

ISSUES AND OPTIONS PAPER:

**THE USE OF THE TERM 'ASIAN' IN NEW ZEALAND AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**



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This “Issues and Options paper” was developed from materials covered in the workshop “*New Zealand definition of ‘Asian’- The use of the term and implications for research and policy development*”.

The workshop was organised by the Centre for Asian Health Research and Evaluation (CAHRE), University of Auckland on Friday the 29th July 2005 at the School of Population Health, of the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, Tamaki Campus, University of Auckland.

The co-hosts of the event were the Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research (CACR), Victoria University of Wellington and the Centre for Asian Migrant Health Research, Auckland University of Technology.

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Executive Summary

With a background of continually changing immigration policy over the last fifty years, the diversity of New Zealand's population continues to increase. Asian peoples¹ in New Zealand have progressed from being a small group ignored as 'Other' twenty years ago to being a diverse, vibrant and significant sector of New Zealand society today. However, Asian peoples have their own unique issues and needs. Despite the increasing visibility of Asian peoples in New Zealand, the response of the state and private sectors to their needs has been variable. Asian peoples are often still invisible in government policy. Better allocation of resources according to identified needs is required for Asian peoples to fully contribute to New Zealand society.

This paper details and discusses the issues raised in a workshop held in Auckland to examine definitions of the term 'Asian' used in New Zealand. It investigates the limitations and utility of this term in advocating for resources, securing fair and equitable access to opportunity and gaining adequate representation. A multi-disciplinary, multi-sector group attended the workshop.

The key outcome of the workshop was a consensus that there needs to be sufficient fluidity and flexibility in the definition for 'Asian' to allow 'Asian' communities to be grouped together or looked at separately. As recent migrants often have different social and health status compared to members of communities with longer settlement histories in New Zealand, consideration must be given to settlement status in projects which employ the term 'Asian'. Explicit identification of the limitations and complexities of using the term 'Asian' will help improve the accuracy and utility of policy, research and other projects that use this term.

Considering the current New Zealand context, it is important that deliberations over the term 'Asian' do not create another route to marginalisation for 'Asian' peoples by either proscribing consideration of smaller groupings or by discouraging the use of the term 'Asian' outright. Overall, future policy development, programme planning and research need to be done in partnership with the communities concerned, with an explicit identification of what is meant by using the term 'Asian'.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, the term 'Asian peoples' is used to represent the diversity, plurality within the Asian communities.

1. Background

The ethnic composition of New Zealand has changed markedly in the last fifty years. This has been due to differing fertility rates amongst ethnic groups and continuing changes in New Zealand's immigration policy. Since the major revision of immigration policy in 1987, the most striking demographic changes have been seen in peoples of Asian origin. Peoples classified in New Zealand as Asian constitute a rapidly growing population and are projected to number approximately 600,000 by the year 2021².

The rapid growth of this population has exposed the lack of policy and structures to evaluate and address the needs of these peoples. In this changing environment, existing structures and concepts need to be examined. New policies may be required to facilitate the aspirations and development of these peoples, and enable them to contribute fully as New Zealanders.

A key issue is the contestability of the meaning of the term 'Asian'. The term 'Asian' in its simplest sense refers to someone with origins in the Asian continent. However, Statistics New Zealand uses the term 'Asian' to describe peoples with origins in the Asian continent, but excludes peoples originating in the Middle East and Central Asia. This definition has increasing currency in New Zealand, but it is a novel definition of 'Asian'. With either definition, 'Asian' lacks specificity as a term of description. Peoples classified as 'Asian' in New Zealand have diverse languages, cultures, religious and political backgrounds, and social and health needs.

This workshop was held to identify and address these complex issues. The aim was to bring together a multi-disciplinary, multi-sector group to:

- arrive at a working definition for the term 'Asian' and clarify whether this term requires modification and negotiation based on different contexts.
- raise understanding as to how, when, where and why the term 'Asian' may be used to advocate for resources, secure fair and equitable access to opportunities and enable representation in New Zealand society.
- raise awareness of the limitations of using 'Asian' as an 'umbrella' term to signify such a diverse group of peoples (with differences along several axes) and the potential confusion that the use of such an 'umbrella' term may cause in the allocation of resources and services to more specific groups.

