Glass Ceiling and Asian Americans: The New Face of Workplace Barriers
Deborah Woo
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Throughout her book Deborah Woo does an excellent job of incorporating research gleaned from historical archives, legal actions, Census data, Glass Ceiling Commission findings, personal interviews and other sources in her book Glass Ceiling and Asian Americans: The New Face of Workplace Barriers. The end product is a hard-hitting, concise and information packed reference source that is sure to become a valued tool for anyone wanting to understand both the history and current status of the Asian Pacific American (APA) Glass Ceiling. At the end of each chapter, Woo provides a thorough and highly informative notes section, which greatly compliments each chapter. The reference section in the back of the book offers a comprehensive bibliography of additional sources to pursue, from a list of highly respected authors. This book is a must-read for anyone concerned about improving the career opportunities of APAs, the nation's fastest growing population. Whether the reader is a manager, APA or both Woo makes it clear by stating the obvious – that in the long run the nations’ economy will benefit, if APAs are provided comparative opportunities for career advancement.

Per Woo, the primary thesis for her book is that “the majority of glass ceiling barriers involves subtle biases, sometimes imperceptible or ineffable, quietly or unconsciously reproduced.” She decided to do an organizational study of Asian Americans because there was an obvious lack of research in this area. The resulting product is an exposé of the truths associated with APA over-representation and under-representation in various professional arenas. Woo was very aware that too often Americans of Asian descent were not considered when discussions of who to promote were conducted. The overwhelming majority of CEOs interviewed by the Glass Ceiling Commission thought in terms of women when thinking of glass ceilings. The CEOs next thought about minorities, which in this case was almost always interpreted as African American. The non-minority CEOs admitted that Asian Americans rarely came to mind as prospective managerial candidates.

The term Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) is used to encompass both Asian Americans (without a hyphen) and Pacific Islanders. Americans of Asian descent are not homogeneous. Their ethnic heritage can be traced to the Asian continent, subcontinent and islands within the Pacific Rim. The term Asian American first originated during the late 1960s as a term that the community activists themselves coined as a form of self-identification, and as a
way to replace what was perceived by them to be an offensive but commonly used label "oriental." It was also during the 1960s that another term not coined by the members of the APA community first evolved, the term "model minority." This latest term has caused much conflict and confusion through the years and has contributed to the present backlash against APAs and their career pursuits.

APAs are the fastest growing ethnic population in the USA. In 1960 there were 877,934 Americans of Asian descent, representing less than one-half of one percent of the country's population. The numbers of APAs doubled from 1970-1980, and nearly doubled again from 1980-1990. It was predicted that by the year 2000 there would be approximately ten million Americans of Asian descent, or over 4 per cent of the total US population. By the year 2050, APAs are expected to account for 10 per cent of the total US population, or over 41 million.

Immigration accounts for about 86 per cent of the growth and births (minus the deaths) the rest. Although only 7.9 per cent of the total US population is foreign born, of this figure 63.1 per cent of the APAs were born outside the USA – by contrast 36 per cent of Hispanic and 33 per cent of whites. During the last three decades there has been a radical shift from predominantly US born to where the majority of the APA population is first-generation American. Per the 1990 Census over 30 Asian groups and 21 Pacific Islander groups were reported in the States. Much of this growth can be attributed to the increase of Southeast Asians. And, with the influx of new APA ethnic groups the national APA socioeconomic picture becomes radically altered, as the new immigrants do not have the same access to the wealth, education or community connections of the previous Asian immigrants/refugees.

The term Glass Ceiling was originally coined in 1986, and was initially applied to white women working in a largely white male workplace. In 1991, the Glass Ceiling Act sought to address imbalances in the work place. The Federal Commission on the Glass Ceiling conducted a study of the workplace and learned among other things that the gender gap was most noticeable in professional specialty areas where women were under represented in the highly prestigious jobs such as physicians, judges and lawyers. They also noted that there was a recurring pattern of Asian Americans being over-represented in professional fields but under-represented in managerial positions.

In addition, the Commission found that Asian/Pacific Islander Americans held less than one-hundredth of one percent of all corporate directorships in 1995. The Commission determined that Asian Americans had bimodal distribution with representation heaviest at the lower and upper ends. This finding was flawed in the sense that there has historically been little attempt to disaggregate the Asian data. Foreign Asians (Asians in America) are often mixed in with the Americans of Asian descent demographics. As a result of the aggregate data APAs sometimes are penalized for their supposed "over representation" in areas where the Asians present are not even Americans. APAs making up such a tiny percentage of the corporate directorships, yet
seemingly heavily represented at the upper ends of management is an example of contradicting information.

