

The Foundation Review

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Open Access*

2009

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Wing Yi Chan

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Recommended Citation

Yi Chan, W. (2009). Supporting Asian-American Civic Engagement: Theory and Practice. *The Foundation Review*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-09-00017>

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Supporting Asian-American Civic Engagement: Theory and Practice

Wing Yi Chan, M.A.

Introduction

Youth civic engagement has received increased attention from social scientists. Promoting youth civic engagement is particularly important because people who are engaged as adolescents are more likely to participate as adults (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). Further, research suggests that engaged youth have higher self-esteem and stronger ties with community members (Schmidt et al., 2007). Although promoting youth civic engagement has clear benefits to youth and to society at large, few studies have examined the factors that encourage or hinder civic participation of Asian-American youth (Junn & Masuoka, 2008) despite the rapid growth of this population over the last 10 years (U.S. Census, 2004). Thus, we know little about the pathways to civic engagement among Asian-American youth. Although the research on African American and Latino youth provides some insights on Asian-American youth civic development, unique promoters and barriers to Asian-American youth civic engagement exist, given this group's distinct historical, cultural, and sociopolitical experiences. The purpose of this paper is to identify influences on Asian-American youth civic engagement and to offer suggestions to foundation staff on how to evaluate theories and programs that are designed to support Asian-American youth civic development.

Who Are Asian-American Youth?

Asian-Americans—in particular, Chinese, Japa-

Key Points

- This paper is a review of relevant research related to the civic engagement of Asian-American youth.
- Little work has been done to understand the civic engagement activities of Asian-American youth. However, unique promoters and barriers to Asian-American youth civic engagement exist, given this group's distinct historical, cultural, and sociopolitical experiences.
- Asian-American youth may have two different *ethnic* and *racial* identities, and these identities may be related to different kinds of civic engagement. Asian-American students who have a stronger pan-Asian identity are more aware that their fate is linked with other Asian-Americans and therefore are more likely to engage in activities that aim to unite different Asian ethnic groups to promote the rights of Asian-Americans as a whole. Ethnic identification with a particular group (e.g., Vietnamese or Chinese) may encourage more social activism related to the specific social justice issues of that group.
- Foundation theories of change and program design should take into account whether the types of proposed civic engagement outcomes are appropriate to the participants' racial and ethnic identities.

nese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Indians— have been members of the U.S. since the early 1800s. Since the first settlement of Chinese labor in California in the 1840s, Asian-Americans have experienced racism and been excluded from mainstream society (Zhou & Lee, 2004). For example, a series of

racist immigration laws barred immigrants from many Asian countries. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 excluded Chinese from immigrating to the U.S. for almost 60 years. The Asian-American population began to increase drastically after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 and the fall of Saigon in the late 1970's. The Immigration Act abolished the race-based quota system and allocated a 20,000 per country limit for family reunification and skilled labor (Zhou, 2004). The U.S. also resettled refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos after the Vietnam War. As a result, close to 70% of today's Asian-American population are foreign born, and 76% of the Asian foreign born came to the U.S. between 1980 and 2000. Currently Asian-Americans, including those who are multiracial, represent 4.2% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2004).

For Asian-American youth, racial and ethnic identities can be two distinct identities.

Asian-American youth do not form a homogeneous group; the diversity reflects the immigration history of Asian-Americans:

- Because Japanese were never excluded from entering the U.S. like other Asians, Japanese Americans have the highest percentage of third- and fourth-generation adolescents and thus have the highest percentage among Asian-Americans (65%) of English-only speakers.
- On the other hand, 15% of Vietnamese adolescents speak English less than very well.
- The percentage of Asian-American youth living below the poverty level in 1990 ranged from 4.4% of Japanese to 52% of Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong (Zhou & Lee, 2004).

The cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences among different groups of Asian-Americans have great implications for understanding the development of their civic engagement because such diversity may translate into different forms

of civic activities and various levels of civic commitment to multiple communities. This article will discuss how programs can incorporate the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity among Asian-American youth to affect their pathways to and forms of civic engagement.