Any changes proposed to currently used definitions need to traverse the policy process. Issues need to be identified and recommendations expressed clearly showing why there is a need for change to current practice. This paper aims to clarify the use of the term 'Asian' in New Zealand and to facilitate policies and practices that are of interest to all New Zealanders.

² Statistics New Zealand (2005). National ethnic population projections 2001(base) – 2021 update: commentary. Retrieved 26 August 2005, from <http://www.stats.govt.nz>

2. Record of events

Fifty-seven people attended the workshop. They were drawn from a wide-cross-section of interests and organisations, and included members of government departments, community workers, researchers and community leaders.

The workshop began with welcomes from Dr James Liu, Ruth De Souza and Dr Samson Tse representing the three co-hosting institutions. The workshop facilitator, Richman Wee then outlined the agenda and format of the day. Attendees then introduced themselves to their fellow workshop members.

Fezeela Raza (Office of Ethnic Affairs) chaired the first session and moderated the first two papers to be presented. Dr Elsie Ho (University of Waikato) discussed recent migration trends and population statistics with regard to Asian peoples in New Zealand. Jo-anne Allen (Statistics New Zealand) presented 'Views on ethnicity in New Zealand from small group discussions' conducted by Statistics New Zealand. Following these presentations, there was general discussion for twenty minutes after which the chair concluded the session with her observations of the session.

Associate Professor Manying Ip (University of Auckland) chaired the second session. Dr Kumanan Rasanathan (Auckland Regional Public Health Service) presented on 'The use of term 'Asian' as an ethnic category in New Zealand' after which further discussion ensued for another twenty minutes. This set the stage for the group discussions to follow. Associate Professor Ip concluded the session with her closing remarks and attendees were invited for morning tea.

Ruth De Souza reconvened the workshop after the interval and divided the entire group into four small groups & finalised the topics to be discussed in each group. The topics finalised for discussion were:

- Group 1&2 : The use of term 'Asian' in the context of social and health research. These groups were facilitated by Dr Samson Tse and Ruth De Souza.
- Group 3 : The use of term 'Asian' in the context of community engagement. This group was facilitated by Dr James Liu.
- Group 4 : The use of term "Asian" in Policy Development. This group was facilitated by Richman Wee.

Four of the groups discussed four questions within their group, concluding their work to break for lunch.

After lunch, Professor Colleen Ward (Victoria University of Wellington) chaired the final session of the workshop. The four group leaders presented the key points and conclusions of their small group sessions. A lively and engaging general discussion followed. Professor Ward then concluded the workshop with a summary of the day and comments on where the workshop may lead.

3. Issues

3.1 Use of the term 'Asian'

Ethnicity in New Zealand is defined in relation to relationships which have evolved historically. Understanding of the past and the way concepts of race and ethnicity have evolved in New Zealand requires an understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, New Zealand's founding constitutional document. Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides the structure and context of ethnic relationships and how ethnicity is now defined in New Zealand. Maori have been defined and redefined in New Zealand and have led the way that ethnicity is not defined by blood descent but by self identification. When a person defines who he or she is the person is indicating which one or more cultural groups or populations he/she feels most comfortable with.

Defining ethnicity is a complex and dynamic process. However, in New Zealand, 'Asian' functions as a socially constructed category that is not a genuine ethnicity. Some peoples in New Zealand may see themselves as 'Asian'. For others, the term is imposed on them. 'Asian' is also used as an outsider-label to signify "race" based on physical appearance. As such, in these differing contexts in New Zealand, 'Asian' can mean different things.

'Asian' has resonance in New Zealand in a policy domain in providing a recognised political voice for representation and lobbying and in developing research and services for specific communities. In the context of differing understandings of the term 'Asian', the purpose of clearly defining 'Asian' is to clarify these policy and service developments. The broader context of the term 'Asian' and its multi-dimensional nature (with variations not just in ethnicity but also in origin, settlement history, and languages spoken) needs to be addressed. A better understanding is required which recognises this complexity and the limitations of using 'Asian' as an 'umbrella' grouping.

Examining the Asian population in New Zealand, it is clear that the diversity of peoples grouped under the term 'Asian', along several axes of difference, presents a significant challenge to the state sector to set unitary priorities or to devise coherent policy for this Asian grouping. For example, emerging health data shows the diversity in health status amongst the various groups collected as 'Asian', and thus the potential for masking of issues by treating these peoples as a single group. The usefulness of the current Statistics New Zealand classification of 'Asian' used in the state sector is thus now in question.

