Asian' by the U.S. Census Bureau). However, we can piece together a picture of variability in Asian phenotypicity by examining literature on racial prototypicality, representativeness, and its manifestation in visual stimuli in race research in social psychology.

'Asian' as a Social Construct. The social constructionist perspective of race emphasizes the fragile scientific basis for racial categories, arguing instead that race is best explained as a social construction (Omi & Winant 1994; Appiah 1985). Unlike essentialism, the constructionist approach theorizes that distinctions between racial groups, and the focus on genetic or phenotypic traits as markers of racial difference are social consequences of cultural, historical, ideological, geographical, and legal influences (Sen & Wasow, 2016). Social categories are typically indicative of social structures that reinforce group-based hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto 2001). Although the popular folk understanding of race tends toward the essentialist, a robust body of work suggests that a constructionist theory better fits how race actually operates in the world. In the study of race, this hierarchy is usually highlighted in the context of ancestry.

Ancestry-based racial categorization has played a pivotal role in informing both folk ideas and legal definitions of race, particularly in U.S. history. During the early 19th century, the U.S. had intermediate categories for mixed-race people, classifying individuals as "Mulattos" if they had at least one-quarter Black ancestry (Hickman, 1997). This legal definition was further elaborated on in the early 20th century, with the introduction of the "one-drop rule" (Hickman, 1997). The one-drop rule classified all individuals with any documented Black ancestry as

belonging to the Black race (Young et al., 2020). These anti-miscegenation laws were precursors to the idea of hypodescent, which is a mode of racial categorization in which multiracial or racially ambiguous individuals are categorized as their lower status group (Cooley et al., 2017; Ho et al., 2015).

These laws are no longer enforced or endorsed today, but it may be argued that hypodescent persists even today as an example of how a country's history and sociocultural context can inform social categorization (Ho et al., 2013). Despite the initial conceptualization of hypodescent within an American context, it has been applied in the psychological literature in a broader fashion. Psychological research uses hypodescent as a contemporary prediction about how perceivers categorize multiracial individuals in other contexts. This research includes studies with samples from non-U.S. populations (e.g., Chen et al., 2017), non-Black multiracial targets (Ho et al., 2011), and the use of racially ambiguous faces instead of information of ancestry as an operationalization of multiracialism (Halberstadt et al., 2011). This branch of research highlights the fact that the pivotal role of ancestry in making racial and ethnic categorizations is not limited to the U.S., having also been documented in other parts of the world (e.g., Korea; Shin, 2006; China and Canada; Qian et al., 2019).

In addition to bolstering the literature on multiracial individuals, records of landmark verdicts in U.S.' legal history also document the social construction of monoracial groups. The year 1790 saw the U.S. Congress limit naturalization to "white persons" (Haney Lopez, 1996). The racial prerequisite to attaining citizenship only changed 162 years later in 1952. Until then, it became crucial to legally define racial boundaries which helped separate white immigrants from non-whites. It also helps us map the history of the current (U.S. Census) definition of 'Asian',

which was constructed in 1997 by the Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997).

The first 'Asian' immigrants were Chinese prospectors who arrived during the California gold rush. Those who remained in the U.S. worked as transcontinental railroad laborers and were categorically excluded from the right to naturalize with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (Chan, 1994) – no such bill was enacted for white railroad laborers, who were granted the right to naturalize. This legislation was passed in keeping with U.S. policy to prevent the naturalization of non-white immigrants (Lee, 2015).

In another instance, in the 1922 U.S. Supreme Court case *Ozawa v. United States*, the plaintiff Takao Ozawa – a Japanese immigrant who had lived in the U.S. for over 28 years at the time of petition – was denied the right to naturalize because of his non-white heritage (Lee, 2015, pp. 120-121). Ozawa contended that he should be granted the status of a naturalized citizen, because his skin tone was not yellow, but white, and lighter than “the average Italian, Spaniard, or Japanese”. Ozawa’s skin tone-based argument was rejected by the Court, which contended that he could not be categorized as what was “popularly known as the Caucasian race” (Haney Lopez, 1996). In other words, Ozawa, despite his light complexion, did not fit the ideal of a ‘Caucasian’ because he was better suited to be classified as an ‘Oriental’ or a ‘Mongolian’ (Bhopal, 2007). The Court’s ruling was an exercise in social constructionism because it invoked folk ideas of whiteness (“popularly known”) to sustain the science-endorsed skin tone-based racial classification of the time (“Caucasian race”; Haney Lopez, 1996).

