



The Influence of Ethnicity and Gender on the Leadership Experiences of Female Asian-American Managers

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Abstract

Asian Americans represent the fastest-growing, best-educated, and highest-income demographic in the United States. The successful status of Asians Americans is reflected in the fact that they are collectively associated with a “model minority” stereotype that characterizes them in terms of traits such as being academically-oriented, high-achieving, studious, law-abiding and hard-working. Yet despite the apparent success of Asian Americans and, the positive stereotypes associated with this minority, compared to other women of color, Asian women are significantly less likely to hold leadership positions. This study attempts to understand the reason for this gap. Using a grounded theory methodology, this study explores the live experiences of 16 Asian American female middle managers to understand the influence of ethnicity and gender on their leadership experiences and career opportunities. The study’s results reveal that the participants had complex and conflicting experiences that resulted in both opportunities and challenges. Participants sometimes benefited from the positive associations of their Asian ethnicity with qualities such as intelligence and diligence, and sometimes they face the demerits of being Asians, that reinforce a view of them being passive and lacking in leadership skills. Research also reveals the impact of gender identity over the career of working women. The study also shows that because of being women and those too from a minority; the Asian working women face difficulties in becoming part of local culture.

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That is, there exists an insider culture within corporate America that up-holds the importance of male-oriented leadership qualities and that does not allow Asian-American females to become a part of it.

Keywords: Asian-American; Asian women; ethnicity; gender; leadership.

1. Introduction

The history of Asian immigration to the United States yields many insights about the nature of American society and its attitudes towards ethnic minorities. The Asian-American working women still face discrimination based on gender and ethnicity. The present study contributes to the field by applying the analytical framework of previous studies on African American women (and other ethnic and gender groups) to Asian American women, and thereby makes an attempt to include them within the existing stream of scholarship on ethnicity, gender, and leadership. At the same time, since the study has adopted a grounded theory approach, an important objective is to generate an explanation or theory from the data collected.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Inadequate representation of Asian American women in managerial positions (where they can learn and exercise leadership skills) and their exclusion from workplace diversity programs is problematic not only for scholars and policymakers but also for employers in the United States.

1.2 Rationale for Study

This study proposes to investigate three phenomena of interest as given below.

- (a) The influence of ethnicity on the leadership experiences of female Asian American managers, manifested through the “model minority” stereotype
- (b) The influence of gender on the leadership experiences of female Asian American managers
- (c) The influence of the interplay of ethnicity (through the influence of the “model minority” stereotype) and gender on the leadership experiences of female Asian American managers

1.3 Research Questions

How do female Asian American managers working for *Fortune 1000* firms in the United States experience and describe the influence of ethnicity and gender on their leadership experiences and career opportunities?

- i. How do female Asian American managers experience and describe the influence of the “model minority” stereotype generally applied to Asian Americans?
- ii. How do female Asian American managers perceive the influence of their gender on their leadership experiences and career opportunities?
- iii. How does the interplay of ethnicity (operating through the “model minority” stereotype”) and gender

shape female Asian American managers' leadership experiences and career opportunities?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Asian American women are underrepresented in leadership roles in corporate America, in the feminist movement and they are even underrepresented in the research work. The present study is significant because it represents an effort to apply the analytical framework of previous studies on African American and Hispanic American women to Asian American women specifically, and to include them within the stream of scholarship on ethnicity, gender, and leadership. The researcher hopes that the study will open up novel areas of knowledge about Asian American women and it will serve the field of organization theory and management.

2. Literature Review

Before the 1960s, Asian immigrants were often stereotyped as “aliens,” “outsiders,” and “inassimilable foreigners” who could never integrate well into American life [1]. They represented a cultural, economic, military, and political threat often referred to as the “yellow peril” and the fears arose from East Asia’s large population, the potential economic and military power of China and imperial Japan. On the other end of the spectrum, the “model minority” stereotype came to be applied to Asian Americans beginning in the 1960s to favorably distinguish their economic and educational success from the perceived backwardness and economic stagnation of African Americans [1]. Studies have shown the Asian Americans as “intelligent”, “industrious”, and “self-disciplined” compared to other ethnic groups [2]. Taylor and Stern [2] opine that this positive stereotyping might be one factor that explains the paucity of research on Asian Americans – in comparison with African Americans and Hispanic Americans. In fact, the genesis of the *model minority* stereotype can be found in magazine articles which were then adopted by other media such as television advertising, primetime television series, and even Hollywood films [3] and won praise from then-President Ronald Reagan [4]. Taylor and Stern [2] reviewing the findings of previous studies, noted that Asian Americans were depicted in the *print media* as “technically competent, hard-working, self-disciplined, serious, and well-assimilated”. However, Li [5] notes that the “model minority” myth is not exclusively positive – on the contrary, it racializes Asian Americans as “passive, lacking social skills, apolitical, submissive, and lacking the aggressiveness required for high-ranking managerial positions”. Asian American women actually face abovementioned negative stereotypes combined with the *Dragon Girl* stereotype and feel smothered by them. To illustrate this, Li [5] gives the example of the character of Tracy Tzu from the film *Year of the Dragon*. Although Tracy Tzu is an upwardly mobile female professional, she is depicted as a passive and submissive woman who finally gets abused by working-class police detective. This perception of Asian-American working woman puts them at risk of sexual harassment. Li [5] outlines several cases where Asian American women were subject to racialized sexual harassment. Roshanravan [6] opines that since the “model minority” view is an idealized construction that relies on denying the reality of discrimination, it prevents Asian American women from being considered women of color and deprives them of their honor. This analysis supports Ngan-Ling Chow’s [7] finding that Asian American women are underrepresented in the feminist movement.