3.2 Usefulness of the term 'Asian'

The term 'Asian' provides a highly inclusive category that provides a critical mass of numbers for representation and advocacy. Moreover, it facilitates visibility for peoples in New Zealand who were previously marginalised as 'Other'. As government policy moves towards evidence-based allocation of services and resources, the term 'Asian' can be used to identify the need to gather evidence from specific Asian communities, rather than being dismissed as 'Other'. The term 'Asian' also provides a basis for solidarity amongst a group

of peoples who are often perceived together by the mainstream, but amongst which specific groups are sometimes singled out for criticism.

The term 'Asian' is useful now (in some contexts), but political and demographic changes may result in the utility of the term decreasing. In policy and political contexts, definitions and the use of the term 'Asian' need to evolve to reflect these changes to maintain relevance.

3.3 *'Asian' and the media*

Negative portrait or in some case the so-called "model minority" especially those articulated in the media, can limit effective use of the term 'Asian' to advocate for resources. Mainstream stereotyping of minority groups such as 'Asians' raises sensitivities within such groups to political advocacy out of fear of being perceived as "seeking privileges" or promoting a "culture of complaint". Asian peoples thus need to negotiate the balance between asserting a place within the national culture and drawing negative reaction from the mainstream media.

3.4 *Asian people and biculturalism*

In some models, the term 'Asian' may not easily fit into New Zealand's bicultural context. However, there is considerable variation in attitudes towards biculturalism amongst Asian peoples, from those deeply committed to biculturalism and engagement of the *tangata whenua*, to those who feel marginalised by the model and who would argue for a multicultural model. The variation is also reflected in peoples' conceptualisations of their relationship to Māori and Pakeha. For example, some Asian peoples find Māori protocols of welcome well suited to their traditional customs. For other Asian peoples, there is a sense of difficulty in being a "third" party to a bipolar context with underlying conflict. It is felt that the issues of biculturalism and multiculturalism, Asian peoples' relationships with Maori need to be discussed in relation to Treaty of Waitangi.

3.5 *Unresolved issues*

A key issue is whether there is sufficient commonality amongst the culturally diverse groups collected under the term 'Asian' to make considering them together coherent in any setting. Collecting peoples together as 'Asian' may limit the chances of identifying and meeting the individual needs of smaller ethnic groups. Furthermore, some communities in New Zealand classified as 'Asian' by the state sector reject this label and even actively disassociate themselves from other Asian peoples. This particularly occurs where there is a feeling that other Asian peoples are negatively perceived by the mainstream, for example in terms of crime.

A statistical issue implicit in revisiting the use of the term 'Asian' is that 'Asian' provides statistical power as a mirror of the critical mass it provides in policy settings. If the category 'Asian' is broken down into ethnically coherent subgroups in research studies, the sample size may become too small to allow analysis or detection of differences. The abandoning of 'Asian' could thus prove an obstacle to the consideration of Asian peoples in research. But this

consideration needs to be evaluated in lieu of what meaning can be ascribed to collective 'Asian' findings.

The bicultural environment of New Zealand provides a potential obstacle to defining ethnicity more specifically for Asian peoples. Fragmentation into individual ethnic groups could further undermine visibility given current ethnic frameworks which consider ethnicity only in a binary sense, with respect to being Māori (or not) or being European (or not), such as in health and education.

In making progress on the use of the term 'Asian' in New Zealand, it is important to keep in mind that definitions, terms and concepts of "ethnicity" necessarily unite and divide by counting "who is in and who is out". As such, when used to advocate for scarce resources and support, their impact can be either constructive or negative, depending on where peoples are situated.

3.6 Challenges

The range of communities included in the 'Asian' category have diverse and unique social and cultural needs, which inform domains such as health and education. Some of these communities have now grown to the extent that their needs are requiring specific attention from providers, including mainstream services.

It is in the interest of all New Zealanders that the needs of diverse groups subsumed under the term 'Asian' are made visible as a prerequisite to addressing these needs through policy, community development and research. To coherently explore these needs requires greater insight of and refining of the 'umbrella' term 'Asian'. Delays in the process of defining the term 'Asian' may serve to mask disparities and deprivation in social areas such as health, keeping 'Asians' invisible at the level of targeted services and resource allocation.

