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## “Finding our Story”: Asian-Americans at the Mexican-American Border

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### Abstract

In late 2021, a group of Asian-Americans came to the Mexican-American border to witness the dire situation that was facing asylum seekers who had been forced to stay in Mexico due to U.S. COVID restrictions. This research is grounded in the interviews of their experiences, which reveal a desire to see change at the border, the sense of dehumanization of migrant communities, and the role their faith serves in understanding migration. Additionally, the participants discuss how their own immigrant heritage is both similar and different to what they saw at the border and how this relates to the broader sense of solidarity among migrant communities. This study has relevance to the current discussion about immigration, integration, faith, and human rights, particularly in the U.S. context. Through the interviews, the common humanity and immigration history becomes clear.

**Keywords:** Immigration; Mexican-American border; asylum seekers; Asian-Americans; second-generation immigrants; xenophobia

### Introduction

In December of 2021, a group of primarily second-generation Korean-Americans traveled to the Mexican-American border in the midst of the border camp that had grown in Reynosa, Mexico due to the restrictive policies of the U.S. toward asylum seekers-particularly the Title 42 COVID restrictions. This study examines the experiences of these individuals with particular focus on how they relate their own immigrant heritage to the realities of the borders, the connections they made to their own spiritual traditions, and the insights they had in regard to reforming the situation.

Reynosa, Mexico became in many ways the center of the migration routes in 2021. Previously, the neighboring border city of Matamoros had been where one of the largest migrant camps had been formed, due to former President Trump’s implementation of the Migration Protection Protocol (Remain in Mexico), which forced migrants to stay in Mexico while they

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waited for their asylum hearing (Coronado, 2020). Though the Biden Administration sought to quickly end the Migration Protection Protocol when they came into office in 2021, they did not end the Title 42 COVID restrictions (Aguilar, 2021), which had essentially shut down the border since the spring of 2020. This policy meant that the initial camp in Matamoros was shut down, but soon a new camp was formed in Reynosa, which in some ways was an even more dire situation for the migrants due to the greater dangers of the city of Reynosa, reduced public support, and less actual space to live.

It was in the midst of this environment that this group of Korean-Americans came to experience the reality of what was occurring at the border. Through the analysis of their interviews after their trip, this study was formed. The central focus is understanding the relationship and attitude of established and often more secure immigrant communities to newly arrived and often more desperate immigrant communities. This understanding is of particular importance in a time of growing xenophobia and social division.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on the theoretical framework of group empathy theory. Sirin et al. (2016) look at this level of group empathy even between groups that are in some ways in competition due to the common sense of solidarity they have of being marginalized by the larger society. More specifically it is based in the “process where members of one group begin to internalize and vicariously experience the perspectives and emotions of members of another group even when they do not share intimate family or friendship bonds” (p. 895). In their study, they found that African Americans and those of Latin American descent had higher levels of general group empathy than their Anglo peers. This sense of group empathy was especially the case when it came to undocumented immigrants. As the authors state, “both (minority groups) strongly side with other minorities experiencing discrimination even when they perceive such out-groups to be a significant threat to their in-group economic and political interests” (p. 906). Ironically, African-Americans and those of Latin American descent were actually as empathetic to Anglos as Anglos were to themselves.

This relates to the ideas of intercultural empathy (DeTurk, 2001). She stated that ‘perhaps the most important implication of empathy is that if each of us can think of ways in which we have been both privileged and marginalized.’ She adds that through this “we might also be able to see others' liberation from oppression as our own struggle” (p. 382). She highlights that one of the keys to this intercultural empathy is based on understanding oppression and being mindful of it in order to “transcend” it. Though these ideas can be applied to minoritized groups as a whole, there is specific relevance to immigrant communities. This is particularly the case in understanding the relationship between more privileged immigrant groups and those that are currently facing greater struggles and discrimination.

### **Literature Review**

This study is based within the broader scholarship on the border particularly the negative perceptions that the concepts of borderlands and migration can cause. Further focus is placed on the specific realities of Asian-American immigrants, particularly those who would be considered second generation immigrants who are central to this research.



