

## The Japanese American Internment Experience Throughout the Decades: One Professor's Multidisciplinary Perspective

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This paper focused on the role of a multicultural professor in teaching a multicultural class in Family Studies. Specifically the author illustrates the Japanese American internment camp experience in numerous aspects of his teaching. The article makes the connection between this social, political and historical experience of Japanese Americans to other ethnic groups suffrage. The article also incorporates a variety of methods and strategies to illustrate the internment camp issue and how that could potentially influence multicultural education in the United States.

So how do YOU do it? How do you try to accomplish the daunting task of being an instructor who is at once multicultural, multidisciplinary, multicontextual, and so on? I do it by thinking like an old English guy. One of my academic heroes, James Burke, has a series of documentaries called "Connections". He can take a whole series of seemingly unrelated events and people and show you how they are all connected directly and thematically. One episode had him connecting telecommunications with the Battle of Hastings, mineshafts, Gallileo, and radio (Burke, 1979). His thinking seems like stream-of-consciousness, but it's really the ultimate in multilayered thinking. This kind of thinking is especially useful in undergraduate courses that may have many non-majors and are all about a kind of global, General Education, way of looking at the world. What follows is one set of connections, based upon the defining moment for Japanese Americans, WWII and the internment camps. This kind of exercise can be done for almost any group in any context, American Indians and the Dawes Allotment Act or African Americans and the movement west and north in the early part of the twentieth century for example, but I thought I would take this opportunity to share with you one person's journey and some insights that you may not have considered.

These recollections all come from the time I spent teaching, "The Family and Social Issues", an undergraduate-lower-division-introductory Family Studies class from 1998-2002. I found this class interesting because it not only had mostly non-majors, but I also taught it every year to a group of first time Freshmen who were with the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP) at CSU Sacramento. This program serves a population of students who have the desire to attend college, but who may not quite have the social or academic preparation to achieve as they would like. Most of these students were ethnic minority students who were the first in their family to go to college. So I was often introducing students to my field (Family Studies), Social/Behavioral Sciences in general, Ethnic Studies in particular, college life, AND I was introducing ethnic minority students to a professional world where most of the people around them would be European Americans. I like a challenge.

Bringing up the topic of Japanese Americans and the internment camps means different things in different contexts.

The basic story of 120,000 loyal children to elderly Japanese Americans from mostly the West Coast unconstitutionally rounded up and put behind barbed wire, doesn't need to be retold for most California college students. Due to local and statewide efforts, from education and community sources, this story has been told with a respectable amount of clarity. Professors bringing up this topic in other states may need to spend some time giving the overview of the basic story.

Since most California students have the basics, I had the luxury of being able to concentrate on some areas that are often overlooked. As a Family Studies professor in a Family Studies class, I first want to look at how the internment camp experience impacted Japanese American families and what this teaches us about all families. I have seen a lot of internment camp videos, and the best one to accomplish the above task is Satsuki Ina's "Children of the Camps" (Ina, 1999). This video takes an intimate look at the families of several people who were children in the internment camps. To learn about the family dynamics during and after this time, I also recommend a collection of plays by Phillip Kan the issues these families dealt with were everyday problems like depression and family violence that were exacerbated by the camp experience. Other issues were directly attributable to the experience, such as the self-hate that came from being locked up behind barbed wire as a child for merely looking like the enemy. A child would something wrong or something must be wrong with me." So here we are able to talk about Family Stress theories, Post Traumatic Stress, and the impact on families of other social injustices in the world.

After discussing the key "Family Studies" topics related to the internment camp experience, I then like to make a few connections that are at once more personal and more global. There were some very personal decisions that had to be made by people back then, that led to some big picture consequences. I mention both of the following topics, but dwell on one or the more depending on the makeup of the class.