This has been in many ways the current state of affairs for Asian peoples. In the words of one workshop attendee, "as a nation, we are waiting for something to happen." Few policies or programmes have been specifically developed to address the needs of Asian peoples. Government policy does not seem to have caught up to the increase in population of Asian peoples in New Zealand – a trend which is projected to continue.

Research may play an important part in addressing these issues – in investigating needs and providing evidence to inform resource allocation. It will also help to inform the coherence of the term 'Asian' as used in New Zealand. Such research will require multi-ethnic and intersectoral collaboration to coherently address health and social issues for Asian New Zealanders.

4. Recommended options

4.1 *Health and social research*

All labels and terminology are socially embedded and thus have a political dimension. This dimension is problematic for the term 'Asian' due to the diversity of the peoples it covers. However, as a term in New Zealand it still has strategic value in that it has increasing currency, particularly in the state sector. The challenge is to balance this value with the limitations of using the term. Reflecting this challenge, in fields such as health research, the term 'Asian' must be explicitly defined and researchers must acknowledge the limitations of using an 'umbrella' term.

In the design of questionnaires for surveys, standardised ethnicity data questions based on the Statistics New Zealand census question should be used, to allow comparability of data. Ethnic affiliations can change over time and different understandings about ethnicity can result in identification with different survey categories of ethnicity. For Asian peoples, further questions about language spoken, length of stay and country of birth (if overseas-born) and ancestry are important to better inform respondents' ethnic and cultural identity. These supplementary questions can help to improve the understanding of derived ethnicity data given the different conceptions of ethnicity survey respondents may hold.

Researchers need to take responsibility for explicitly defining the construct of 'Asian' they are using in their study. In designing studies where ethnicity data is required, early multi-disciplinary collaboration with the ethnic communities involved will prove useful. Such collaboration is vital to ensure that there is an understanding of terms being used amongst study participants. This is particularly important for self-report measures or where self identification is required. Researchers may need to maintain more comprehensive ethnicity data than that which is stipulated by funding providers. A self-reflective approach may be useful through the project planning and implementation phase, rather than reifying categories into fixed end points from the outset.

Census data gathering and analysis methods for ethnicity change in response to demographic changes. For example, prior to 1996, peoples currently output into the 'Asian' category were classified as "Other". No system can fully capture ethnicity data so issues need to be explicitly identified to allow the practical consequences of these gaps to be evaluated, and solutions formed. Explicit definitions and identifications of ethnicity are important in this regard. In particular, it is important to consider how the increasing population with multiple ethnic identities will be handled in data analysis.

Overall, however, there is still a need to develop a working definition of 'Asian' for research purposes to allow continuity and comparisons of data. Despite its limitations, there is value in the continued use of 'Asian' while new terms are developed, in preference to ignoring the peoples collected under the 'Asian' term.

4.2 Community engagement

In pursuing Asian projects, there is a need for accountability to the groups included within the 'umbrella' term of 'Asian'. Together with government support and initiatives, Asian communities need to participate in building the infrastructure to facilitate this accountability. Networking to share best practices is essential. This includes fostering talent and educating the mainstream. Asian communities also need to learn to be astute and support each other in dealing with negative mass media depictions.

4.3 Policy development

While the term 'Asian' is useful to gain attention and to argue for resources, this 'umbrella' term needs to be broken down for the effective targeting of resources. In the current political climate, it is important to justify resource allocation on evidence-based need, in addition to rights arguments.

Policy makers should be flexible in considering different dimensions of Asian peoples for different purposes. Ethnicity itself may not be the most relevant factor for some policy. It may be more important, for example, to consider settlement history in New Zealand or linguistic ability in considering the ability to access services.

The use of the term 'Asian' provides stimulus for a place on the agenda for Asian peoples to be included in 'top-down' national policy, which may not stretch to consider individual communities. However, for such policy to be effective, it needs to be complemented and integrated with 'bottom up' approaches that provide a more finely grained analysis of the appropriate categories for the given situation.

4.4 General comments

As discussed above, to make the term 'Asian' more meaningful and useful, it should be cross referenced to other markers of identity such as country of origin, acculturation, or settlement history. For migrants, length of stay in New Zealand and category of migration are particularly important variables to consider.

