

## The racial self-identification of South Asians in the United States

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**Abstract** *The racial identity of South Asians has long been a subject of controversy in the United States. Their inchoate racial status translates into a variety of racial descriptors being chosen by and for South Asians. This paper uses 1990 census data to examine the socio-economic and demographic correlates of the racial self-identification choices made by household heads of Asian Indian origin, both foreign- and US-born. The results of multinomial logit analysis show that respondents who are more acculturated to the United States are more likely to describe themselves as 'Black' or 'White' than are those with less familiarity with American society. However, higher socio-economic levels are associated with a greater likelihood of self-identification as South Asian on the census race question. Finally, comparison with a sample of Asian Indian children reveals the latter's greater tendency to be identified with a race other than South Asian, due both to their more extensive mixed ancestry and their larger share of US-born respondents.*

KEYWORDS: RACIAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION; SOUTH ASIANS; INDIANS; UNITED STATES; LOGIT ANALYSIS; CENSUS

### Introduction

Americans in general seem to have difficulty accepting complexity and ambiguity. I'm either Indian or American, white or black ... I can't be both and neither. (Kavitha Mediratta)

The great thing about being Indian is that everybody thinks you're one of them (Amit K. Misra).<sup>1</sup>

The racial identity of South Asians has long been a subject of some controversy in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In the early years of the twentieth century, when whiteness (or African ancestry) was a prerequisite for naturalisation, American courts vacillated on the question of whether Asian Indians were white or not. In contrast to Mexicans and Armenians, who were deemed white for the purposes of citizenship acquisition, and Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino applicants who were not, the verdict on the racial classification of Indians changed from case to case (Haney López 1995). American uncertainty over South Asian racial identity has also been mirrored in the Census Bureau's frequent changes in its classification of this group. Over the course of the last century, respondents of South Asian origin have been classified variously as 'Hindu', 'White', 'Other', and 'Asian' (Lee 1993).

South Asian newcomers are not alone, however, in confronting an American racial landscape that at first seems to have no clear place for them. Not only does the diversity of the United States' contemporary immigrant pool ensure a steady influx of people who do not fit easily into the traditional black/white dichotomy

(Bashi and McDaniel 1997; Mazumdar 1989), but in the past as well, immigrants tested, stretched and molded the nation's conceptions of racial categories. As Ignatiev (1995) has shown, Irish immigrants were not considered white until well after their arrival in the United States, and this was true of other European groups as well (Jacobson 1998; Sacks 1994). Similarly, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Americans were not always considered to constitute a pan-ethnic Asian race (Espiritu 1992; Takaki 1989).

But unlike the Irish who have already become white, or the Chinese and Japanese who are now Asian, the racial classification of South Asians in the United States is still in flux. Although they now seem firmly ensconced in the census 'Asian' category, this is a fairly recent development and one that came about only after considerable debate (Espiritu 1992). Moreover, several writers have described an uneasy alliance between South Asians and East Asians under the pan-ethnic 'Asian' rubric (see the contributions in Shankar and Srikanth 1998a). Finally, other Americans seem unsure as to their racial status. F. James Davis (1991: 162) finds evidence that some blacks consider Indians to be black as well, and Rosemary Marangoly George (1997) reports a widespread concern among Indian Americans in California over being taken for Mexican or black. More broadly, Nazli Kibria (1996; 1998) maintains that South Asians are seen as 'ambiguous non-whites' in the United States.

Given their inchoate racial status, South Asian Americans may offer unusual insight into the process of racial formation. Defined by Omi and Winant (1994: 55) as 'the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed', racial formation is both macro-level process and the culmination of myriad individual encounters. It is constituted by 'racial projects large and small' (Omi and Winant 1994: 61). This paper seeks to explore individual-level adoption of some racial labels and resistance to others.

The diversity of opinions regarding their 'appropriate' racial classification leads South Asians to choose an array of labels on the census form, even when census instructions explicitly direct them to one checkbox category. I use 1990 census data to examine the socio-economic and demographic correlates of the racial self-identification choices made by respondents of Asian Indian origin, US- and foreign-born, who make up the majority of the South Asian population of the United States.

In the next section, I review the literature regarding racial and ethnic identity in general and South Asian racial self-conception in particular. I then develop a series of hypotheses to be tested, using data and methods described in the third part of the paper. The last two sections are devoted to analysis of the data and discussion of the results.

## South Asians and racial formation

### *Theories of racial formation and of ethnicity*

Many branches of race and ethnicity theory lend themselves to the exploration of how South Asian Americans come to view themselves in racial terms, but central to this investigation is Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory. In the first edition of *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986: 61–2), they present their paradigm in the following terms:

The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective and

personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and reformed. We use the term *racial formation* to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings.

Thus we can think of the South Asian experience in the United States as a case study of the process by which racial categories are formed and transformed. More specifically, it provides an example of what Omi and Winant call *racialisation*: 'the extension of racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice or group' (1986: 64).

Much of the literature on racial formation privileges the broad social and political forces, historical and contemporary, which shape the development and spread of racial schema (e.g. Davis 1991; Jacobson 1998; Marx 1998). Students of racial formation writ large, however, often ignore the individual-level actions and encounters that shape racialisation on the ground. Instead, theories of ethnicity – as opposed to race – have delved deeper into the murky waters of personal identity. Joane Nagel (1998: 237) describes a prevailing paradigm of ethnicity that, in its emphasis on volition, situational contingency, and social interaction within communities, places the individual at the heart of the ethnic identification process:

According to this constructionist view, the origin, content, and form of ethnicity reflect the creative choices of individuals and groups as they define themselves and others in ethnic ways ... The location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalized, both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outside observers.

