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The Leadership Experiences of Asian Americans

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Although the number of Asian American professionals has continued to increase significantly in the United States, their underrepresentation in leadership roles remains. Given the absence of literature in this area, this article presents a qualitative study on 14 Asian American leaders in order to understand their perceptions and experiences in attaining and performing in leadership roles. Semistructured interviews were conducted, and themes were then garnered from them. Major themes identified included the influence of common Asian values, having to negotiate multiple identities, leading in response to the urging of others, using a group orientation and collaborative style, having a strong work ethic, emphasis on excellence, having to respond to stereotypic perceptions and expectations, and the importance of support and mentoring. Although participants were unique in their experiences, salient aspects across participants emerged showing that they were influenced by their identification as Asian Americans. These qualitative findings generate hypotheses about Asian American leadership that warrant further investigation.

Keywords: leadership, Asian Americans, Asian American leaders

Asian Americans have been labeled the “model minority” because they are hardworking and “overachieve” in many areas, including achievement tests, grades, educational degrees, and entry into some of the best colleges and universities. Their educational attainment is higher than other racial groups with 44% of Asian Americans completing at least a college or advanced degree in comparison with 26% of the White population, the next closest racial group (Julian & Kominski, 2011). Despite this “overachievement,” the number of Asian American executives, officers, and directors included 96 men and women who held 127 seats at Standard & Poor 1500 companies during 2004, representing less than 1% of the total seats. The discrepancy between high educational attainment and low percentage of those in leadership positions within corporate America raises some interesting questions about “Why?” Questions include: whether or not they possess the requisite leadership skills and characteristics; the existence of barriers such as racism, sexism, and discrimination; the availability of opportunities; mentors and role models; and the necessity for representation.

Leadership Styles of Asian Americans

Because there has been little in the leadership literature about Asian American leaders, it would be beneficial to learn from their experiences to begin to answer these questions. This case study

method is useful to generate hypotheses for further research in the same way early leadership research was conducted on existing leaders. The use of qualitative methods is also important to avoid preexisting biases shaped by testing current theories. Those few studies that do exist have addressed how Asian American leaders face the adverse effects of both positive and negative stereotypes, the biases they face, and the influence of cultural values on leadership style.

Sue (2009) found some common characteristics among pioneer ethnic minority leaders, which included Asian Americans. The first was the courage to seek graduate educations and to be involved in ethnic issues because so few role models and limited systems of support existed. Second, these leaders had an intolerance of injustice; they not only identified problems, but also sought out solutions to change the prevailing access barriers to leadership roles. These leaders were also active in contributing to the multicultural movement, displaying a commitment to cultural diversity, and protesting against conformity to existing White norms. These early pioneers were advocates who paved the way for social mobility of future Asian American leaders via a social justice orientation.

Lim and Ployhart (2004) found that Asian American leaders strived to be transformational leaders who develop, intellectually stimulate, and inspire those they lead and to put aside their own self-interests toward a “higher collective purpose, mission, or vision” (p. 611). A transformational leadership style typically is defined as including the following four qualities: charisma, inspirational motivation, vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Transformational leaders raise the bar by appealing to higher ideals and values of followers. In doing so, they may model the values themselves and use charismatic methods to attract people to the values and to the leader (Burns, 1978). One dimension of this leadership style is to act as a coach or

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mentor to followers and to inspire them to work for the collective whole.

Although many dimensions of a transformational leadership style are consistent with the Asian collectivistic cultural value, in which the group's needs are put before individual needs, there is some evidence to suggest that Asian Americans appear to favor a collaborative leadership style over a transformational style (Chin, 2013). The use of a collaborative process with a focus on the needs of the group as a whole, emphasis on the relationship, and working together to come to a consensus in order to make decisions was embraced by the Asian American leaders. Moreover, Chin (2013) suggested that dimensions such as charisma and assertiveness, commonly associated with a transformative style, may have different semantic meanings within Asian cultures.

Kawahara (2007) discovered that Asian American female leaders were often visionary and had the ability to inspire others to follow and work toward a shared vision with enthusiasm, energy, and passion. Women leaders in her study tended to use a relational and collaborative leadership style which emphasized empowering others, sharing power, and utilizing the strengths of others to achieve a common goal. This style of leadership involved the opinions, feelings, and thoughts of others and is contrasted with more hierarchical and authoritarian styles. Essential to the success of these women leaders was the support and mentoring received from family, friends, and colleagues.