The media loves to tout Asian rags-to-riches Horatio Alger stories of success as the public is led to believe that yet another American of Asian descent has pulled himself up by the bootstraps, and overcome immense economic and social hardships in order to become a highly successful and wealthy person. The harsh reality is that the Horatio Alger story is a work of pure fiction and few real examples of a real APA “bootstrapper” can be found among the APA community. Invariably every Asian Horatio Alger example ever brought to light in the past few years has been realized not because of sheer pluck and gumption alone, but because of family access to finances and/or political connections. Research has confirmed that social class was critical for the early APA upwardly mobile stories. Of all the Asian American CEOs of the Fortune 1,000's, few of them could truthfully consider themselves "bootstrappers." This truth undermines the veracity of a real Horatio Alger situation. Therefore contrary to popular belief, the American dream seems to be achievable only to those with material advantages and social connections.

If the average APA were to believe that APAs have no desire to achieve upper management status, then this issue would not be a subject of debate. However the reality is that not only is the model minority a myth, but so also is the assumption that APAs do not desire to be promoted. Therefore the model minority thesis continues because "it has been stretched or reinvented and then reasserted to be the case." According to Woo, "if perceptions of managerial disinterest among Asian Americans is widespread, there are clear empirically documented incidences showing that it is also misinformed."

When addressing the career pipeline barriers facing APAs, the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission identified negative factors affecting the APA performance evaluation process, as relate to standards:

- special or different standards for performance evaluations; and
- biased rating and testing systems.

One of the examples cited in the book related to the application of a different set of standards is the case of the Filipino candidate seeking a civil service position. He was rejected for the position, even though he scored the highest on the exam out of 700 applicants, because it was believed he lacked appropriate English skills. Court proceedings verified that the plaintiffs' English "was, if anything better than many of the other participants – yet defendants interviewed continued to claim plaintiff could not be understood well enough to serve as DVM clerk." In another situation, an APA candidate was constantly passed over for promotion. When he asked why, he was told that he was so valuable to the tech staff that they did not want to lose him. If he were moved up, then the tech staff would suffer.

Currently APA managers are seen mostly in areas where APAs are self-employed. Rather than view this phenomenon as a positive, it should be viewed instead with a bit of caution. Invariably the situation is indicative of downward
mobility and APA dissatisfaction with mainstream employment. Per Woo, “Glass ceiling complaints are mostly audible in fields where we might expect their professional concentration to lead to greater managerial representation – that is in the sciences, engineering and other tech professions.” Woo continues, “Evidence of blocked mobility in other areas such as law, journalism, government, and academics is emerging.”

Research revealed that APA educational attainment did not correlate to salary/position levels of non-APA counterparts. Woo observed that “Asian Americans not only receive lower returns commensurate with other groups but increasingly lower returns for more years of service.” In addition, as would be expected, APA women face gender bias, as well as racial discrimination. New immigrants/refugees seriously impact the APA population as a whole, as they possess a slate of issues above and beyond APAs. In addition, the differences between the different generations of APAs in America, and among the different ethnic groups, pose additional diversity of issues and concerns.

As companies and businesses downsize in increasing numbers, affirmative backlash has been on the increase. One of the results of the backlash is less accountability in the areas of affirmative recruitment and hiring procedures. Whereas little opposition exists to the merits associated to diversifying the work force, if only because such a practice is “good for business,” diversifying upper echelons is another whole different story. Woo provides a credible and sustained job of exploring how institutionalized discrimination has pervaded and reinforced a level of status quo that has reinforced both overt and covert discrimination against APAs. The overt/covert discrimination aimed at APAs ethnically, as well as collectively has had a collective negative effect on the nations’ economy by marginalizing a group of people that could otherwise be more productive in modern society.

Woo’s book provides invaluable information for both managers interested in increasing numbers of APAs in upper management positions, as well as APAs wanting to understand the effects of the glass ceiling and their abilities to progress upwardly. Most helpful for managers is the section where she discusses proactive steps for upper management and shares perspectives on the “bigger picture.”

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Further reading