Leadership Perception Among Asian American College Students

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Research Question

How do undergraduate Asian American students at a highly selective research institution perceive their personal leadership involvement, and how can the institution support their development as leaders?

Data Interpretation

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how the model minority stereotype may or may not influence Asian American college students' pursuance of leadership opportunities. Through this study, the researcher hoped to gain insight into students' perceptions of leadership and the relevance of race/ ethnicity. As such, critical race theory was used to answer the question: how do undergraduate Asian American students at a highly selective research institution perceive their personal leadership involvement, and how can the institution support their development as leaders?

The data collected from the AAVS-M and interviews showcased how a student's ethnic identity contributes to both negative and positive leadership outcomes for Asian Americans. Both administrators and students presented common themes supporting the importance of leadership development for Asian Americans: encouragement, passion, giving back, campus culture, future career, Asian American conflict, model minority stereotype, parents, real life, and challenge vs. support. Upon further examination, these ten themes were condensed into two categories: internal and external factors. Internal or personal factors particularly focus on conflicting cultural values. External factors, such as stereotypes and discrimination, concentrate their implications on the glass ceiling. This chapter will examine the interrelations of these categories and the AAVS-M subscales of collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, and humility.

Internal Factors

The first section discusses the personal experiences that students shared throughout their experiences as student leaders. This includes how they became involved and the benefits of extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. Next, the discussion focuses on the places where students find support for their student leadership. Students also reflected on their experiences as an Asian American in general and the cultural struggles that they faced throughout these sections.

Student involvement and student leadership. This study found that students become involved in organizations for two reasons: encouragement from friends and passion for an issue. While ethnicity was seldom used in comments about involvement, it cannot be ignored in interpreting data. For instance, Harper mentioned he "wanted to make sure that people, like me, have resources available to them and things are accessible to them that they might not necessarily have been able to find out about just by simply being a normal student." They were then motivated to take on leadership positions for three reasons: to give back to their organization, the campus culture or climate, and resume building and future careers.

All students interviewed and surveyed were leaders of Asian American organizations; however, there was very little mention of ethnicity driving students' involvement. This is contrary to Arminio et al. (2000) findings that ethnic organizations can provide a comfort zone and an entry point for Asian American students. Nevertheless, Arminio et al.'s research still holds true as all students mentioned that the first organization they joined was an Asian American organization. Interestingly, students who were leaders of non-Asian American organizations did not confirm findings by

Arminio et al. (2000) that students of color who were leaders of predominantly White organizations spoke up less and felt like they had to either defend their race or bring up issues of race, since no one else would. This might be dependent on the campus racial dynamics of the campuses where students were attending. Also, this may depend on the types of organizations students participated in, and the peers involved in the organization as to whether or not students feel the need to defend their race. Student participants in this study also did not confirm findings from the Arminio et al. (2000) study of loss of privacy, interdependence, association, and collateral relationships as a result of their leadership positions.

The preponderance of interviewed student leaders were involved in multiple organizations; many held leadership positions in more than one student club. Kevin complained, "There are too many leaders" at the university. Paige commented on the tendency for students to become fully committed to co-curricular events: "You don't have people who are kind of involved. You have people who are involved in a million things or people who do their homework and have a 4.0. There's no in-between." Comments from the interviews support the findings in the AAVS-M, where conformity to norms scored slightly above four. This confirms Kim et al. (1999)'s findings, which stated, "Conforming to familial and societal norms is important; one should not deviate from these norms. It is important to follow and conform to the expectations of one's family, and the society has for one" (pg. 345).

Further, the researcher found that students sough out leadership positions because they were motivated to give back and further their passions for an issue(s) the organization represented. Many students noted that they wanted to give back to incoming

students the opportunities that the organization had provided for them. Another influential theme was that students were requested to take on leadership positions by their peers. This sense of giving back to their organization was possibly heightened when they were asked to take on a position. This theme coincided with findings of a study published by Balón & Shek. They found that students conceived their leadership role as being a member of an organization that shared the responsibilities and having a responsibility to the race and group to lead for the benefit of the group (Balón & Shek, 2013). Similarly, Asian American leaders interviewed in this study felt a sense of responsibility for taking on leadership position to further their student organization.

