

Marriage and Intermarriage Among Asian Americans: A Fact Sheet

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Definitions

What does the term “Asian” mean?

Asian refers to individuals who have origins in Asia, the Far East, Southeast Asia or India.¹ The six major Asian American groups are Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian/Hmong/Laotian.² The Asian American population is very diverse, coming from at least 16 different countries and speaking multiple languages. The nomenclature used to categorize this diverse group and the demographics of the Asian population in America have evolved in the last century, especially in the past decade. With the increased rate of intermarriage in the Asian population, the way mixed race children define themselves may alter these categories. Thus, there could be variations among those who recognize themselves as Asian American.

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Intermarriage refers to marriages involving two people with different racial (*interracial*) or ethnic (*interethnic*) affiliations.³ Racial affiliation is based on shared biological traits of a population; while ethnic affiliation is based on common cultural, religious or linguistic traits of a group of people. Interethnic

marriages of two Asian ethnicities may be referred to as *pan-Asian* marriages. Although intermarriage is generally infrequent in Asian countries, Asians in the U.S. have an intermarriage rate slightly greater than 25 percent. Of those who are intermarried, 92 percent are married interracially and 8 percent are married interethnically.⁴

Headlines/Trends

Marital rates

All Asian ethnic groups living in the U.S. have a greater than 60 percent marriage rate.⁵ Compared to other racial groups, their marriage rate is most similar to that of non-Hispanic Whites.⁶

Intermarriage Rates

Asians marrying non-Hispanic Whites comprise the greatest proportion of intermarriages in the United States.^{7,8} Additionally, Asian/White intermarriages in the U.S. have increased in recent decades for all Asian ethnicities, and for both men and women, with



the exception of Japanese women, whose rates of interracial marriages have been high since post-World War II.^{9,10}

Current population

As of 2004, there were over 12 million reported Asians (either Asian alone or in combination with another race) living in the U.S.,¹¹ and it is anticipated that the Asian population will continue to grow.¹²

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Chinese are the largest Asian group in the U.S., followed by Asian Indians and Filipinos.¹³ Asian Americans who are of mixed heritage number about the same as Asian Indians - approximately 1.4 million.¹⁴ More than 50 percent of the Asians in the U.S. live in three states: California New York and Texas. Los Angeles and New York City are the two cities with the largest Asian population.¹⁵ Asian Americans represent over 40 percent of the total population in Hawaii.¹⁶ Language differences are notable, as about 77 percent of the Asian American population speaks a language other than English at home.

Socioeconomic status

Regardless of nativity, Asians have the highest educational attainment level of all racial groups living in the U.S.¹⁷; however, there is wide variation in socio-economic status among them. According to 2000 Census data, Cambodians, Hmongs and Laotians have the lowest educational attainment levels compared to other Asian ethnic groups and

other major racial/ethnic groups (Whites, Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans). In addition, their level of poverty (22.5 percent) is much greater than other Asian ethnicities (6.9 percent -16.7 percent), and is comparable to that of Hispanics/Latinos (21.4 percent).¹⁸ Of Asian ethnicities, Indians have the highest educational attainment, the highest rates of being in the labor force (with mostly high-skill occupations), and have the highest median personal income. They also have the highest marital rates.¹⁹

Background

Marriage in Asian culture

Asian American cultures place great value on marriage as demonstrated by high rates of

marriage. Asian cultural attitudes about marriage center on traditional family values, often encouraging gender-specific roles and a strong familial focus on children. Marriage is considered the means to building families, and families are fundamentally important to Asians. In most Asian cultures, a marital relationship is not solely a relationship between spouses, but involves the extended family as well.²⁰

Migration and immigration history

The history of Asian immigration to the United States is complex. The first Asian immigrants to the Americas – the Chinese – arrived in the United States (U.S.) in the 1850s. By the late 1800s, a growing anti-Asian movement resulted in anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited Asians from marrying Whites and anti-immigration acts that prohibited Chinese women from immigrating to the U.S. As a result, interracial marriages all but halted until after World War II when many U.S. service men brought “war brides” home from China, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam.²¹ The 1965 Immigration and Nationality

Act finally eliminated any restrictions on Asian immigration based on gender, and as a result, war brides were able to sponsor the immigration of their family members, increasing the population of Asians in the U.S.²²

The politics of migration still continue to determine the portion of each nationality that enters the U.S. For example, professional qualifications are one of the allowable reasons for immigration to this country. The Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian and South Asian populations have been part of the most recent waves of Asian immigration to the U.S. They have entered the country under a variety of circumstances - as refugees, educated professionals, students, or as a sponsored family.