In the late 1980s, it was estimated that 53.3% of the Asian American population in the United States was

engaged in managerial or professional positions [2]. However, there was no data available about Asian-American working women, until Yamanaka and McClelland [8] used a sample of 39,701 Asian women and found out that they worked more hours in comparison with non-Hispanic white women. Kim and Zhao [9] proved that Asian American women are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to achieve managerial positions. Eng and Layne's [10] study reveals that while female Asian-American engineers had similar education levels compared to others, they were less sure about their abilities, they cited gender and racial discrimination as a real barrier, they were less satisfied with support facilities and advancement opportunities and less satisfied in respect of the confidence that their supervisors showed in them. The evidence shows that Asian American women not being promoted to managerial roles because of views that Asian Americans, particularly women, are "introverted" and "inarticulate" Eng and Layne's [10]. Asian-American women face discrimination for not only being Asian, but also for being women. Tang [11] refers to this as the "double penalty" thesis where women of color are dually disadvantaged for being women as well as ethnic minorities. The researcher also shows Asian American women occupy only "marginal positions" in management. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis [12] describe the challenges faced by women in respect of leadership opportunities; they mention that because leadership is associated with manly traits e.g. dominance and strength, women are ignored. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis [12] note that women of color must navigate "gendered racism," wherein the woman of color must decide if the prejudice she faces is due to her ethnicity, gender, or some other aspect of her identity, and formulate a response accordingly. In 2002, the Asian Pacific American Women's Leadership Institute's (APAWLI) study "Leadership challenges and opportunities: An Asian American and Pacific Islander Woman's Lens" [13] revealed found that in corporate America, fewer than 0.5% of the positions on corporate boards and corporate office officer ranks were held by Asian American women. "Glass Ceiling" is a phenomenon that refers to an invisible block that prevents ethnic minorities and women from reaching the top positions with organizations "regardless of their qualifications or achievements" [14] a majority of respondents in the Catalyst Research Center's [15] seminal study on Asian American women in business indicated that mentors were needed to aid in professional development and thus evade the *glass ceiling*. However, Batra's [16] findings show that mentoring helps men more than women.

3. Research Methodology

This study is an attempt to understand the leadership experiences of female Asian American managers working in corporate America from their own perspectives. Since the study focuses on their lived experiences and seeks to elicit a depth of rich, detailed information from participants, a qualitative approach is appropriate [17].

3.1 Research Design

The choice of grounded theory has also been carefully considered. The study adopts a grounded theory approach to methodology to investigate the influence of ethnicity and gender on the leadership experiences of female Asian American managers in corporate America. To explore these issues, the study uses a classic grounded theory research design, consisting of analyzing data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a sample of female Asian American managers working with *Fortune 1000* firms in the United States.

3.2 Target & Sample Population

The research population for the study consists of female Asian American managers working in the United States for *Fortune 1000* firms at mid-level management positions. The sample population was defined to include female Asian American managers working for *Fortune 1000* firms, who are resident in the southwestern United States. Sample size turned out to be 16.

3.3 Sampling Technique

Due to the absence from the public domain of any contact information for mid-level managers working at private firms, the present study relied on a snowball sampling technique, using the researcher's personal and professional contacts as well as third-party organizations.

4. Data Collection & Data Analysis

The following instruments of data collection were used in this study:

- Demographic questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was constructed for the proposed study. The demographic questionnaire consists of both screening and substantive questions. This data has been used to undertake a separate quantitative analysis of sample frame and sample characteristics. The points of analysis for the sample frame and the sample were: age, level of educational attainment, tenure of managerial experience, and job function/designation. Microsoft Excel analytical tools were used for this analysis.

- Semi-structured interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was the principal data collection instrument constructed for the study. The member-checked transcripts with annotations and supplementary information were used for analysis. The "Import" feature of the QSR NVivo 9 qualitative research software allows a one-step import of transcripts, and a code was assigned to each transcript upon import.

- Researcher's notes and memos

Researcher notes and memos are important to establish the trustworthiness of the study [18]. The recording of the researcher's ideas in a systematic manner is known as memoing, and is undertaken during both data collection and analysis [18]. For the memoing stage of this study, the two diaries referred to in the preceding section (the reflexive journal and the researcher's notes) were analyzed and notes and ideas expressed therein were mapped to specific transcripts, notes, and categories within NVivo

- Reflexive journal

A reflexive journal helps acknowledge and "bracket" biases and beliefs while undertaking research [19]. As

such, the researcher chronicled her experiences interviewing subjects and researching the topic in a reflective journal.

