

# HYPHEN

## — ASIAN AMERICA UNABRIDGED

### When Words Fail: Careful Framing Needed in Research on Asian Americans

Submitted by Karthick Ramakrishnan on June 27, 2012



*Image from Pew Research Center's report, "The Rise of Asian Americans."*

Sometimes, a two-page press release can have greater impact on race relations in the United States than an entire report. That certainly seemed to be the case last week, when the Pew Research Center put out a 215-page report on the growing importance of Asian Americans.

The report had many commendable aspects, including presenting new data on the six largest Asian American groups, adding to our knowledge from past demographic studies and surveys. It presented a trove of graphs, maps, and tables for the largest national-origin groups. Unfortunately, it also prioritized questions asked of Asian Americans -- regarding their parenting styles and their own stereotypes about Americans -- that seemed more concerned with Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* than with the priorities of Asian Americans themselves, either as revealed in past surveys or as articulated by organizations serving those communities. And the demographic analysis did not adequately cover national origin groups whose economic outcomes are far less promising.

More concerning than the Pew report, however, was the sensationalist headline on the press release that introduced the study to news media: *Asians Overtake Hispanics in New Immigrant Arrivals; Surpass US Public in Valuing Marriage, Parenthood, Hard Work*. These few words carried sway in hundreds of newspaper articles in the first two days of the report's release, provoking outrage among broad swaths of the Asian American community, including many researchers, elected officials, and community organizations.

As one of 15 advisors to the project, I felt blindsided by the press release. Words failed me as I read it for the first time, as we had not gotten a chance to review it. The dominant narrative in the release reinforced the frame of Asians as a model minority, stereotypes that the advisors had strongly objected to in the only meeting of the group two months ago. What we contested in private then, and what others are challenging in public now, is a monolithic frame that often renders invisible the struggles of many who fall under the Asian American label.

What made this press release particularly troubling, however, were the invidious comparisons it seemed to invite, of a racial group that is overtaking Hispanics and other Americans in a metaphorical race for national supremacy. As many critics have rightly noted, this zero-sum frame has been invoked time and again since its formal articulation in 1966 -- when Japanese and Chinese Americans were valorized in relation to other minority groups, and yet still viewed as perpetually foreign. And the model minority myth has often had detrimental effects, from inviting resentment and violence against Asian Americans to masking problems internal to the group.

This is unfortunately not the first time that Pew has presented research on minority populations that has confused matters more than clarified. In October 2010, its executive summary and lead graphic signaled that Latinos were divided on unauthorized immigration, even though much of the data in the report showed overwhelming Latino unity on a host of issues, including support for legalization (86%) and opposition to Arizona's SB1070 (79%). Similarly, it framed the jobs recovery in October 2011 in zero-sum terms, as immigrants gaining and the native-born losing -- a claim that researchers at the University of Southern California found to be unusually sensitive to how the study was conducted.

In the case of Pew's Asian American press release, the damaging effects may have been more significant, mostly because there are so few think-tanks that conduct research on Asian Americans, and Pew made scant mention of prior studies to provide a sufficient basis for comparison. What could have been a celebratory moment for all, showcasing the need for significant and sustained attention to the Asian American population, instead became a contested debate over a frame with a tangled history.

Still, I remain optimistic. At the press launch of Pew's report, I noted that the study is a conversation starter, and this is true in many ways. It can start a helpful public conversation about the opportunities and challenges we face as a country, and how Asian Americans fit into that mix. It can initiate a dialogue among researchers, community leaders, and news media on how better to report on minority communities. Hopefully, it will also start a conversation internally at Pew, on the care Pew needs to exercise in publicizing its research, particularly given its outsized role in shaping news coverage about minority populations.

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*Karthick Ramakrishnan is associate professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside and fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.*