When my class has mostly European American students in it, these students often get defensive when

we start talking about social justice issues such as the indignity of the internment camps, racist westward expansion, the civil rights movement, etc. I try very hard to present the information in a way that does not suggest that they should feel guilty or responsible for the past, only that we all share responsibility for dealing with present consequences, but it sometimes does not get through. So to help them have something to celebrate, we begin by discussing the brave few in the European American community who were against internment, from the two California state legislators to Eleanor Roosevelt to Colorado Governor Ralph Carr to Bob Fletcher, the California farmer who saved the farms of many Japanese Americans in the community of Florin until their return, (Tsukamoto and Pinkerton, 1988). We then discuss some important questions that often make for interesting discussions. What do you suppose it was like to risk your career and personal and family safety, and stand up for what was right? Do you know of other examples where individuals from one group have taken risk upon themselves to work for social justice for people of another group? Will you have the courage to one day work for social justice? Even if the group needing the work is not your specific subgroup? Of course the hoped for conclusion is the understanding that we should all stand up for each other because of the old truism by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963), "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The second topic I dwell more heavily on when I have an EOP class with mostly ethnic minority students is a powerful topic for the immigrant students in my classes. I remind them of the story of the 442<sup>nd</sup> regimental combat team and the 100<sup>th</sup> battalion. Comprised largely of young men drafted from the internment camps, these were the most highly decorated units in WWII. Imagine your parents and siblings being rounded up with only what they could carry, accused of collaboration with enemy, locked away behind barbed wire, and then being visited by an army draft recruiter and asked to fight and die for your country. Large numbers signed up and showed that they were loyal Americans. After a discussion of the long-term significance of this act, then it becomes time to bring it to a contemporary connection. We are at war now. What if Iraq joined forces with Mexico or Laos or Russia? What if they rounded up you and your family, would you then be interested in serving your country after it violated your constitutional rights? This isn't as far fetched as it may sound. There were calls from some to go after loyal citizens who happened to be Arab, Sikh, or Muslim. There is a lot of Muslim activity in Asia, and some Asian country could be the next to be invaded. AND there's even a book out called *In Defense of Internment* (Malkin, 2004) that features a picture of a Japanese heritage person on one side of the cover and a picture of a Muslim heritage person on the

other side. The threat is real and ethnic minority families, especially immigrant families, need to think about these issues. Whether it is about being ready to serve and prove something that shouldn't need to be proven or whether it is about voting for people and supporting policies that protect civil liberties, I hope this discussion gets student thinking about their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

The first time I led the above discussion was one of the most memorable events of my years teaching. In a class consisting of about two-thirds Asian and Latino immigrant students, the future of the Asian American and Latino communities, not one of them said they would sign up to serve their country. A few said that they felt for their family's country of origin more than the United States, many said that they would be like the handful of Japanese Americans who resisted the draft. Those resisters were saying, "Why should I fight and die for a country that had violated my family's civil rights and locked us up?". Others, sadly, have grown up with no sense of responsibility to the United States. Even knowing how far the service of the Japanese Americans in WWII helped to break down barriers for Asian Americans and even knowing about the long tradition of military service in the Latino community and even knowing that a significant number of those fighting and dying overseas right now are immigrants who aren't even citizens yet, nobody was willing to stand up and serve. How about stand up and be counted? I asked this group of first-time Freshmen, how many of them had voted or were planning to vote? Just a few. This has been gnawing at me for the last several years. This group, which seemed like an average group of young professional immigrants, seemed ready to buy into all the rights of citizenship but precious few of the responsibilities. If the Asian American and Latino communities are really going to come into their own at last in the United States, we have got to get those in college more interested in participating in their civic responsibilities.

After making connections to European American allies, the next step is to make connections to ethnic minority allies. I do this by asking a question, "So who were these Japanese Americans who were on the West Coast that by these people. But symbolically it showed that the government was willing to put its money where its mouth was. That symbolism and that check were not lost on other groups, especially many African Americans. Now many are combining this act with the old promise from General Sherman (Wharton, 2002) of "40 acres and a mule" in a call for "Reparations".