Stereotypes and Perceptions of Asian Americans

Although these characteristics facilitate the exercise of good leadership, Asian American leaders also face barriers and challenges to their leadership. Asian cultural values and characteristics can both facilitate and hinder the exercise of leadership. A "bamboo ceiling" shaped by racism, stereotypes, and biases toward Asians can result in their not being selected or appearing "unfit" for leadership positions.

Xin (2004) identified Asian Americans as the "model minority" because they are "diligent, agreeable, flexible, modest, polite, soft spoken, and nonconfrontational" (p. 161). Although this stereotype about Asian Americans is positive, it is also viewed as passive, nonassertive, and subservient. Despite their being highly qualified, hardworking, and well-respected, they are often perceived as unqualified for leadership roles. Asian cultural values of compassion and having a genuine concern for others' well-being, often over the well-being of oneself, underlie these behaviors. It is noteworthy that Asian American leaders do not see these same characteristics of compassion and the use of indirect communication as passive or nonassertive (Chin, 2013). Rather, they view these strategies as important to achieve similar leadership goals, while maintaining the interpersonal relationship and protecting others from "losing face," an important value in Asian cultures.

Although Asian Americans are perceived to have the competencies necessary for jobs in engineering and sciences, they are often not perceived to have the qualities necessary for success in sales or leadership (Sy et al., 2010). Engineers typically need to be task-oriented, methodical, and skilled in mathematics with little social interaction, whereas salespersons typically need to engage in promotion and aggrandizement. Negative stereotypes about Asian Americans include "social introversion, emotional withdrawal, verbal inhibition, passivity, a quiet demeanor, and a reserved

manner," which are not considered ideal for certain leadership positions and occupations (Sy et al., 2010, p. 905). Although these perceptions of Asians have their bases in Asian cultural values, they carry different semantic meaning among Asians and are often misunderstood when judged by Western values. For example, social extraversion is valued and positively associated with the ability for sales, good social networking, and important to climbing the corporate and social ladders in Western culture, yet social introversion in Asian cultures is valued and positively associated with integrity and good moral character. Modesty in Asian cultures is valued and practiced as not being boastful, being reserved, and being considerate of others, although self-promotion, as practiced in Western cultures, is often considered rude and shameful by Asians. It is also noteworthy that attributions of social introversion are inconsistent with Asian cultural values, which emphasize the importance of relationships in negotiations and business practices (see Chen & Rao in this issue for further discussion of this topic).

In a study of Asian American management and supervisor-subordinate relationships, Xin (2004) explored discrimination toward Asian Americans as well as stereotypes about their being nonassertive, submissive, and not having the "right stuff" for leadership. Asian Americans were found to be lower on individualism and higher on collectivism. They tended to defer to authority figures and were high in power distance. They tended to be loyal and diligent workers, arriving early and staying late at work. Although viewed as passivity and submissiveness in Western cultures where competition prevails, it is viewed as *li* in Asian cultures or as correct according to Confucian emphasis on social propriety in superordinate-subordinate relationships. Xin (2004) also found that Asian Americans were less likely to argue with their bosses or to advocate for themselves in seeking promotions or higher pay. This reflects Asian cultural values, which emphasize harmony and cooperation in interpersonal relationships and an expectation that others will do the right thing (i.e., their bosses will recognize their good work).

Gender stereotypes about Asian American males have varied from being hypermasculine to effeminate and from being viewed as inferior, aggressive, or commendable (Shek, 2006). When these stereotypes differ from the prototypic White, heterosexual, male leader, then it is more likely that they will be viewed as not fit for leadership positions. On the other hand, Asian American women are challenged with different kinds of stereotypes. Louie (2000) revealed that leadership in the form of social advocacy has not been studied among Asian American women because they are stereotypically thought to be "passive and apolitical," portrayed in the media as "demure and obedient and as sex objects," and as "victims of a patriarchal 'traditional' Asian culture" (p. 13). This blending of racism and sexism toward Asian American females results in being overlooked and not taken seriously for leadership positions.