In this study, the AAVS-M produced a score of 4.14 for collectivism, where one places the family or group's well-being before oneself, making decisions that may fulfill the needs of a group as opposed to concentrating on one's own needs, and believing that personal achievement is reflective of the achievement of the entire family or group (Kim et al., 1999). The researcher found that as Asian American leaders, their goals were to make a change and make a difference for the organization, supporting the findings in the AAVS-M. Students also wanted to encourage equity and awareness within their college community. The students wanted to empower Asian Americans, educate others about Asian Americans and promote social justice issues.

Students described the skills that they gained from their leadership involvement. Students most frequently indicated that they gained professional skills, such as networking and communications. Personal growth, such as identity formation, was also discussed. These advantages that students discussed aligned with the benefits of student involvement described by Astin (1984). Astin (1984) asserted that the more involved a

student was, the greater the student learning and personal development. Students who participated in the present study indicated that they grew personally and that their participation enhanced their in-class learning.

Kezar and Moriarty (1990) compared outcomes of leadership participation by gender and found males had an increased self-perceived leadership compared to females. Contrary to this finding, the current study did not find a gender difference in the benefits of elected positional leadership positions. This might be because, in the current study, all participants held elected positional leadership positions, so there was not a comparison of types of leadership. Further, the participants in the Kezar and Moriarty (1990) study consisted of only White and African American students. Thus, the gender difference that was found by Kezar and Moriarty (1990) might be specific to those two ethnicities, but might not apply to Asian Americans. Further, the gender difference might have lessened from when the Kezar and Moriarty study was published in 1990 and when the current study was conducted.

The Asian American students in the current study agreed that their leadership involvement enhanced their personal experience or development. Another study, carried out by Logue, Hutchens, and Hector (2005), found that the impact that leadership involvement had on students was enhanced personal experience. Although their study was conducted solely with White students, findings from the current study on Asian Americans supported their findings. The concept of enhancing a students' personal experience should be further explored, since there seemed to be a nuanced difference in the experiences from the Logue, Hutchens, and Hector (2005) study. In the current study, respondents perceived that the model minority stereotype influenced Asian American

students and in many cases, this was the impetus for their leadership involvement. The researcher found that for many students, fighting the model minority stereotype led them to and enhanced their personal experience. Thus, the racialized environment that Asian American students encounter on a daily basis as an effect of the model minority stereotype affects their leadership experience.

The present study also supported findings by Komives et al. (2005), which hypothesized that student leaders go through a self-development process. In general, students spoke about their personal development as a result of their leadership experience. Also, the findings supported part of Cooper et al.'s (1994) study that students who participated in leadership activities developed their practical competence, social and political awareness, and organizational skills. The researcher also found similar findings to Kodoma's (2014) study, which concluded that leadership positively affected student development of leadership skills and competencies. Although Asian American students had somewhat different motivations for leadership involvement than students from other ethnicities, they showed the same benefits from leadership participation.

Support for student leadership. A major theme that was not highlighted in the literature was parental or family influence on student activities. Students mentioned that as long as they were maintaining their grades, then it was acceptable for them to be involved in extracurricular activities and leadership roles. This aligns with the findings from the AAVS-M, where family recognition through achievement ranked highest for the students interviewed. While the selective nature of institution probably contributes to this, a mean of 5.14 (19 % difference between the next highest score value) indicates the value is particular to Asian American students.

Only one student noted that their parents assisted them or encouraged them to pursue leadership positions. Seven of the nine students interviewed said that their parent(s) were supportive, provided that it not impact their schoolwork or future career plans. Meanwhile, when asked if their parents knew what organizations they were involved in, students frequently (8 of 9) noted that their parents were removed from their extracurricular activities, stating that their parents had "no idea" or "maybe" or "they don't seem very curious." Additionally, some (4 of 9) students noted that their parents did not encourage involvement prior to college nor did they discuss being a leader in anything beyond academics. As Brian said, "being president or CEO of a company was never a topic of conversation with my parents." Interestingly, Brian's father has worked in the corporate world his entire career and currently is a vice president of a Fortune 500 company. His parents always encouraged him to pursue more "stable" careers. As such, Brian is on his way to medical school.