How Can We Promote Asian-American Youth Civic Engagement?

Although few studies have examined the civic development of Asian-American youth, much can be gleaned from the literature on how multiple identities and minority youth commitment to their racial/ethnic communities affect African American and Latino youth civic engagement. This literature can also inform the theories of change behind foundation programs.

Previous research with Latino adults found that increasing pan-ethnic consciousness led to higher voter turnout (Stokes, 2003); however, promoting a pan-ethnic identity may not be a significant pathway to increased civic engagement among Asian-American youth because some do not identify with their race despite being grouped into one racial category. Many Asian-American youth identify with their own ethnic group instead of the pan-Asian identity (Hong & Min, 1999; Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002). For Asian-American youth, *racial* and *ethnic* identities can be two distinct identities. Moreover, their identification with different communities may affect their civic activities. Although little is known about how Asian-American youth's ethnic identity affects their civic engagement, research on Asian-American students' collective action has examined the impact of the pan-Asian identity in greater detail (Rhoads, Lee, & Yamada, 2002; Wei, 2004). The pan-Asian identity was the driving force behind the Asian-American Movement in the '60s and has united different Asian ethnic groups on college campuses to form pan-Asian organizations (Rhoads et al., 2002; Wei, 2004). Asian-American students who have a stronger pan-Asian identity are more aware that their fate is linked with other Asian-Americans and therefore are more likely to engage in activities that aim to unite different Asian ethnic groups to promote the rights of Asian-Americans as a whole (Rhoads et al., 2002).

On the other hand, it is possible that those who have a stronger ethnic identity would participate more in their own ethnic communities instead of the larger Asian-American community. For example, youth from refugee families may feel that they have different concerns than their U.S.-born counterparts and, therefore, may be more involved with their own ethnic community. Hence, the multiple identities of Asian-American youth complicate the pathways to and forms of their civic engagement.

Multiple Racial Identities: Suggestions for Foundation Staff

Theory of Change

Since research has consistently found that Asian-American youth are more likely to identify with their own ethnic groups, the theory of change behind programs that aim to promote Asian-American youth civic engagement should include the impact of *both* racial and ethnic identities. Grantees should not assume the importance of the pan-Asian identity. The emphasis on racial and/or ethnic identity would depend on the program's intended civic outcomes. If the purpose of the program is to promote political awareness among Asian-American youth, then raising pan-Asian consciousness may be appropriate because the current political system emphasizes Asian-Americans as one racial group. On the other hand, if the program intends to encourage Asian-American youth to participate in their local communities, then the effects of ethnic identity may be more important because many Asian-American youth live within, and feel closer to, their own ethnic communities (Loo, 1986; Mazumdar, Mazumdar, Docuyan, & McLaughlin, 2000; Logan, Zhang, & Alba, 2002). Thus, the importance of racial and ethnic identities is related to the program's intended civic outcomes, and the theory behind the program needs to consider such relationships carefully.

Program Design

When evaluating programs that aim to promote the pan-Asian identity, foundation staff need to question whether grantees have carefully consid-

ered the diversity among different Asian ethnic groups when designing the programs. This is important for several reasons. First, some Asian ethnic groups may endorse the pan-Asian identity more than others; for instance, Koreans were found to be more conscious of their pan-Asian identity than Chinese and Japanese (Masuoka, 2006). Second, tension between different Asian ethnic groups discourages pan-Asian collective action (Okamoto, 2003). As a result, it may be difficult to promote a pan-Asian identity while targeting youth from multiple ethnic groups, because of possible underlying tension between the groups. If the goal is to promote the pan-Asian identity, the program needs to include activities to facilitate understanding and respect among participants from different ethnic groups. Activities that elicit racial pride have also been found to increase pan-Asian consciousness (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). For example, visiting Asian-American museums and attending lectures by Asian-American leaders can help Asian-American youth from various ethnic backgrounds to gain a better understanding of their shared history and promote solidarity among them. In sum, programs that aim to promote Asian-American civic engagement through developing the pan-Asian identity need to recognize the differences and similarities among Asian-American youth and include components that help youth to understand how the diversity that exists within their community can be an asset to their civic participation.