## **Perception of the Border**

Though there has not been a large amount of research about the reflections of individuals at the Mexican-American border, there has been some burgeoning research on the Mexican-American border as a whole. Elias (2021) focuses on how the lack of individuals' personal experiences at the border often leads to policies that could be irrelevant, unhelpful, or even harmful. There is a disconnect from what works in theory versus what works in reality.

Rosas (2019) examines the complexity of the border where in order to gain political asylum in the U.S., an immigrant must prove that they are unable to return to their native country without putting themselves or their families at risk. This level of risk, however, is decided by the Department of Homeland Security, and the immigrants are "officially rendered voiceless, effectively rightless in these proceedings" (p.308). While some immigrants may be escaping inhumane living conditions in order to preserve their lives, others are in less literal life-threatening situations, and are searching for a better place to raise their families. The United States is asking immigrants to "die to let live" (Rosas, 2019, p. 305), admitting that their native countries, and therefore heritage, culture, and history, are inhabitable, and thus bad.

Over time, U.S. citizens have become so familiar with this concept of foreign countries being horrible, terrifying places to live, that this sense of "otherness" has developed, which Elías describes as "a deeply felt-sense of difference toward groups or individuals conceived as foreign and external to one's reality" (Elías, 2021, p. 2). It is clear to see the dangerous effects of the development of otherness, as "The U.S.-Mexico border has become a zone of sacrifice" (Rosas, 2019, p. 304), resulting in desperate attempts to cross the border when the United States attempts to prevent these "others" from entering. However, many U.S. citizens also are unaware of the fact that "border residents view this area as economically and culturally rich due to the constant interaction and exchange between the two sides" (Elías, 2021, p. 6). Ignoring the fact that borderlands can be prosperous areas rather than solely dangerous areas further perpetuates the fear that so many Americans feel towards the idea of letting "others" into their country.

## **Outcomes of Negative Attitude Towards Immigration**

The negative image that has been portrayed about borderlands and their inhabitants has also affected the perception that Americans have of immigrants from many different racial and generational backgrounds. These perceptions have negated personal experiences of immigrants and limited their abilities by creating systemic promotion of downward assimilation and internalized racial oppression (Pew Research, 2013).

Perceptions of and actions made towards immigrants, however, have seemed to affect different generations uniquely. According to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, second generation immigrants are more successful economically and socially than their parents (Pew Research, 2013). The second generation Asian and Hispanic immigrants who are descendants of those who immigrated in the early 20th and 19th century (adults whose immigrant parents are older or have passed away) have exhibited success in integrating in their society. However, there is hesitation surrounding whether or not more recent children of immigrants will be able to reach the same "upward mobility," since many first-generation immigrants have had to enter the country illegally, impoverished, and uneducated (p. 9). This leads researchers to believe that they may not have as much economic

and social success adapting to the United States and those outside of their immediate communities as older second generations.

Researchers also recognize that “second generation” immigrants cannot be grouped into one large category statistically, because not all data and findings can be applied to these different immigrant groups. Cultural background and country of origin must also be considered when attempting to predict success. For example, many Hispanic immigrants tend to be less formally educated than most Asian immigrants, and therefore work lower paying jobs (Pew Research, 2013).

When considering biases and prejudices and their effects on immigrants and their children, it is often assumed that these families suffer because they cannot assimilate to “American” culture, and that their lifestyles result in less success. That is often not the case, in fact, those who migrate to the United States often settle for a lower standard of living than they have hoped in order to fit into the mold created for them. If immigrants were all professionals and highly educated, downward assimilation (when assimilating to American culture has negative effects on immigrants and their children) would be eliminated, however, the United States thrives as a result of low-wage working immigrants. Therefore, there is an extremely high demand for poorer immigrants willing to work manual labor jobs (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, Haller, 2009). Families are leaving or have left conditions unimaginable to most U.S. citizens, which makes it easier to coerce these workers into lifestyles that are less than ideal, causing disadvantages, and the disadvantages that immigrants face typically lead to the same predicted negative outcomes (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, Haller, 2009).