Education is seen as the only path to success throughout much of Asia. Parental pressures and fear of failure ignite academic ascension, but it is not translating to Asian Americans in leadership positions. Both staff members spoke about this theme extensively. Charlie noted that the Asian American culture is parent influenced, "If you're told that you're going to be a doctor and you don't want to do that, but you're still going to do it just because of the power of the parent takes that over, then you may not have time to take on leadership roles." This is an important observation as it indicates these students who lack encouragement from parents may not have the same levels of autonomy or support and may rely more heavily on faculty or student affairs members for additional encouragement. Additionally, findings such as Charlie's, explains the high

family recognition through achievement subscale score of 5.14. Furthermore, it supports Kim et al.'s (1999) conclusions that Asian Americans may feel disgrace or pride based on their family's support.

At the campus level, it appears faculty generally supported student leadership development and provided support for student organizations, with the exception of one student who felt his advisor was absent from conversations. Additionally, students indicated that many student support services, leadership development conferences, and student service departments on their campus fostered their leadership development. Thompson (2006) stated that leadership development played an important role in many higher education institutions and was frequently found in mission statements. Participant interviews provided support for this idea that leadership development was a priority at the university; however, it could be improved.

Students discussed that their leadership, in general, was supported at the university, but when asked about leadership development support specific to Asian Americans, their refrain changed slightly. While there have been leadership programs for Asian American students, many of the students interviewed noted that they were not seen as a high priority. For students who had attended, they did feel it would beneficial for others, but wanted to see more consistent programming. Additionally, two students noted that these programs are geared toward those already in leadership positions, and wondered what could be done for Asian American students who are exploring the possibility of leadership. Boatwright and Egidio (2003) conducted a study investigating female college student leadership and concluded that there should be an emphasis on encouraging leadership aspirations for women, increasing their leadership skills, and

broadening their knowledge of potential careers involving leadership positions in college, especially early in their college experience. They also said that once women aspire to become leaders, their leadership skills should be fostered and honed. These findings are similar to those found in the current study. Thus, leadership support focused on Asian Americans is beneficial. It seems that emphasizing and encouraging leadership in any minority group facilitates their participation in leadership opportunities. An emphasis and encouragement of Asian Americans to pursue leadership might counteract the model minority stereotype and enable Asian Americans to see themselves as capable leaders.

In looking at opportunities for leadership, students indicated there is not a lack of it. All students interviewed felt there was an overabundance of opportunities, as "everyone seems in a leadership position." While that may be the case, the question becomes, are they building leadership skills? At a highly selective institution, such as the one in this study, one would assume they are developing leadership capabilities in their students, but that might not be the case in the current study.

Asian American experience. Throughout the interviews, the researcher found that Asian American students faced a struggle between being Asian and American. Students saw a dichotomy between cultural values and language and described their experiences as either Asian or American. They also cited a difference in cultural orientation where Asian culture was more collectivistic and American culture was more individualistic, which supports the AAVS-M results in this study. The AAVS-M subscales scores were found in the middle of scale, hovering around 4, with the exception of family recognition through achievement. Kim et al. (1999) addressed this cultural dichotomy in the Asian value scale. In the current study, the AAVS-M indicated that there was a difference in

adherence to collectivistic ideas between leaders of Asian American organizations and non-Asian American organizations. Asian American students who chose to participate in Asian American organizations had a more collectivistic orientation than Asian American students who chose to focus on non-Asian American organizations.

