

BAMBOO CEILING: STEREOTYPING ASIANS AND DISCRIMINATING THE 'MODEL MINORITY'

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to review literature by other authors and researchers on the concept of 'bamboo ceiling', given by Jane Hyun, in white-dominated countries in general and America, in particular. It analyses the situation of Asian American students and the stereotypes related to them in a mixed culture setting. It then analyses the situation of Asian American employees and the problems faced by them in the professional setting, in seeking executive and managerial positions, and the reasons associated with this discriminated- lack of leadership skills and Asian values taught by the parents in their upbringing. It discusses the problematic nature of the subtle promotion of white values for reaching higher position and breaking through the bamboo ceiling. It also shows the variations seen within the bamboo ceiling and the problems faced by Asian women and Asians with varied gender and sexual orientations. It discusses the issues with racial discrimination faced by Asians in their careers.

Keywords: bamboo ceiling, Asian American, leadership position, racial discrimination

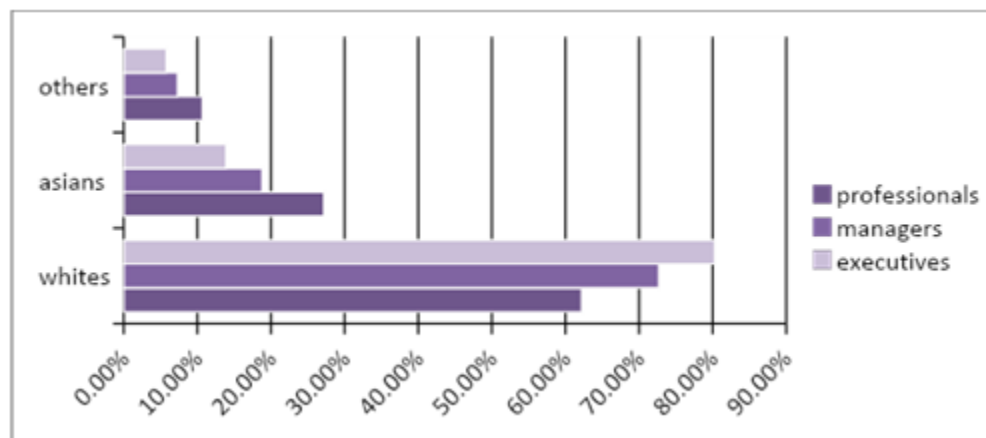
1. Introduction

The glass ceiling for women in professional perimeters has an equivalent called the bamboo ceiling for Asian American people, especially in the western part of the world. Jane Hyun in her book *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians* (2005) introduced the term 'bamboo ceiling' defining it as 'a combination of individual, cultural, and organizational factors that impede Asian Americans' career progresses inside organizations.' There are a number of factors hindering Asian American people from climbing up the ladder and attaining executive and managerial positions. In American context, bamboo ceiling is defined as a social barrier faced by a person from Asian descent in progress in professional quarters, employment or other. Asians are usually stereotyped as the 'model minority' and people consider this as a great opportunity for these people but in reality, this stereotype stops them from getting ahead. They have to face discrimination from other races and are not able to climb up the ladder in the professional arena.

Their progress is stopped and there is no way of reaching desirable positions despite the required training and qualification. This racial discrimination refuses the Asians of any development in their careers after a certain point.

2. Under representation of Asians

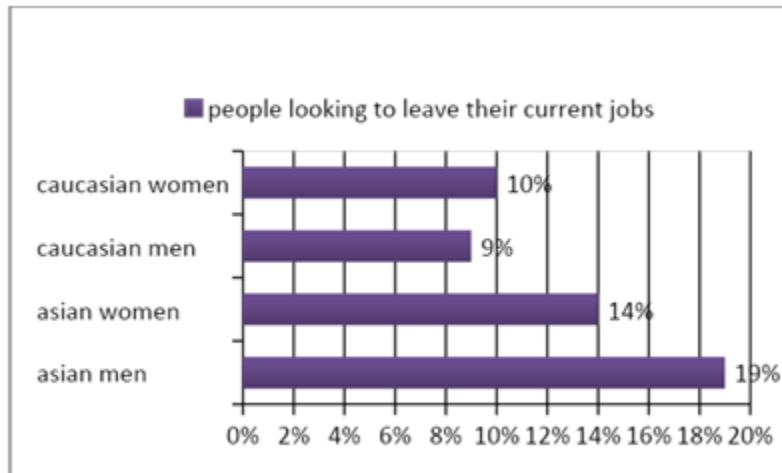
Asian Americans, while stereotypically being described as academically gifted, do not see the practical results of their potential in the professional arena and face discrimination from other communities for bring over represented and ‘over-favored’ while the reality is far from that. For instance, It is evident that a part of prestigious high schools in the US, especially the science and technology fields, highly constitutes of students from Asian American minority followed by whites. This has raised concerns about making the institutions “too Asian” and the official bodies wanting to make the exams more intensive for Asian American students or possibly increasing the acceptance scores. However, this is only the case for a small part of high schools and moreover, the asian American students who do not fit the stereotype of being highly academically intelligent will have to face problems if the exams are made more difficult in comparison to other students.