Interethnic Unions

Recent research comparing interethnic unions with same-ethnic unions found that relationship quality and relationship satisfaction were reportedly lower among men and women who were married to or living with someone of a different ethnicity. Relationship conflict was reportedly higher among interethnic couples than same-ethnic couples, and the perceived chance of relationship dissolution was also significantly higher. More complex relationship histories (divorce, remarriage and serial cohabitations), greater differences in couple demographics (age, education or religion), fewer shared values, and less social support largely account for these differences.²³

Cultural differences may create challenges for interracial relationships, or even relationships in which nativity or acculturation may vary. Culture can have a strong influence on how spouses measure

their marital satisfaction. This type of information is important for marriage educators, who place a great deal of emphasis on certain measures of marital satisfactions (such as healthy communication which has been shown to be valued by White American couples) as being the key to a good partnership.

Still, Asians who were born or primarily raised in the U.S. may also experience stress due to conflicting cultural values from varying degrees of cultural identification and assimilation. Issues may arise between couples when it comes to marital roles, family roles and responsibility, parenting duties, and methods of communication. Experiences of these relationship issues may, in turn, affect how spouses perceive the quality of their marriage.

Yet other research offers a different perspective on differences in marital or social values between foreign and native Asian couples. In one study, Asian Indian couples in arranged marriages living in the U.S. rated love significantly higher in importance for marriage than couples in arranged marriages in India and couples in choice marriages in the U.S.²⁴

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Difference by Subgroup

Variations between Asian and American cultural values

Asian cultures value the family unit. Most research describes the difference in Asian and American culture as a difference between collectivism and individualism respectively.^{25 26 27} Specifically, American culture touts an individualistic attitude,

encouraging people to be independent and self-identified but responsible. Asian culture purports a collectivist perspective, discouraging individual expression and encouraging inter-dependence.²⁸ One recent study described the differences in perspective between Western culture (specifically, American) and Eastern/South Asian/Middle Eastern/African culture (specifically, Asian Indian) in marital mate selection. In most Western cultures, mate selection is an individual, face-to-face choice, involving interpersonal attraction and love. In contrast, in most Asian cultures, love is secondary, and marriage is a contract arranged and agreed upon by both families for their mutual benefit. This is, in part, due to the cultural norm for couples to help support their elderly parents.

Variation in intermarriage patterns among Asian Americans

There are several variations in intermarriage patterns among Asians in the U.S. based on a number of factors, including their country of origin, their nativity (foreign-born or native-born, and generational status), their immigration history, their acculturation status (e.g., English-language proficiency), their socioeconomic status (SES), and their gender.

Country of origin

According to the 2006 Census, among all marriages involving at least one Asian, the Vietnamese are the most likely to marry someone of the same ethnicity.^{30 31} Overall, the Japanese are the most likely to intermarry,^{32 33} and compared to other Asian subgroups, the Japanese have the highest proportion (over 30 percent of their total population) of interethnic as well as interracial marriage.^{34 35}

Nativity

Asians born or raised in the U.S. are more likely

than foreign-born Asians to be involved in interracial or interethnic marriages.³⁶ Marriages involving two Asians raised in the U.S. (born here or arriving before the age of 13) make up only 20 percent of all marriages in the U.S. involving Asians. Among Asians raised in the U.S., Filipino and Korean men and women are more likely to marry someone who is White rather than someone of their same ethnicity.³⁷

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Acculturation

Research has found that individuals who are more acculturated are more likely to marry outside their ethnic group than those who are less so.³⁸ Therefore, immigration history, immigration status, and English proficiency are factors that affect intermarriage rates of different Asian ethnic groups.³⁹

- Asian groups that have been in the U.S. longer, like the Japanese or Chinese, are likely to be better assimilated into the larger (American) culture, and more likely to intermarry.
- The Vietnamese are one of the most recent Asian subgroups to have arrived in the U.S. Almost all are foreign-born and have low English proficiency rates, and generally experience the lowest rates of intermarriage.^{40 41}
- Asian Americans who speak English fluently are more likely to intermarry, both interracially and interethnically.⁴²
- Even though Asian American men are

less likely than Asian American women to intermarry, the tendency increases with the length of time they have been in the U.S.⁴³

Gender

Of Asians living in the U.S. who intermarry, about 75 percent are women. Asian women who intermarry are most likely to marry non-Hispanic, White men, followed by marriage to an Asian person of a different ethnicity.⁴⁴ Asian men are much less likely than women to intermarry. Of those that do, men are more likely than women to marry inter-ethnically.

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Socioeconomic Status

Research has shown that intermarriage is more common among the middle class and among those who are more educated (holding a college degree or higher). Higher education likely increases exposure to individuals from other races/ethnicities and to the idea of marriage outside the culture (also known as exogamous marriage). They are also more likely to be exposed to examples of exogamous marriages. Still, there are gender differences within class, with more women than men of Asian descent marrying exogamously.⁴⁵

Data Sources

<http://www.hias.org/programs/domestic/refugee-family-strengthening-program>

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