In 1995, Earley completed a study in line with the above results, where 96 managerial trainees were taken from the People's Republic of China and the United States to work on tasks with low to high accountability and responsibility. Groups were formed from both countries based on their demographics such as age and occupation. The tasks given to each group ranged from writing memos to evaluating product plans and were turned in so that other people could not judge their work. Then the trainees were divided into either a high accountability and responsibility group or a low accountability and responsibility group to complete given tasks within one hour. The individualistic participants performed worse on tasks that required shared responsibility and low accountability and that the collectivist participants performed better on these tasks. The study showed that collectivism dramatically reduces the effect of social loafing, which the author believed to explain why social loafing occurs much more frequently in American culture than in Chinese culture. In the case of this study, many of the Chinese participants demonstrated collectivist thinking; they placed the interest of the group above the interest of themselves. At the same time, they believe that the other members in the group will do the same. In the end, the outcome of the group far outweighs self-interest. On the other hand, the individualistic participants demonstrated social loafing by diverting efforts to other group members because it is the only way in which they could maximize self-interest. Individualism focuses on individualistic accomplishments over

the achievements of the collective. Therefore, it is nonsensical for the individualistic participants to put the interest of the group above the interest of their own.

The social phenomenon shown by the results of this study is especially problematic for many Asian Americans who were raised with collectivist cultural values. Most American management theories are based in individualism and do not apply to collectivism (Diversity Inc., 2014). These theories emphasize values such as leadership, innovation, and taking initiatives, which are contrary to traditional Confucian collectivist beliefs that permeate throughout Chinese, Korean, and Japanese culture. In China, tradition dictates that an employee seeking a promotion waits for his or her boss to approach him or her for a promotion, whereas in the United States the employee must take the initiative to approach his or her boss about the issue. In the United States, the culture of business encourages employees to voice their opinions, which is antithetical to what many Asian American students were taught growing up.

While students in this study leaned toward collectivism, their emotional self-control and humility present differences that are not reflective of the above theories. Students indicated on the AAVS-M that emotional self-control did not rank high on the values scale, resulting in a score of 3.25. Keeping in mind that the students interviewed are considered leaders on campus, four students mentioned they were elected into a leadership position because they were able to vocalize their ideas the best or expressed the most passion the organization. Approximately 25% scored 4.0 or higher on emotional self-control, signifying that it is a value of interest for Asian Americans. For students who were raised to less verbally expressive, potential consequences can arise, which in turn, could affect their careers and social relationships. Interestingly, most of the students who

scored high on emotional self-control were pursuing majors in the sciences. Andrew (staff member) mentioned:

> Very often, students do not pursue careers in the humanities and social sciences because it requires more verbal communication compared to careers in the sciences. What's unfortunate is that I know students who are passionate about topics outside of the sciences or math, but do not have enough support and encouragement from their family to get them beyond the hurdle. (Andrew, staff)

Andrew went on to link this to confidence as he discussed that many of students he interacts with have the knowledge, ability, and skill to pursue any academic major or extracurricular, but lack the confidence to move down a different path. This finding correlates with AAVS-M's humility score, in which 50% of students scored four or higher. Kim et al. (1999) describe humility as being modest or having a low estimate of one's ability. This is concerning from a leadership perspective as research has shown that a high self-confidence and self-esteem is needed for leadership growth (Harvard Business Review, 2007).

Throughout this section, positive and supportive (and lack because of that) personal experiences that Asian American student leaders experienced were explained. This included student involvement and student leadership along with support for leadership development. The conflict amongst American and Asian values was not void from any conversation, student or staff. Studies, such as Earley, continue to find this difference. With an understanding of these experiences and experiments, the next section will explore how external factors, such as the glass ceiling and the model minority stereotype contribute to the lack of Asian American leaders and the need for student

focus.

External Factors

A number of themes found throughout this study related to the glass ceiling and model minority stereotype contributing to the lack of Asian American leaders. First, this section elucidates the political implications and the fight against the model minority stereotype. Next, it explores themes discussing the glass ceiling in relation to mentoring and role modeling. Then a lack of representation of Asian Americans in leadership positions is addressed. Lastly, themes centered on how the model minority stereotype inhibited leadership in Asian Americans are discussed.

Fight against the model minority stereotype. Students, when initially asked about the role the model minority stereotype had on their lives, most did not have a personal story to share initially. Instead, they discussed the history of it and how Asian Americans were used politically as a model for other minorities to strive towards. Because of their involvement in Asian American organizations, most had a general understanding of the political implications of the stereotype. The knowledge they shared supported the argument discussed in the literature review. After further probing, all but one student saw the model minority stereotype as something that still existed and that they did have to deal with it.