The contrived nature of the ‘Asian’ category was further cemented the following year in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. Based on the Court’s prior definitions of whiteness, Thind made the anthropological (essentialist) argument that South Asians (particularly East Indians) are

members of the Aryan or Caucasian race, therefore fitting the category of 'white'. Despite having previously used a similar essentialist argument to deny Chinese and Japanese migrants the opportunity of naturalization, the Court denied Thind's application for citizenship based on an outright rejection of the scientific definition of Caucasian. Instead, the Court endorsed the common American's understanding of the phrase 'free white persons', which excluded the people of India (Haney Lopez, 1996). To tackle the question of Indians' race, they were determined to be of the "Asiatic stock", subsumed into the Asian racial category and thereby rendered ineligible for naturalization (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). Since this verdict, South Asian Americans have been recategorized several times as 'Hindu', 'White', 'Other', before finally being recast as 'Asian' in the 1980s (Lee, 1993). The frequent relocation of South Asians highlights two things. First, it reflects South Asians' desire for self-categorization beyond the White-Asian racial dichotomy that was offered by the American legal system. Second, the U.S. government's willingness to reclassify or create new racial categories for South Asians acknowledges the racial ambiguity that South Asian ancestry presents, making them poor examples of the Asian prototype which arise from folk definitions of Asian.

'Asian' Exception. Notably, this mode of exclusionary categorization did not apply to the racial status of most immigrants from the Middle East and Central Asia (and North Africa). Immigrants who were identified as being of Middle Eastern origin⁶ were eligible to acquire U.S. citizenship on the basis of *Dow v. United States* in 1915. George Dow, a Syrian immigrant, was granted the right to become a naturalized citizen based on the erstwhile scientific definition of the 'Caucasian race' – similar to the argument presented in *United States v. Thind*. In this case, the verdict favored the petitioner, because it was adjudged that it was "the generally received opinion . . . that the

⁶ There is no clear definition of 'Middle Eastern' available from governmental agencies or peer-reviewed sources. Colloquially, southwestern Asian countries are considered to make up the Middle East.

inhabitants of a portion of Asia, including Syria, [are] to be classed as white persons” (*Dow vs. United States*, 1915).

The verdict of *Dow v. United States* (when contrasted with verdicts which deemed immigrants to be ‘Asian’) raises two points of note. First, it establishes that the idea of ‘Asian’ is an imagined boundary between Whiteness and otherness, when the ‘other’ cannot claim Black or Native ancestry. This is clear from the words of the ruling judge in *Dow v. United States*, who explicitly asserted that certain people who claim their origins in the continent of Asia can be considered Caucasian instead of Asian. This statement may not necessarily be considered surprising or abstruse from a contemporary social psychological perspective, but it reveals the inconsistencies which have arisen when classifying people into the ancestry-based racial category of Asian. Second, it can be argued that the verdict – based on 20th century American sensibilities – unmasks the idea that something about people of Middle Eastern origin makes them fundamentally *better* suited to be considered Caucasian, as opposed to people who claim East-, Southeast or South Asian ancestry.

Despite being labelled ‘White’, Americans of Middle Eastern origin are considered low status and face high levels of discrimination. This is supported by research: Black-White morphed faces tend to be categorized as Middle Eastern, suggesting that the group is not prototypical of Whiteness, and is instead considered to be of ambiguous ancestry (Sanchez et al., 2020). However, Middle Easterners are considered more prototypical of the White category when they are compared to individuals who appear Black. It follows that immigrants from the Middle East may have crossed the fluid boundaries of racial categories to ‘White’ status primarily because they were perceived to bear *less* resemblance to the prototypic Asian American, than the prototypic White American (Sanchez et al., 2020).

What is this person's race?
 Mark ☒ one or more boxes **AND** print origins.

☐ White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc. 

☐ Black or African Am. – Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc. 

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc. 

☐ Chinese ☐ Vietnamese ☐ Native Hawaiian

☐ Filipino ☐ Korean ☐ Samoan

☐ Asian Indian ☐ Japanese ☐ Chamorro

☐ Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc. 

☐ Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc. 

☐ Some other race – Print race or origin. 

