🔴 **COMMENTARY**

Moving beyond the West vs. the rest: Understanding variation within Asian groups and its societal consequences

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After decades of focusing almost exclusively on Western populations, psychology and other social sciences have at last begun to diversify their samples. Massive efforts have been made to compare cultures around the globe on basic psychological processes, and researchers have amassed much evidence for differences between "the West and the rest" (1–4). Indeed, social–psychological theories that were thought to be universal—from attribution theory to the structure of emotions to group dynamics and beyond—have been shown to vary considerably between Anglo-Americans and Asians among other cultural groups (5, 6). Yet, in the quest to understand differences across cultures, little attention has been given to the profound variation that exists within cultural groups. For example, lumping all Asian groups—from East, South, and central Asia—may not only miss important subcultural differences but may also neglect the distinct barriers that different subgroups face in attaining status and power in societies at large. The work by Lu et al. (7) in PNAS represents one of the first attempts to investigate not only important variation within Asian groups but also, the consequences of such variation for important societal outcomes—most notably, leadership attainment in US organizations.

What Is the "Bamboo Ceiling"?

Lu et al. (7) begin their investigation by asking a simple question. Are Asian groups disadvantaged relative to whites when seeking leadership positions in the United States? At first glance, the question seems counterintuitive. Asians are typically seen as a "model minority"—with relatively high levels of academic and occupational attainment as compared with other racial minorities (8–10). The much-publicized notion of "tiger parents" of Asian descent, popularized by Amy Chua (11), reinforces the expectation that Asians will be highly successful in society at large. Yet, recent research on what has now become known as the "bamboo ceiling" suggests that Asians are disadvantaged when it comes to achieving positions of power in the United States (12). Asian Americans, however, are incredibly diverse, with different histories, cultures, and experiences (13). This begs the question: do all Asian groups experience hurdles in advancing to leadership positions in US organizations?

Across an impressive set of nine studies using a variety of methods (n = 11,030), Lu et al. (7) explore for the first time whether there is a discrepancy in leadership attainment among different Asian groups as well as the mechanisms that may underlie such differences. Not only do the authors predict that some groups—namely, East Asians (EAs)—may be particularly disadvantaged compared with other groups, but they also suggest that in some cases some groups—e.g., South Asians (SAs)—may even surpass whites in their leadership attainment.

Lu et al. (7) begin by examining how well-represented EAs and SAs are in chief executive officer (CEO) roles as compared with whites in Standard & Poor's 500 companies. Across multiple years, they show that, while EAs are proportionally less likely than whites to be CEOs, SAs are proportionally more likely than whites to be CEOs. Next, they show that the gap observed among CEOs generalizes to top leadership roles in large US companies with EAs holding a significantly lower rate of senior leadership positions than SAs.

Lu et al. (7) then examine whether the same dynamics in the field are present in the breeding ground for senior leaders: Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs. Do MBA students view their EA and SA classmates as equally deserving of leadership positions? The answer is affirmatively no. In data from over 5,000 MBA students, EAs were significantly less likely to be both nominated and elected as leaders than whites, whereas SAs were significantly more likely to be nominated and elected as leaders than whites.

As a final test of the differential leadership attainment among EAs and SAs, Lu et al. (7) conducted a clever online experiment where they asked people to read the profile of a job candidate and rate the candidate on leadership potential. All participants read the same exact information about the candidate's qualifications and experience, with one subtle difference: half of the participants were told that the candidate was named "A. Wang" (a prototypical Chinese name), and half were told that the candidate was named "A. Patel" (a prototypical Indian name). The results are striking. Although the information in the profile was identical, participants who thought that the candidate was EA rated the candidate as significantly lower on leadership potential as compared with participants who thought the candidate was SA.

What Explains the Leadership Attainment Gap?

Why are EAs, but not SAs, affected by the bamboo ceiling? Lu et al. (7) speculate that differences in assertiveness underlie this gap in leadership attainment. In the United States, the ideal leader is confident, motivated, and assertive, and candidates who demonstrate these qualities are more likely to attain leadership positions (14). SA cultures tend to value assertiveness (4), while EA cultures prioritize harmony and humility (15). Lu et al. (7) predict that the cultural mismatch between US leadership values and EA cultural values may explain why the bamboo ceiling affects EAs to a much greater extent than SAs.

Indeed, their results across studies are clear: SA employees rate themselves and are rated by others as more assertive than EA employees, and assertiveness mediates the gap in senior leadership attainment between EAs and SAs. Lu et al. (7) also rule out other possible explanations for such differences. For example, EAs and SAs do not have differential motivation to achieve positions of power. Nor do these groups experience differential prejudice in organizations that limits EAs' leadership attainment. In fact, SAs experience more prejudice than EAs in these studies. SA MBA students report higher levels of prejudice than their EA classmates, and surveys of the general public show that people feel less comfortable interacting with SAs than EAs. Variables such as country of origin, English fluency, personality, and education also had no effect on the pattern of results. Taken together, these results demonstrate that the disproportionate effect of the bamboo ceiling on EAs is due at least in part to cultural differences in assertiveness.

Looking Ahead

This research opens up a number of exciting questions for future research. The notion that EAs hit the bamboo ceiling because EA cultural values of harmony do not fit with US leadership prototypes implies that, if they were more assertive, they would transcend the bamboo ceiling. Yet, it is quite possible that this is not the case. Some research suggests that EAs may face considerable backlash for such strategies. Berdahl and Min (16) found that the stereotype of EAs as less dominant (e.g., not assertive, not likely to take charge)

than whites is both descriptive and prescriptive. That is, Americans not only believe that EAs are less dominant than whites but also, that they should be less dominant than whites. For example, they found that people are less likely to want a dominant EA as a coworker than a nondominant EA or a dominant or nondominant white coworker. Dominant EAs also were more likely to experience much more harassment as compared with other groups. Other research likewise has shown that Asian Americans were sabotaged when they succeeded in counterstereotypical activities (17). Tellingly, participants who feared such a backlash were likely to behave in ways that preserved rather than challenged these

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stereotypes to avoid such backlash. To the extent that EAs are aware of the expectation of backlash for assertive behavior, they may be rationally calibrating their behavior to avoid punishment. Future research needs to further explore whether these hidden biases are creating a "double bind" that prevents EAs from attaining leadership positions at the same rates as SAs and whites, for whom assertive behavior may be seen as more acceptable. This is critical not only for theory but also, for policy, which needs to identify mechanisms that can level the playing field.

The research of Lu et al. (7) also invites us to dig deeper into variation in other Asian subidentities. How do gender and ethnicity interact to predict leadership attainment? Research on gender and leadership tends to ignore ethnicity, just as research on culture and leadership tends to ignore gender. Only recently has research begun to examine how race and gender interact to affect organizational outcomes (18, 19), but it still tends to lump Asians into one category. Research is needed on whether and why leadership attainment may differ for SA and EA women and men. Future work should explore how leadership attainment varies for Asians and other groups in different industries. Are the patterns for EAs and SAs found in Lu et al. (7) similar in industries where Asians are heavily represented, such as engineering and computer science (20)? Finally, it would be interesting to examine whether whites in expatriate assignments face a penalty in leadership advancement in Asian contexts where assertiveness may be seen as maladaptive.

More generally, this research highlights the importance to both theory and practice of not lumping Asians or other groups into one category. To truly level the playing field in organizations, we need to understand the unique barriers that subgroups face in attaining positions of power in the United States and beyond.

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