This sociological perspective also draws attention to the interplay of internally-chosen and externally-imposed definition, or as Nagel puts it, 'what *you* think your ethnicity is, versus what *they* think your ethnicity is' (1998: 240). In doing so, it draws attention to what is perhaps the most crucial distinction between processes of racial and of ethnic formation, namely the varying degrees of external versus internal definition that they incorporate.<sup>3</sup> Banton (1983: 10) contends that 'Membership in an ethnic group is usually voluntary; membership in a racial group is not.' Moreover, there is a powerful element of hierarchy embodied in the notion of race that is not inherent to ethnicity:

while 'ethnic' social relations are not *necessarily* hierarchical, exploitative and conflictual, 'race relations' certainly appear to be. Although ethnic boundaries involve relations of power, and social categorization is inherent to the internal-external dialectic of ethnic identification, hierarchial difference is *not* definitive of ethnic relations ... 'Race', however, unlike ethnicity, seems to be much *more* a matter of social categorization than of group identification (although still a matter of both). (Jenkins 1997: 74–5)

Although the spectrum of internal versus external definition encompasses both the processes of ethnic and racial identification, they fall at decidedly different points on this scale. Thus the 'ethnic options' and 'twilight of ethnicity' respectively revealed by Waters (1990) and Alba (1985) to characterise contemporary European Americans appear much less plausible for those whose lives are constrained by race.

### *South Asians in racial terms*

Both the volitional aspect associated with ethnicity and the externally imposed nature of race appear to be forcefully at work in the case of South Asians, who

have not yet come to be closely identified with a racial label in the United States. As discussed in the introduction to this article, the federal government currently classifies most South Asians as belonging to the 'Asian' race, which at face value constitutes a powerful external mechanism of categorisation (Nagel 1986).<sup>4</sup> Upon closer examination this situation reveals a curious concordance of external and internal definition. In the 1970s, Indian American associations successfully petitioned for inclusion in state and federal Asian racial categories, with an eye to benefiting from affirmative action measures (Espiritu 1992). Thus the group was able to impose its choice on the state – which otherwise would have continued its practice of designating South Asians as white – rather than the other way round.

Yet despite the adoption of this mutually agreed-upon official classification scheme, neither South Asians nor other Americans seem to perceive them as racially Asian. Participation in pan-ethnic Asian coalitions is frequently portrayed as a political strategy (Espiritu 1992; Visweswaran 1997) that has had little impact on South Asians' actual racial self-perception. According to Kibria (1998: 75), 'South Asian Americans have a sense of profound racial difference from other Asian Americans,' and this sense of difference is reciprocated by other Asian Americans (Kibria 1996; Shankar and Srikanth 1998b). Instead, South Asians find themselves treated at different times as blacks or as whites (Davis 1991; Dworkin and Dworkin 1988; Gwaltney 1993; Mazumdar 1989).<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps more common than their assignment to one defined racial group is South Asians' treatment as 'ambiguous non-whites' (Kibria 1996: 79), a term which neatly reflects the power that both external opinion and internal self-identification have had in situating them in the American racial landscape. For if the 'non-white' label has been assured by US society at large, the 'ambiguous' positioning appears to a considerable extent to have been the product of concerted effort on the part of South Asian Americans. Kibria (1996: 81) describes their 'ideological disengagement from the US racial order' and George (1997: 31) observes 'a certain reluctance to acknowledge a racial identity for oneself and for the community at large. What is refused by nearly all upper and middle class South Asians is not so much a specific racial identity but the very idea of being raced.' Intentional obfuscation can also be read in the array of labels that Indian Americans have offered when pressed for a racial identifier. Terms such as 'Aryan', 'Dravidian', and 'Indo-Aryan' (Fisher 1980; George 1997; Kibria 1996) are more than simply notions with some currency in the subcontinent; they are also obviously out of place and meaningless in the American context. For all intents and purposes, claiming 'Dravidian' status is like claiming no racial status in the United States. Such racial marginalisation (Kibria 1996; Rajagopal 1997) may be preferred to racialisation, however, if the racial group to which one risks being appended is a low-status one.

Indeed, many see South Asians' 'refusal of racial identity' (George 1997: 32) as a reaction to their non-white status. Rajagopal (1997: 52), for example, claims that: 'Denied full acceptance into white society, they assume a deliberately blurred perception of their relationship to the majority society.' On the other hand, George (1997) strongly refutes this connection, contending: 'Upper-class and upper-caste Indians in the US do not want to pass for white or to escape blackness as much as they wish to move unconsciously and unobstructed through the public sphere, as they do in India.'

Integrally tied to the controversial contention that South Asians wish to be

identified as white is the less-contested assertion that they try to distance themselves from blacks and Hispanics. Rajagopal (1997: 52) links the two explicitly when he writes, 'Even as they insist on being called "brown", the plea of Indian immigrants *not* to be called black is what is most audible. They aspire toward whiteness ...' Many researchers have noted the existence of considerable anti-black and anti-Hispanic prejudice among South Asians (Dworkin and Dworkin 1988; Mazumdar 1989; Prashad 2000; Singh 1996), often accompanied by a fear of being mistaken for black or Hispanic that Mazumdar (1989: 51) has characterised as 'an almost paranoid response to even being thought of as black'.<sup>6</sup> Although this fear betrays bigotry, it is not necessarily unfounded. As one Indian American interviewee put it, 'This society will place them in the same status as blacks in the blink of an eye' (Rajagopal 1997: 52). And South Asians are not the only ones to hold this view; one of Gwaltney's African-American respondents said of South Asians, 'A lot of them don't want to admit their color because they are afraid that these whitefolks over here would give them a hard time. Now they are right about that' (cited in Davis 1991: 162). As Singh (1996) points out, immigrants from South Asia would not be the first to avoid underdog groups in order to climb the American social ladder.<sup>7</sup>