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Racial Identity question presented in the 2020 U.S. Census. The number of ethnic subcategories listed under 'Asian' far outnumbers those in other racial categories, betraying the lack of common cultural heritage and ancestry within this racial category.

Fluid boundaries of racial categories mean that members of racial groups are not homogenous in terms of appearance, culture, or ethnicity. This is especially true of Asians, given the haphazard development of the racial category. According to the Pew Research Center, the term 'Asian' covers more than 20 ethnic groups and accounts for around 23 million citizens in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2019). These ethnic groups or national origin groups are placed under the umbrella term 'Asian' despite not sharing a common language, culture, or religion, and not having a shared history of immigration to the U.S. (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019; Espiritu 1992; Omi and Winant

1994). The sole commonality which exists in the social construction of the 'Asian' racial category is that Asians Americans are non-White individuals who cannot be classified as descendants Black or Native American people (Lew-Williams 2018; Lee, 2015; Ngai 2004).

The Prototypic Asian: Implications of the Asian Prototype on Race Research

The vast breadth of ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities of the population(s) labelled 'Asian' also correspond a large number of phenotypically varied populations. Given the immense diversity within this category, some Asians under this umbrella are considered more inherently 'Asian' than others (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). Results of a 2016 Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) national survey show that people of Filipino, Indian, and Pakistani heritage are the least likely to be considered Asian. Even within the Asian American community, both East Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Koreans) and Southeast Asians (Cambodians, Filipinos, Hmong, and Vietnamese) are likely to exclude Indians and Pakistanis from their definition of Asian (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). Further, Lee and Ramakrishnan found that respondents' age and level education predicted racial (Asian) categorization. Specifically, college-educated and younger Americans are more likely to classify Indians and Pakistanis as Asian, irrespective of respondents' own racial identity, suggesting that access to information regarding American perspectives on racial categorization (via access to a college education), coupled with intergroup contact, can alter individuals' perceptions of the boundaries of Asianness (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019). Importantly, this implies that individuals who may not have pursued a college education, or older people, may be likely to base their categorization of Asians on a folk prototype of Asianness derived from phenotypicity (Brewer, 1988). The evidence for this lies within research on Asian prototypicality.

What is Prototype Theory? In our quest to better understand the world around them, humans often cognitively organized complex social groups and its constituent members into simple prototypes (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Prototypes represent a set of attributes which may include physical appearance, behaviors, interests, traits, beliefs, and attitudes (Hogg, 1993; Medin, 1989; Rosch, 1978). Despite their abstract nature, prototypes are culturally transmitted and become shared societal representations of social groups (Bailey et al., 2018; Eagly & Kite, 1987; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Fillmore, 1975). People evaluate targets in accordance with both category-based prototypes and within-category prototypes (Fiske, 1993; Hogg, 1993; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Category-based methods of prototyping assumes that all members of a category fit similarly with the prototype and are thus equally likely targets of potential bias. On the other hand, within-category approaches to prototypes showcase how people's perceptions and treatment of group members depend on how different they are from their group prototypes. Research on gender prototypicality provides us with an excellent example of category-based prototyping (Coles & Pasek, 2020; Lei et al., 2019).

Studies on gender prototypicality demonstrate that people may refer to an individual's nose size and shape, eyebrows, as well as the shape of their jawline, chin, and cheeks in order to categorize the person into a gender category (Brown & Perrett, 1993). In the case of research on gender prototypicality, we find that both men and women share the same vision of a prototypical woman (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, women with physical attributes that are considered non-prototypical, alongside women who behave in non-prototypical ways are likely to be punished by men and women alike (Rudman & Glick, 2001). A prime example of this effect are Black women and Asian men, who are viewed as less prototypical -- both of their gender category and of their race category when compared to White women, Asian

women, Black men, and White men (Schug et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2014). Further, people of different races may not consider the same “gendered” facial physiognomy when categorizing others. While White participants have been found to primarily assess the shape of an individual’s jawline (Brown & Perrett, 1993), Japanese participants use a person’s eyebrows as a gender cue which is as important for gender categorization as the shape of the jawline (Yamaguchi et al., 1995). In the case of gender prototypicality, stimulus categorization occurs rapidly and automatically -- even if the primary task at hand is ostensibly unrelated (Tomelleri and Castelli, 2012). Binary (male vs. female) gender encoding is particularly robust and underscores the methodological importance of constructing stimuli whose prototypicality can be controlled during both simple and complex cognitive tasks (Kurzban et al., 2001).