The whites are the most highly represented community in the professional arena despite their contradicting claims.

A lot of asian Americans have faced discrimination at workplace. Studies found the figure to be around 25-30%. The actual level of discrimination might be even higher considering unspoken inequities faced by asian Americans. They are constantly made to feel like they don't fit in despite the efforts. They are neglected and criticized for their accents and suggestions even if they are at a superior position. They are often hesitant to bring new ideas to the table and are regarded as incompetent. These reasons lead to hindrance in their careers. CWLP finds that 63% of asian men and 44% of asian women feel stalled in their careers.(Hewlett,2011). Asian

Americans have to look for better jobs elsewhere with the continuing discrimination and companies are losing their competitive skills.

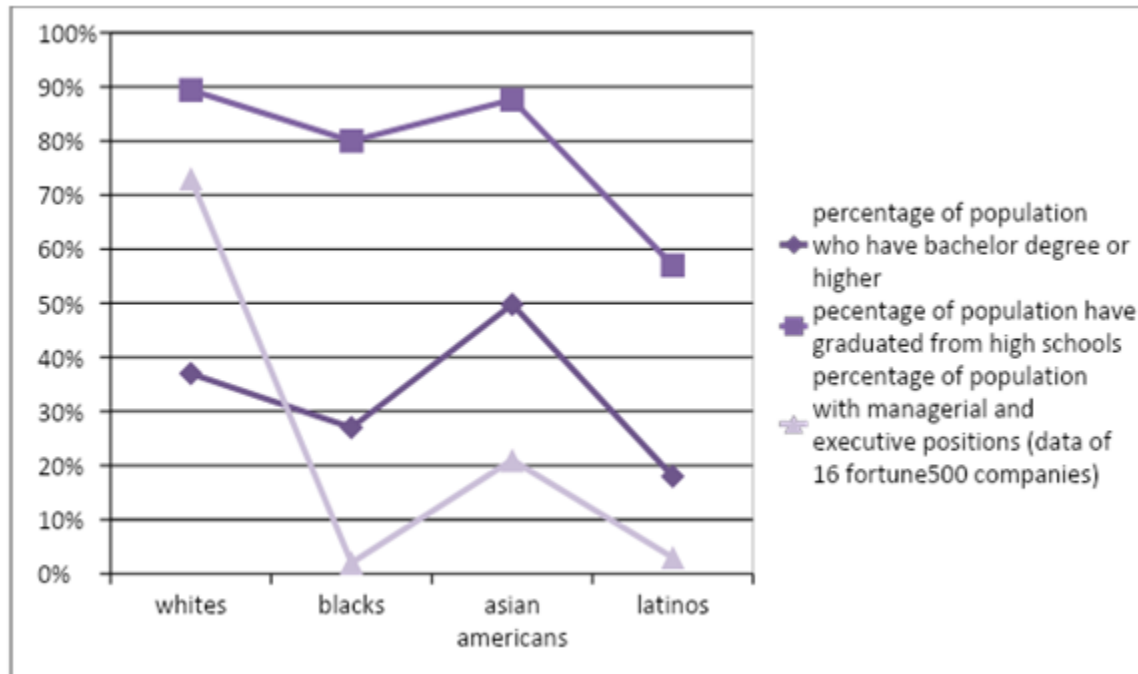


2.1 Reasons for under representation

Many-a-times Asian Americans are described as ‘lacking leadership skills’ and having ‘poor communication skills’ by their colleagues and superiors. Asian teachings and values have been regarded as the reason for this. Many people claim that they’ve been raised to accept authority figures and not question or ‘disturb’ them, by small talk or suggestions. This might be reason why Asian individuals do not come across as very talk-able and charismatic personalities. They don’t usually talk about their achievement which is actually being humble in Asian culture but does not help them in the American workforce. Their facial features are also said to be arrogant and inattentive. This makes them less likeable and these qualities do not appeal to American employers. However, many believe that naming these as ‘misunderstandings’ is only a way to justify racial discrimination. Following the stereotype, Many employers even want asian American candidates to have a higher education or from a more prestigious institution compared to a fellow white candidate for the same position. Problems in networking have also been considered as a possible cause of asian American not reaching higher positions despite qualification.

