

Q&A: Stanford scholar on how high-skilled Asian immigrants have become the benchmark for achievement

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Silicon Valley has seen a large wave of immigration, and now has one of the highest per-capita populations of foreign-born residents in the United States. Social scientists have given a lot of attention to how immigrants have adjusted to their new home and how they do – in education, work and economic status – compared to the U.S.-born population.

But until now not much research has looked at assimilation from the other direction – from how the host population is shaped by immigration, in cultural, demographic and political terms.

Stanford Assistant Professor Tomás Jiménez departs from the traditional sociological approach in his latest research project that examines three areas of Silicon Valley – Cupertino, East Palo Alto and the San Jose neighborhood of Berryessa – and how their third-generation American residents are being impacted by an influx of immigrants.

In an interview with the Stanford News Service, Jiménez discusses the project and his findings from the Cupertino case study, "When White Is Just Alright: How Immigrants Redefine Achievement and Reconfigure the Ethnoracial Hierarchy," which was recently published online in the *American Sociological Review*.

Jiménez is working on a book that will incorporate the findings from the entire project.

Why did you pick East Palo Alto, Cupertino and Berryessa?

I'm trying to enhance our theoretical, and in some degree empirical, understanding of assimilation. What does immigration mean for all of the people whose families have been here for multiple generations? Each of these communities gives an opportunity to look at different populations, different [socioeconomic status](#).

In the case of East Palo Alto, it's how are Latino immigrants shaping life for the black population? In Berryessa, which is mostly middle class, there is a pretty large Vietnamese population, but also notable [immigrant populations](#) from Mexico, China and India. The established population there is also mixed: white, Latino, African American and Asian.

Cupertino is, socioeconomically, at the other extreme from East Palo Alto. It's a very affluent area with highly skilled Asian immigrants at the same socioeconomic level as the host, or white, population. There are also Asian Americans with deep generational roots in Cupertino.

How do you study assimilation compared to how it has been studied in the past?

The traditional way of studying the native population with respect to assimilation is to ask native-born whites about their opinion of immigrants and whether they think immigrants compete for jobs, and to see whether their views are motivated by racial animosity or a realistic group threat.

Some researchers are now asking the same kinds of questions of African Americans. The underlying idea is that if whites, as the dominant population in American society, looks positively upon immigrants, then

it will be a lot easier for immigrants to assimilate. But most of the social science research examines how immigrants and their children adjust to a new social, economic and political environment.

These same [social scientists](#) – and I include myself in this group – often marvel at how much immigration is changing the United States. But what we haven't really looked at is what this means for the people who don't trace their recent family history to an immigrant origin.

So, if immigrants are changing the very social, economic and political dimensions of U.S. society – and I think they are – then we have to ask how everyone else is adjusting to these changes. In essence, I'm taking the questions we ask of immigrants and applying them of the established populations.

So far, you have results for the Cupertino case study. What did you find?

The broader finding is that Cupertino implies immigrants are not just coming here and fitting into established ethnic and racial categories and all that those categories imply with respect to some very important aspects of life, like education. But instead, in some contexts, immigrants might be flipping established categories on their heads.

What do you mean by flipping established categories?

In survey research, if you want to know whether immigrants are assimilating socioeconomically, you compare them to native-born whites. How are Latinos doing in school compared to whites, for example? In Cupertino, that white benchmark has been squashed and replaced by Asian. And most surprisingly, the shift impacted what "white" means. It doesn't represent the top. The conception of

achievement was upended. Historically, a "model minority" can meet or even exceed the standard-setters but there is no effect to the standard-setters because the relevant comparison is between Asians and other minorities. In Cupertino, where there are no other minorities, whiteness has come to represent academic mediocrity, while "Asianness" stands for high achievement, success and working hard.

How did you do your research?

We [Jiménez and sociology doctoral student Adam Horowitz] didn't set out to uncover how whiteness was being flipped on its head from what it traditionally means; we really set out to understand quite inductively how individuals U.S. born who have U.S.-born parents are making sense of these massive, immigration-driven changes going on around them. We interviewed families, teachers, school administrators and other city or neighborhood leaders.

Does this just confirm stereotypes that Asians are smart and driven?

The study is not about stereotypes, affirming them or not. What is new here is that an immigrant group has managed to change how the host population is viewed and sees itself. And how immigrants can redefine achievement norms.

Is this unique to Cupertino?

This study is not generalizable, and it wouldn't be an appropriate use of our data to try to make broad empirical statements. You can't take our findings here and say that this is how it is in other communities. There were conditions, this study suggests, that allowed this ethnoracial hierarchy flip. First, it's a very upper class setting. What distinguishes

Asian immigrants – who make up 70 percent of students in the population – to whites – who make up 23 percent of students – is not class. They [white and Asian] also have the same desires for their kids: good college, the goal that their kids replicate their good fortune.

These conditions make it so if one does extremely well, by comparison, the other is perceived as not doing well. Though make no mistake, white students in Cupertino are still doing fine and they're going to do well. But in Cupertino, we found that this flip in what it means to be white results in whites changing their behavior to adopt the norms of Asian immigrants and there even results a stereotype threat for whites. Some white students, for example, said they felt they were expected to do poorly in certain subjects because they were white.

From an academic standpoint, this project examines an issue in a different way than has historically been done. For the nonacademic audience, what can be gleaned?

There are many nuances that are entailed in the way that immigration is changing things. One important nuance is that [immigrants](#) are not just the poor, the tired and the huddled masses. They are also people who are coming here and doing extremely well. And they're doing extremely well from the get-go. That has implications for everyone else – how they think about themselves ethnoracially, how they perceive what it means to fit in.

The theoretical lesson from Cupertino is not that whites are in decline or that being white no longer connotes privilege but rather there's a variation in the experience of being white. Hopefully this shows the utility of thinking about assimilation as something we're all doing to varying degrees.

More information: [asr.sagepub.com/content/early/ ...
22413497012.abstract](https://asr.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/09/24/22413497012.abstract)

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