The cognitive inflexibility of people’s gender prototypes may shine a light on why research on *racial* prejudice often neglects to pay attention to the variability of physical appearance. Social psychologists often turn to the most prototypical-looking faces within racial groups when developing stimuli for empirical research. Zebrowitz et al. (2008) posit that this apparent inattentiveness to developing diverse stimuli within racial groups may suggest an ambivalence about appearance within the field of social psychology. Alternatively, the scarcity of diverse visual stimuli might result in researchers reverting to the most stereotypical representations of any social category when creating experimental stimuli. This is seldom considered problematic: research clearly indicates that exemplars who present more race-signaling cues are categorized as group members more rapidly (Ma et al., 2018). Targets who are more racially prototypical are also evaluated as having greater group-level traits (Blair et al., 2004; Blair et al., 2002; Livingston & Brewer, 2002; Ma & Correll, 2011). However, it may be imprudent to neglect developing and administering visual stimuli which deviate from categorical prototypes. Given the social

psychologists' constructionist stance on race, it is important to establish the benefits of conducting (and replicating) research on racial groups using non-prototypical categorical stimuli.

The Prototypic Asian. Like many areas of social psychology, research on racial prototypicality is inundated with examples of U.S.-based studies which investigate Black and White racial categorization and social judgment. There is relatively limited research on the social categorization of other racial groups, and almost none which examines the categorization of Asian as a pan-ethnic group – even within literature on the categorization Asian Americans (see Feliciano, 2015, Note 2; Cheryan & Monin, 2005, Note 1). Besides Lee and Ramakrishnan's (2019) findings on the categorization and of Asian Americans (both by ingroup and outgroup members), there is evidence of differences in Asian prototypicality in U.S. and British samples (Goh & McCue, 2021; under review). Evidence of Asian prototypes can also be found in research on visual stimuli: the Chicago Face Database provides researchers with a sizable collection of photographs of targets from all racial categories (Ma et al., 2015). The accompanying norming data allows the reader to visually represent the prototypicality ratings of each racial group (see Figure 2). Although such a visual depiction has not been presented in empirical papers (likely due to restrictions on publishing database-sourced stimuli in journal articles), studies support the idea that Americans consider East Asians to be the most prototypical of the Asian racial category. Figure 2 represents visual stimuli from the photographs of Asians included in the Chicago Face Database. The prototypicality ratings corroborate evidence from Lee and Ramakrishnan (2019) as well as Goh and McCue (2021): Americans perceive East Asian facial features to be the most prototypical, followed by Southeast Asians. South Asians are considered the least prototypical. This is not the case in other countries, where more relevant historical events have shaped people's prototype of Asians (see Goh &

McCue, 2021). However, in the context of social psychology, we focus on American prototypes, since they are the most widely represented in experiments (Arnett, 2008).