The forms of civic engagement vary greatly among Asian-American youth because of their multiple identities and interests. Instead of defining civic engagement for grantees, foundations can focus on evaluating whether the suggested civic outcomes are relevant to the target population. The choice of civic activities should rest on the youth; Asian-American youth who participate in any civic programs should have the right and responsibility to decide how they would like to engage civically and politically. Such a choice should be considered as one of the criteria when foundation staff are evaluating civic programs for all young people, including Asian-American youth.

Commitment to Racial/Ethnic Communities

Sánchez-Jankowski's (2002) intergroup theory of civic engagement suggests that youth from historically oppressed groups are more likely to engage in civic activities that help the advancement of their group and to feel more responsible to their community than to the larger society. For example, a group of immigrant Latino youth reported high levels of community involvement but low levels of electoral activities because they felt that the political system does not address their needs as minorities, and they must rely on themselves to improve their community (Bedolla, 2000). Such commitment to one's own racial/ethnic community is found among Asian-American youth as well.

To promote Asian-American youth civic engagement, foundations can take an active role in funding projects that seek to develop theories on activist identity development.

Many Asian-Americans participate in civic activities that aim to challenge social inequality against their own racial and ethnic groups because they feel excluded and marginalized regardless of their generational, immigration, and socioeconomic status (Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999; Yeh, Kim, Pituc, & Atkins, 2008). For example, a group of young Asian-American college students participated in the Asian-American Movement in the 1960s to establish Asian-American studies on the West Coast (Wei, 2004). They protested against ethnocentric education and demanded to learn about the history and contribution of Asians in the United States (Wei, 2004). More recently, Asian-American youth mobilized themselves via the Internet to protest a line of racist T-shirts from a large clothing store (Wei, 2004). Across college campuses, many Asian-American students joined pan-Asian and ethnic student organizations to celebrate their cultural

heritage and promote their rights as Asian-Americans (Rhoads et al., 2002). Similar to other youth of color, many Asian-American youth are committed to their racial and ethnic communities, and their civic activities are likely to orient toward these communities instead of the larger society.

Commitment to Communities: Suggestions for Foundation Staff

Theory of Change

Evidence from previous research suggests that Asian-American youth are committed to their racial and ethnic communities, and their civic engagement is likely to take the form of action against social injustice. However, few psychological studies have examined the development of an activist identity (Watts, 2004). We know little about how individuals develop their interests in and become committed to social justice. To promote Asian-American youth civic engagement, foundations can take an active role in funding projects that seek to develop theories on activist identity development. Following theories of sociopolitical development (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003) and liberation psychology (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003), a theory of activist identity development needs to take a population-specific approach with an emphasis on the distinct historical, cultural, and sociopolitical experiences of the population (Watts, 1994). A theory of activist identity development for Asian-American youth would consider their diverse social and political experiences. Some examples might be the following:

- The effects of World War II internment camps are critical to understanding the civic engagement of Japanese Americans.
- Refugee experiences are important to many Southeast Asian-American youth.
- Chinatowns play a significant role in the adaptation and development of generations of Chinese Americans.

