



Immigrant Integration *and* Asian-American Community Development

by Lisa Hasegawa and Gen Fujioka

DURING XU LIN'S FIRST YEAR IN PHILADELPHIA high school, he was assaulted so often he lost count of the incidents. Lin was 16 and spoke little English. He recalls that, as a recent immigrant from China, he had no understanding of the dynamics of his racially mixed neighborhood or what to do about the violence. When he was attacked by white teens in the neighborhood, the police would not take a police

report. Teachers did nothing to prevent racial name-calling or attacks in school. In his second year, an outbreak of attacks in school sent several Chinese students to the hospital. "That is when,"

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Lin recalls, “we had to organize. We learned to complain. We learned to work together.” Lin and his classmates met with counselors, the principal, and others. Their persistence led the school to increase security and to provide a school bus to shuttle students around the worst trouble spots in the neighborhood.

In the eight years since Xu Lin’s arrival, more than 2.5 million Asian immigrants have been lawfully admitted into the United States.¹ In addition, it is estimated that 1.3 million undocumented Asian immigrants reside in the country, many of whom are recent arrivals.² Over the next 20 years, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the Asian population will increase from 4 percent to 7 percent of the total national population, with most of that increase a result of immigration.³

If Lin’s experience upon arriving to the United States was extreme, other Asian immigrants continue to face a range of overt and covert discriminatory conditions and barriers.⁴ As a consequence, many Asian immigrants remain marginalized. The poorest quarter of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders continue to be substantially poorer than non-Hispanic whites.⁵ Lower-income Asian immigrants are more likely to live in substandard housing, work in low-wage jobs, operate marginal microbusinesses, and lack access to adequate health care. They are cab drivers, restaurant workers, laborers,

and home-care aides. Their experiences and challenges are often eclipsed by the relative success of professionals and higher-profile entrepreneurs of Asian descent.⁶

The challenge of immigrant integration, bringing new arrivals into what President Barack Obama describes as “one American family,” has long been a central concern for Asian and Latino and, more recently, African-American community-based organizations.⁷ Now research indicates that the social implications of the success or failure of immigration integration efforts extend far beyond the impact on immigrants themselves.

In “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century,” *Bowling Alone* author Robert Putnam argues that the nation’s growing diversity tends to suppress public engagement among minority and majority populations. Based on a large-scale national survey, Putnam indicates that while over the long term immigration and ethnic diversity bring positive benefit, in the short and medium term, diversity creates a general decline in social capital. “People living in ethnic[ally] diverse settings appear to ‘hunker down’—that is, to pull in like a turtle,” writes Putnam.⁸ The results are declines in public participation, voting, volunteerism, even donations to charitable causes. According to Putnam, as neighborhoods become more diverse, residents become more mistrustful of their neighbors. Instead of celebrating diversity, they “huddle unhappily in front of the television.”⁹

As with his other writings, Putnam’s latest conclusions have stirred controversy and criticism. But as Xavier de Souza Briggs notes, while we may disagree with some of Putnam’s conclusions, the research provides “good enough” evidence that increased diversity is associated with declining social engagement. Briggs, formerly at MIT and now with the Obama administration, concludes that the evidence should compel public and private actors to “be more purposeful about forging interethnic bridges, and function at a much larger scale to address growing diversity.”¹⁰

Putnam’s own conclusions are not fatalistic. He argues that active intervention to build community and engagement can overcome the tendency

to withdraw. He argues for expanding programs that foster interethnic interaction, English-learning opportunities and affirmatively growing “bridging” forms of social capital.¹¹

Building Supportive Communities

For the past 10 years, a network of nonprofit organizations has worked to engage Asian-American immigrants, Native Hawaiians (who are indigenous, not immigrant), and Pacific Islanders in building community capacity to address unmet needs. The National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (CAPACD) is a member-based network involved in a wide range of community development activities in 18 states and more than 25 metropolitan areas. Collectively, its members have developed more than 5,000 units of affordable housing in cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, and New York. Member organizations also provide training for new workers, micro-enterprises, and small businesses and have built neighborhood health clinics and youth centers to serve otherwise unmet needs in Asian immigrant, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific-Islander communities.