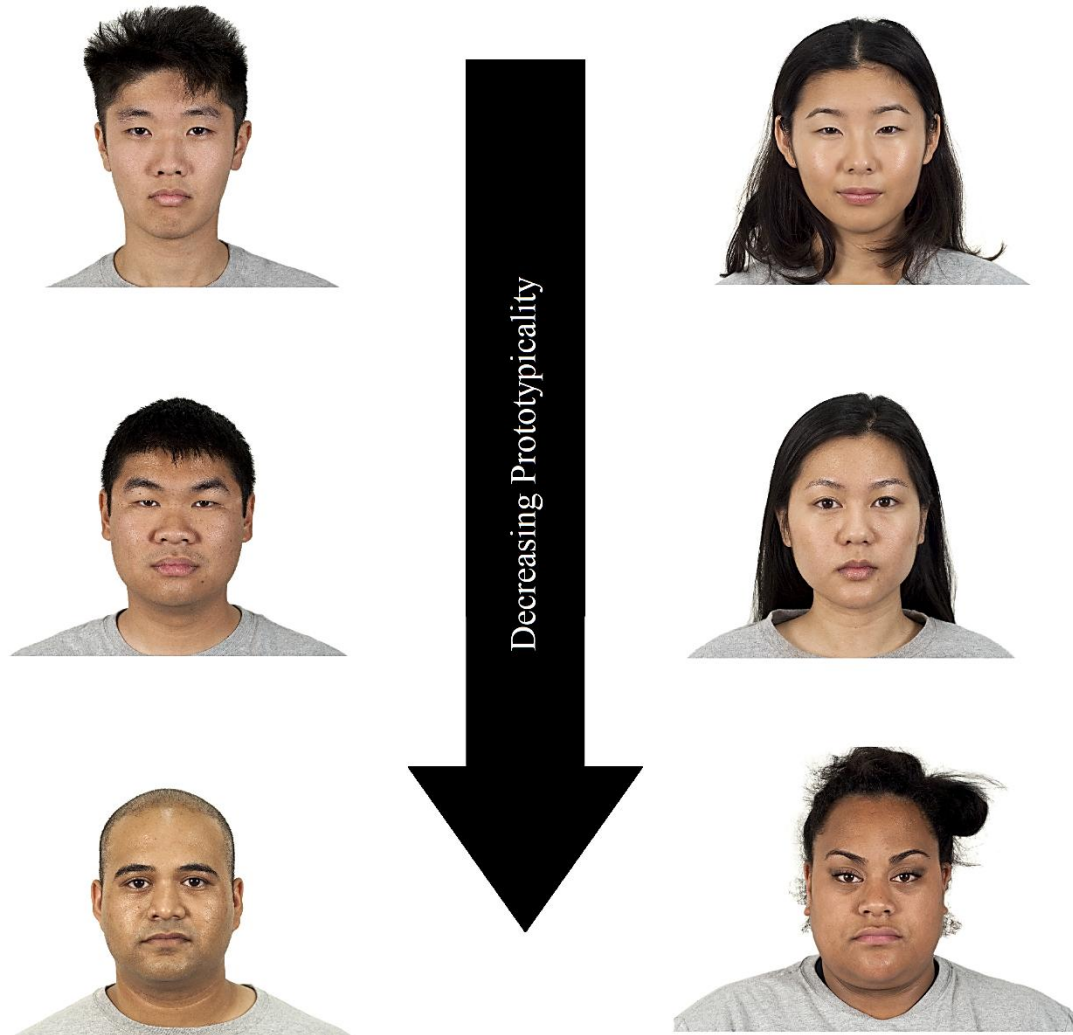


Figure 2. Photographs of male (left) and female (right) Asian individuals from the Chicago Face Database. The photographs are ordered according to their racial prototypicality. That is, participants rated the faces in the top row to be the most prototypically Asian. The faces in the middle row received the median participant ratings for appearing prototypically Asian. The faces in the bottom row were rated by participants to be the least prototypically Asian.

Ma et al. (2018) also explain that American perceptions of Asian racial prototypicality were determined by four factors: eye shape, eye height, eyelid height, and nose shape. Asian

prototypicality (for American samples) consistently relate narrower eyes, thinner eyelids, and narrower noses – all features that are typically represent East Asian facial physiognomy (Ma et al., 2018). As of 2021, The Chicago Face Database also includes a supplementary corpus of Asian Indian facial stimuli, which were selected on the basis of subjective face impression ratings from both Indian and U.S.-based participants (Lakshmi et al., 2021). As a part of this study, participants were asked to categorize Caucasian and Indian faces as one of the following (ethnic) groups: Chinese Asian, Japanese Asian, Indian Asian, Other Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, White/Caucasian, and Other. This categorization task sheds light on the Asianness or prototypicality (or lack thereof) of South Asians faces, because it was found that Asian Indian faces were most commonly miscategorized as Middle Eastern by participants from the U.S. (Lakshmi et al., 2021). These findings suggest that, in the absence of contextual cues, South Asians are more likely to be categorized by Americans as Middle Eastern than Asian based on phenotypic cues.

A real-world implication of miscategorizing or minimizing attention towards non-prototypical Asian ethnic groups is that these groups are chronically excluded from discourse on race (Schiavenza, 2016) or representation (Ellis-Peterson & Kuo, 2018). For instance, the U.S. presidential election in 2020 saw multiple Asian and Pacific Islander⁷ candidates vie to earn the Democratic party's presidential nomination. Despite this, the most prototypical candidate – Andrew Yang -- was lauded as the singular 'Asian' candidate. Yang, whose Taiwanese heritage makes him part of the prototypical East Asian category, endorsed this view when he said that: "My Asian-ness is kind of obvious in a way that might not be true of Kamala [Harris, of Jamaican and

⁷ Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders are not considered racially 'Asian' but are often lumped together in social discourse (e.g., the existence of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage month). Although it is equally important to discuss the seemingly arbitrary grouping Asians and Pacific Islanders 'races' within modern folk beliefs on racial groups, it is outside the scope of this paper.