In contrast to these negative stereotypes, Louie (2000) found Asian American women active in leading community based organizations and in national Asian advocacy organizations where they were "instrumental in defining issues, formulating policy, and influencing social change" (p. 14). These women were motivated to become leaders to solve social problems; their leadership styles involved empowerment and connectedness; and their commitment was lit by the fire of social inequities which encouraged them to fight harder for the rights of others as well as their own. Yet, they

experienced barriers due to the lack of organized support, limited leadership development opportunities, and few Asian American role models early on to help them rise to ranks of leadership. They were pioneers who broke the glass ceiling caused by sexism and racism with limited financial and personal resources.

The report of the [Federal Glass Ceiling Commission \(1995\)](#), created by President Bush and Congress with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, provides evidence that discrimination resulting in poor access to leadership roles among ethnic groups, including Asian Americans, continues; it was significant in urging corporate America to address the inequities faced by ethnic minorities in the U.S. and their social responsibility to recruit qualified ethnic minorities to leadership positions. The term “glass ceiling,” coined in 1986 by the *Wall Street Journal*, described the invisible or artificial barriers faced by ethnic minorities in rising to leadership roles in corporate America which include stereotypic perceptions that preclude them in selection processes and misinterpretations that result in poor performance appraisals. The report concluded that “Many judgments on hiring and promotion are made on the basis of a look, the shape of a body, or the color of skin” (p. 6). A glass ceiling remains to influence many business decisions.

The Commission reported the “Supply Barrier” or educational opportunity and attainment as one factor contributing to maintaining the glass ceiling. For many Asian Americans, the supply barrier is not one of enough credentials, but of sociocultural barriers that involve conscious and unconscious racial stereotyping and bias that “they are perceived as superior professionals, but not as management material” ([Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995](#), p. 10). As a result, they end up working in areas such as human resources, communications, public relations, affirmative action, and customer relations where there is very little vertical movement.

[Hyun \(2005\)](#) acknowledged that stereotyping and discrimination toward Asian Americans exist, but suggested that this invisible barrier, which she coins as a “Bamboo Ceiling,” can also be internal. She cited the influence of Confucian values on Asian American behavior such as maintaining order and harmony, respect for elders/superiors, and limiting self-expression in the workplace, which clash with Western values of individualism, competition, and materialism. Similar to [Chin’s \(2013\)](#) conclusions, these values can negatively influence upward mobility in hiring and promotions of Asian Americans in Western settings.

[Hyun \(2005\)](#) identified certain stereotypes of Asian Americans in the workplace that include waiting their turns to speak up in meetings, being soft spoken, and not being good at self-promotion and marketing themselves. They are viewed as respecting authority and often too busy working with little time given to socializing. Although these are extremely valuable to a company for middle manager or worker bee positions, they are not associated with behaviors for moving into positions of power and leadership. These findings are confirmed in several of the articles in this special section.

Statement of the Problem

To date, the limited literature and research on Asian American leadership has focused on the negative perceptions, barriers, stereotypes and biases, as well as the challenges that Asian Ameri-

cans face, and how Asian Americans do not appear “to have the right stuff” to be leaders. There is little research that explores how leadership is viewed and experienced by Asian American leaders themselves, including their strengths, abilities, resiliency, and the context in which they led.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences and social identities of Asian American leaders in order to better understand how they shape their leadership styles and the contexts in which they lead. Lived experiences included childhood, family, community, and work environments as well as the process of exercising their leadership and the perceptions and expectations of them as leaders. Social identities included dimensions of ethnic and gender identity and how they influenced leader identity and the exercise of leadership. Finally, leadership styles endorsed by the leaders were identified.

Method

Participants

All the participants who identified as Asian American from a database of a national research study on diversity and leadership were used as the sample in this study, totaling 14 participants. This convenience sample came from the original study, which included 367 participants who completed an online survey. Of the 367 participants, 135 participants initially expressed a willingness to have a follow-up interview; however, only 73 participants were interviewed. Of the participants who were not interviewed, half did not respond to outreach by interviewees, and others gave incorrect contact information or were unable to schedule a time with the interviewer. Leader was operationally defined as holding or having held a formal position of leadership with a title of responsibility and oversight for at least a year. These positions included such titles as director, manager, vice president, or president. Oversight included such responsibilities as supervising, managing programs, companies, or divisions. Demographics of the participants can be found in [Table 1](#). Names of the participants have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the participants’ confidentiality.