Michele Norris in her interview with writer Wesley yang and Jane hyun (2011) discusses that Asian American are over achievers in all fields when it comes to education but they are severely underrepresented in corporate leadership positions. It is also the case the Asian Americans who do step in leadership positions, essentially represent white culture and values. Asian values are severely undermined and even considered inappropriate in the work place. In the interview(2011), Jane hyun comments on how her peer focused on building a relationship with

the boss, while she had been taught to keep working hard and wait to get noticed. This highlights the points that she puts forward- changing the habits taught in Asian upbringing for professional success. But the mere fact that becoming like elite white people and ‘American’ is the only way to strive in the workplace if you are an Asian American doesn’t sit right with many Asians and is often said by many Asian Americans to ‘uphold white supremacy’.

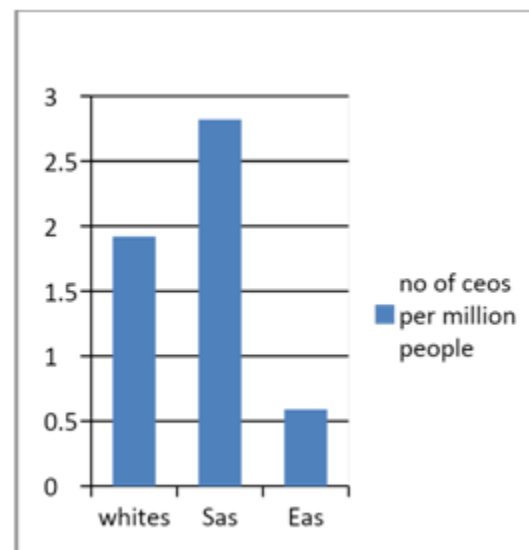
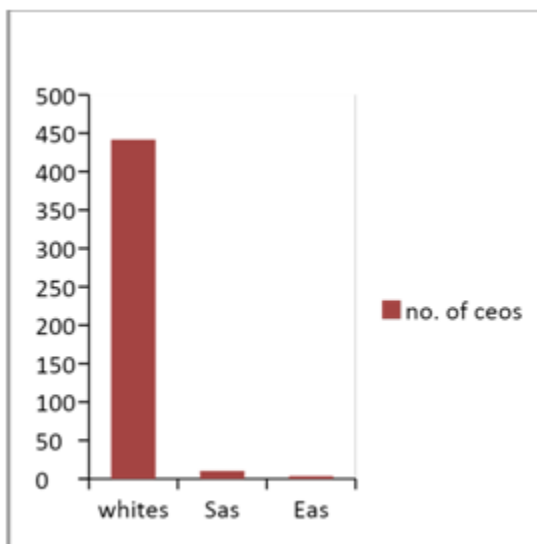


Margaret m.chin (2016) showed through her study that a fairly large population of Asian American students takes up higher level studies. Getting a job becomes easy for a degree holder but movement up the pipeline is where the problem arises. It is only the proportion of white males that increases as they move up the ladder. The study also shows that most of the Asian American CEOs among the fortune500 ceos belong to upper middle class family background and all CEOs except for the African American had a similar personal style as the ‘old’ while male CEOs and that the corporate elite belong to a similar group of personality, behavior characteristics identical to whites, and are therefore considered elite. The figures have changed over time and asian American representation has been increasing with respect to the percentage of high schools graduates and students receiving higher education because at a time, asian American were the least represented community among executives and managers and almost all the positions belonged to whites.

