

== Preface ==

In 1997 President Clinton announced his intention to create a national dialogue about race. No American president had ever voluntarily confronted this social problem. Clinton unveiled his ambitious Initiative on Race in a commencement address at the University of California—San Diego. He proclaimed (Clinton 1997):

A half century from now when your own grandchildren are in college there will be no majority race in America. Now, we know what we will look like, but what will we be like? Can we be one America, respecting, even celebrating, our differences, but embracing even more what we have in common? Can we define what it means to be an American, not just in terms of the hype in showing our ethnic origins, but in terms of our primary allegiance to the values America stands for and values we really live by? Our hearts long to answer yes, but our history reminds us that it will be hard. To be sure, there is old, unfinished business between black and white Americans, but the classic American dilemma has now become many dilemmas of race and ethnicity. That is why I have come here today to ask the American people to join me in a great national effort, to perfect the promise of America for this new time as we seek to build our more perfect union.

The day before giving this speech Clinton issued executive order 13050, creating the President's Advisory Board on Race. Included in its goals were "promote a constructive national dialogue to confront and work through challenging issues that surround race" and "bridge racial divides by encouraging leaders in communities throughout the Nation to develop and implement innovative approaches to calming racial tensions" (President's Advisory Board on Race 1998, A-1).

To achieve these goals the advisory board held forums for dozens of religious and corporate leaders, supported a nationwide "Campus Week of Dialogue," and organized hundreds of town hall-style meetings around the country. President Clinton attended three of these meetings, including one that was broadcast on national television. The Initiative on Race also obtained funding from fifteen federal departments and agencies for "an historic gathering of the nation's leading

scholars on racial and ethnic relations," which resulted in a two-volume anthology more than a thousand pages long (Smelser, Wilson, and Mitchell 2001, 1). One year into the initiative, CNN reported a poll that found that 48 percent of the American public believed the initiative would improve race relations.¹

President Clinton's goals are still shared by many people in the United States, yet few of us now remember his Initiative on Race. Its moment in the public spotlight passed quickly, leaving in its wake no new program or policy nor even an enduring image of reconciliation. One reason for the initiative's shortcomings was the very problem President Clinton identified when announcing it: "The classic American dilemma has now become many dilemmas of race and ethnicity."

Since the 1940s social scientists have used the phrase "the American dilemma" as shorthand for the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between blacks and whites over the questions of why racial inequality exists and what should be done about it. Sustained international migration since the 1970s means that many other groups are now encountering these issues. As a result, one branch of the social science literature on immigrants examines the repercussions of demographic changes as whites of European ancestry become a smaller proportion of American society. Another branch focuses on immigrants' economic adaptation, looking for signs of upward mobility. With mid-twentieth-century African American history in mind, many scholars ponder "the potential for deep social conflict resulting from the immigrant quest for progress and the obstacles that such a search entails" (Waldinger 2001b, 329). Social conflict, however, involves symbols and not just material conditions such as population and poverty. Thus another aspect of the new American dilemmas concerns racial and ethnic adaptation: how immigrants interpret and respond to new identities and inequalities that result from perceived physical and cultural differences.

I examine racial and ethnic adaptation among immigrants (of which refugees are a subgroup) with the help of some inconspicuous people living in some obscure places. Most U.S. residents have never met Hmong (pronounced "mung") and Khmer (commonly called Cambodian) refugees and have never heard of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and Rochester, Minnesota.² These groups and places appear marginal to the "real diversity" typically studied in international cities such as Los Angeles, Miami, and New York. Yet policy makers, journalists, and social scientists can learn much about American society's new racial and ethnic dilemmas by looking at diversity in less-well-known places. According to the sociologist Howard Becker (1998), we should more often study "cases that don't fit" in order to counterbalance the tendency

of scientific inquiry to focus on a narrow range of topics dictated by conventional wisdom.

I compare Cambodian and Hmong refugees because these two groups are commonly subsumed within aggregates such as Southeast Asian, Asian American, and even the residual category “other Asian.” In addition to belonging to the same race (according to the American system of classification), both groups have a low socioeconomic status and a common migration history rooted in failed U.S. foreign policy. Despite these similarities, the Hmong in Laos and the Khmer in Cambodia belong to very different ethnic groups. By beginning my analysis with this distinction in ethnic origins I am able to analyze how the histories, politics, and cultures that Cambodian and Hmong refugees bring with them shape their adaptation to American race and ethnic relations.

The Hmong in Eau Claire and the Cambodians in Rochester would in any case be worthy of investigation if only to learn about immigrants in small cities, since most research is conducted in large urban areas. But the previously insular midwestern cities that now have significant Asian (and Hispanic) populations are much more than interesting “deviant cases”—sociologists’ term for situations whose atypical qualities reveal exceptions to accepted generalizations. Carefully choosing cases using precise theoretical and methodological criteria creates a powerful comparative research design on human behavior in social groups. My analysis therefore compares the Hmong in Eau Claire with those in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cambodians in Rochester with those in Chicago, Illinois (see figure P.1).

In this comparative context minor groups and out-of-the-way places suddenly become very important because they raise fascinating theoretical questions. Perhaps Cambodians and the Hmong have similar forms of racial and ethnic adaptation regardless of where they reside because they are Asians with low or moderate incomes in an affluent and predominantly white society. Conversely, living in a large or small American city may determine the refugees’ adjustment to new social identities and inequalities. Another theoretical possibility is that being Hmong or Khmer shapes responses to contested identities and inequalities no matter what social environment the refugees live in. Finally, the interaction between the refugees’ ethnicity and the urban social structure could produce a hybridity of patterns in their racial and ethnic adaptation.