The discussion above points to the conclusion that despite official classification as Asian, the debate over the racial designation of South Asians is far from over, both within and outside the community, and the meaningful points of reference are white and black, not Asian. This outcome supports the claim by Bashi and McDaniel (1997), Ong (1996) and Song (1998) that all immigrants to the United States, regardless of country of origin, are absorbed into a system of racial stratification that is structured around only one axis: the black-white dichotomy. Ong (1996: 751) elaborates:

I maintain that the white-black polarities emerging out of the history of European-American imperialism continue to shape attitudes and encode discourses directed at immigrants from the rest of the world that are associated with racial and cultural inferiority. This dynamic of racial othering emerges in a range of mechanisms that variously subject non-white immigrants to whitening or blackening processes that indicate the degree of their closeness to or distance from ideal white standards.

This view suggests that official classification of South Asians as part of the Asian racial category represents little more than an agreement of convenience or a *détente* in the struggle between South Asians and society at large over a more fundamental issue: where they fit along the black-white spectrum. Here the state is not the real imposer of identity; the external culprit is instead the centuries of black-white polarisation that have left US society unable to conceive of its constituents in any other way. Regardless of the federal government's classification directives, it is local, transnational and situational norms instead – the 'everyday experience' that constitutes the micro level of racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994: 58) – that are more closely bound up in how South Asians see themselves and are seen by others in racial terms. And the contextual variety flourishes; you can be Indian American and 'white' on your Texas driver's license, and you can be Indian American and 'one of us' in a black Brooklyn community.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Individual-level determinants of racial self-identification: hypotheses*

Several studies by Alejandro Portes and colleagues have explored the relation-

ship between the negotiation of internal and external identities on one hand, and individual socio-economic and demographic characteristics on the other. Although these investigations study ethnic self-identification, their explicit theoretical incorporation of the pressures of external definition makes them relevant to the study of racial identity as well.

In a 1984 article entitled 'The rise of ethnicity: determinants of ethnic perceptions among Cuban exiles in Miami', Portes *et al.* examine exiles' 'ethnic awareness', which they define as 'the perception by members of a minority of the social distance separating them from the dominant group and the existence of discrimination based on racial or cultural differences' (Portes *et al.* 1984: 384). Thus these immigrants' sense of ethnicity is linked to their reception by the host society. More specifically, Portes *et al.* find support for the 'ethnic competition' hypothesis that increased exposure to and knowledge of the host society heightens perceptions of social distance and discrimination. Therefore education, English proficiency, and occupation – to the extent they bring one out of the ethnic enclave and into the mainstream labour market – are positively associated with ethnic awareness.

Individuals' interaction with the larger society is also at the heart of Portes and Rumbaut's (1996) notion of 'linear' versus 'reactive' ethnicity. In this view, immigrants' self-definition is largely coloured by the cultural prescriptions of their homeland, while their children's is much more attuned to the host country context. More specifically, the second generation's 'reactive ethnicity' is fostered in large part by the injustices visited upon the first. As a result, the ethnic identity of the second generation is distinct from the 'linear' identity maintained by their immigrant parents.

Individual demographic and socio-economic characteristics are not important solely because they govern exposure to the host society, however. Portes and McLeod's (1996) study of second-generation schoolchildren demonstrates that these attributes are also associated with differing capacities to resist ethnic labelling imposed by the mainstream. Here Nagel's (1998) dialectical process of ethnic formation, shaped by the interplay of internal and external definition, becomes a 'contest' in which immigrants and their children attempt to fend off the 'symbolic violence' of imposed ethnic identities (Portes and MacLeod 1996: 524, 528). In this struggle, some groups and individuals are better equipped to resist the external imposition of labels than others. Portes and MacLeod find that use of the 'Hispanic' pan-ethnic label, now widely applied in the United States, is more readily embraced by some Latin American-origin groups than others, with Nicaraguans being the most receptive and Cubans the least. Within national groupings, children who are less acculturated (as measured by their length of residence in the United States and their command of English) and less well off (reflected in family income and father's education) are more likely to adopt the Hispanic label.<sup>9</sup> These results support the hypothesis that groups and individuals with greater resources can resist outsiders' labels.

Taken together, these empirical inquiries into ethnicity associate four broad sets of factors with racial self-identification: socio-economic status (e.g. education, income, occupation); acculturation (length of time in the US, English usage, nativity); national origin; and demographic characteristics such as age and sex. Moreover, these variables are featured in what can be termed as three theories:

- *ethnic awareness*: higher socio-economic status and greater acculturation are associated with increased perception of social distance from the dominant group;
- *contest of ethnicities*: higher socio-economic status, greater acculturation, older age, and being male all enable individuals and groups to resist the use of mainstream, or externally-imposed, identity labels; national origin also has an impact on self-designation;
- *generational divide*: the first, immigrant generation is less likely to use mainstream identity labels than are second-generation individuals.

The translation of these ideas into hypotheses concerning South Asians' racial self-description is not straightforward. In particular, they pose the question of whether there is currently a mainstream-imposed racial label in the United States that is at odds with one (or more) internally preferred and defined by South Asians themselves. If we are to speak of externally imposed labels, we might consider the categories of 'Black' and 'White' just such terms. Regardless of the ostensible differences of desirability between them, together they constitute the axis of mainstream American understanding of race, and the framework that South Asians who 'refuse to be raced' would eschew. Therefore I will treat South Asian labels – recorded on the US census race question as national designations – as the preferred options for racial self-identification. However, it should be kept in mind that a significant portion of the literature on this topic suggests that racial designation as white would be preferred even to designation as South Asian.