With the delivery of linguistically and culturally accessible services as a starting point, CAPACD and its members also recognize the need for advocacy that services alone cannot address. Restrictive immigration policies continue to separate families and push tens of thousands into abusive conditions. Racial and sexual harassment remain ongoing scourges. Programs providing English skills training and other forms of assistance to immigrants are chronically over-enrolled and frequently threatened with cutbacks by unsympathetic elected officials. When facing such hostility or adversity alone, most immigrants tend to withdraw or, as Putnam would say, “hunker down.”¹²

To counter this inclination, CAPACD and its members provide support to start-up immigrant-led organizations addressing immediate needs while also seeking to engage those organizations in advocacy for broader reform. Bringing community organizations together in common-cause links local experience to systemic problems.

This work of framing and “connecting the dots” is critical groundwork to forge a common agenda with other communities of color and low-income groups.

From support for national campaigns to support for immigration reform to local tenants organizing to improve housing conditions, CAPACD promotes advocacy from the ground up. CAPACD’s technical assistance program emphasizes a peer-to-peer approach that supports the sharing of culturally relevant program models between communities—often bridging the lack of shared competencies that immigrant-serving organizations may experience at a local level. Similarly, CAPACD has mobilized and supported local community leaders to inform and participate in CAPACD’s advocacy at a national level and, most recently, in its regional and statewide initiatives in California. In each of these contexts, CAPACD provides immigrant communities with a forum to find their own voice.

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Building Bridges between Communities

But what is the role of a race-specific organization such as CAPACD in the goal of building cross-racial identification and solidarity? Mutual assistance within specific ethnic communities is generally considered more likely to build the “bonding” form of social capital than the more transformative “bridging” form. “Asian Americans helping Asian Americans” may be a model for racial self-help, but not for broader change. More challenging are examples where stronger group identification can result in increased inter-group competition (e.g., redrawing of the districts of elected officials to favor one ethnic group or another). Would the strengthening of a national formation of an Asian and Pacific-Islander coalition undermine the aim of establishing a more universal identity?

Putnam himself offers part of an answer to this question. He notes the value of organizations based in immigrant communities that engage members. “Ethnically-defined social groups (such as the Sons of Norway or the Knights of Columbus or Jewish immigrant aid societies) were important initial steps toward immigrant civic engagement a century ago,” Putnam writes. “Bonding social

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capital can thus be a prelude to bridging social capital, rather than precluding it.”¹³

In Putnam's view, bringing immigrant communities into the civic dialogue, even dialogues organized by ethnicity, can be a necessary step toward building a more perfect union.

Organizing Asian immigrant, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific-Islander communities in particular may demand the development of values and tools that foster bonding and bridging social capital in the context of great internal diversity. As has often been noted, “Asian-Pacific Americans” as a racial classification is more a political concept than a culturally or historically rooted identity.¹⁴ Consequently, CAPACD's membership includes organizations that collectively cover a dozen languages and are rooted in the experience of immigrants from the breadth of Asia and across the Pacific to Guam, as well as Native Hawaiians. Within our members' lifetimes and personal experience, wars were fought and atrocities committed in the name of ethnic and religious identities contained within the definition of “Asian-Pacific Americans.”

Given these sometimes harsh histories and experiences, sharing knowledge or resources among CAPACD members requires overcoming significant ethnic and cultural differences to build trust and a common agenda. Neighborhood and community projects offer one setting for diverse populations to work through those differences and to build trust based on shared aspirations.

An example of such bridge building is the work of one of CAPACD's founding members, Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), based in Los Angeles's historic Japantown. In the course of developing housing and community space in Japantown, LTSC cultivated real estate development expertise and a solid track record. Then, with the support of CAPACD, LTSC obtained a start-up grant to provide technical assistance to other community-based organizations. LTSC then partnered with organizations with roots in the city's Chinatown, Thaitown, Koreatown, and Filipino community to build affordable housing in other neighborhoods. Most recently, LTSC has begun to provide technical assistance to organizations in

the predominantly Latino East Los Angeles area and another based in the African-American community of South Los Angeles.

A differentiating element of LTSC's approach toward technical assistance is that the organization trains staff of its partner organizations and shares the development fees from the projects. This collaborative approach has built goodwill and fostered partnerships for other joint activities, such as a multiethnic small-business support program. Through such partnerships between LTSC and community-based organizations, more than 400 units of affordable housing in nine neighborhoods have been built or are in the process of being constructed.