A proper working definition for the term 'Asian' is needed that accommodates the variations in its use. It may well be permissible to continue to use differing definitions as long as the meaning used is clear. Such an approach may be most useful, highlighting the primary value of the collective term being the visibility it facilitates due to the large population it contains. Any approach to better define 'Asian' as a term will need to accept that this definition may itself need to change over time.

5. Summary of the three presentations

Paper presented by Dr Elsie Ho – Titled “Asian Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand; Birthplace, Ethnic Self Identification, Language and Religion”.

Changes made to New Zealand immigration policy since 1986 have resulted in a rapid influx of migrants from countries in Asia who are grouped together as the ‘Asian’ population of New Zealand. Census records from Statistics New Zealand reveal that in 1991, there were 99,756 Asians who made up 3% of the total population in New Zealand. By the year 2001 figures have more than doubled to 237,459, accounting for 6.6% of the national population.

Other major ethnicities that make up the population of New Zealand are those who identify themselves as European, Māori and people of Pacific Islands origin. In 1991 Europeans made up 83.2% of the New Zealand population, yet in 2001 a decade later, Statistics New Zealand figures indicate a decline of Europeans to 80% of the total population. Figures for Māori have risen from 13% to 14.7% and people indicating Pacific ethnicities have also increased from 5% to 6.5%. While all four ethnicities of the New Zealand population are projected to increase by 2021, the projected increase for the Asian population is approximately 120% and as such, is expected to number around 600,000 people by 2021.

Interpreting population statistics on Asians as a single sub-population is misleading as it implies homogeneity of the Asian population by masking the diversity of cultures represented therein. The label ‘Asian’ includes groups with a wide range of ethnic affiliations such as Chinese, Indian, Korean, Filipino, Japanese and Thai. These groups differ in terms of birthplace, language spoken, religion, etc. Although a majority of the ‘Asians’ in New Zealand were born in countries in the Asia such as China, India, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Philippines, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Bangladesh and Pakistan, one in five had been born in New Zealand. There are also those self-identify as Asians but had been born in countries in Europe, or in South Africa, Fiji, etc.

It is also important to have some appreciation of the people who indicate that they are of mixed ethnicities. In New Zealand, people are counted as ‘Asian’ for census classification purposes if they have at least one Asian ethnicity, irrespective of any other ethnicities they may have. Thus it is wrong to assume that all people who self-identify as Asians are non-European, non-Māori or non-Pacific Islander. There is considerable diversity within the Asian communities in New Zealand in the extent to which their populations identify with mixed ethnicities. For example, the shares of the Filipino and Japanese populations that identify with a European ethnicity are much higher than the Korean and Cambodian groups.

The majority of Asians in New Zealand have appreciable capability with the English language, yet they also find comfort in their ethnic vernacular. As the Asian communities in New Zealand increase in their numbers, there are increasing diversities in terms of the languages they speak and their affiliation

with religious groups. The umbrella term 'Asian' now represents more diversity than previously assumed commonality.

The 1986 New Zealand Standard Classification of Ethnicity defines an 'ethnic group' as a self-perceived group identification and is made up of people sharing a sense of common origins, claiming a common and distinctive history and identity, possessing dimensions of collective cultural individuality and feeling a sense of unique collective solidarity. In light of the statistical evidence available on this sub-population in New Zealand there is now a case for developing a working definition for the term 'Asian' in New Zealand, to address the increasing health, social and cultural needs of a diverse population.

Summary of paper presented by Ms Jo-anne Allan –Titled 'Views on ethnicity in New Zealand from small group discussions'.

Ancestry, collective cultural identity and common geographic origin are inherently important in the formation of self-identification of ethnicity, as are political climate and environment. Over recent times increasing numbers of settlers to New Zealand have been coming from less traditional source countries. In order to adequately represent the diversity of these settlers and address associated policy and social needs, adjustments were required to the classification framework used to measure ethnicity in official statistics. Therefore, Statistics New Zealand undertook a review of the measurement of ethnicity in 2000 completed in 2005.

As part of the consultation process for RME people representing African, Middle Eastern and Asian communities from three centres in New Zealand participated in small group discussions. Discourse analysis was the qualitative analysis method used in analysis of transcripts of the recorded discussions.