The theories at issue can now be operationalised in the following hypotheses regarding South Asian Americans' racial self-definition:

- *ethnic awareness*: higher socio-economic status and greater acculturation are associated with a decreased tendency of South Asians to self-identify as 'White' and an increased tendency to identify as 'Black';
- *contest of ethnicities*: higher socio-economic status, greater acculturation, older age and being male are all associated with a decreased tendency to self-identify as both 'Black' and 'White,' and an increased tendency to identify as South Asian; national origin also has an impact on South Asians' racial self-designation;
- *generational divide*: the first, immigrant generation of South Asians is less likely to use the mainstream racial labels of 'Black' and 'White' than are second-generation individuals.

## Data and methods

### Data

In order to assess the hypotheses above, this inquiry utilises a 1 per cent Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) sample of the 1990 US Census (Ruggles and Sobek 1997). For the purpose of investigating the racial self-description of South Asian respondents, this data set offers the advantages of being nationally representative, being large enough to include representatives of the fairly small South Asian population (which constitutes roughly 0.3 per cent of the total population), and including ancestry and birthplace information that permits the identification of South Asian-origin respondents.

Although the foregoing discussion of racial identity has applied to the South Asian community as a whole in the United States, the principal analysis below focuses exclusively on respondents of Asian Indian origin (who made up 80 per cent of the American South Asian population in 1990). The scope is limited in this way because only Indians find a checkbox (i.e. the 'Asian Indian' category) targeted for them on the census form; others must write in their responses on the race question (e.g. 'Pakistani'). As a result, Indians face a qualitatively different process of self-identification when responding to the US census than do those of other South Asian backgrounds. However, the racial reporting of non-Indian respondents will also be presented.

Respondents are identified as being of Asian Indian origin if they indicated on the census either Indian ancestry or an Indian birthplace. However, this grouping does not include respondents born in India if they describe themselves as having been born abroad to American parents or if they indicate their ancestry to be entirely from another region. An important exception to the latter decision rule, however, is the inclusion of individuals who reported their birthplace as 'India' and described their ancestry as 'American Indian', apparently unaware that the Census Bureau uses this term to refer to Native Americans. The total size of the Indian-origin subsample comes to 6,722 respondents.

The reporting and coding of ancestry responses present particular problems for this study. In addition to the problem of South Asians describing their ancestry as 'American Indian', it is also quite possible that Census Bureau coders made errors in assigning written-in ancestry responses of 'Indian' incorrectly to either the 'American Indian' or 'Asian Indian' categories. As a result, the delimitation of the Indian-origin community may mistakenly include some native Americans and exclude some South Asians. I address the latter problem by including as Asian Indian those respondents born in India whose ancestry has been recorded as 'American Indian'. But I do not attempt to reverse the first problem – i.e. American Indians mistakenly designated as Asian Indian – both because there is no clear guideline for exclusion and because the problem is likely to be minor. Only 19 of the 73 Indian-origin respondents who marked their race as 'American Indian' were born in the United States, so the likelihood is small that racial self-reporting as 'American Indian' is being driven by miscoded native Americans.<sup>10</sup>

### *Methodology*

The main variable of interest in the analyses to follow is the racial label chosen by respondents, i.e. the box chosen from the 1990 census' list of seven main racial groupings: 'White', 'Black or Negro', 'Indian (Amer.)', 'Eskimo', 'Aleut', 'Asian or Pacific Islander', and 'Other race' (see Figure 1). The Asian category offered a series of subcategories, of which 'Asian Indian' was the only South Asian option, and it provided a fill-in blank so that one might write in responses such as 'Pakistani'. To preserve this information, I use as the dependent variable a recoded measure of racial response with the following four categories: White, Black, South Asian (grouping here the 'Asian Indian' checkbox as well as written-in Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Sri Lankan responses), and Other (containing the remainder).

The independent variables to be considered are age, sex, education, an occupational prestige index (Duncan's Socio-Economic Index), family income,

<p><b>4. Race</b> Fill ONE circle for the race that the person considers himself/herself to be.</p> <p>If <b>Indian (Amer.)</b>, print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe. →</p>  <p>If <b>Other Asian or Pacific Islander (API)</b>, print one group, for example: Hmong, Fijian, Laotian, Thai, Tongan, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on. →</p> <p>If <b>Other race</b>, print race. →</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> White</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Black or Negro</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Indian (Amer.) (Print name of the enrolled or principal tribe.) ↓</li> <li style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 100%;"></li> <li><input type="radio"/> Eskimo</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Aleut</li> <li style="text-align: center;"><u>Asian or Pacific Islander (API)</u></li> <li><input type="radio"/> Chinese      <input type="radio"/> Japanese</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Filipino      <input type="radio"/> Asian Indian</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Hawaiian      <input type="radio"/> Samoan</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Korean      <input type="radio"/> Guamanian</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Vietnamese      <input type="radio"/> Other API ↓</li> <li style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 100%;"></li> <li><input type="radio"/> Other race (Print race) ↑</li> </ul>
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Figure 1. 1990 US Census race question

language spoken at home, citizenship status, and nativity.<sup>11</sup> I also include an indicator of non-South Asian ancestry; since respondents were allowed to list up to two ancestry types, some recorded both a South Asian and a non-South Asian ancestry (e.g. French, Brazilian, Japanese).