An emphasis on Asian-American youth's unique historical, social, and political experiences is critical to the development of a population-specific theory of activist identity. Similar to many youth

TABLE 1 Suggestions for Theory Development and Program Design/Implementation

Theory development	Program design/implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Use of racial and/or ethnic identity theories depends on the intended civic outcome of program · Develop an activist identity theory · Emphasize unique experiences of Asian-Americans (e.g., internment camp, refugee background) · Expand boundaries of civic engagement to include activities relevant to target population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Include activities (e.g., visit Asian-American museums) to elicit racial pride · Include social justice-oriented activities · Institute transformative civic education with community involvement · Create internships at local community organizations · Include leadership and career training · Create partnerships with local community-based agencies · Conduct needs assessment before start of program

of color, Asian-American youth are likely to engage in civic activities that aim to promote social justice. Thus, an activist identity theory can help to advance our knowledge of how to promote and sustain activism within the Asian-American community.

Program Design

In addition to funding projects that work on theory development, foundations can help to promote Asian-American youth civic engagement by providing support for programs that are social justice oriented. Activities that raise critical consciousness and provide opportunities and tools for youth to analyze and challenge social and political systems are important to the development of civic engagement among Asian-American youth because they are more relevant to the lived experiences of the youth (Wei, 2004; Zhou & Lee, 2004; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). For example, when designing a civic education curriculum for Asian-American youth, transformative civic education may be a more appropriate choice than mainstream civic education because it recognizes the multiple dimensions of one's citizenship and teaches students to challenge the status quo and examine power relationships (Banks, 2008). A community component may also be helpful. For example, schools can invite leaders from the Asian-American community to speak about the issues of their community and opportunities for youth to participate. To support Asian-American youth civic engagement, programs should provide

Asian-American youth with opportunities to explore their cultural, social, and political identities and to critically analyze and challenge oppressive social and political systems. This type of civic education helps students to understand and experience their multiple dimensions of citizenship and apply their knowledge and skills to promote social justice.

Since many Asian-American youth are interested in improving their racial and ethnic communities, it is important to develop civic programs that prepare them to take on leadership roles. Foundations can encourage grantees to develop programs that include leadership training in addition to short-term community involvement. Leadership training such as workshops on effective communication and networking can help Asian-American youth to become leaders of their communities and to increase the political capacity of their communities. Civic programs that increase Asian-American youth's capacity as change agents for their communities are necessary to sustaining their long-term civic engagement (see Table 1 for a summary of recommendations).

Impact Fellow Program

The Impact Fellow Program is a youth civic project in Chicago designed specifically for Asian-American youth. This program illustrates how an agency has incorporated Asian-American youth's multiple identities and commitment to their racial and ethnic communities to design a civic program

that aims to promote sustainable leadership in the Asian-American community.

Asian-Americans began to reside in Chicago as early as the late 1800s. As a result of the 1965 immigration law, the population of Asian-Americans increased rapidly over the next 20 years. By 2000 there were 423,603 Asian-Americans (excluding Pacific Islanders and native Hawaiians) living in the state of Illinois. Asian-Americans make up about 4% of Chicago's population. In comparison to the first wave of Asian immigrants in the early 1900s, the Asian-American population has become more diverse in terms of ethnicity, immigration history, and socioeconomic status. Despite their long history in Chicago, Asian-Americans are not well represented politically. To date, there are no elected officials of Asian descent in Chicago. In 1992 a group of visionary Chicago community activists, academicians, and business leaders established the Asian-American Institute (AAI). The mission of the institute is to advocate social, economic, and political equity for the Asian-American community through education, research, and coalition building.

In 2007 AAI started the Impact Fellow Program (IFP). IFP is a summer leadership program that aims to provide young Asian-Americans with tools and opportunities to engage their communities around issues of interest. The program consists of two components: leadership training and internships. The leadership training includes workshops on communication, networking, risk taking and change making, negotiations, public speaking, and team building. Further, the program incorporates the unique historical and social experiences of Asian-Americans in its training by including workshops on identity development, Asian-American history, and issues that currently confront the local and national Asian-American communities. In addition to workshops, fellows visit community partners and legislative representatives. After three weeks of initial training, fellows are placed in ethnic organizations and government offices where they work three days a week for a month. Since 2007 AAI has graduated two cohorts of fellows and plans to continue the program in the summer of

2009. Although a formal evaluation has not been conducted to examine the effectiveness of IFP, participants have expressed an increased sense of connectedness to the Asian-American community, and one fellow has since become a community organizer.

