

# Like a Boss? Asian Americans, Leadership, and the Bamboo Ceiling

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## Abstract

Development of students' leadership skills is consistently focused on (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). However, few studies specifically examine Asian Americans and leadership, or the contradiction presented by the "bamboo ceiling" concept and the "model minority" stereotype. The present study investigated the question, "Why do we not see more Asian American leaders?" It compared the perceptions of leadership skills of an Asian American and a Caucasian individual. It was hypothesized that Asian Americans would be perceived as less suitable for a leadership position than Caucasians. It was also hypothesized that Asian Americans would be perceived as having less typical leadership qualities.



Several studies address the perception of leadership and minorities, but few have specifically focused on Asian Americans and leadership. The work experience of Asian Americans is rarely researched or seen in literature (Cheng & Thatchenkery, 1997; Landau, 1995; Leong, 1995; Leong & Gupta, 2007), yet there is extensive research about other racial minorities (Cox, 2004; Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Dewberry, 2001; Rosette et al., 2008). Very few known studies have looked at Asian Americans and leadership perceptions specifically (Xin, 1997; Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005; Rosette et al., 2008; Sy, et. al., 2010), although the question is receiving ongoing mainstream attention.

Concerns address the contrast of Asian-American students' academic over-representation and success, and their under-representation in leadership positions in corporate America (2011). This concept has been named the "bamboo ceiling," a derivative of the "glass ceiling" idea of managerial position barriers for minorities. The bamboo ceiling is more specifically defined as the "combination of individual, cultural, and organizational factors that impede Asian Americans' career progress inside organizations" (Hyun, 2005). As noted by Yang (2011), this concept is often juxtaposed with the seemingly contradictory stereotype of Asians as highly successful in many areas of life.



Known as the "model minority" stereotype, it is ostensibly the most pervasive and influential stereotype about Asian Americans (Kawai, 2005). Engrained within this stereotype are the perceptions of Asian Americans as intelligent, academically and professionally successful, and hardworking (Kawai, 2005; Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009). This stereotype is persistent, in spite of research suggesting that it is in effect a myth, which ignores the unequal opportunities and the wide disparity of status within Asian Americans themselves (Yu, 2006).

Sy et. al. raised the question of "whether Asian Americans are viewed in a manner that is inconsistent with expectations for those who hold leadership positions?" They found that Asian Americans are perceived as less suitable for leadership roles, due to having highly specialized set of skills, which are in contrast to the broad range of skills considered important in leaders (2010). Therefore, the present study attempted to investigate the question, "at a college level, what do leadership perceptions of an Asian American student look like in comparison to a Caucasian student?" It was hypothesized that using a resume as basis for judgment, an Asian American student would be perceived as less suitable for a leadership position than a Caucasian student. It was also hypothesized that the Asian American student would be perceived as having less typical leadership qualities.

## Method

### Participants

One-hundred and-three undergraduates were recruited from a small liberal arts college in Northern California, and were offered extra credit in their lower-division psychology courses. Women composed 67% of the participants and men composed 33% men, aged 17-31 ( $M = 20.1$ ). The ethnic composition of the sample was diverse. However, for the purposes of this study, participants were categorized into Asian (41.7%) and Other (58.3%). All participants were treated in accordance with APA ethical guidelines.

### Materials

Two versions of a resume were used, containing a fake resume of a pre-med student, and three leadership scales. One version of this resume included a picture of a male Asian American, while the other version included a picture of a male Caucasian American, both of which were similar in age, attire, and body type (see images). All other aspects of the two resumes were identical.

### Scales

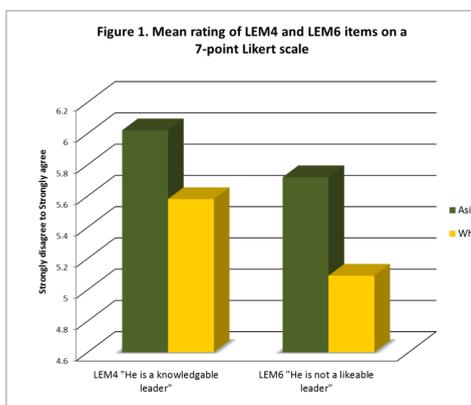
Leader Evaluation Measure (LEM). A 7-point Likert scale, composed of seven items, rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Leadership Effectiveness Scale. (LES) A 5-point Likert scale, composed of five items, rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Student Perception of Leadership Instrument (SPLI). A 5-point Likert scale, composed of eighteen items, rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### Procedure