The analysis will proceed in two stages. First I draw a subsample containing only the Indian-origin heads of household (n = 2,090), and use multinomial logistic regression to analyse the relationship between their racial self-description and the aforementioned independent variables. Because household heads are the ones most likely to fill out the census form, it is appropriate to consider their responses an expression of self-identification, but the same assumption cannot be extended to other household members, especially children. Yet because the racial reporting of children, especially the US-born, may follow a pattern different from that of their parents, I present descriptive statistics on the racial description of Indian-origin children as well as other children in households headed by Indian-origin respondents. Finally, variations in racial self-description by national origin will be briefly reported using an expanded sample of South Asian household heads.

## Analyses

### *The racial self-designation of Indian-origin heads of household*

On the 1990 US census, 90 per cent of Indian-origin heads of household designated their race as South Asian (see Table 1). This is not surprising given the presence of an ‘Asian Indian’ checkbox on the census, but it represents a striking change from the census of 1970, which was the last to lack such an option or directions expressly for South Asian respondents. In that year, nearly three-quarters of the South Asian-origin population was designated as ‘White,’ due both to self-classification as white and to the Census Bureau’s reassignment of Asian Indians from the ‘Other’ race category to the white one (Espiritu 1992).

The structuring of the census race question and its tabulation by the Census Bureau clearly have a tremendous impact on the racial classification of South

**Table 1.** Race and socio-economic characteristics: descriptive statistics

Socio-economic characteristics	Asian Indian heads of household				All US heads of household
	White	Black	South Asian <sup>1</sup>	Other	
Mean age (years)	41.7	41.4	40.3	39.7	48.4
Male (%)	71.1	58.7	90.3	74.0	67.5
Mean education <sup>2</sup>	11.2	10.0	13.7	11.5	10.4
Mean family income (\$)	39,242	30,605	57,038	44,903	35,710
Socio-economic index (SEI) <sup>3</sup>	50.6	31.2	61.0	44.7	43.0
Foreign-born (%)	45.6	58.7	97.8	89.0	9.5
US citizen (%)	75.6	67.4	43.5	41.1	95.9
English monolingual (%)	73.3	89.1	15.8	20.5	87.9
Non-South Asian ancestry (%)	42.2	30.4	1.1	8.2	84.7
N = 2,090	90	46	1,881	73	917,641

Notes: <sup>1</sup> 'South Asian' responses include both the 'Asian Indian' checkbox and written-in responses such as 'Pakistani' and 'Sri Lankan'.

<sup>2</sup> Educational level codes are: 10 = High School graduate/GED; 11 = 'Some college, no degree'; 12 = 'Assoc. degree (occupational)'; 13 = 'Assoc. degree (academic)'; 14 = 'Bachelor's degree'.

<sup>3</sup> SEI = Duncan's Socio-Economic Index, scaled from 1-96. The 3.6% of the sample that received an SEI score of 0 - meaning they are not employed - is excluded here.

Source: IPUMS 1990 1% unweighted sample.

Asians. However, these factors do not tell the whole story of how South Asians choose racial identifiers. As Table 1 shows, 10 per cent of the 1990 Indian-origin heads of household identified themselves as white, black, or otherwise (including American Indian), *despite* census instructions that directed them to the 'Asian Indian' category. And as we see later, this figure rises to 16 per cent among their children. Accordingly, I now turn to the examination of how the selection of racial label varies with individual-level characteristics.

#### *Cross-tabulations of race and socio-economic characteristics*

As Table 1 shows, Asian Indian householders who choose different racial labels for themselves vary considerably in their socio-economic and demographic attributes. Those who describe themselves as 'Black' show the lowest levels of education, family income and occupational prestige (Duncan's SEI), despite having the second-highest average age. This may be due in part to the relatively high share of female householders: women make up over 40 per cent of the 'Black' respondents in this sample. This is also one of the two most acculturated groups, having the highest percentage of English-only speakers.<sup>12</sup> 'White' respondents, however, show the highest rates of US birth and citizenship.

In contrast, the group which chose a South Asian label on the race question has the highest income, occupational and educational levels. It also shows a limited degree of acculturation: the respondents who use a South Asian racial descriptor have the highest percentage of foreign-born, the lowest share of monolingual English speakers, and the second-lowest rate of US citizenship. Both the 'South Asian' race and 'Other' race respondents are less acculturated than those who have adopted the 'Black' and 'White' labels that constitute the primary axis of American racial stratification.

Finally, ancestry also appears to be associated with the racial labels selected by

**Table 2.** Race and socio-economic characteristics: multinomial logit results (relative risk ratios)

Independent variables	Exponentiated results					
	White		Black		Other	
	RRR	S.E.	RRR	S.E.	RRR	S.E.
Age	1.020	0.011	1.015	0.013	0.995	0.011
Male	0.913	0.311	0.510	0.194	0.481*	0.144
Education	0.874*	0.036	0.788*	0.039	0.848*	0.029
Family income	1.000	0.000	1.000	0.000	1.000	0.000
Foreign birth	0.086*	0.030	0.258*	0.113	0.316*	0.149
English only	4.979*	1.488	25.447*	12.927	0.893	0.303
Non-South Asian ancestry	7.624*	2.987	4.386*	2.073	3.454*	1.844
Pseudo R-square	0.275					
N = 2,090						

Note: \* Significant at the 95% level.

Source: IPUMS 1990 1% unweighted sample, Asian Indian heads of household, base category: South Asian race.

the Indian household heads. As the last row in Table 1 shows, individuals who gave a racial response other than South Asian were much more likely to report some type of non-South Asian origin; this was especially true for those describing themselves as black or white.

*Multinomial logit results for Asian Indian heads of household*

To test the hypotheses outlined earlier, I turn to the multinomial logit results shown in Table 2. The independent variables in this regression include: the demographic variables of age and sex; the socio-economic variables of education and family income; the acculturation-related variables of nativity and English monolingualism; and finally, the variable reflecting mixed ancestry (i.e. reporting of some ancestry other than South Asian). Duncan’s Socio-Economic Index (SEI) is not included due to its high correlation with education and income, and the citizenship variable is excluded because of its strong correlation with nativity.