IFP fills the gap in youth programming in Chicago because it is one of the few programs that aims to promote the pan-Asian identity and movement. Because the focus of IFP is different from other programs offered in the area, it is probably not seen as a competition by other social service agencies; rather, many agencies are community partners and welcome IFP fellows to intern at their agencies. The partnership between the Asian-American Institute and other local agencies also aids the recruitment process and ensures that participants are from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. A careful evaluation of the needs of the local community is critical to the success of any Asian-American youth civic programs. Foundations can play an active role in ensuring the local sensitivity of civic programs by requiring grantees to conduct a needs assessment of the local community and/or to have local community partners. A civic program that meets the needs of the community and of the youth is more likely to achieve its goal of supporting youth civic engagement.

Another unique aspect of IFP is the extent to which youth exercise choice over their internship experience. Applicants to the program indicate their preferences for different types of civic activities, internship sites, and skills they would like to acquire. Although not every wish is granted, IFP tries to match participant interests with agency needs to ensure a meaningful and fruitful internship experience. Thus, participants have the chance to interact with and learn from community leaders about their own issues of interest. Internships at local ethnic organizations also help to promote a greater sense of community among participants because they can experience how their work can create change in their own communities. The experience of being change agents is particularly empowering among Asian-American youth because, as young people

of color, they often experience marginalization (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Yeh et al., 2008). Active participation in the local community is a valuable experience for many Asian-American youth.

Finally, IFP's commitment to developing leadership in the Asian-American community is critical to promoting sustainable civic engagement among Asian-American youth. Through leadership and career training, participants gain knowledge and tools that are necessary to become critical thinkers and engaged citizens more broadly. Career training plays an important role in promoting civic development as well. Previous research found that employment stability is related to political involvement (Shanahan, Mortimer, & Krüger, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002). When youth are unemployed or underemployed, they are less likely to participate in civic activities because of limited personal resources (such as time) and lack of connection to their communities (Youniss et al., 2002). This is a particularly serious problem for youth who do not graduate from college, because fewer jobs are available to them. Thus, career training needs to be an integral component of Asian-American youth civic programs, especially for youth who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. When funding projects that aim to support Asian-American youth civic engagement, foundations can consider expanding the boundaries of civic programs to include career development and leadership grants.

Conclusion

Asian-American youth are one of the fastest growing populations in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2003). The health of our democracy depends on participation from all members of our society. Thus, it is critical for us to learn more about what factors promote and/or hinder the civic engagement of Asian-American youth. As is seen among African American and Latino youth, Asian-American youth are likely to have multiple identities and show greater commitment to their own racial and ethnic communities. Depending on the salience of their racial and ethnic identities, they are likely to participate in different kinds of civic activities. Thus, foundations can support Asian-American youth civic engagement

by funding research that investigates the relative salience of these two identities. When deciding what programs to fund, foundation program officers can question whether the programs carefully consider the relationships between these two identities and the intended civic outcomes. Because of their stronger racial and ethnic identities, Asian-American youth are likely to feel more connected to their racial and ethnic communities than to the larger society. As a result, they are likely to participate in civic activities that are social justice-oriented because of the history of oppression against Asians in the U.S. Foundations can support and sustain activism among Asian-American youth by funding investigations on the development of an Asian-American youth activist identity and programs that promote leadership and sustainable involvement of Asian-American youth.

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Wing Yi (Winnie) Chan, M.A., is a doctoral student in the Division of Community and Prevention Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Currently she is working on her dissertation, which examines whether the collective historical, social, and political experiences of Asian-Americans impact Asian-American college students' civic engagement. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wing Yi Chan, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology, 1007 West Harrison Street (M/C 285), Chicago, IL 60607-7137 (email: wchan8@uic.edu).