2.2 Representation of asian American subgroups

Jackson G. Lu, Richard E. Nisbett, and Michael W. Morris(2019) conducted nine

studies(n=11030) to find out the scope and mechanisms of the bamboo ceiling on two of the largest Asian groups in us i.e. East Asians(EAs) and south Asians (SAs). The hypothesis was that east Asians are least likely to attain leadership position while south Asians are more likely than whites to attain such position. They examined three mechanisms which are prejudice, motivation and assertiveness to find the mechanism responsible for such discrimination in professional areas. These three mechanisms have been considered as tentative explanations for ‘bamboo ceiling’. Prejudice was however, considered unlikely since south Asians face higher levels of discrimination in everyday life as compared to east Asians. Motivation, similarly, was disregarded as an explanation because East Asians and south Asians do not seem to have a significant difference in motivation levels, keeping the motivating factors same. Asians are often stereotyped as being the worker and being more interested in numbers rather than leadership which could be considered as a reason for less motivation towards leadership positions but studies found that Asians aspire to be in better positions and high-ranking jobs as compared to non-Asians. Lastly, assertiveness can be seen as a reason. The leaders in USA are supposed to fit a prototypical category of people who show readiness to speak for themselves, build good relations with people through competitive communication skills, tell people about their abilities and goals which is considered as ‘tooting one’s own horn’ in many Asian societies and all-in-all be an assertive person who could stand out and up as a role model for people. EAs are more on the quiet and steady side as compared to SAs who are loud, forceful and lively and thus, more likely to stand out.

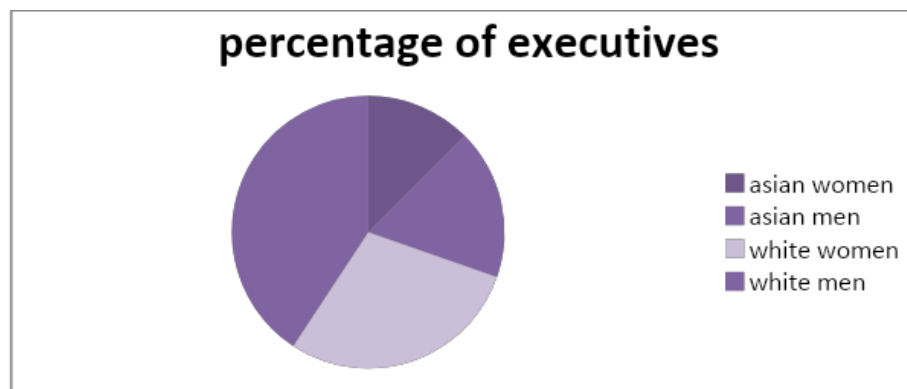


SAs have a higher ceo-population ratio than whites, however, the most no. of ceos remain white despite various ethnicities in USA found, because of better opportunities for immigrants. The other studies found that SAs experience more discrimination and are considered less competent

and likely to be CEOs, but show more leadership potential and are more assertive as compared to EAs.

3. Struggle of women and Variations of bamboo ceiling

Leyi cao (2019) analyses the status of asian american women in the silicon valley. The study shows that asian American individuals struggle in the workplace yet the proportion of asian American women is far greater than asian men. There is only 1 in 285 asian American women in executive position compared to 1 in 201 asian American men, 1 in 123 white women and 1 in 87 men in companies like google, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, LinkedIn, and Yahoo(EEO-I data).



Asian American women have to face gender as well as race discrimination. According to a research paper on the wage gap faced by Asian American and Pacific Islander women, the study shows that these women earn only 52 cents for every dollar earned by a white man, i.e., half of the wage received by a white man. Many Asian American women have a wage gap as much as their incomes, which means half the wage as compared to a white man while working more difficult, tiring, and at times, even hazardous jobs. The cases and number of Asian American women earning more than a white man are fairly low, close to 20 cents, and then also the wage gap is not as wide. Asian American women have to work more than twice as hard to make ends meet for their family while constantly struggling with poverty, discrimination, harassment, and devaluation of their work. This is also, at times, referred to as 'concrete ceiling' describing its more solid nature. Breaking such a barrier, as such, becomes very difficult despite being equally capable and showing potential for such positions.

Another variation of the bamboo ceiling is seen when these people belong to the LGBTQIA+ community, which in general is known as 'glass closet'. However, Asian people in the glass closet not only have to face racial discrimination but also, homophobia; which is still prevalent in organizations around the world and poses innumerable problems for these people making them feel like 'outsiders among outsiders' (Jerald Adams, 2019) living in a white-

dominated gay community in the work place.