Semistructured Interview Guide

Archival data was utilized for this study from semistructured interviews. The major questions included in the interview guide were: (a) What is your leadership style? How do you lead?; (b) Who are you as a leader?; and (c) What has made you who you are today and the type of leader that you are? If and how has race, gender, or ethnicity influenced your exercise of leadership or your access to leadership? Based on the participant’s initial responses, the interviewer could prompt the participant for more information and details about the response.

Procedure

Interviews for this study came from Asian American participants who completed the online survey and who agreed to a follow-up interview. They were contacted and interviewed by

Table 1
Participants Demographics

Name*	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Leadership positions
Michael	Japanese American	Male	60	Administrator, Natl. Professional Assn. Leadership
Kiran	Asian Indian	Female	37	Former Training Director
Patty	Asian American	Female	55	Public Health Administrator
Lori	Korean American	Female	34	University Program Coordinator
Jeff	Biracial-Asian/White	Male	55	Training Director, Natl. Professional Assn. Leadership
Niyati	South Asian/Pakistani	Female	30	National Professional Association Leadership
William	Chinese American	Male	77	National Professional Association Leadership
Diane	Japanese American	Female	44	Department Chair, National Professional Association
Thomas	Chinese American	Male	67	National Professional Association Leadership
Neesha	South Asian	Female	28	National Professional Assn. Leadership
Carol	Chinese	Female	75	Manager of Governmental Committee
Dave	Japanese American	Male	62	Former Dean, Professor
Aditi	South Asian	Female	52	Practitioner, Activist
David	Chinese	Male	76	Dean, Pastor

Note. * Names have been changed to pseudonyms.

telephone for about 1 to 1 1/2 hours using the semistructured interview guide. These were audio-recorded and then transcribed. No incentives were provided to the participants. Participants' data included demographics and interview transcripts from this national study.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach was used as the methodology to collect and analyze the data. This approach was appropriate to generate questions and hypotheses about leadership phenomena in a population about which there is little research and likely to differ from those populations already studied. It is a step in the process of formulating a theory about diversity leadership. The sample size of 14 in this study is consistent with the number of 15+/-10 reportedly used in current interview studies (Kvale, 1996).

Transcripts from the interviews were read several times by the researchers. Open coding was used to code the data. The constant comparative method was then utilized to group the units of meaning together; determination of the categories and themes were made by the researchers. In addition, axial coding was then utilized to further understand the interrelationships and causal conditions of the categories as well as the themes.

Provisions of Trustworthiness

To increase the credibility of the results, different provisions of trustworthiness were instituted. A research team, consisting of the two researchers and the external reviewer, was used. An audit trail of the different activities throughout the research process was kept. First, the researchers kept journals of their experiences (e.g., their thoughts, questions, potential influences on the research process, and conceptual formulations), which document the entire research process. The journals were also used to facilitate ongoing examination the researchers' awareness and influence on the research (e.g., reflexivity). Second, all documents, including the transcripts and those from the data analysis, were maintained. Lastly, the third author did an external review of the findings given her expertise on the intersectionality of leadership and diversity.

Researchers' Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an ongoing process of self-questioning and self-understanding, leading to the researcher's awareness of his or her own worldview, beliefs, assumptions, and biases; an examination of his or her way of knowing and knowledge; and how this influences and interacts with his or her research (Patton, 2002). Profiles of the two researchers are provided to show the awareness of their worldview, ways of knowing, and influences on the research process.

Debra M. Kawahara is a third generation Japanese American woman who is a Professor of Clinical Psychology and holds an administrative role in her academic department. She also held leadership roles in professional psychological associations. As a younger female child in a family of six children as well as being younger than her grade peers during her K-12 education (her November birthday made her one of the youngest students), being a leader was not a position to which she was accustomed within her family, school, or work. Although there was a desire, she often would be hesitant to pursue leadership roles. This changed as she began to develop as a professional psychologist, specifically as an academic where mentorship and encouragement from more experienced, senior female and male psychologists assisted in her attaining leadership roles.

Monica S. Pal is a biracial female with an older brother, and she was raised in the diverse suburbs of New York. The dynamic interaction of her social identities (i.e., gender, age, race, and leader) played out within her family. Her father immigrated from India when he was 26, coming from a humble Hindu patriarchal family. Her mother came from an egalitarian home, and a Christian, White European American background. Monica works as the Project Director of an outpatient substance abuse counseling center and as an Adjunct Professor. Given her family of origin, leading did not come easily to her. As a humble and young leader, Monica initially had difficulty delegating work or asking others for help, especially of those whom were older; she felt as though she could and should complete the work herself. Mentors and supervisors have inspired Monica to ask for assistance and encourage others to

take the lead of different tasks and projects in order to strengthen her own leadership abilities.