In describing what ethnicity means to them, discussants spoke about the process of change within the construction of cultural identity in the New Zealand setting. Also, comments made by people belonging to the same ethnic group reflected both common elements across the group as well as individual differences, displaying a lack of homogeneity within groups. However, there were recurring views similar to written submissions for the review from all sectors of New Zealand society, reinforcing the similarity of views.

Those who were a long way along in the process of ethnic identity formation and those newly arrived here comparatively, had differing and conflicting views on their relation to ethnic groups within New Zealand. There was a strong view that people would like to identify with, or assimilate into, New Zealand, however, some wanted to identify with their original culture, and some to identify with both.

Relational discourse brought out the uniquely New Zealand bicultural context of Māori and European and the uncertainty this creates for some people who are unsure of their place in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi. Being neither Māori

nor Pākehā, they consider that they are not defined in relation to the Treaty and would like to be.

Talk was about being ascribed ethnicity by the 'majority groups' based on their physical characteristics and country of origin, being referred to as a minority group because of their belonging to a particular cultural or ethnic group and the use of the term 'ethnic' being incorrectly ascribed to people, whose food and practices, are not Māori or Pākehā.

Patterns of thought throughout the discourses on ethnicity identity in New Zealand suggested ethnogenesis for the population either born in New Zealand or residing here for many years. Age of arrival was pivotal in the acquisition of the new culture, traditions and values. There was a movement towards identification with New Zealand when length of time in New Zealand was considered and by being born here.

Talk around invisibility and the importance of some ethnic groups in New Zealand support political climate as a dimension of ethnic identification. It was expressed that groups in the 'Asian' and 'Other' categories should be differentiated as the groups want to be acknowledged and identified. It was highlighted that the use of 'Other', to refer to people in an aggregated category at the top level of the classification and for output purposes, was seen as a very negative label, also increasing their invisibility. Where groups are named they are given rights and relationship, where they are 'other' their uniqueness is dismissed.

Having a classification and output groups that cover all possibilities is a challenge and the usual procedure is to have an 'other' to account for those not fitting into the main classification groups. However, classifying people as a homogenous group in one category for statistical classifications and output encourages the notion of within group commonalities despite obvious differences.

Concern and objection was expressed about the reporting of the detailed name of an ethnic group as it was felt it could be used divisively. For example, a negative event mentioned in the newspaper naming an individual of an ethnic group could then negatively reflect on the whole group.

The discourses around ethnicity in the New Zealand context in this research indicate the need for the measure of ethnicity to be more relevant and respectful. It has also shown the impact of biculturalism on the ethnic identity of those neither Māori nor European. As seen in the discourses, ethnogenesis has occurred and needs to be acknowledged in the way ethnicity is collected and classified. The challenge is to do this in a way that can be operationalised and which provides information that users find relevant.

Summary of paper presented by Dr Kumanan Rasanathan - titled 'The use of Asian as an ethnic category in New Zealand'

The term 'Asian' is increasingly used as an ethnic category in New Zealand, but the meaning of the term varies across users, and many people described as such are not necessarily comfortable with this description. This presentation aims to consider the background and issues to this usage of the term 'Asian', and conclude with some recommendations to enable further discussion in the subsequent sessions.

Chinese and Indian peoples have settled in New Zealand since the 19th century. In that time, they have experienced racism and marginalisation. More recently, they have also had the experience of being constructed as 'model minorities'. Regardless, there has been a general lack of information and interest in the status of these communities, as reflected by the dearth of health data available until very recently.

'Asian' was not widely used as a term in New Zealand until relatively recently. The removal of bias from immigration legislation in 1987 enabled various peoples from East, South and Southeast Asia to migrate to New Zealand. The increase in these populations in New Zealand led to them being collected together as 'Asians'. From the early 1990s, parts of this population become the focus of often negative mainstream attention as 'Asians', particularly in Auckland.