Portes and colleagues remind their readers of the inhumanity of this concept of downward assimilation. As they state, “Making successful outcomes less exceptional among this population should be a public policy priority. The tools to accomplish this goal are at hand” (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009, p. 18). They specifically mention what educational systems can do in order to make these successful outcomes more of a reality. They describe how an active family life, preservation of familial culture, and large school efforts to encourage students to succeed all have shown to have a positive impact on second generation immigrants’ success as well as a negative effect on downward assimilation (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009).

### **Research on the Asian American Immigrant Experience**

Additionally, children of immigrants’ understanding of race has shown to greatly affect their views of immigration. Relevant research highlights some common trends amongst Asian Americans’ experiences. The “Asian American” identity is used by so many citizens, yet most of them feel that this title is too broad and does not fully encapsulate the ethnic and cultural backgrounds that play such an integral role in how they view themselves. Stereotypical and broad categorizations with no regards of personal cultural backgrounds affect the ways Asian Americans view their heritage and identity (Greenwood, 2022).

Misconceptions surrounding Asians and Asian Americans being the ‘model minority’ and lifestyle privileges after migrating to the United States can discredit the difficulties that they have faced and continue to face to this day. This often prevents the Asian and Asian American population from receiving the help and support they need during difficult migration processes. It can also create new stressors in response to stereotypes. Despite these struggles,



the Asian American community has statistically proven to exhibit strong familial bonds, support, and expectations, ensuring continued success for children of immigrants (Xia et al., 2013, p. 3).

Stereotypes and biases have also tended to increase the development of internalized racial oppression: when the view of one's self is "heavily influenced by the dominant group's negative gaze" (Trieu & Lee, 2017, p. 2) resulting in a negative self-perception that focuses on traits stigmatized by the dominant group of society. In this situation, Asian Americans have developed internalized racial oppression, in which they perceive themselves with vocabulary and lenses that white Americans have created. For example, "there is a strong link between experiencing consistent discrimination as a result of being Asian and the pervasive desire for whiteness (e.g., blonde hair and blue eyes)," and "behaviors such as harboring self-hatred, desiring to be white, and using terms...can and do have the potential to cease over time (Trieu & Lee, 2017, p. 12)."

The detrimental effects of stereotyping, explicit racism, and internalized racial oppressive behaviors have been shown to shift through exposure to ethnic and racial history, ethnic organizations, and co-ethnic social ties (Trieu & Lee, 2017). While immigrants may not be able to avoid the inequality and disparities they face, encouraging the development of a positive relationship with one's racial and cultural background is something that can be helpful for those trying to develop a sense of identity as American citizens.

Familial connections are a major influence on the acculturation process of children in immigrant families, which can lead to an increase in identity in both native and American cultures. Developing a bicultural identity encourages cognitive development, increased social skills, and self-esteem. Parents and children of immigrant families experience different biases and acts of racial discrimination, and even more differences are found between different Asian-American subgroups. When parents prepare children for the discrimination they will face, there is a more positive relationship between children and their native and American cultures than when they promote mistrust towards these events" (Woo et al., 2020). As Trieu and Lee (2017) highlight "this is necessary work toward the dismantling of systems that perpetuate racial inequality" (p. 13).

### **Political Views of Immigrant Communities**

Asian Americans from different backgrounds obviously have different political preferences and beliefs, and therefore different opinions on immigration policies in general. Japanese-Americans are statistically more in support of a path to citizenship than Chinese or Vietnamese Asian Americans, possibly because these groups have reported experiencing less racial discrimination than Japanese Americans. Younger Asian Americans born in the United States are also more likely to vote Democrat and support immigrant rights than older Asian Americans born in their native country (Wong, 2021). The changing political realities and more anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies from the Republican Party may have also shifted the dynamics. As Tures (2020) highlights, previously Asian-Americans would vote more for Republican candidates in the Presidential elections, but since 2000 there has been a movement towards the Democratic party, which has greater support among Asian-American voters.

