



A bamboo ceiling in the classroom?

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A large body of research has well established that Asian Americans have achieved equal and sometimes superior socioeconomic status compared to that of Whites since the civil rights movement (1–3). A salient feature of the Asian American population is their very high educational achievement relative to Whites and other racial groups. Indeed, it has been proposed that Asian Americans have resorted to formal education as a channel of social mobility to safeguard against potential racial discrimination toward them in American society (4–6).

Due to their socioeconomic success, Asian Americans have been stereotypically called the “model minority” in popular media. The social reality, however, is far more complicated than what the “model minority” label supposedly entails. A more apt sociological description would be a “heterogenous minority” (1). While today’s American society is already highly diverse, Asian Americans are even more diverse than Americans in general. Not only are Asian Americans highly heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, immigration generation, and path of immigration but also in occupation and income (1). For example, a larger portion of Asians live in poverty than do Whites (1). Coined initially for the purpose of political advocacy at the end of the civil rights movement in 1968 (7), the term “Asian Americans” has been used mainly as a convenient label encompassing heterogenous individuals and heterogenous groups of individuals of Asian descent (8). Many Asian Americans still prefer to identify themselves by their ethnicity, such as “Chinese Americans,” “Korean Americans,” and “Indian Americans.”

Culture as an Explanation for the Bamboo Ceiling

This commentary examines the findings of a valuable new paper by psychologists Lu, Nisbett, and Morris (hereafter LNM) (9), a follow-up of their 2020 paper examining reasons as to why East Asians (EAs), but not South Asians (SAs), face the “bamboo ceiling”—the underrepresentation of EAs in leadership positions in the United States (10). The research question is not new, as it has been well known for decades that EAs are underrepresented in leadership positions, even in natural science and engineering, where their overall overrepresentation is obvious and sometimes overwhelming (11). Various explanations, ranging from racial discrimination to English-language ability, have been proposed but have not been adequately validated with convincing evidence.

What is new in LNM’s twin articles is a bold cultural-psychological explanation and an innovative research design to support it empirically. I characterize their theoretical approach as “bold” because there is a tendency in social science in general, and psychology and economics in particular, to presuppose the universality of the mind:

The way middle-class White Americans think is the way everyone else in the world thinks (or should think). Anthropologist Joseph Henrich has criticized this proposition, demonstrating, historically and globally, that so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) people are psychologically peculiar, such that research findings about them should not be taken as universal truths but as culturally specific and limited (12). Of course, a small school of cultural psychologists have long questioned this supposition by acknowledging, and indeed studying, the influence of culture. Most prominent is the idea that Confucian culture, a systematic, sophisticated, and integrative system of beliefs and values vastly different from Christianity-influenced Western culture, has been affecting people in East Asia for two millennia and by extension affects EAs in the United States (13–17).

LNM’s basic theoretical argument is as follows. Due to the cultural influences of Confucianism, EA Americans exhibit lesser assertiveness—assertiveness being an attribute highly valued in American society—which contributes to their lower representation in leadership positions. Why does Confucianism reject personal assertiveness? Because Confucianism places a high priority on harmony of interpersonal relationships over an individual’s display for distinction (13, 18). In particular, Confucius himself considered self-promotion undesirable: “Men of antiquity studied to improve themselves; men of today study to impress others” (18). LNM’s twin articles provide many vivid examples derived from folk wisdom in which EA culture discourages assertiveness.

To evaluate their argument empirically, LNM have devised an innovative approach. Instead of comparing EAs to Whites, as in a typical study of the kind, they compare EAs to SAs. This approach has the attraction that both EAs and SAs are similar in being mostly recent (post-1968) immigrants and being treated as Asian Americans in the larger society—that is, both potentially suffering from racial prejudice and potentially benefiting from positive stereotyping (3, 19). In their first paper, LNM reported the results of nine studies that showed why EAs, but not SAs, suffer a disadvantage in obtaining leadership positions such as chief executive officer positions in the corporate

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world, due to lower assertiveness (10). In their more recent paper, LNM extend the research context, through six studies, to the classrooms of law and business graduate programs, where future leaders in the corporate and political worlds are trained, and where initial competition for leadership positions takes place (9). An important finding is that EAs, but not SAs, suffer a distinct disadvantage in grades. Consistent with expectations derived from the authors' theoretical argument, the EA disadvantage is more pronounced in social courses emphasizing class participation than in quantitative courses and is more muted for online classes than in-person classes. The results are strong and cannot be explained by factors considered by the authors, such as nativity (foreign- versus US-born), English proficiency, and students' academic abilities as measured by performance on standardized tests.

Critiques

By revealing disadvantages of EAs, as compared to SAs, in attaining leadership positions in the United States, LNM have shown the potential role of culture in producing inequality in socioeconomic outcomes. However, their research has raised new questions that await future research. I will discuss three of them below.

First, culture is a system of beliefs and practices that support one another. While Confucian culture's deemphasizing of assertiveness may be detrimental to the attainment of leadership positions, its concurrent aspects may promote the attainment of high socioeconomic status in general. For example, we know that under the influence of Confucianism EAs are more likely than WEIRD people to believe in the importance of effort, especially in overcoming disadvantages of either low family socioeconomic background or limited innate ability (16, 20–22). I conjecture a psychological link between an emphasis on effort and a deemphasis on assertiveness. An emphasis on effort connotes that one should be well-prepared and thorough before one speaks up. Communication, especially to authority figures, should reflect what comes from one's best effort rather than one's initial impulse. In other words, what is considered a disadvantage by LNM for leadership positions may also be to EAs' advantage in more general settings where evaluation depends on "harder" criteria such as a test, a

paper, a report, or an audition, in which improvement through effort matters.

Second, related to the above reasoning, there is a methodological, alternative explanation for the findings in LNM's most recent article. Admission into law and business graduate programs is highly selective. Admission committees typically consider a combination of factors, including standardized test scores and future leadership potential. LNM's research is based on data from students who were already admitted and enrolled in law and business graduate programs. In a sense, their sample is selected on an outcome variable: current enrollment in law and business programs. From a causal inference viewpoint, this sample selection may create what is known as the "collider bias" (23): Standardized test scores (one admission criterion) may be negatively correlated with future leadership potential (another admission criterion) in this selective sample even if they are uncorrelated in the general population. Since EAs are stronger in the former (quantitative test scores in LNM's data), they may be weaker in the latter.

Third, while LNM controlled for nativity in their analysis, they did not control for place of undergraduate education among foreign-born students. Earlier research on labor force outcomes has clearly shown that the foreigner disadvantage among Asian Americans is limited only to those who attained their highest education abroad (24). One can extend this finding to LNM's setting and propose that EAs' disadvantage in law and business classrooms may be more pronounced among those EA students who had attained their undergraduate education abroad (or from institutions where the instructional language is non-English). Indeed, their data show a lower average verbal test score (but not quantitative test score) among EAs than among SAs and Whites. This suggests that foreign undergraduate education may account for some of their findings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the twin articles by LNM are innovative, insightful, and provocative. Their research clearly demonstrates the importance of culture not only to the workings of the mind but also to social stratification in American society. Their work deserves to be studied, debated, replicated, and extended in the future.

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