'Asian' is a contestable term which has several commonly used, but differing, meanings when describing people. Most simply it can refer to someone from the Asian continent. In New Zealand, state sector and academic usage of the term often refers to the Statistics New Zealand definition adopted in 1996, which includes peoples with origins from Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the east and Indonesia in the south. This definition excludes peoples from the Middle East, Central Asia (apart from Afghanistan) and Asian Russia. This Statistics New Zealand definition has increasing currency but it differs from colloquial usage of the term 'Asian' in New Zealand, which generally excludes South Asian peoples. Indeed there is equivocation in colloquial usage between 'Asian' and 'Chinese'. This colloquial usage is a racialised construction of 'Asian' based on the 'Mongoloid race'. Finally, it is important to note that the Statistics New Zealand definition of 'Asian' is not the same as that used in other western countries. For example, in the United Kingdom, 'Asian' preferentially connotes South Asian peoples and excludes East and Southeast Asian peoples – the reverse of the New Zealand colloquial usage.

The full list of peoples included as 'Asian' in the Statistics New Zealand definition is shown in Table One. From this, it is obvious that 'Asian' does not constitute a genuine ethnicity – it in fact contains half the peoples of the world. However, despite this, 'Asian' is increasingly used as a proxy ethnic category in New Zealand, as a counterpoint to European, Māori and Pacific.

There are undoubted benefits to the use of the term 'Asian' for peoples in New Zealand who used to be ignored as 'Other'. The term collects a critical mass of

people to demand attention and a place on the agenda in New Zealand society – a place for the construction of ‘Asian’ New Zealanders as full citizens. In being positively identified by the mainstream as ‘Asian’ rather than ‘Other’, it is possible to assert these peoples’ contribution and status as New Zealanders rather than being considered perennial migrants. It also provides a structure from which to advocate for needs identification and resources – measures which are seldom possible for those labelled as ‘Other’. The ‘Asian’ banner also provides a structure for the collegiality of researchers and pooling of resources to fund such research, as seen in the health research centres that have arisen in Auckland.

Indeed, ‘Asian’ is probably the only viable current structure for consideration of East, South and Southeast Asian peoples in New Zealand. The current liberal inclusive framework of New Zealand extends to consider ‘Asians’ in a way which may not occur for more specific categories such as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Indian’ – even ‘Asian’ is still marginal

Despite these benefits, there are significant issues with the use of the term ‘Asian’. As ‘Asians’ are obviously not a single ethnic group, treating them as such is problematic. The vast diversity of ‘Asian’ peoples in New Zealand needs to be accounted for. Many people labelled as ‘Asian’ may not identify themselves as such, which poses problems for services targeted at such ‘Asians’.

The diversity of ‘Asian’ peoples in New Zealand is particularly a problem in using this category for research. ‘Asian’ does not automatically identify a group with similar social status and needs. The diversity of ‘Asian’ peoples in New Zealand (across several axes of difference such as ethnicity, settlement history, English language ability, acculturation, and socio-economic status) results in wide differences in needs in sectors such as health and education.

Thus research which employs ‘Asian’ as a category of focus is likely to fall into the trap of ‘averaging’. That is, the inclusion of high status groups with low status groups can result in masking of the needs of the lower level groups because the average indicator for the whole category will fall in the middle. With the diversity of ‘Asian’ peoples in New Zealand, the well-being of some groups may well mask needs in others. In particular, smaller groups are likely to be disadvantaged by being considered as ‘Asian’ as their needs are particularly likely to be obscured.

There is already evidence of this phenomenon in health. Early indicators present the picture of comparatively good health for ‘Asian’ peoples in New Zealand overall. However, smaller studies have suggested areas of concern in smaller groups, and recent evidence has suggested particular concerns for specific ethnic groups. Examining the socio-economic profile of ‘Asian’ peoples in New Zealand further informs the potential for ‘averaging’ to occur for this grouping, as it reveals a picture of almost equal spread across all deciles.

Further issues with the use of the term ‘Asian’ in research includes its unsuitability as an epidemiological variable, the differences between New

Zealand and other countries' definition of 'Asian' (and thus the difficulties of using overseas findings for these populations), and the tendency for studies on even specific groups to be generalised in the media as applying to all 'Asians'. There is also the concern that the increased focus on 'Asians' in New Zealand will result in further marginalisation of those peoples who remain as 'Other' in New Zealand, such as African, Middle Eastern and Latin American peoples.

Overall, use of the term 'Asian' needs to account for the fact that 'Asian' is not a coherent ethnic identity in New Zealand. This of course may change – it is possible that a pan-'Asian' identity may arise in New Zealand in a similar manner to what has occurred for younger Pacific people. However, at present, the contestability of the term 'Asian' in New Zealand should be acknowledged whenever it is used.