Indian descent] or even Tulsi [Gabbard, who has Samoan and European ancestry]. That's not a choice. It's just a fairly evident reality" (Time Magazine, 2020).

In social psychology, attempts to adhere to folk perceptions of Asianness have led to the gross underrepresentation of non-prototypical Asian subgroups in research (see Tables 1 and 2). Researchers' tendency to administer prototypical Asian stimuli (as dictated by American norms) leads to the neglect of research on psychological phenomena that may extend to or are unique to non-prototypical Asians. This means that specific research on Filipinos – who do not best fit the Asian prototype – is scant, despite Filipino Americans making up nearly a fifth of the Asian American diaspora, as demonstrated by the numbers in Table 1.

Asian American Ethnic Subgroup (Proportion of Asian American Population)	Journal of Experimental Social Psychology	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	Psychological Science
Chinese (23%)	1 ⁺	1 [^]	1 [*]
Indian (20%)	0	0	0
Filipino (18%)	0	0	0
Vietnamese (9%)	0	0	0
Korean (8%)	1 ⁺	1 [^]	1 [*]
Japanese (6%)	1 ⁺	1 [^]	1 [*]

Table 1. This table represents the number of research articles which contain the term 'Asian American' in their titles, but also discuss specific Asian ethnic groups within the article body. The search was limited to empirical papers (including cross-cultural research) which were published between 2010 and 2021.

⁺ A single paper mentions Chinese, Korean, and Japanese participants within an Asian American sample

[^] A single paper mentions Chinese, Korean, and Japanese participants within an Asian American sample

^{*} A single paper mentions Chinese, Korean, and Japanese participants within an Asian American sample

Perhaps more importantly, U.S. prototypes of Asians dictate the current direction of psychological research, rendering the study of non-U.S. populations almost non-existent. Despite making up a mere 7% of U.S. populations, Asian people across the world make up around 60% of the world's population (Pew Research Center, 2019; UN Population Fund, 2019). Given the skew of research towards U.S.-centric questions and populations, Asian subgroups that are underrepresented within the U.S. are also marginalized when it comes to social psychological research (see Table 3). Thus, ethnic groups such as Indonesians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Vietnamese – which collectively account for more than 750 million people across the globe – are practically invisible in social psychological research.

Asian Ethnic Subgroup	Journal of Experimental Social Psychology	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	Psychological Science
Chinese	0	1**	0
Indian	0	1 ^x	0
Indonesian	0	0	0
Pakistani	0	1 ^x	0
Bangladeshi	0	1 ^x	0
Japanese	0	1**	0
Filipino	0	1	0
Vietnamese	0	0	0
Korean	0	1**	0

Table 2. This table represents the number of research articles which contain the term 'Asian' (including 'East Asian' and 'South Asian' subgrouping, but not for 'Asian American' samples) in their titles, which also discuss specific Asian ethnic groups within the article body. The search was limited to empirical papers (including cross-cultural research) which were published between 2010 and 2021.

**A single paper mentions Chinese, Korean, and Japanese participants within an East Asian sample

^xA single paper mentions Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi participants within a British South Asian sample

Asian National Group (Population in Millions, mid-2020)	Region	Journal of Experimental Social Psychology	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	Psychological Science
Chinese (1402.4)	East Asia	113	154	142
Indian (1400.1)	South Asia	47	92	53
Indonesian (271.7)	Southeast Asia	6	15	20
Pakistani (220.9)	South Asia	9	22	17
Bangladeshi (169.8)	South Asia	1	7	2
Japanese (126.0)	East Asia	50	89	115
Filipino (109.6)	Southeast Asia	9	15	15
Vietnamese (96.8)	Southeast Asia	4	4	13
Korean (North: 25.8, South: 51.2)	East Asia	29	56	60

Table 3. This table represents the number of research articles which contain mentions of Asian nations in their article body, **without** checking for mentions of racial categorization such as 'Asian' or 'Asian American'. The search was limited to empirical papers (including cross-cultural research) which were published between 2010 and 2021. Population estimates were sourced from Population Reference Bureau (2020).