Sanchez focuses on the opposite shift in Hispanic American voters, as their vote actually increased in favor of Trump in 2020 versus the election in 2016 (Sanchez, 2022). He lists

multiple reasons why Hispanic voters would increase in favor for the Republican party (especially from 2016): Hillary Clinton was not on the opposing ballot which could have resulted in less Democratic female voters, topics of conversation shifted from immigration to COVID-19, and Latino voters’ perception of Trump’s hostility towards them decreased significantly (Sachez, 2022).

Despite a rise in support of Donald Trump during the last presidential election, possibly due to a shift in media coverage and the former president’s overall decrease in conversation around immigration, there is still significant evidence that immigrants or children of immigrants are more likely to vote as Democrats. The Public Policy Institute of California states that “immigrants are more likely than US-born residents to trust the federal government” (Baldassare, et al., 2018, para. 3), and that “immigrants have more favorable views on immigration than US-born residents” (Baldassare, et al., 2018, para. 4), resulting in more liberal participation in politics among immigrants.

This work seeks to expand upon some of this previous research by examining first and second-generation Asian-Americans immigrants as they are exposed to and process the realities of modern immigration at the Mexican-American border. It is of particular relevance as it speaks to the larger issue of the interaction of immigrants not only with their own specific immigrant traditions but with the larger views on immigration, particularly immigration realities that might be more controversial in the present.

## **Methods**

This study is based in a post structuralist methodological design that uses a more inductive approach (Garcia, 2019). This is one where “data more clearly tell their own story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11). As Thomas (2006) highlights this is an approach where, “though the findings are influenced by the evaluation objectives or questions outlined by the researcher, the findings arise directly from the analysis of the raw data, not from a prior expectations or models” (p. 239).

It also draws from an interpretive description design (Thorne, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004) that is a “coherent conceptual description that taps thematic patterns and commonalities believed to characterize the phenomenon that is being studied and also accounts for the inevitable individual variations within them” (p. 4). Though overlapping concepts between participants were highlighted, space was also given for the unique insights of individual participants. Both researchers analyzed the data in order to find relevant concepts, both those that related to the theme of awareness about realities of the immigration experience (particularly in relation to Asian-Americans), but also in the spirit of an inductive approach also those additional and sometimes surprising ideas that arose, which might have been outside of this exact schema. This study also draws from the larger ethnographic work on the border that the first author is involved with in helping to understand the background of the situation at the border, particularly in the city of Reynosa.

## **Participants**

All the participants were part of a small team that came to the Mexican-U.S. border in December of 2021 in the midst of the Title 42 policies of the U.S. government. They went to the city of Reynosa, Mexico, which borders the U.S. city of McAllen, Texas. This study specifically examines the experiences of four Asian-American participants who went on a trip



to the Mexican-U.S. border. They were primarily second-generation immigrants who all reside in Orange County in Southern California. They were part of the same faith community, which is what had initially propelled them to go on the trip. A short description is provided for each participant (pseudonyms were used).

-Brandon is a pastor of the local congregation where all the participants attend. He is in his early 40s. He considered himself a "1.5 immigrant" as he was born in South Korea but immigrated to the United States at a young age. He describes in some ways how he was more conservative in his views, but had been led to become more involved with immigration through a mixture of experiences. He also talks about the importance of learning about his identity over time.

-Heather was a second-generation immigrant in her early 30s. Her father had come to the United States as a young child but her mother was born in the United States. She helps run a podcast for the congregation and was particularly engaged with some of the journalistic stories about what was occurring at the border. She was also particularly concerned about the issues of nationalism within the church in regard to immigration.

-Nilcen was the one individual who was not from a Korean background. His family is from Vietnamese and Chinese heritage. He is in his early 30s. His grandparents were refugees themselves. He is a lawyer and specifically mentioned how easy it was to forget about his own family's history of migration with relative wealth that they had living in Southern California.

-The fourth participant, Kristina, worked at the church. She was the youngest of the participants in her mid 20s, and the only one without children. Her parents had immigrated from South Korea, which she highlighted was far different than the situation of being a refugee. However, her great grandparents had fled North Korea as refugees, so some of that tradition was still with her and was relevant in the discussions with her.

## **Findings**

There were several primary concepts that emerged from the interviews, some were highlighted by multiple participants while others were relevant insights from one of the individual participants. Focus was both placed on the initial thoughts about their experiences about the border and then the issues of the larger relevance to their own family's immigrant experience.