'Asian' is a practically and politically useful structure, but the diversity within 'Asian' peoples in New Zealand must be addressed. In a sense, what is required is "strategic essentialism", as coined by the Indian American philosopher Gayatri Spivak. That is, the political and practical benefits of the term 'Asian' should be utilised while at the same time recognising its limitations and being cautious with its use in research and service provision. However, the challenges of engaging the diversity within 'Asian' peoples in New Zealand must not be an excuse to ignore the status and needs of these 'Asian' New Zealanders.

Table One. Ethnic Composition of Statistics New Zealand 'Asian' Category

Asian NFD	Fijian Indian
Southeast Asian NFD	Gujarati
Filipino	Tamil
Cambodian	Punjabi
Vietnamese	Sikh
Burmese	Anglo Indian
Indonesian	Indian NEC
Laotian	Sri Lankan NFD
Malay	Sinhalese
Thai	Sri Lankan Tamil
Southeast Asian NEC	Sri Lankan NEC
Chinese NFD	Japanese
Hong Kong Chinese	Korean
Cambodian Chinese	Afghani
Malaysian Chinese	Bangladeshi
Singaporean Chinese	Nepalese
Vietnamese Chinese	Pakistani
Taiwanese	Tibetan
Chinese NEC	Eurasian
Indian NFD	Asian NEC
Bengali	
NEC = not elsewhere classified	NFD = not further defined

Appendix A: Names of attendees

Peter Adams	University of Auckland
Jo-anne Allan	Statistics New Zealand
Juthika Badkar	Ministry of Health
Juliet Bir	Werry Centre for Child & Adolescent Mental Health
Lian-Hong Brebner	University of Auckland
Isobel Brown	Ministry of Social Development
Madhu Chatterji	Ministry of Health
Janet Chen	Auckland District Health Board
Kitty Chiu	Centre for Asian Health Research & Evaluation
Nelly Choy	Centre for Asian Health Research & Evaluation
Shireen Chua	Health Research Council
Liz Cowling	Harbour PHO
Ruth Davy	Well Woman's Nursing Service
Robert Didham	Statistics New Zealand
Lorna Dyall	University of Auckland
Gareth Edwards	Health Research Council of New Zealand
Rebecca Foley	Asia New Zealand Foundation
Shirin Foroughian	University of Auckland
Vas Gavriel	Office of Ethnic Affairs
Lorelle George	Researcher
Karen Hayman	University of Auckland
Andy Heinemann	National Research Bureau Ltd
Elsie Ho	University of Waikato
Christina Howard	Ministry of Social Development
Manying Ip	University of Auckland
Kathy Jackson	Auckland Refugees as Survivors
John Jensen	Ministry of Social Development
Liz Kiata	University of Auckland
Denise Kivell	Counties Manukau District Health Board
Sandy Latimer	Waitemata District Health Board
Tess Liew	University of Auckland
Gigi Lim	University of Auckland
James Liu	Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research
Susan Morton	University of Auckland
Vaso Moses	East Health Services
Shobha Nayar	Auckland District Health Board
Vanessa Ng	Te Korowai Aroha
David Pang	Researcher
Rod Perkins	University of Auckland
Deb Potter	Statistics New Zealand
Angelique Praat	Ministry of Social Development
Kumanan Rasanathan	Auckland Regional Public Health Service
Yogini Ratnasabapathy	Waitemata District Health Board
Fezeela Raza	Office of Ethnic Affairs
Ana Ricciotti	Community Alcohol & Drug Services
Judy Simpson	Ministry of Education
Ruth De Souza	Centre of Asian & Migrant Health & Research, Auckland University of Technology

Martin Tobias	Ministry of Health
Samson Tse	Centre for Asian Health Research & Evaluation (CAHRE) University of Auckland
Leonie Vander Slius	Citizens Advice Bureau - Auckland City
Colleen Ward	Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research (CACR) Victoria University of Wellington
Carole Webb	Family Information Service
Richman Wee	University of Otago
Vivien Wei	Te Korowai Aroha
Denise Whitfield	Werry Centre for Child & Adolescent Mental Health
Grace Wong	Auckland University of Technology
John Wong	Problem Gambling Foundation