Results

Common Asian Values Endorsed by Leaders

Many of the participants emphasized certain characteristics that they possessed both as a person and a leader which were consistent with Asian cultural values that they associated to their leadership style. Many of these values appeared to be instilled from their upbringing as well as their families and communities. These values included being humble, having concern for others' well-being first, being kind, giving back to the group or community, valuing education, respecting one's elders, and being responsible. Some examples include:

... an attention to, a respect for, a concern for, how the well-being for the other people and the attempts to put others before yourself. That's the idea that modesty is an important value. (*William*)

In the cultural values of being raised as an Indian and Hindu, emphasis was paid on kindness and giving back and compassion and getting to your best potential through education. All those are values that I tap into as a leader that allows me to transfer those over to those that come under me. (*Aditi*)

Being South Asian, there's just that emphasis on respecting your elders and respecting people with more experience than you in general. (*Niyati*)

A sense or tendency to be overly responsible. (*Lori*)

Negotiating Multiple Identities

The participants discussed their various multiple identities and social locations throughout the interviews. The shifting and integrating of their multiple identities was evident in the lives of the participants as the participants had to think about and negotiate aspects of themselves as an iterative process with their experiences, roles, changes, and contexts that they found themselves in. The salience of a particular identity appeared to be context dependent; it was influenced by the density of others with similar identity dimensions and the friendliness of the environment's climate with regard to diversity. Most participants identified strongly with three dimensions: ethnicity, family, and work.

I feel like I'm stepping in and out of identities all of the time. If I had to pick a professional identity, I strongly identify as a counseling psychologist . . . I do a lot of community work and I'm engaged in a lot of not-for-profit work and volunteering that definitely community activist would be another one. And family is just really important to me, so whether, I don't know what the label would be daughter, sister. Those are some identities. (*Niyati*)

I used to work in a world where there were a lot more men than women and I was asked less to help out or I was referred to as "Honey" or "Sweetie" or stuff like that. Totally focused on gender. That was more focused on gender than race or ethnicity, whereas where I currently am, it's more cultural. (*Neesha*)

I think that context is important. For instance, the way I was raised as an Asian Chinese male in this culture is not very healthy for our survival. (*David*)

The priority is my family and the community in some ways is an extension of my family. I really try to protect my time with my family and community and I try not to have my leadership responsibilities interfere with my time with my family. (*Jeff*)

"Leadership by Necessity": Being Asked to Lead

For many of the participants, the role of the leader was not one that they actively sought, but were asked to fulfill by others. Interestingly, participants noted that their preference is to have a lower profile and not be highly visible. Yet, many were sought out for leadership roles because of their reputation to "get the job done" or their highly credible position in their profession. In addition, they often found strong support for them to take on leadership roles, which then led them to consider the roles, and many were willing to serve in the leadership positions for the good of the group.

Leadership by necessity. I've been asked to be a leader from time to time. When I was asked to be President of [organization], it was not something that I was seeking to do. (*Jeff*)

I don't seek leadership positions. I think culturally, I prefer to keep a lower profile and not bring a lot of attention to myself. (*Patty*)

My leadership position was something I didn't choose. I fell into it. Individuals seek me out for feedback and increased responsibility not because they know I'll get the job done but because of their sense of my ability to respect privacy and approach without judgment. (*Lori*)

I've earned leadership positions through my research. That has always been the case. I was President of [organization] because people asked, "Hey, you have this background and knowledge, why don't you run for it? . . . I would only run for a position if, indeed people were receptive to it and I felt that I could contribute things to it. (*Thomas*)

Group-Oriented and Collaborative Style

When asked about their leadership style, participants responded that their style was collaborative and group oriented. Specifically, the emphasis on the group's efforts and outcome as opposed to solely the leader's and the respectful inclusion of all group members' input and opinions were significantly evident. Other behaviors illustrating this style were listening and empowering others, decision making based on consensus, facilitating the group in working together, and giving everyone credit.

