

Study: Asian Americans are not viewed as ideal leaders

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Asian Americans are widely viewed as "model minorities" on the basis of education, income and competence. But they are perceived as less ideal than Caucasian Americans when it comes to attaining leadership roles in U.S. businesses and board rooms, according to researchers at the University of California, Riverside.

In a groundbreaking study, researchers found that "race trumps other salient characteristics, such as one's occupation, regarding perceptions of who is a good leader," said Thomas Sy, assistant professor of psychology at UC Riverside and the lead author of the study.

The peer-reviewed paper, "[Leadership](#) Perceptions as a Function of Race-Occupation Fit: The Case of Asian Americans," appears in the [Journal of Applied Psychology](#).

Co-authors are Lynn M. Shore of San Diego State University, Judy Strauss of CSU Long Beach, Ted H. Shore of CSU San Marcos, UCR graduate students Susanna Tram and Paul Whiteley, and Kristine Ikeda-Muromachi of CSU Long Beach.

"Understanding the effects of race on leadership perceptions is important, in part, because the U.S. workforce is increasingly racially diverse, and organizations are realizing that the inclusion of [racial minorities](#) constitutes a competitive advantage in a global market," according to the researchers. "However, racial minorities are often perceived to be less suitable for management positions in the United

States, as evidenced by a persistent glass ceiling for these groups, lower managerial promotion ratings, lower job suitability ratings, and individuals' attributions of success and failure."

Asian Americans represent approximately 5 percent of the U.S. population and are projected to account for 9 percent of the population by 2050. However, they account for only .3 percent of corporate officers, less than 1 percent of corporate board members and about 2 percent of college presidents, despite their higher representation in business and professional occupations.

This study is the first on Asian Americans and perceptions of leadership, and may explain why fewer Asian Americans advance to senior positions of leadership than their education, experience and competence would suggest, Sy said.

"We've been taught that if you have greater education, skill and experience you will succeed," Sy said. "That falls apart when it comes to Asian Americans."

The researchers sampled three groups of individuals — 131 business undergraduates from a large business school on the West Coast, and one group of 362 employees and another of 381 employees in the Los Angeles region — and asked them to evaluate an employee. In one experiment participants received identical information about the employee's expertise as an engineer or salesperson, but some were told the employee was Asian American and others that he was Caucasian American. In a similar experiment, participants assessed the employee's leadership attributes.

Study participants perceived Asian American engineers as more technically competent than Caucasian American engineers, and Asian American salespersons as less capable than Caucasian American

salespersons. Leadership perceptions were higher for Caucasian Americans than for Asian Americans regardless of occupation.

"Across all three studies, our results indicate that when making between-race comparisons, Asian Americans are perceived as less ideal leaders than are Caucasian Americans. This suggests that Asian Americans may be disadvantaged relative to Caucasian Americans when organizational leaders make decisions about whom to promote to managerial positions," the authors wrote.

"The stereotype in the workforce is that Asian Americans are great workers, not great leaders," Sy added. "In the Western world, the ideal leadership prototype is charismatic, which is associated with Caucasians. Asians are perceived as competent, intelligent and dedicated, but lack the perception of charisma needed to be viewed as strong leaders."

Past research has found that Asian Americans are perceived to possess the necessary attributes for engineer occupations, but lack the necessary attributes for the sales fields, the study notes. Traits often associated with Asian Americans, such as social introversion, emotional withdrawal, verbal inhibition, passivity, a quiet demeanor and a reserved manner are not typically viewed as compatible with sales positions.

The study found that even when Asian Americans were perceived to be more technically competent - such as Asian American engineers vs. Caucasian American engineers — they still were perceived to be less ideal leaders than were Caucasian Americans.

This suggests that organizations and leaders need to understand there is a pervasive bias and examine current practices, Sy said.

"People are not even aware they have biases. It is subtle, pre-conscious behavior," he explained. "Management needs to understand this is

happening and needs to look at leadership selection and development. The awareness is there for African Americans and for gender issues, but not for Asian Americans."

Sy said it also is important to determine whether Asian Americans have the same motivations as Caucasian Americans to aspire to leadership positions. For example, many Asians in the West have come to believe that Caucasians make better leaders.

"They look at the leaders in their organizations. If there are no examples of leaders of your race or gender, you're less likely to believe you are leader-like and consequently you don't aspire to be a leader," he explained.

At the same time, Asian Americans tend to believe that technical competence is the primary criterion for promotions, so they may focus their energy on improving their technical rather than their leadership skills, further perpetuating the cycle of bias.

"Ultimately promotions and leadership advancement of Asian Americans and other minorities occur in a competitive environment where they are compared with others, especially their Caucasian counterparts, who may be viewed as best fitting for a business leader," the researchers wrote.

"Consequently, the extent to which Asian Americans and other minorities are perceived as less ideal leaders in comparison with others has significant implications for leadership advancement."

Provided by University of California, Riverside

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