In general, the demographic variables of age and sex have little effect on the householders’ choice of racial category. The socio-economic variables appear somewhat more relevant: although family income shows no significant relationship with racial identity, education consistently demonstrates a significant association with the outcome variable. More specifically, moving up one level in the educational attainment schema (see Table 1 notes for the educational codes) decreases a respondent’s probability of selecting ‘White’ instead of a South Asian term by over 10 per cent. The same increase in educational level is associated with an even steeper drop – over 20 per cent – in the probability of selecting the ‘Black’ label instead of a South Asian one.

The variables related to acculturation also demonstrate significant and sizeable effects on respondents’ choice of racial category. Foreign-born respondents have a 90 per cent lesser probability than the native-born of choosing the ‘White’ label rather than a South Asian one, and a nearly 75 per cent smaller likelihood of

**Table 3.** *National origin and race*

National origin	N	Race selected on 1990 Census (%)				
		White	Black	South Asian		Other
				'Asian Indian' box	Nationality write-in	
Indian	2,090	4.3	2.2	88.8	1.2	3.5
Pakistani	299	6.7	0.3	25.8	65.9	1.3
Bangladeshi	53	1.9	0.0	43.4	50.9	3.8
Sri Lankan	38	7.9	0.0	26.3	65.8	0.0
Total	2,480	4.6	1.9	79.3	11.1	3.2

Source: IPUMS 1990 1% unweighted sample.

selecting 'Black' instead of a South Asian term. Similarly, speaking English only increases dramatically one's probability of self-identifying as 'White' (by nearly 5 times) or 'Black' (by a factor of 25) as opposed to South Asian.

Finally, the variable reflecting mixed ancestry also produces striking results. Respondents who report some ancestry other than (or in addition to) South Asian are over seven times more likely than those who do not to describe themselves as 'White' rather than South Asian, and over four times more likely to call themselves 'Black' than South Asian.

In sum, education, acculturation and mixed ancestry all seem to relate strongly to Asian Indian household heads' choice of racial label on the census – even in a context where the framing of the question points them to one category above the rest. However, this group constitutes only a portion of the larger South Asian community of all ages and family status to which we might wish to generalise these findings. In the next section, simple descriptive statistics are presented to shed some light on the racial identification of other South Asian heads of household, and finally on Asian Indian children, the next generation.

#### *Taking national origin and generation into account*

The hypothesis that national origin affects choice of racial label cannot be thoroughly explored here, both because the sample of non-Indian South Asians is a very small one, and because – as noted earlier – the race question on the 1990 census is structured differently for Indians than it is for other South Asians. However, Table 3 presents the distribution of racial responses for the four largest South Asian groups, from which at least two points of interest emerge.

First, there appear to be distinct differences in the patterns of race reporting across national origin, although the small numbers of some of the groups entail large confidence intervals around these estimates (not shown). Indians display the highest likelihood of selecting the 'Black' category, while Sri Lankans followed by Pakistanis are most likely to describe themselves as white. Second, the extent to which non-Indian groups used the 'Asian Indian' checkbox to describe themselves is considerable, and it also varies by national origin. Only half of the respondents of Bangladeshi origin identify themselves as such; roughly the other half simply checks 'Asian Indian'. At least two explanations may be given for this 'borrowing' of the Indian checkbox. One may be that

**Table 4.** *Generation, race, nativity and ancestry*

Generation	Race	Nativity and ancestry				All
		US-born		Foreign-born		
		Mixed ancestry	No mixed ancestry	Mixed ancestry	No mixed ancestry	
Household heads	South Asian	7.8	56.1	60.7	93.7	90.0
	Other	92.2	43.9	39.3	6.3	10.0
	N =	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Children	South Asian	21.2	92.5	41.4	91.3	83.7
	Other	78.8	7.5	58.6	8.7	16.3
	N =	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
		255	1,333	29	713	2,330

Notes: 1. The sample of children includes all children of Asian Indian-origin household heads, as well as all other children identified as being of Indian origin, regardless of the ancestry or birthplace of their household head.

2. Here the 'Other' category of race includes all responses other than a South Asian one (e.g. White, Black, etc.).

3. 'Mixed ancestry' reflects reports of some ancestry other than a South Asian one.

Source: IPUMS 1990 1% unweighted sample, Asian Indian householders and children.

respondents gravitate to the printed category that most closely resembles their self-definition, even if it is not a perfect fit. In this sense, the 'Asian Indian' category on the US census becomes a pan-South Asian umbrella for all respondents with roots in the subcontinent. The second, and likely simultaneous, explanation is that South Asian respondents who report their ancestry or birthplace outside India but indicate 'Asian Indian' race are a testimony to the shifting of geopolitical borders in South Asia over the course of the twentieth century. It is likely that many respondents in this sample of heads of household were born in what was once India but is now Pakistan or Bangladesh.

Let us now examine generation. As explained above, the racial reporting of household members other than the head, and especially minor children, is much less likely to reflect self-identification choices. Nevertheless, the racial description of youth may still provide some insight into the ways that future changes in the nativity balance of the South Asian population – immigrant versus native-born – may affect the group's racial profile in the United States as a whole.

Table 4 compares the racial reporting of Asian Indian householders to that of a sample of children 18 and younger that includes the children of these householders, as well as other children who are identified as being of Asian Indian origin (by birthplace or ancestry), regardless of the origin of their heads of household.<sup>13</sup> The last column of Table 4 indicates that the children are 60 per cent more likely than the householders to be racially identified as something other than South Asian.

