

# Interracial marriages involving Asian-Americans still can leave racial barriers

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(Phys.org) —A University of Kansas researcher says the high rate of interracial marriages among Asian-Americans should not simply be interpreted as a litmus test of assimilation for the minority group.

Second-generation Asian-Americans who marry white Americans are not always able to transcend racial barriers without problems, and their biracial children face the same obstacles, said Kelly H. Chong, an associate professor of sociology who authored the study "Relevance of Race: Children and the Shifting Engagement with Racial/Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Interracially Married Asian Americans," published recently in *The Journal of Asian American Studies*.

"With the multicultural environment that has emerged in the last few decades that has made it easier and made it more fashionable to be different, we now celebrate diversity, so that makes a difference," Chong said. "But even for Asian-Americans who believe in the general multicultural framework, they find that within their actual lives it's very difficult for them to just blend in through intermarriage and sometimes even for their children who are biracial."

As part of the qualitative study, Chong interviewed middle-class couples living in the greater Chicago area that included one Asian-American spouse and one white spouse. The Asian-American respondents were of Chinese, Korean and Asian Indian descent.

"It's important to shed more light into the ways in which different groups

assimilate and become incorporated as Americans," she said. "And it's not the same for everybody. Also, within this new context of multiculturalism and color-blind ideas, we have to more fine-tune the whole assimilation theories that have come out of sociology."

Chong said Asian-Americans face both the "model minority" stereotype, where they are perceived to achieve a higher level of success based on their race, and the "forever foreigner" problem, even if their family has lived in the United States for several generations.

"They will still get questions like 'where are you from?' or 'your English is so good,' because your looks always mark you as being a foreigner," she said. "That's why I was very interested to see where Asian-Americans would fit into this."

Through the interviews she found that the Asian-American spouses experienced this growing up, particularly if they lived in a mostly white community. Many noticed similar occurrences with their own children from the interracial marriage.

"I find that a lot of it has to do with the way you look. Biracial kids who look more Caucasian have a much easier time than ones who look more Asian, because the ones that look more Asian just get marked," she said.

Overall, Chong said a key finding in her study was how most Asian-American parents in the interracial couple typically gave little attention to their own ethnicity until they had children.

"It's just so interesting how many of the participants said that they themselves couldn't care less. They actually say if I didn't have children, I wouldn't even be carrying about any of this business of reclaiming my ethnic identity or roots. It's just because of my children," she said.

Chong attributed that idea to the fear that a minority culture could become absorbed into a majority culture, or, to the fear of "cultural erasure," something that has happened historically in many societies.

Asian-American parents said they were also more attuned to the possibilities their biracial children will face issues growing up related to their race and ethnicity, particularly if they look less white.

"They were aware that they need to be prepared because their [children](#) will go through identity and cultural struggles," Chong said.

The white parents in the interracial couples would tend to downplay these issues.

"They're not ignorant. It's just they tend not to attribute too much significance to racial matters," she said. "At least they don't want to, whereas the Asian-American parents are vigilant about it because they themselves have experienced all of this growing up."

As sociologists continue to study the effects of immigration, she said it would be crucial to continue to study the implications of interracial marriages and biracial individuals and how they negotiate their ethnic and racial identities over their lifetimes.

"This assimilation path is not really following the old European ethnic model," Chong said. "There's something different going on. It's hard to tell what is going to happen in the future."

**More information:** "Relevance of Race: Children and the Shifting Engagement with Racial/Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Interracially Married Asian Americans." Kelly H. Chong. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Volume 16, Number 2, June 2013, pp. 189-221. [DOI: 10.1353/jaas.2013.0019](https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2013.0019)

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