Discussion: Redefining 'Asian' research

Overall, literature that examines or samples Asian populations seems to be constrained by psychology's tendency to focus on American perceptions of racial groups and racial prototypicality. When it comes to the construction of 'Asian' as a racial category in social psychological theory, we find that the foremost unifying characteristic of all Asians is their exclusion from Whiteness over the course of U.S. history, through legal definitions that were informed by contemporary ideas of race (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2019; Lee, 2015). Empirical research, however, tends to revert to more essentialist depictions of Asians when testing perceptions of Asian culture and behavior (e.g., Fu & Markus, 2014; Chen et al., 2018) and when investigating anti-Asian bias (Lin et al., 2005; Misra et al., 2020). Within psychological literature, Asians are the most often represented as relatively fair-skinned individuals with high brows and cheekbones, wide foreheads, flatter noses and narrower eyes (Yarrow et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2018). This, despite the purportedly constructionist approach of psychology, reinforces the idea that people of 'Mongoloid' origins are a unique racial category. Within psychology, the preclusion of non-prototypical stimuli may be justified as a means to better control an experiment, but its consequences are damaging to the external validity of these studies.

From a methodological perspective, the overrepresentation of prototypical Asians (or East Asians) in research is imprudent on two counts. First, the use vignettes and photographs of East Asian targets to prime participants leads to the marginalization of other Asian group members who may not be considered prototypical enough to be stimuli or populations of interest in psychological studies. This leaves Southeast- and South Asians underrepresented and understudied (recall Table 3). This is closely related to our second problem: studies testing psychological phenomena using either East Asian stimuli or East Asian samples, are often presented as research on Asians or Asian

Americans (refer to Table 1). This leads to overgeneralizations which may not be applicable to understudied Asian communities. Often, this consequence is shrouded by the fact that studies dealing with Asian (American) populations do not include an ethnic breakdown of participants, since this is not required to be reported according to if the racial breakdown of a sample is already mentioned (Publication Manual of the APA, 2020). As a result, authors may simply state that they recruited an 'Asian American' sample without stating the participants' ethnic or national origin, leading readers to make their own assumptions about which Asian groups were represented in the sample. In other cases, East Asian American samples are used as a substitute for all Asian Americans, leading to discrepancies between how authors define their sample (e.g. Chinese Americans) vs how authors summarize their research in the article title, abstract, and discussion (e.g., "Asian Americans respond less favorably compared to European Americans." article by Sims et al., 2018).

Overgeneralizations of community-/ethnicity-specific findings to the entire category of Asians could indicate a tendency to assume group homogeneity (Park et al., 2015). Both racial majority and minority members employ prototype representations for racial minority groups, and evidence suggests that there is concordance in racial categorization for both ingroup and outgroup members (Rice & Mullen, 2003). This explains the perpetuation of American stereotypes of Asians as a 'cold but competent' model minority, an eternally foreign monolithic group in the U.S. (Xu & Lee, 2013; Lin et al., 2005). These ideas mask crucial intragroup/ethnicity-specific information about Asian Americans such as disparities in education, median income, health outcomes, and immigration issues (Shafer et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2019; Patraporn et al., 2021).

Social psychological research on Asians (beyond Asian groups in the U.S.), is alarmingly scarce in high-impact journals, making it difficult to assess the generalizability of studies

conducted using Asian American samples. In this regard, non-U.S. *Asian* populations are not unique – research on African and Latin American samples are practically non-existent in social psychology (Cheon et al., 2020). Thalmayer et al. (2021) found that within psychological papers published between 2014-2018, roughly 60% of all authors and samples of empirical papers were based in the U.S. despite the fact that Americans make up less than 5% of the world's population. While this is an improvement from previous estimates – Arnett (2008) previously reported 70% of all psychological research to be U.S.-based – it appears that dominant narratives presented through psychological research still neglects to include 89% of the world's population in their studies (Thalmayer et al., 2021). Of the first authors of JPSP (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology) articles published between 2014 and 2018, only 3% belonged to Asian countries. More importantly, only 4% of samples presented in JPSP articles published in this time period were from Asia (Thalmayer et al., 2021). These statistics signal a clear future research direction: It is crucial to sample Asian populations beyond the U.S. – if for no other reason, then to replicate foundational psychological research findings in samples which represent hundreds of millions of people in the world.