## **Experiences at the Border**

When the participants were asked about what they remembered about the experience or what stood out to them, there were a variety of responses. Heather talked about just having this one image in her head of the largely unsanitary and overcrowded camp where a mother was sitting there cooking onions over a makeshift grill. She described the contrast she has with never even having to think about food with a fully stocked kitchen and at times feels guilty for how much food waste there can be with raising children.

Nilcen talked about the paradoxes of the border particularly at the river. He described how, there were "constant contradictions, like, just, like everywhere you turn. And so that was....really hard for me, particularly kind of tough to sit with." He talked about the nice properties on the Rio Grande River on the Mexican side, but about how that same river was a source of death to so many migrants. As he stated, "if you didn't know any better, you're just like, on a nice river. And then like, you see this reality of people dying in the river." He

added sorrowfully that, "Depending on whose narrative, whose perspective, we had a very different story of the border. The 'River of Life' was fully surrounded by nature, but you'll find dead bodies floating in it from people trying to cross." He talked about how, "If you're not constantly looking or actively trying to see through the veil, you're never going to see that side of things."

Kristina gave a specifically poignant story that stood out her in mind, "I remember when we went through the tents...one of the kids, I was holding his hand, and he was joyfully giving me a tour with a little bit of pride." She commented that this "kind of struck me because it's like, this is not a house, this is not a community. And yet, he would say like, oh, this is the school, this is my school" but "it's just, it's just a tarp." She highlighted that though many people would never think to take joy or pride in such a place, for many of these children this had become part of their identity. What seemed like just chaos and poverty to those coming from the outside also held a bit of joy and even pride for these young children.

Heather mentioned how the trip helped break her out of the "binary" thinking she had about the border, the Mexican-U.S. border was much more complex with people from all different backgrounds and countries. This was especially relevant for her given her strong focus on the news about the border, which often did not portray the full picture.

## **Dehumanization**

One idea that became central in the discussion amongst the participants was the dehumanization that immigrants and asylum seekers face along the border and in the U.S. society. As Kristina talked about "how heavy the role of politics and nationality can play in a human life, when you would think a life is a life. And yet, you're seeing on the border, that that's not always, always true. She added, "there's different priorities at times, right, that kind of dehumanization." She elaborated that "at times with politics, and policies and social work, you can kind of become grouped into, you know, 10 people came through, you know, or five people deceased, or they're just numbers." However, "what matters is the person there right now, who has a name."

Heather highlighted that in the news coverage that she had been engaged with in regard to immigrants; "it was treated as an almost academic topic rather than the experiences of migrants themselves. It was almost like a story about how the immigration system was so broken... it didn't really humanize asylum seekers at all." She also asked how we could humanize the issue when it was so controlled by politics. Brandon talked about how the migrants at the border were just "invisible" to the American public. In some ways, dehumanization is not even needed if people just ignore their existence.

## **Changes Needed**

All the participants felt like there were needed changes at the border based on what they had seen and through their direct discussions with asylum seeking families. Brandon talked about how much of it may come down to better communication and relationship between Mexico and the United States to ensure some form of humane treatment was occurring. He asked that "as a nation...are we able to look at other countries with dignity...with self-respect and say...we the biggest, strongest country that cannot protect even the weakest among us?"





Kristina talked about the need for the United States at the minimum to allow asylum seekers to be on U.S. soil while they are being processed. She added that even if this was for the short term, it would be a better situation which they are currently living in. Nilcen made a similar argument stating that even if it was not an ideal situation it “would be a better situation than just leaving them on that side (Mexico) where the gang violence is so prominent.” He also pointed out how often the real push for change was lessened when there was not as much to gain politically. For example, some of the public focus on the inhumane immigration policies were lessened once Trump was out of office.

### **Race and Immigration**

The comparison was also brought up with the difference in treatment with Ukrainians and other migrant groups at the border, which at the time were primarily from Central America. This was particularly relevant when these interviews were taking place in mid 2022 just months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine when public sentiment was very favorable to Ukrainian migrants.