The current study was conducted in a library computer lab on a small liberal arts college campus. Participants were randomly assigned arbitrary ID numbers to ensure anonymity. They were then each directed to an individual computer area spaced away from other subjects. Researchers informed the subjects that the study had two main parts, the first of which involved rating one of two resumes using three standardized leadership measures. This first part of the study was explained to subjects under the guise of another unrelated research project, so as to not influence subjects' responses during the latter half of the study. The subjects filled out an informed consent form and were randomly assigned to rate one of the two resume types.



## Results

The Asian American student was not seen as significantly less suitable or as having less typical leadership qualities on the scales as a whole. However, in partial support of our hypotheses, two items of the Leader Evaluation Measure had statistically significant differences between the Asian American and Caucasian student.

Independent samples t-tests revealed two significant differences. Specifically, the LEM4 (He is a knowledgeable leader) item was marginally significant for the Asian American student being perceived as more knowledgeable ( $M = 6.02$ ,  $SD = .1.09$ ) than the Caucasian student, ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ),  $t(101) = 1.91$ ,  $p = .059$ . Additionally, on the LEM6 (He is not a likeable leader) item, the Asian American student was perceived to be a less likeable leader ( $M = 5.72$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ), then the Caucasian student ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $t(101) = 2.13$ ,  $p = .036$ ).

## Discussion

The first hypothesis, that the Asian American student would be perceived as less suitable for a leadership position that a Caucasian student, was not supported. In fact, the Asian American student and the Caucasian student were seen as equally capable for leadership across the three scales. However, the Asian American student was seen as a more knowledgeable leader than the Caucasian student. This finding is telling and consistent with previous research suggesting that the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans as intelligent is pervasive (Kawai, 2005). The second hypothesis, that the Asian American student would be perceived as having less typical leadership qualities, was partially supported. The scale item related to likeability was significantly lower for the Asian American student. This particular finding supports research noting that Asian Americans face negative stereotypes of being emotionally reserved, and therefore may encounter less overall likeability (Hyun, 2005).

It is possible that during the college years, some stereotypes and perceptions of Asian Americans are present, particularly those supporting the model minority myth. However, the overall finding of equal perception of leadership capabilities, across several scales, suggests that there is more than perception affecting the presence of Asian American leaders in American society. Current studies are incorporating the appropriation of model minority beliefs of Asian Americans themselves, in connection to leadership and locus of control. It may be that intrapersonal factors weigh more on addressing the bamboo ceiling than interpersonal factors such as perception of leadership qualities.

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**OBJECTIVE**  
Pursuing an M.D. with an emphasis in pediatrics.

**EXPERIENCE**  
**Main Lab Assistant, Biology Department – For Dr. Sharon Lynch**  
Napa, CA – 2010-2012  
Led out between 20-30 students once a week in lab procedure. Summarized Presentations of the procedure and expectations for the lab that day. Answered questions and kept general order in the lab.  
**Stockroom Worker, Chemistry Department**  
Napa, CA – 2010-2012  
Stocked and prepared chemical solutions for chemistry labs on a weekly basis, as well as disposed of chemical following each lab session. Also, handed out extra equipment to lab students.  
**Internship, Kaiser Permanente Vallejo Medical Center**  
Vallejo, CA – 2011  
Shadowed General Pediatric Surgeon and helped with patient transport.  
**VOLUNTEER**  
**Queen of the Valley Medical Center**  
Napa, CA – 2010-Present  
Worked as a greeter at front desk of hospital. Handed out I.D.s and gave general directions to visitors.  
**Public Relations Officer, Association for Student Activities**  
Napa, CA – 2010-2011  
Worked to enhance communication between the student population and administration at Napa Valley College.

**EDUCATION**  
**Napa Valley College**  
Chemistry B.S. – Fall 2013  
Pursuing a bachelor's degree in chemistry with an emphasis in pre-medicine.

**SKILLS**

- Excellent interpersonal and communication skills
- High competence in Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint
- Great organizational and time management skills

**REFERENCES**  
Available upon request.