These students perceived that the model minority stereotype influenced Asian American college students' involvement in leadership by motivating them to fight against the stereotype. John mentioned that he found himself wanting to do the opposite of what his parents instructed him to do. He claimed he wanted to be more "white" since he grew up in a pre-dominantly white community with very few Asians in the Midwest. Others

wanted to prove to society that Asian Americans were capable of leadership and not homogenous. These findings support and contradict the suggestion by Hoffman et al. (2002) that students of color who seek leadership positions might have been those whose culture more closely aligns with the White culture. Certainly this may be the case for John. For others, the current study suggests otherwise, that Asian American students choose to take on leadership positions because they wanted to fight against the stereotype imposed on them.

Glass ceiling and representation. Unfortunately, Asian Americans in the United States are not well represented in leadership positions in higher education and outside of the field (Diversity Inc., 2014). This lack of representation contributes to the glass ceiling effect for Asian Americans, since Asian American students do not have adequate mentors and role models in leadership positions. The researcher found that respondents believed the shared ethnicity between an Asian American mentor and an Asian American mentee positively impacted the mentoring relationship. Sarah mentioned "it would be nice if they [multicultural center] had more advisors or people like us to talk to and available every day. It would be great to not have to rely on one person to talk to about this stuff." Students were careful to say that they felt the university was very supportive, but that there were very few Asian American faculty or staff that they looked to as a mentor. They shared that Asian American mentors could provide them with a more realistic view of life as an Asian American beyond the campus walls. Kodoma (2014) stated that students noted it was important for them to have role models and that there was a lack of role models on their campuses. He went on to specify that the role models that students were able to identify with were the same race and gender as themselves. The findings of

students who participated in the current study mirrored the sentiments of participants in Arminio et al. (2000), Kodoma (2014), and Balón & Shek (2013). Student participants in the present study indicated that the ethnicity of mentors matters.

Both students and staff mentioned that others might perceive Asian American organizations as insignificant because they catered to a specific population. Students indicated that their leadership positions held less esteem in society because of their roles in cultural organizations. While staff members indicated that cultural organizations are a great entry point, but Charlie stated, "There is a reality that it seems like the minorities have to go out of their way to learn how to work with Whites." This biased view contributes to the glass ceiling effect. Lee (2002) described the glass ceiling as an invisible, impenetrable barrier that prevented qualified individuals from advancement in career trajectories to management positions. Since their leadership in Asian American organizations was not valued, participants felt they were put at a disadvantage when compared to Whites with similar experience in non-ethnic organizations. Woo (2000) posited that the glass ceiling blocks the upward mobility of individuals within an organization. Consequently, Asian Americans were being blocked from obtaining upward mobility within organizations because their involvement was in ethnic organizations instead of other non-ethnic organizations.

The research also found that the model minority stereotype portrayed Asian Americans as only being successful in math, science, and engineering fields and as unsuccessful in fields that required language or personal communication skills. They saw the stereotype as a barrier to leadership that perpetuated the idea of Asian Americans not being fit to serve in leadership roles. Thus, if Asian Americans chose to take on

leadership positions, they were facing an uphill battle where they had to prove that they were capable of these positions. Further, the researcher found that Asian Americans were reluctant to purse careers in the humanities and social sciences. Students cited the model minority stereotype, including family orientation, emphasis on education, and financial rewards as reasons Asian Americans were not pursuing leadership roles beyond college. Cheng and Yang (2000) and Chun (1995) explained that the stereotypical image of Asian Americans consisted of success in math, science and engineering. Suzuki (2002) stated that Asian Americans were underrepresented in occupations that required language skills and personal contact. These occupationally segregated perceptions of Asian Americans limited the range of occupations that Asian Americans attempted to enter. Meanwhile, a staff member noted, "Asian Americans are encouraged to pursue more stable jobs, like medicine or law. There's less risk and less pressure to fight against stereotype." Other interviews also bolstered the research cited because students felt the barriers of the model minority stereotype inhibited Asian Americans in general from pursuing leadership positions at a societal level. This contributes to the glass ceiling effect that Asian Americans face, if they are seen as capable of leadership positions.