In the absence of substantive representation of non-American groups (on the basis of national origin, ethnicity, racial identity, etc.), it would not be unfair to claim that the current state of social psychology can be considered the 'American' state of social psychology, which does not extend to marginalized ethnic groups within the U.S., let alone demographic groups outside the U.S. In the case of 'Asians' and Asianness, it is apparent from descriptive statistics that race-related studies in non-American countries requires researchers pay closer attention to participants' ethnic identities, as self-categorization data on racial identities are not as well-documented as data on ethnic identities (refer to section titled: "How to define 'Asian'").

In the case of Asian countries, data on racial identity is similarly scarce: the National Bureau of Statistics in China (2019) provides information on ethnic minorities in China, but no racial categorical information is available. The same is true of Indonesia (BPS – Statistics Indonesia, 2020). In the case of India (Census India, 2011), respondents are asked to identify their mother tongue (i.e. their native language), which is an indicator of their ethnic identity. Neither Japan (Statistics Japan, 2020) nor South Korea⁸ (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2018) collect any data on respondents' cultural heritage or racial identity.

As previously stated, population censuses are intended to convey information about the source countries. The census information from various nations of Asia allude to the fact that racial identity is not as salient to people in Asian countries as they are in the U.S. context. From the data, it appears that most populations in the world are more likely to self-categorize as members of an ethnic group or nationality, although this certainly does not imply that racial categorization (of both self and others) and racism is absent in non-U.S. cultures (e.g., Qian et al., 2015; Burdsey, 2004). Instead, the trends in how ethnoracial diversity is labelled worldwide suggests that it may be beneficial to re-evaluate how we define social categories.

A potential solution to address the discrepancies in labelling social categories is to shift the field's research focus from studying 'racial differences' to studying differences for specific determinants of race (such as facial features, skin tone, ethnocultural group, etc.) and limiting our empirical claims to the specific racial determinant that we are studying, within the population that we are sampling from (e.g., Simons et al., 2017). Shifting the manner in which we describe studies on interracial processes could help us generate more meaningful, information-rich research. It

⁸ KOSIS, the Korean Statistical Website, does provide information on the nationalities of non-Koreans who are married to Korean citizens.

would also steer the field away from our tendency to conduct research on prototypical members of socially constructed groups.

In the case of Asian samples, this would dissuade researchers from their tendency to overgeneralize findings from East Asian samples to all Asians, and instead encourage new research avenues (and populations) that are worth pursuing. Further research on specific ethnic groups within the category of 'Asian' can provide us with more detailed insight into the role of ancestry (in the form of ethnolinguistic heritage and national origin) without glossing over the crucial role of more essentialist beliefs tied to phenotypic cues of race (Roth, 2016).

Conclusion

Racial categorization is a key issue in both public discourse and in the advancement of behavioral sciences. While areas of social sciences (including social psychology) lean towards social constructionist views of race, there is a marked influence of essentialist ideas in the origins of those social constructions (see Haney Lopez, 1996; Bhopal, 2007; Machery & Faucher, 2005). Despite the endorsement of seemingly social constructionist views on racial categorization (i.e. focusing on ancestry information), social psychology reverts to more essentialist ways to operationalize race (i.e. using stereotypical photos of prototypical Asians, sampling only prototypical Asians, or citing papers that only sample prototypical Asians; e.g. Kim et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2014). Overall, this review suggests that the recurring focus of prototypical Asians (as perceived by Americans) does a disservice to social psychological methodology. Specifically, this means that East Asian populations are overrepresented as samples in high impact journal articles, while Southeast- and South Asian populations are practically unexplored (see Tables 1-3). Instead of focusing on racial categories, recording people's ethnic identities (with its associated cultural norms and behaviors) may better augment the current state of knowledge. In the case of 'Asians',

research could successfully capture cross-cultural variations of over 4.3 billion people (UNFPA, 2018). Although this may move social psychology away from its U.S.-centric focus, psychologists should be incentivized by the fact studying race-based theories through a global lens will serve to increase external validity of empirical research. "Who is Asian?" will still yield a complex answer, but a systematic examination of this question can enable us to generate a more nuanced picture of racial categorization, setting the precedent for more organized and thorough research into other ethnoracial categories.

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