In fact, all of these outcomes are evident among Cambodians and the Hmong in the Midwest because racial and ethnic adaptation is a multi-dimensional process. The refugees are adjusting to different types of social

Figure P.1 The Upper Midwest of the United States



Source: Graphics Division, Learning and Technology Services, University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire.

identities, such as “Asian American” and “American citizen,” and varied forms of inequality, such as stereotypes and institutional discrimination.

Yet despite this complexity a central pattern is evident: the refugees’ ethnic origins are the primary influence on their racial and ethnic adaptation. Cambodians in Rochester have views of American diversity that are more like those of their compatriots in Chicago than they are like the views of the Hmong in Eau Claire. Similarly, the Hmong in Milwaukee have views about race, ethnicity, and inequality in the United States that are much closer to those of the Hmong in Eau Claire than to those of Cambodians in Chicago. This finding supports the transnational perspective on migration and its premise that explanations of immigrant adaptation must include circumstances in their homeland. It also suggests the need to revise prevailing theories that are based on examinations of assimilation, ethnic competition, and modes of incorporation, which focus almost exclusively on events in the host society.

To demonstrate the importance of ethnic origins for immigrants’ adaptation, I start with two chapters on concepts and theories from two related yet distinct fields of research: immigration and race and ethnic relations. Chapter 1 makes the case that despite an incremental increase in research on immigrants’ homelands, prevailing theories about immigrant adaptation minimize or ignore cultural variations among immigrants. Chapter 2 presents the concept of ethnic origins and explains how cultures, as well as homeland histories and politics, establish ethnic boundaries and ethnic identities that influence how immigrants respond to new boundaries and identities in the host society. It also discusses the research design I developed to test the ethnic-origins hypothesis on two ethnic groups in four cities.

The next two chapters focus on Southeast Asia and establish that Cambodians and the Hmong have distinctive ethnic origins. Chapter 3 examines the historical, political, religious, and kinship components of Khmer ethnic origins in Cambodia, and chapter 4 examines the same factors for the Hmong in Laos (for readers who wish to proceed to the book’s core chapters, this information is summarized in table 2.4, “Components and Qualities of Khmer and Hmong Ethnic Origins”). Two subsequent chapters on places describe the midwestern urban environments in which the refugees resettled from the mid 1970s through the 1980s. Chapter 5 presents the experience of small-town hospitality and hate as the refugees became the first nonwhite populations to live in Eau Claire and Rochester. Chapter 6 presents the refugees’ encounter with ethnic succession in the urban pecking order as they established enclaves in distressed neighborhoods in Chicago and Milwaukee.

Chapters 7 through 12 compare the refugees’ racial and ethnic adaptation in large and small cities. In most chapters I first use survey data

to reveal the main similarities and differences by ethnicity and urban locale. I present some of these quantitative data as descriptive statistics, such as percentages and means, but I also employ OLS (ordinary least squares) regression analysis to pinpoint particularly interesting findings. Rather than expect the statistics to prove the significance of ethnic origins, I use the quantitative data to establish the general contours of the empirical terrain. I then turn to qualitative data to explore the salient features in more detail (see appendix A for an overview of my methodologies and appendix B for a detailed discussion).

My comparative analysis of the refugees' responses to the urban pecking order and small-town hospitality and hate begins with the meanings they attach to two prominent social identities: that of Asian American and of American citizen. Chapter 7 shows that ethnic origins profoundly shape the degree to which Cambodians and the Hmong develop a sense of pan-Asian ethnicity at the micro-level. Chapter 8 determines if these refugees feel they become "Americans" when they become citizens. Few of them do, largely because racial polarization undermines national unity in the United States. Instead, urban locale and ethnic origins influence what becoming an "American citizen" means to them.

Four subsequent chapters compare the refugees' perceptions of and reactions to racial and ethnic inequality. Chapter 9 evaluates what Cambodians and the Hmong like most about the United States and whether racism is among the things they most dislike. Urban locale explains their dislikes, whereas homeland social structure (not ethnic origins) explains why the two groups differ in their assessment of the positive aspects of American society.

When Cambodians and the Hmong think about the United States as a whole they tend to emphasize the positive attributes of American society and downplay racism. Their views are quite different when they discuss specific forms of inequality. Chapter 10 examines Cambodians' and the Hmong's sensitivity to three common stereotypes about them: eating dogs, lacking a work ethic, and not belonging in the United States because they are foreign-born. Chapter 11 analyzes their perceptions of institutional discrimination in the workplace, housing market, and criminal justice system. Ethnic origins strongly influence the refugees' perceptions of prejudice and discrimination, but ethnicity also interacts with urban locale to shape their views.

Severe prejudice and discrimination against a people distinguished by race or ethnicity transform them into a minority group. Chapter 12 explores Cambodians' and the Hmong's communal reactions to inequality. In 1996 the U.S. Congress significantly restricted immigrants' access to federal social welfare programs by making U.S. citizenship an eligibility requirement. Cambodians and the Hmong have suffered from

the law in similar ways, but they have reached different conclusions about its ramifications and what to do about it. Discussion among peers reveal that ethnic origins influence how groups mobilize and plan collective action to achieve equality. Ethnic origins thus help us understand why there are now “many dilemmas of race and ethnicity” in the United States and how they differ from those in the past.