This is an opportunity to share that there was an official delegation from the Japanese American Citizen's League (JACL) at Martin Luther King's March on Washington, and begin an informed discussion on the issue of reparations in the context of a comparison with redress and perhaps bring in similar topics from other groups, such

as United States promises to American Indians. Talking points to bring to the discussion include the fact after the symbolic pittance given only to the Japanese Americans who actually were interned and still alive in the mid 1980's, that was it, nothing else was ever given to compensate the Japanese American community or their descendants. Would it be right to let the government off so easily for its complicity in the slave trade? Some have suggested reparations in the form of taxbreaks, would this work (Wharton, 2002)? And what of this "40 acre" promise? Just look at what happened when the government guaranteed land to American Indians. Most of the land that they were put on, (NOT given. How can you "give" someone land that was part of their original territory in the first place?) was some of the worst land around. AND it was cynically given, because then it was taken away when many of the Indians were unable to quickly make enough money to pay the tax on it. Ultimately the American Indian connection is actually a more appropriate one than the Japanese American one. The small number of Japanese Americans who got money in the eighties were getting an apology, African Americans who want reparations want the government to honor a promise. Many African Americans are advocating for this promise to be honored in the same way that many American Indians are fighting for the treaties they have signed with the government to be fully honored. This is why when noted author Vine Deloria Jr. was asked what American Indians really needed he said, "A thousand Indian lawyers."

About 40,000 of the internees consisted of elders. These were people who had been contributing to the growth of this country for decades. Again, no threat to anyone. This is an opportunity to share about the Asian connection to agriculture, and thus to the Latino community. I often share that Ronald Takaki (1993) in *A Different Mirror* discusses how Japanese Americans stood side by side with Latino farmworkers as early as a 1903 labor dispute. Also, the first governing body and first activities of the United Farm Workers union included Filipino workers.

So what are those remaining internees up to these days? Lots. But a few things that make for some interesting learning. Bringing it back to families, Japanese Americans have some of the highest rates of out-marriage in the country. Former internees have watched their children and grand children marry non-Japanese Americans. At first, most were very upset about this trend (a few still are), but most have grown to accept the new members of the community. Now the concern is to keep the community/culture strong, and not to worry so much about genetics. I share with my students several places where it seems to be working. From youth activities of the JACL to Asian based performing arts activities to some of the most active interethnic organizations like MAVIN and the HAPA Issues

Forum, most strong and positive stories about interethnic American seem to be Asian based.

Another key area that Japanese Americans have been active in has been to take the notoriety of having endured the Internment Camps, and channel that to efforts to protect the civil liberties of other groups. The most notable group of late has been that group of people who look like "terrorists", the Muslim/Sikh/Arab community in the United States. Personally, I think a terrorist looks like the Unabomber or Timothy McVeigh, but that's beside the point. After the attacks happened on September 11, 2001, there was an awful lot of hysteria going around. And now as the war in Iraq goes on and more Americans get killed, it is getting worse and worse. Illegal searches, vandalism of Mosques and Temples, and harassment of innocents (often loyal citizens) are reported all the time. One of the first groups not from within this community to stand up and condemn this hysteria was the Japanese American community, led by elders who were children in the Internment Camps.

I enjoy making connections across multiple contexts. It makes learning exciting for me, and think it helps the students relate to the material better. This is but one of several strategies I employ. Another strategy is utilizing another favorite scholar, Stephanie Coontz (1992) who wrote *The Way We Never Were* (sure this book is a little dated now, but it is still a masterpiece you all should read). The book is basically an exercise in busting one myth after another that we have about the European American family (my favorite is when she breaks down the myth of American rugged individualism). I bust myths all throughout the semester that we have about families in multiple contexts, especially ethnic minority families. I could share a bunch of the myths I breakdown in class here, but that will have to wait until my next article....

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