4. Breaking the bamboo ceiling

In her book, Jane Hyun says that the first step in breaking through this barrier is 'self-awareness'. They need to realize their situation and find ways to connect more with people and realize what they can do to improve their situation. She had herself faced the problem of not being very connected with her superiors and her peer had made her aware of this fault. Other ways to get ahead can be 'forgetting' some of the values taught to them which might prove to be burdensome rather than being useful in career perspective. Many Asians, as aforementioned, are taught to be humble and keep their achievements to themselves rather than bragging about them but in American society, talking about your achievements can actually help you in moving up and no achievement is considered small or irrelevant. Learning how to toot your own horn subtly can get you very ahead in life and gain you credibility. Networking is also very important. Staying connected to people and getting to know more influential people. Not only will this help build your career but also represent you as a charming personality which is an admired virtue in professional quarters. Building a personal brand can assert your image as a good authority figure. Hesitation in making decisions, however, can ruin that brand, thus, making decisions carefully but without hesitation is an important quality. Leaders are criticized as much for wrong decisions as they are for hesitating because it makes them seem not ready for the responsibility of leadership. Lastly, confidence is the most important and can go a long way in getting ahead and taking command when necessary. (Kevin Kan, 2020)

5. Bamboo ceiling in other countries

The forces of racial discrimination are prevalent in many other white dominated countries as much as America. In Australia, only 3% of their total senior leadership positions are given to Asian-Australians while the total population constitutes of about 12% of people from Asian descent. (Gareth Evans, 2019). All of the people in cabinet positions in Australia are of European descent. No Asians hold positions of cabinet ministers or university presidents despite 7 of Australia's 10 biggest trading partners being Asian countries. Programmes are being started in UK to promote Asian talent and break the bamboo ceiling by bringing the issue forward, familiarizing people with the term and incorporating Asian people in big firms. In Canada, the gap between white people and POC is very high. For every dollar earned by a white person, a POC earns only about half of it, which is substantially less which having the same expenditure and qualifications. (Chloe Tse, 2021)

Results

The various studies show that the bamboo ceiling is very much present in white-dominated

societies and Asian underrepresentation is a result of various stereotypes and racial discrimination faced by all people of colour. Asians are often seen as lacking leadership and communication skills needed in people in authority position. As such, they are denied such positions and are left unsatisfied with their work conditions. This also leads to wastage of potential. Asian American students, at times, have to work twice as hard to get into prestigious schools and universities and the institutions are also criticized for taking in too many asian students and not being inclusive or favouring asian students for being smarter. Asian employees are much less likely to reach leadership positions as compared to whites and people of other races, while they are far more likely to obtain the qualifying education and degrees and aspire for such positions. Almost one-third of the asian employees have admitted to having faced discrimination in the workplace and a lot of asian people in authority position are not taken seriously or seen not fit for their positions by their subordinates. The number of asian people looking to leave their job is also more than twice as compared to their white fellow employees. Asian American women also have to deal with racial discrimination as well as sexism. The wage gap between asian women and white American men is very wide and women are forced to work harder and for more number of hours without receiving the same benefits. The number of women in leadership is already not even 10% and the percentage of asian women among these women is very low. Within the subgroups, South Asians are much more likely to be CEOs than East Asians because of their assertiveness. East Asians are not very assertive and consider it rather boastful which is also a reason why asian people find it harder to climb up the ladder.

Discussion

The people caught under this barrier have to suffer without a reason. They have to accept lower positions while having potential and the workplace also loses important assets due to this distinction. There are clear laws prohibiting any kind of racial discrimination in most of the countries, but their results are not seen in the professional setting. People need to be more open-minded towards poc to ensure that they are treated at par with the white people and their abilities are not exploited or neglected. Rather than blaming all the issues on the people who are suffering, these types of discrimination should be brought forward and people should be sensitized towards their problems. People in authority positions should understand the issues faced by asian people due to their upbringing and rather than hindering their success and denying them competent positions. People need to understand that just providing them jobs cannot end their plights and efforts should be made to free the countries of racial discrimination at the root so that asian individuals do not have to work harder while getting the same benefit. Moreover, definitions of who and who cannot lead should be changed because the privilege only belonging to the elite class can result in waste of very important human resource and talent.

Conclusion

The researches by various people shows that bamboo ceiling is deeply rooted in white-dominated countries and despite improvement and efforts, there is still a long way to go. Getting rid of such discrimination and barriers is very important to ensure people safety and opportunities. Asian people are just as capable and deserving of authority positions. Promoting asian people in all spheres of life is very important. The continuing scale of hate crimes against asians and denial of adequate opportunities will not break till racial discrimination is removed at the root and asian people will continue to suffer. The stereotypes associated with Asians are only harming them even if they are claimed as the 'model minority'. The people who migrate to such countries just looking for better opportunities and lifestyle are disappointed because of the slim chances of getting leadership positions. The society will be deprived of talented and determined individuals if the situation is not helped.

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