I certainly believe a lot of people talk about empowerment, about delegation . . . in order to really do that, it is very difficult. And I'm not saying that I'm the paragon for doing that, but in my own mind consciously, that's what I try to strive to do. (*Dave*)

Mainly, a respect for the members of the group and their opinions, which leads to an emphasis on consensus. (*William*)

I see it as a democratic process. I'm a facilitator. I help bring people together. (*Michael*)

... I've been able to motivate and mobilize people to work together on common interests and projects. (*Thomas*)

I tend to go through facilitative leadership, being consistent—where everyone can talk, but everyone's goal is to make a decision. (*Patty*)

Strong Work Ethic and Excellence

All participants appeared to have a strong work ethic and were hardworking. Many discussed working long hours and being driven in their desire to do a good job or to attain their goals. Further, participants seemed to be very conscientious and sought quality or excellence in their work. These strengths appeared to be the very attributes that led to being recognized by others as having the capabilities to lead well and being asked to take on those leadership roles.

I feel like just working hard and being conscientious because it is a lot of work and needing to stay on top of things. (*Diane*)

... I love what I do, I'm driven to do the work, to create the knowledge base, and I will spend the hours and work, if possible 6-7 days a week to work toward these goals and I think in some sense that, and I know it's true. (*Thomas*)

I place a strong emphasis on doing the job and doing it well the first time. If I'm going to do something, there is no reason to do it half-heartedly. It'd be disrespectful of everyone else's time. (*Lori*)

Expectations and Stereotypes Based on Appearance

Participants reported instances when they believed expectations and stereotyping by others were occurring due to their appearance. Based on the participants' appearance, others seemed to make assumptions and have unfounded expectations about the participants based on stereotypes (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion), particularly if the participant was the only one in the environment. The explicit and implicit dynamics of stereotyping were believed to still be present today.

Historically, people didn't think of Asian Americans as potential leaders. I grew up in those times and so my sense is that people do not always expect leadership capacity from me and I think that social expectations as well as stereotypes play a role in what we do. Otherwise, presently, I do follow and believe the implicit subtle discrimination research that's out there. Even now that there are policies and public statements supportive of diversity that at some level, there are still differences in expectations that are present in some systems and organizations of the larger community and that can be a hindrance and I see it still. (*Michael*)

I would say that the main thing that I have felt is when people don't know me that well, they think I'm pliable because I'm a small Asian woman and I'm quiet. (*Patty*)

Age is probably the only thing because I look really young so it's hard for people to take me seriously. I feel it more outside of the South Asian community, being a woman actually. (*Neesha*)

... the stress comes when I'm the token minority and they say, "Oh look we have this South Asian and she's Muslim and she's active," so I feel like I'm being used somehow not necessarily because of what I'm professionally capable of, but because of my ethnic or religious identity. (*Niyati*)

I've had to become very good at advocating for myself and letting others know when they are making assumptions about how I should be reacting to things. (*Lori*)

Support and Mentoring by Others

To assist the participants in their careers and leadership positions, role models and mentors were mentioned as being sought and consulted for information, advice, and guidance. In addition, the participants found that they served as valuable models and supports in surviving and thriving as well as balancing the various aspects of their lives such as their professional careers and personal lives. Further, the mentors could advocate, empower, intervene, and validate when necessary when issues, problems, or difficulties arose.

I always look to models and mentors and thought of them as the way in which I've been able to thrive as well as survive. (*Michael*)

There were a number of women . . . I would always ask them how did they bring together their professional life and their family life. It was nice seeing women being strong, academic, rigorous, respected without being pseudomale. (*Patty*)

There are two women at this counseling center currently who have been extraordinary supports to me in terms of when things happen in meetings that don't feel really good. They have been valuable in validating my experience. They've been very helpful in getting me to advocate for myself. (*Lori*)

Discussion

Participants were all Asian American leaders who have held a leadership position. It is clear that the participants were different and unique in their own way of being as the interviews illustrated. Each traveled a different path and brought different life experiences to their leadership and to who they are today. These differences illuminate the intersectionality of their multiple identities of race, gender, and social locations that comprised the constellation of their life dimensions. Systemic factors such as the sociohistorical period in which they grew up, their acculturation, and their ethnic and gender identities were also important in shaping the contexts of their leadership.