Cross-tabulating both samples by nativity (US-born versus foreign-born) and ancestry (mixed ancestry versus no mixed ancestry reported) offers some insight into these differing patterns of racial identification. Among the householders, the

vast majority (93 per cent) is made up of foreign-born respondents who do not report having any ancestry other than South Asian. This group, in turn, is unlikely to use any racial descriptor other than a South Asian one: only 6 per cent deviate from this pattern.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the adults, the sample of children is much more diverse: only 30 per cent are foreign-born respondents who do not report any non-South Asian ancestry. Instead, the largest component of this sample is made up of US-born children without mixed ancestry, but they make up only a little over half of the sample. However, neither of these groups demonstrates patterns of racial reporting that are substantially different from those of the heads of household. Instead, the greatest contributor to the differences between householders' and children's racial reporting overall appears to be the higher degree of mixed ancestry among the children. Respondents who list some ancestry other than South Asian make up less than 4 per cent of the householder sample, but they contribute over 12 per cent – three times as many – of the sample of children. Among these mixed-ancestry children, only 23 per cent are identified as South Asian on the race question; instead, 54 per cent are reported as 'White' and almost 10 per cent as 'Black' (details not shown). This result is broadly consistent with Allen and Turner's (1996) finding that over 80 per cent of the children of Asian Indian/white marriages were listed as 'White' on the 1980 US census – a higher rate of white identification than for any other Asian/white combination.

## Concluding discussion

Together, the multinomial logistic regression on the Asian Indian householder sample, coupled with the descriptive results for all South Asian household heads and for Asian Indian children, yield mixed results for the three hypotheses outlined earlier. The 'generational divide' hypothesis receives the most support, as immigrants appear more likely than the US-born to be racially identified as South Asian in both the samples of Indian householders and children. However, in the sample of children, the theorised 'linear' versus 'reactive' ethnicity divide does not seem to be at work so much as differences in the degree of mixed ancestry. The absence of a 'linear'/'reactive' contrast among the children may be due to the fact that among them, nativity does not distinguish immigrants from their children, but rather it marks 'child immigrants' from 'immigrants' children' – that is, the 'one-and-a-half' generation from the second.

Some evidence appears for differences in racial self-identification by national origin, but the limitations of the data – namely, small sample sizes for the non-Indian groups – preclude definitive conclusions.

Perhaps the most striking pattern to emerge from the analysis of Indian heads of household is the consistently parallel directions in which the probabilities of reporting as 'White' or 'Black' are affected by the independent variables. In other words, the data refute the implicit assumption behind the 'ethnic awareness' hypothesis that the probability of adopting the black racial label is inversely related to the probability of adopting the white one. Instead, independent variables that increase the likelihood of selecting 'White' also increase the likelihood of selecting 'Black'.

The regression results vindicate the assumption embodied in the 'contest of ethnicities' hypothesis that 'Black' and 'White' constitute binary components of a single system of racial labelling, one to which the use of South Asian labels

stands as an alternative. Still, the support for this hypothesis is mixed. While socio-economic status (when measured by educational attainment, but not income) is positively correlated with the probability of identifying as South Asian, greater acculturation (as measured by US birth and English monolingualism) increases the likelihood of using mainstream, non-South Asian labels. Nor do the age and sex variables provide support for the 'contest' idea.

Although none of the three hypotheses receives unconditional support in this analysis, several findings merit further exploration in connection with likely future developments in the American South Asian community.

First, the South Asian population of the United States is growing more diverse in terms of national origin (Morning 2001). A growing share of Pakistanis, for example, might raise the overall rate of self-identification as white in the South Asian community, as well as discourage any trend toward using the 'Asian Indian' census category as a pan-ethnic South Asian identifier. In contrast, a growing Bangladeshi presence might produce the opposite effect. And either development might affect which racial categories are listed on the census form itself in the future.

In addition to becoming more diverse in terms of nationality, immigrant inflows from South Asian countries have also become more socio-economically and occupationally heterogeneous since the early 1970s. Although the multinomial analysis conducted here found no evidence of association between family income and racial label, it did reveal a considerable influence by educational attainment. Among the Indian householders with a Bachelor's degree or higher (69 per cent of the sample), over 95 per cent described themselves as South Asian, but among the less-educated householders, less than 80 per cent did. Thus shifts in the educational attainment of the South Asian community might modify its racial reporting patterns. Greater occupational and income diversity could have a similar effect, as a larger share of working-class members might expose the South Asian community to greater discrimination. Misir (1996: 57) writes:

Working-class or state school-educated second generation Indian Americans do not see a natural alliance or unity with other Asian American groups. They do know that when they are called 'Dothead' the slur is meant for them, and others who look like them. These young Indian Americans are more inclined than their elite peers to socialize exclusively with each other at their universities' large Hindu youth, South Asian students or Indian cultural groups.

Thus the class evolution of the South Asian American population warrants future inquiry.

The 'generational divide' notion that second and later generations have significantly different attitudes toward racial self-definition compared to the first generation has important implications for the South Asian community in the United States. As a relatively new, post-1965 immigrant flow, this group currently has little generational diversity; in 1990 it was largely a first-generation community. The extent to which this remains the case will depend largely on the future volume of immigration (and emigration) and on South Asian American fertility rates. Assuming, however, that the first generation will come to represent an ever-declining share of the total South Asian community, we would expect the use of the racial terms 'White' and/or 'Black' to increase, all else equal. When all Asian Indians from the 1990 census sample are considered,

regardless of age or household status, and the children of all Indian household heads are included as well regardless of their reported ancestry and birthplace, 83 per cent of this sample of 7,758 describe themselves as South Asian. Among the US-born segment of this sample, however, only 65 per cent use a South Asian term. Instead, 25 per cent of the second generation is identified as 'White', and 5 per cent as 'Black'.