Brandon referred to how people saw helping Ukrainians at the time as almost trendy, but that was not extended to the Central Americans. He talked about how this was due to it being white people while “people of color in the same situation that they don't get that kind of coverage.” Heather brought up a similar point about Ukrainians- especially the idea that the acceptance of Ukrainians showed that more could be done if there was actually a political will to do it. She talked about how the Ukrainian children were so quickly moved to better conditions in the United States that they would not even have time to open up the gifts they received. This rapid response was obviously not the same for the Guatemalan children living in danger for months on the streets of Reynosa.

### **Hostility of Established Immigrant Communities**

Another concept that arose from this work is the idea that there is a tendency for immigrant populations, in this case particular Asian-American communities, to not only become apathetic but also sometimes even hostile to new immigrant groups coming in. Heather relayed the story of a Chinese-American friend she had who had come into the country through marriage but had no problem disparaging those who were seeking to come into the country “illegally.” She also talked about others from immigrant backgrounds and how sometimes there is the idea of, “we did it, so you can do it. Like there's, there's almost like less sympathy.” She described how the situation of her family immigrating was so much different and the relative ease and privilege that came with their migration as compared to those at the border.

Kristina described how though her great grandparents were refugees, her immediate family who came from South Korea had a very different situation and immigration story from those that she met at the border. Her family was “not fleeing from life threatening circumstances. And for us, it's more of a chance to thrive, versus them (refugees/asylum seekers) where they're just trying to survive.”

Brandon perhaps had perhaps the most direct critique especially to certain members of the Asian-American religious community who had often taken on the political consciousness of much of white evangelicalism including their support for Trump (which obviously entails

more anti-immigrant attitudes). He compared much of his own community to the Biblical story of the Hebrews who had forgotten they had once been slaves. He remembers thinking, "What's wrong with us? What happened to us? And I realized it is because we're like the Jews in the sense that our parents were like, the exiles are the ones that left Egypt. And now we're prospering in this land." He added that when the Hebrew people did this it led them to push out and exclude the foreigner.

## **Solidarity**

Though there was on one hand a type of distinction from the immigrant experiences of the participants and those of the migrants at the border, there was a certain sense of solidarity that they felt their community had with these new asylum seekers. As Brandon highlighted, "Finding out our story is crucial not only to our formation, but our mission to the other."

Heather described the experiences of her community as a "double-edge sword." Though it was possible for the immigrant community to be more dismissive of new migrants coming in, they could perhaps also understand their experience more. Nilcen talked about how in many ways his immigrant background drew him to the border in the first place, "it's very much in the DNA and like the history of my personal family for me to be there, so it felt like a pull in that regard."

Heather and Brandon talked a little bit about how their communities and even the church had started to evolve to take a more outreach-based perspective. Previously they had just sought to survive as a minority/immigrant community and because of that there was not much attention given to those outside their community. However, as they had become more established it was important for them to reach out. As Heather highlighted, the personal family needs and expectations in some ways did not previously give as much space for really engaging with these larger issues. As she recalled "my understanding of...helping other people, it wasn't so much on the forefront of my mind. It was sort of like, I need to make them proud. I need to help out. I need to give back to them." However, they talked about how their community had begun to look more outward in their mission.

## **Spiritual Realities and the Border**

Their personal spiritual and faith background also played a role in both going on the trip and how they saw immigrants. As Brandon described it, "I think as I got closer to God, and then as I became...a leader in the local church system, right, I began to see that spirit to formation of the local church is tied to what happens around us." However, he added that many evangelicals wanted to disengage from "tangible things" like immigration. He also wanted to emphasize that, "it's not good enough for my eyes just to have seen this. I need our members from our congregation to see it, and it needs to be like seared into our memory."

Nilcen mentioned how his own welcome into the church community propelled him to extend that welcome. As he mentioned in regard to his own "conversion," "I think a lot of my faith is based on like, paying it forward...being welcomed into the house at church with open arms. He added that he was "shown...how life is so much different with community with support with faith with hope."