Interestingly, the sample seemed to consist of male leaders who were older and further along in their careers, whereas the women leaders were younger, particularly the South Asian women in the sample who ages ranged from 28 to 37 years. Skewing of this sample may be related to the number of Asian American males, particularly those of Chinese and Japanese descent during earlier immigration periods in the United States; thus, it is more likely that Asian American males enter the ranks of leadership before their Asian American female counterparts. The patriarchal system in U.S. corporations and society-at-large is likely to have compounded the barriers of prejudice and discrimination toward Asian American females in their access to leadership positions. Since the civil rights and the women's movement of the 60s, social attitudes and mores have become more open and accepting of women and ethnic minorities in the workplace. This may have been reflected in the age differential of the women leaders in this study.

Asian American male leaders in this study tend to describe themselves as nice, polite, compassionate, collaborative, and group oriented. These would not be associated with "typical" masculine characteristics or leadership qualities as defined by Western models, which are often stated to be assertive, direct, independent, and competitive. Yet, these Asian American males were more often

asked to be leaders and were supported by others in their leadership roles. These self-defined characteristics among Asian American male leaders challenge the stereotype that "Asians don't have the right stuff to be leaders." It is possible that they were perceived as not competitive or striving to be the leader; as such, they were not viewed as threats. Research by Berdahl and Min (2012) offers partial support who found that male participants who did not violate prescriptive and descriptive stereotypes leading to their being disliked, mistreated, unwelcomed, and/or harassed were more likely to be supported and sought out to be leaders. Another possibility is that their leadership qualities emerged in different ways that were consistent with their expression within Asian cultures. Yet, a third possibility is that the Asian American male leaders fell prey to stereotype threat in which they behaved based on stereotypes about how Asian males are expected to behave (Steele, 1997). In other words, they may have assessed the environment to be unwelcoming or expecting them to behave like an "Asian male" and made a decision not to challenge these expectations of those who were dominant or in power within the organization.

Although each leader was unique in his or her personhood, these Asian American leaders shared common lived experiences. Family, work, and racial/ethnic identities were important to all of them. These leaders clearly valued both immediate and extended families which are consistent with Asian cultural values despite the variation in age, generational level, and gender. Most of the leaders intentionally gave much thought to the time and energy demands of their positions and the impact they had on their availability for the family. For instance, one leader made a conscious decision to reduce national service while his children were young. Work-family balance was significant and expressed as tension given how important work seemed to be related to their sense of self and self-worth. Many spoke to a strong work ethic and a high conscientious, leading them to set high expectations for themselves and high standards of quality and excellence for their work. Balancing the demands of work and family required continuous adjusting and accommodating over time as situations changed with the raising of their children or caretaking when a parent became ill. Work-family balance is not included in our understanding of leadership. It has special significance for Asian Americans because work is considered a public representation of one's family; children's achievements and successes are seen as honorable for the family, which is connected to the family and group orientation of many Asian families (Sue & Sue, 2007).

Asian cultural values seemed to permeate many of the common characteristics and values associated with leadership behaviors. Humility, kindness, being responsible, respect for elders, importance of education, and thinking of the group before one's individual needs are aligned with Asian values purported by many scholars (Hyun, 2005; Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999; Sue & Sue, 2007) as well as shown by research (i.e., Jose, Huntsinger, Huntsinger, & Liaw, 2000). Despite this high conscientiousness and strong work ethic, many of the leaders reported that they did not choose to be a leader or desire a leadership position. However, their decision to fulfill a leadership position when asked was viewed as part of their duty and diligence and conforming for the collective good. This is consistent with Asian cultural values of collectivism and working hard. It is interesting that many were asked by others to become the leader, and because of this, many

participants felt a responsibility to meet the request of the group. In addition, the support from others also seemed to influence their decision to take on the role of leader. This is reflective of Asian cultural values in which it is more valued to be asked than to ask to be the leader.

Further, the collective, group-oriented leadership style of most of the participants was infused with the Asian characteristics and values above. Listening and empowering others, decision making based on consensus, facilitating the group in working together, and giving everyone credit focuses more on the group and others instead of solely focusing or crediting the achievements of the individuals or the leader. As the leader, the role was seen as facilitating and assisting the group to cooperate and work harmoniously together toward goals, both immediate and future ones. Although the participants as leaders may have seen unique strengths of individual members, it was often more important to reward the entire group for the outstanding accomplishments or work completed.