Finding Shared Values

CAPACD members have gained more experience with cross-racial and multiethnic projects to build not only housing but also community facilities to provide direct services and to engage in shared advocacy. Recently, CAPACD partnered with the National Council of La Raza and the National Urban League to expand foreclosure prevention outreach and counseling. As a result of this shared work, CAPACD has organically developed a sense of shared values and aspirations.

A recent initial survey of CAPACD members indicates the potential and support for growing cross-racial and multiethnic collaborations. The survey asked directors and staff of a dozen member organizations in California to rank priorities for CAPACD's future work. The organizations surveyed included agencies that historically served Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Thai, Korean, Vietnamese, and Hmong immigrant communities.

The survey found that, after addressing concerns about organizational resources, among a field of 36 options, respondents indicated broad support for three substantive priorities, which are quoted here verbatim: (1) “help develop the next generation of API (Asian and Pacific Islander) community development leaders;” (2) “connect newer organizations in underserved communities with more experienced groups for support and technical assistance;” and (3) “build alliances with other communities of color to create more

inclusive housing and community development policies.” The second and third priorities reflect strong support for the kinds of “bridge building” activities proposed by Putnam and others. Arguably the first priority does as well, because within the Asian-American community, younger leaders come increasingly from formerly underrepresented communities.

The aforementioned survey offers only an initial indication of interest. But even if the results indicate only a kernel of support for bridge-building efforts, the experience of CAPACD’s members suggests that there are promising opportunities to grow cross-ethnic and cross-racial collaboration within immigrant-serving community development organizations.

Even if there is the desire to build partnerships, few paths exist to do so. Too few community development programs affirmatively support community-building collaborations. Indeed, the goal of community building has largely dropped off the agenda. Affordable-housing programs increasingly favor larger “plain vanilla” projects rather than smaller projects that are scaled to address community-based initiatives. Community planning processes that could foster engagement have been devalued. In the zero-sum struggle for funding, programs such as the Community Development Block Grant often instill competition and a turf-war mentality rather than collaboration among communities at the local level.

Today, after helping to ease the conflict in his high school, Xu Lin, who is now attending college, works for a founding member of CAPACD, Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, as a youth organizer. “Too many youth drop out or join gangs to protect themselves,” he says. “We need to do more to help them learn the skills to make things change.”

The struggle of low-income immigrant communities to gain a foothold and overcome treatment as “outsiders” is a critical first step toward creating the ideal of an inclusive community. In this unique historical moment, building social networks to include those efforts in a larger cross-racial dialogue could be a lasting legacy of our collective efforts.

ENDNOTES

1. The Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 2, 2008. For the sake of brevity, this article considers refugees together with immigrants, although a more thorough discussion would distinguish between the two.
2. Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, *A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States*, Pew Hispanic Center, 2009.
3. The Pacific-Islander American population is also expected to increase over the same period, although less as a result of immigration given that many Pacific-Islander Americans are citizens by birth.
4. Margery Austin Turner and Stephen L. Ross, *Discrimination in Metropolitan Housing Markets: Phase 2. Asians and Pacific Islanders*, the Urban Institute, 2003 (the national survey finds significant rates of discrimination against Asians and Pacific Islanders in housing markets).
5. R. Patraporn, P. Ong, and D. Houston, *Closing the Asian-White Wealth Gap*, the University of California Los Angeles, 2008.
6. For additional discussion of unmet Asian immigrant needs, see the Urban Institute, *Building Capacity: The Challenges and Opportunities of Asian Pacific American Community Development*, 2000, 1.
7. See Barack Obama’s acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, August 28, 2008.
8. Robert Putnam, “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century,” *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2007, 1371–74.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
10. Xavier de Souza Briggs, “On Half-Blind Men and Elephants: Understanding Greater Ethnic Diversity and Responding to ‘Good-Enough’ Evidence,” *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2008, 218–228.
11. Putnam, 164–65.
12. Pei te-Lien, P., Mary Margaret Conway, and Janelle Wong, *The Politics of Asian Americans: Diversity and Community*. Routledge, 2004, 67–68.
13. Putnam, 164–65.
14. Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

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