Lastly, from the interviews the researcher found that respondents perceived that Asian Americans were not encouraged to become leaders growing up and even college. Reasons cited by participants included: stigmas, lack of support, historical culture, parents or family, and model minority stereotype. Min (2006), Sakamoto and Xie (2006), and Yang (2006) stated that Asian Americans were seen as lacking leadership ability because of their lack of assertiveness, lack of leadership skills, poor social skills, passivity, or authoritarianism. Valverde (2003) reported that Asian Americans were

confined to low-level administrative positions such as student services programs like Educational Opportunity Programs, multicultural services, or affirmative action programs, rather than more prestigious and powerful leadership positions. In the present study, students indicated that they were not encouraged to become leaders as children, which supported findings in these article since students did not have enough Asian American role models and mentors. The model minority stereotype also contributed to the lack of encouragement of Asian Americans to pursue leadership positions, since the stereotype depicts them as not being fit or qualified for such positions. Students specifically cited that they did not see enough Asian Americans in leadership positions at the university. Thus, the glass ceiling is a vicious cycle where it prevents Asian Americans from attaining higher leadership positions and since there is a dearth of Asian American leaders, there are no role models or mentors to encourage Asian Americans to pursue those roles.

Students indicated a lack of support at the societal level in their Asian American leadership development. This finding supported Kwon (2009) and Kodoma (2014), which reported that Asian American college students were underdeveloped in their leadership skills, which negatively affected their pursuing professional leadership positions. Ladson-Billings (1998) found that Asian Americans (in general) internalized the model minority stereotype and were less likely to see themselves in leadership positions and did not actively pursue them. This is a consequence of the model minority stereotype that students in the current study agreed with when they indicated that stigmas, historical culture, and the model minority stereotype all contribute to a lack of encouragement to pursue leadership positions.

The themes found throughout the interviews relating to barriers to Asian American leadership provide a better understanding of why the glass ceiling exists for Asian Americans. Knowing that students perceived leadership for Asian American organizations as being insignificant and not applicable by society contributes to a glass ceiling that blocks the upward mobility of Asian Americans, as defined by Woo (2000). This would contribute to Asian Americans being less likely to obtain managerial positions, since their leadership is not seen as valid, as evidenced by studies conducted by Woo in 2000, Wu in 1997, and Young and Takeuchi in 1998.

Student participants in this study also cited that Asian Americans were not encouraged to pursue leadership positions outside of Asian American organizations. While the campus overly encourages involvement and leaders, a few students felt that the campus climate was alienating to non-White students, and that they lacked mentors to assist in their pursuit of leadership positions. The Glass Ceiling Commission report (1995) found that artificial barriers including stereotypes and not having a supply of employees with the necessary qualifications for higher positions existed. Students in this study cited that the model minority stereotype was a barrier to their pursuit of leadership. Further, the view of involvement in Asian American organizations as insignificant contributes to Asian American students being seen as less qualified for positions. The Glass Ceiling Commission report (1995) also found that internal structural barriers existed, which included a lack of recruitment, alienating corporate climate, and pipeline barriers. Thus, students continue to believe these barriers exist.

Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that the model minority stereotype is a main

contributor to the glass ceiling, presenting a barrier to Asian Americans in their pursuit of leadership positions. Asian Americans were seen as not fit, able, or aspiring to become leaders because of how they are perceived through the stereotype. The stereotype, however, played out differently amongst students who were successful in attaining leadership positions within their college community. These students were quite aware of the implications of the stereotype on the Asian American community and were driven to disprove and educate people about the fallacy of it. For Asian American college student leaders in this study, the model minority stereotype actually fueled their leadership aspirations. Fortunately, at the campus level, these students were provided with the necessary support to foster their leadership potential. However, these students were incited by the stereotype and primarily supported within their college community, they did not see the same support at a societal level. In terms of Asian American leadership, in general, these students still perceived many barriers. They cited the stereotype that they were trying to fight against as restricting Asian American leadership within society and discouraging Asian Americans from pursuing leadership.