Heather talked about how the love of God in her own life had to naturally extend to helping others. As she described it, "if we really, truly believe in a God who, who loves us, like, it



almost feels like, like water kind of rushing down a hill, it's like it has to go somewhere.” She added, “it can't...just like ‘pool here’ kind of thing. And so, I think naturally, my heart has been sort of moving outward.” Finally, Kristina expressed how her faith shaped the way she saw migrants, “I think it definitely helps for me to be able to see life for life, person for person and seeing each person as special as significant and living the life that God intended.” She added, “every person who has a name with a face, is significant. And I think that's something that's highlighted with my faith-faith, being able to see the Imago Dei in all people.”

### **The Resilience and Kindness of the Asylum Communities**

Kristina described how she was moved by how the asylum-seeking communities were serving them in the meal/communion that they had together. Though they had come to “help” the poor immigrant communities, in some ways the roles had been reversed. Brandon also referenced this upside-down way of seeing the situation. As he stated, this was...”not going in on a mission trip...we’re going there to be present, right? We’re just gonna hear, right, and let this mess with us.”

### **Discussion**

The results from this study demonstrate the importance of empathy towards new asylum seekers and migrants, particularly among other more established immigrant communities. One of the central ways that this empathy was expressed was the insistence that the current policies at the border cannot continue the way they are with asylum seekers living in squalor and danger on the other side of the border. As our participants highlighted, these policies go against basic human rights. It could be added that this also goes against the spirit of the UN Convention on Refugees and even US asylum policy.

This policy of deporting asylum seekers back to Mexico has become normalized due to the Migration Protection Protocol (Remain in Mexico) and Title 42 policies. However, forcing another country to “keep” asylum seekers that are coming to the US seems to defy the very ideals of the nation. As Brandon pointed out, at the minimum the US and Mexican governments should be working together to create a humane solution, not to create the facade of a solution without really seeking to assist asylum seekers at all. The incompleteness of these policies can be seen in the analysis of the number of deaths by those trying to cross into the U.S., which the CBP estimates at 853 in 2022 (Montoya-Galvez, 2022).

### **Humans vs Numbers**

In a similar way, the issues of dehumanization of asylum seekers and refugees was also raised. Kristina talked about the need to see the Imago Dei or image of God in all human beings. As was also referenced, migrants are often just seen through the lens of numbers and statistics. This, of course, can be done by those who are opposing immigration, portraying the faceless mass of people who pose a danger to the United States, but it can also be a trap that even those who are more neutral or even more positive towards immigration might fall into. It is easy to see things from that macro level and talk about the numbers, the larger structural causes, and the broader debates. In the end, immigration can just be seen as an issue- a political and structural discussion, rather than one that involves the lives of human beings. There are obviously relevant policy issues, and the numbers, economics and statistics are important, but oftentimes that overshadows and obscures the very face and lived experiences of migrants.

## Understanding One's Immigrant Heritage

Another theme that arose was the need to remember the immigrant experience and heritage. For the Asian Americans in this story, this was a much more recent experience, either being immigrants themselves or having parents or grandparents who immigrated. As Brandon highlighted through the religious reference, just like the children of Israel, it is often easy to forget that we were once immigrants as well and ironically become hostile towards new immigrants. Of course, this applies not only to Asian American immigrants but to the majority of the US population in general—the majority who came from an immigrant heritage (outside of those of Native American descent or who were forcibly enslaved in the United States).

There is often an ease of forgetting this history of immigration or framing it in terms of one's ancestors doing it the "right way" when in fact the immigration system was far different in the past, especially for those coming to places like Ellis Island who were often just allowed to enter with few restrictions. As historian Mae Ngai (2006) highlights, at times U.S. officials would accept over 99% of immigrants. This amnesia about the immigrant experience is of course very common in U.S. The grandchildren of immigrants start lambasting the next group of immigrants. The Irish immigrants who once had been discriminated against, were amongst those discriminating against the Italian immigrants, and the Italian immigrants later on could be railing against the Mexican immigrants. It seems at times like a never-ending process, but one that perhaps through history we can start at least recognizing.