Both mixed ancestry and some type of 'reactive' ethnicity appear to contribute to differences in racial reporting between first-generation immigrants and their second-generation offspring. However, it is an unusual kind of reactive ethnicity that results in the second generation being more likely to racially identify itself with the dominant white group. In Portes and Rumbaut's original model (1996), the first generation faces considerable discrimination, which mobilises the second generation to define itself as distinct from the dominant group. But the highly affluent Indian American community of the late twentieth century, concentrated in professional occupations yet small in numbers and geographically dispersed, has not faced the same virulent prejudice as other contemporary immigrant groups. As a result, the second generation's reaction to the American racial landscape appears to be fuelled less by the first generation's experience of discrimination and more by its purposeful disengagement from traditional American racial schema. Where George (1997) finds the refusal to be raced especially adamant among the first generation, Mazumdar (1989: 53) hypothesises that 'US-born children may not be able to escape color prejudice as easily as immigrant parents'. Kibria (1996: 81) sums up the generational identity difference in the following manner:

'Native' conceptions of racial identity are likely to have far less meaning for second-generation South Asian Americans than they do for the immigrant generation. Particularly given their exposure and socialization into a post-civil rights political environment, one that has been characterized by a heightened consciousness of race, second-generation South Asian Americans may find it more necessary than their parents to directly confront the dynamics of U.S. racial thinking.

Finally, if the South Asian population in the United States continues to grow in both absolute and relative terms, attitudes about racial group membership are likely to change as well. Kibria (1996, 1998) suggests at least two ways in which this might take shape. First, in larger numbers South Asians may be increasingly perceived as an economic threat, either to whites or to racial minority groups. In this instance, the size of the population interacts with its class composition to determine which groups are most likely to see South Asians as competitors. This competition and possible conflict could be instrumental in redrawing racial boundaries. Second, Kibria predicts that a larger South Asian community will make 'greater efforts to gain a political voice in the United States,' and that as part of this process, it will increasingly turn to 'racial self-definition and positioning' (Kibria 1998: 73). The firing of racial and ethnic entities in the furnace of politics has been observed in countless instances both in the United States and abroad (Bell 1975; Horowitz 1985; Portes and Rumbaut 1996). The commonality of this process, coupled with the United States' long history of defining all its citizens along racial lines, make it unlikely that any South Asian 'refusal to be raced' will survive long past the second generation.

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## Notes

- 1 Interview, 17 June 2000, Washington DC.
- 2 South Asia is commonly understood to include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; Afghanistan, Burma and the Maldives are also included by some writers. I use the term 'South Asian' to refer to individuals with ancestral origins in this region, but who do not necessarily identify themselves as part of a South Asian collectivity. As Nazli Kibria (1996: 77) notes, the term is 'highly problematic, masking deeply salient divisions of nationality, culture, religion and language'.
- 3 But see Omi and Winant (1994) and Bashi and McDaniel (1997) for more comprehensive discussion of the differences between race and ethnicity.
- 4 Afghans are the exception: the Census Bureau classifies them as 'White'.
- 5 A black former sailor told Gwaltney (1993: 90) of his travels in Madras, India and Alexandria, Egypt: '... they got some stone black citizens in both of them towns, not to mention the places in between 'em! Hell, no, they ain' white, an' if you could see 'em you sho' wouldn't be askin' no question like that.'
- 6 Ironically, this reaction may bind South Asians closer to the black community, by using the latter as a constant point of reference (Rajagopal 1997: 52).
- 7 Singh (1996: 101) aptly cites George S. Schuyler's 1929 essay, 'Our Greatest Gift to America', which refers to the boon that came in the form of 'the sense of superiority over blacks which new European immigrants were able to maintain in adjusting to the painful realities of their American existence'. See also Prashad (2000).
- 8 Thanks to Jyoti Thottam for these anecdotes.
- 9 Portes and MacLeod (1996) also find that girls are more likely than boys to accept the pan-ethnic label, as are younger children.
- 10 Miscoded native American Indian ancestry might also be inflating the counts of those reporting as white or black, by mistakenly including European and African Americans who intended to report native American ancestry. However, since half of the household heads who report as white or black are foreign-born, it seems unlikely that miscoded European and African Americans could approach anything near a majority of these categories.
- 11 Nativity – i.e. whether one is foreign-born or US-born – also tends to reflect immigrant generation. Although normally being born in the US is insufficient to indicate whether one is second-, third- or a later generation, the relative recency of immigration inflows from South Asia make it a fairly safe assumption that the bulk of US-born respondents of South Asian origin are second-generation. The extremely young age structure of this native population supports this assumption: its mean age is 12 years, and the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile a mere 15 years old.
- 12 The respondents who describe themselves as 'American Indian' – not shown separately here but rather included in the 'Other' category – also have relatively low socio-economic levels, but they show a much lesser degree of acculturation. This choice of label probably reflects for the most part an unfamiliarity both with official US documentation and with the national practice of referring to indigenous peoples as American Indian.
- 13 Note that this procedure includes all children of Indian household heads but does not automatically include the children of Asian Indians who are not household heads. Unless they are otherwise identified as Indian through their birthplace or ancestry data, children of Asian Indians who are married to non-Indian household heads are excluded.
- 14 It should be noted here that although US-born respondents make up less than 6 per cent of the householders' sample, this group appears to have a strikingly high likelihood of using racial labels other than South Asian. This probably stems in part from some erroneous inclusion of individuals of native American Indian ancestry, due to the complications of census coding discussed earlier in the paper.

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