In addition to the Asian cultural values and characteristics that influenced the participants' identities and behaviors, their physical appearance and racial identification as Asian or an Asian ethnicity posed difficult situations. Many participants were in institutions or organizations that were predominately White and found themselves to be one of a few minority persons and/or possibly the only Asian person among them. Being the only one can lead to being stereotyped as there is not a critical mass to show differences or heterogeneity among those who look physically similar or are from similar racial or ethnic backgrounds (Leak, 2003). Furthermore, it can lead to becoming a token minority to fulfill the diversity of the organizations on committees or community activities, leading to additional responsibilities, stress, and burn out and often are not accounted for when being evaluated or in considering these additional responsibilities in promotions. Ultimately, prejudice, discrimination, and marginalization can often result in negative consequences for Asian Americans due to the perceptions and behaviors of others (Zane & Song, 2007).

To address and manage the various situations, difficulties, and challenges that the participants faced, role models and mentors seemed to be critical for guidance, advice, and support throughout their career and were particularly sought when questions and difficulties arose. The benefits of mentorship has clearly been demonstrated by research through increasing promotion rates, obtaining higher salaries, improving career mobility, developing a professional identity, enhancing professional competence and career satisfaction, facilitating greater acceptance within the organization, and decreasing job stress and role conflict (Johnson & Ridley, 2004). Mentorship also seemed to assist with the areas of actual skill performance such as assertiveness, public speaking, or interpersonal fluency (Zane & Song, 2007) that may be counter to the cultural values of collectivism (placing group interest before individual needs), less assertiveness, harmony, respect of hierarchy or authority, and emotional constraint (Sue & Sue, 2007). An important point, however, is actual skill or behavior performance is different than capacity or requisite skills, and Asian Americans may have the capacity or requisite skill set to be assertive or be a leader, but may not show or utilize them until given permission (Zane & Song, 2007). However, with encouragement and support, they are able to translate the skills into performance and can be effective.

In summary, there are Asian American leaders who embraced certain characteristics that are consistent with Asian cultural values. This shows that one does not need to give up one's identity, particularly one's racial or ethnic identity, in order to be an effective leader in the United States. Further, it demonstrates that Asian Americans are capable of being effective leaders, and the questions, doubts, or barriers about Asian Americans being in leadership positions may have more to do with the attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination in the social context by others' perceptions, stereotypes, and stereotype threat that derails Asian Americans from opportunities and selection to be leaders.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. Archival interview data was utilized for this study, and graduate research assistants conducted the interviews prior to the researchers reviewing and analyzing the data. As a result, interactional data between participants and the interviewers were not given or used in the analysis. Further, member checks, which ask participants to verify whether the results describe their experiences accurately, could not be conducted because participants were not asked to participate in this manner at the time of data collection. This would have posed ethical issues of informed consent and confidentiality. Also, a predetermined number of participants were used based on the data available from the data set from the national study. This may have limited what results were obtained about the phenomenon; however, with any qualitative study, there is an assumption that all aspects of a phenomenon will not be captured by any one study, and the research process is part of the ongoing investigation of the phenomenon.

Conclusion and Future Research

The current study examined the lived experiences of Asian Americans who have served in leadership roles in the United States. The results suggests that the bifurcation of identity dimensions (e.g., Asian vs. Western, male vs. female) may not be helpful in understanding the lived experiences of Asian American leaders because the dimensions are not mutually exclusive and are influenced by other societal, systemic, and psychological processes such as sociohistorical context, events, and attitudes; acculturation; and the individual's intrapsychic and interpersonal characteristics. It would seem that an analysis that is inclusive and integrative of all the multiple identities and social locations would likely lead to a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Asian American leaders. However, there appeared to be salient aspects of their experiences as leaders that were unique to being Asian American regardless of gender, age, and generational level. Overall, it is evident from the Asian American leaders who participated in this study that they had to have resilience and strength in dealing with the negative portrayals and work situations to overcome them as they were pursued and fulfilled their leadership positions successfully. As this research attempted to discern what aspects may be common across Asian American leaders, it may be helpful for future research to further elucidate what particular attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors may be specific to leaders who are Asian Americans,

particularly their strengths and resilience, and what situational and contextual factors enhance or impede their development and abilities to lead. This information can then be used to inform, train, and mentor current and future Asian American leaders in being effective and successful, thereby building the pipeline for others to learn and emulate from them.

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