Central to this paper is also the notion of how this specifically relates to the Asian American experience. There are certain caveats here. For one, many of the Korean-American immigrants live in communities that overall have more economic success than some other Asian communities with only 11% living in poverty and with a median house income of \$72,000 in 2019 compared to \$61,800 for the U.S. population as a whole (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021).

However, our participants did have ties to the refugee experience including Kristina and Brian, whose families had to escape North Korea as refugees. Through the interviews, one can see the nuance and often tension in the Asian-American experience towards new migrant populations. As Brandon pointed out, there were some in his community who he worked with that had essentially just become similar to Trump in their thinking towards immigration, and he could not quite comprehend this type of thinking. Heather also pointed out a similar dynamic due to the more conservative cultural and political upbringing of growing up in a white evangelicalism. Even though she was from an immigrant background, there was either a hesitancy or outright resistance to understanding these immigration policies amongst those she was surrounded by.

As Kristina highlighted, there's also a need amongst ethnic minorities and especially those from immigrant families to just focus on building up their own community and just surviving. Because of that, there was not as much thought given to these broader social concerns like the living conditions of migrants and asylum seekers. This is certainly an important caveat. It is often easier for those in positions of privilege to care about issues like the environment, ethical consumer choices, or even immigration because they have the political and cultural capital as well as the time to do so. However, Kristina, seems to also highlight that sometimes a group's (or an individual's) own issues or problems can become so hyper-focused upon that one loses the reality of the broader issues that are deeply important. As was referenced in the



interviews, the participants were immigrants, but they were in more privileged position. They may experience some discrimination as Korean Americans, but their lives as Nilcen described, are so far different in Orange County than those they saw at the border. As Kristin emphasized, her parents had come to the United States not to just survive, but to thrive. There were certainly struggles involved, but it was important to not let that struggle completely drown out the broader humanitarian crisis.

### **The Central of Empathy**

These interviews show the relevance and importance of group empathy theory (Sirin et al., 2016) to the current discussions on immigration. At times, previous and often more privileged immigrant communities will use their history to become more vindictive against newly arrived immigrants. A prime example of this was the 2024 U.S. presidential candidate, Nikki Haley, whose parents are immigrants from India. She used their immigration story on the campaign trail to speak against the asylum seekers coming across the border (McCorkle, 2024). Her parents were described as deserving as compared to those new immigrants crossing the border illegally.

In contrast, the perspective of the participants in this study was based in an empathy that truly understood their own family's immigration story, both some of their possible privileges but also similar struggles and feelings of desperation. They follow the pattern that Sirin found among minority participants where they felt more empathy based upon their own marginalized minority status. What the Asian-Americans in our study demonstrated is that one of the keys to that empathy consists in remembering one's history and also having the humility to understand both the struggles and privileges create one's family narrative. In this way, group empathy does not have to just apply to minoritized groups in the United States but can include the whole population who can begin to see themselves and their families in the stories of those seeking refuge.

Empathy is often lacking in the current political discussions on immigration. Immigrants are dehumanized for political ends, and people began to see them as just a faceless mass as Kristin described. Worse, they begin to just view them as a social problem. Truly interacting with asylum seekers and migrants and possibly even taking the next step of seeing one's self in their situation can perhaps lessen this collective xenophobia.

### **Conclusion**

This work builds upon work the first author (2023) was able to conduct with students at an immigration detention center in 2020. Just like with that study, this group of participants were already more prone to have more compassionate and inclusive attitudes towards immigrants or asylum seekers. These participants were not xenophobic ideologues that had a change of heart. However, that did not mean this type of experience was not impactful. These experiences drew them deeper into what those immigration realities were and perhaps helped them to become greater advocates for immigrants and asylum seekers overall.

The reality is that most Americans have little awareness or are completely ignorant about the lives of asylum seekers at the Mexican-American borders, even if are they just literally feet away from our nation. The lives of migrants stuck in cities like Reynosa are often forgotten and with that amnesia comes policies where migrants are left in inhuman conditions. If there

is going to be long term change, there has to be an actual sense and understanding of what is occurring. This study helped reveal how the children of immigrants can be at the forefront of a more humane migration policies for those currently seeking safety and a better life for their families.

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