5. Findings & Recommendations

The findings and the recommendations that arise from this research are following:

5.1 Findings

- Complicated influence of identity on career trajectory

The majority of the participants agreed that the influence of their identity over their career is complicated. While some of them enjoy the benefits of being Asian-American women, some argue that it is the very reason why they are not at key positions.

- Ambivalence about the model minority stereotype

Likewise, the views of the participants about model minority stereotype, are also complex and uncertain. While some of them believe that model minority stereotype is positive, many consider it a false-representation of the Asian-American ethnic minority.

- Complicated views about Asian culture

Participants expressed the fact that Asian culture generally, and parenting culture within Asian families specifically, in fact, reinforce and support the development of several personality traits that conform to the model minority stereotype including conformity, obedience, hard work, discipline, and humility.

- Complicated feelings about self-identified personal characteristics

Many of the participants expressed the fact that the model minority stereotype was grounded in reality and reinforced by Asian culture. However, other participants noted that, to a certain extent, their behavior did not always conform to the racial and gender stereotypes about Asian women.

- Opportunities and challenges of being Asian in the workplace

. In many cases, the participants noted that perceptions of Asian Americans in the workplace conformed to the model minority stereotype, yet they expressed frustration with what they perceived as the view that Asian are essentially obedient work horses who lack the assertiveness and soft skills to be genuine leaders.

- Opportunities and challenges experienced by women and minorities working in corporate America

Many participants emphasized that, like American society more generally, corporate America is changing and becoming more diverse and that there are greater opportunities for women and minorities. However, some

participants also highlighted the fact that women in their organizations, and in corporate America more generally, still face the *glass ceiling*.

- Complicated personal experiences in the workplace

Some participants emphasized that they could seize opportunities for self-actualization, personal empowerment, and career growth “by leveraging their Asian culture.” However, some others talked about the subtle cultural disconnect between them and their colleagues that created barriers around socializing, and how cultural differences do not lead just to barriers in socializing with colleagues, but also difficulty conforming to the norms of American corporate culture.

5.2 Recommendations

- Organizations can continue to support the career development of Asian women through mentoring programs since they help against the *glass ceiling* phenomenon.
- Organizations can continue to support the career development of Asian women through developing policies and procedures in the hiring and internal development process that ensure equal opportunities for qualified minorities.
- Organizations can continue to support the career development of Asian women through setting goals and objectives that ensure there is a pipeline of qualified internal candidates to fill leadership positions as they become available.
- Most important, is to ensure that as the positions become available the candidates are prepared for the role and not set up for failure. This can be alleviated by starting at the internship level with Asian women coming into the organization.
- Organizations should develop a culture of ethnic diversity and pay optimum attention to it.

6. Limitations & Ethical Considerations

The use of snowball sampling means that not all members of the research population had an equal chance of selection in the sample. However, as this is a qualitative study on an under-researched population, it was necessary to yield an authentic sample. Further, since the study used snowball sampling to construct the sample frame, researcher made sure that personal contacts are strictly limited to disseminating the Call for Participants, any interested individual should use a personal, rather than company, email address or phone to contact the researcher and she refrains from discussing the names or other identifying details of prospective participants. The scope of this study was limited to Asian American female middle managers working in *Fortune 1000* companies. It did not include Asian American women working for small, medium and family-owned enterprises, academic or governmental institutions or those employed as independent contractors. This study relied on qualitative data obtained through in depth, face-to-face interviews using open-ended questions and the collection and analysis of the data was carried out solely by the researcher. To ensure the security of important data the researcher has ensured that participant responses to the demographic questionnaire and interview recordings and transcripts have been appropriately anonymized and kept confidential.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Asian American female middle managers working in *Fortune 1000* with a view to understanding the influence of ethnicity and gender on their leadership experiences and career opportunities. The study's results revealed that the participants had complex and conflicting experiences that resulted in both opportunities and challenges. One of the principal findings of this study was the existence of an insider culture within corporate America that upholds the importance of male-orientated personality traits and leadership qualities and that is often cemented through an enthusiasm for sports and drinking activities. Since, as many participants emphasized, American corporate culture encourages outgoing personality traits, the view that Asians are passive had the potential to put them at a disadvantage and limit their career potential. Participants noted that gender could have a similarly limiting effect on career potential. As the participants revealed, both women and minorities may have difficulties conforming to the norms and values of this culture, or they may be subjected to a negative double standard if they attempt to do so. Thus, they may be unable to penetrate insider culture, effectively coming against a glass ceiling as they attempt to move beyond middle management. In advancing these findings, this study strongly supports the existing research and it sheds further light on how the phenomenon of the glass ceiling operates with organizations.

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