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The Bamboo Ceiling: A Study of Barriers to Asian American Advancement

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The Bamboo Ceiling: A Study of Barriers to Asian American Advancement

Emily Cheng
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Introduction and Background

Asian Americans are widely considered to be a model minority-- they are viewed as particularly skilled in science, and math, as studious individuals who throw off the grading curve, or as quiet students and employees who don't cause trouble. Though this stereotype may seem innocent, its historical roots date back to the Civil Rights era, when the status quo needed a successful exemplar to cast doubt on the validity of existing social disparities that were apparent between the mainstream and ethnic minorities as a whole (Hurh & Kim 1989). Since then, we've begun to embrace the inclusion of all, though there is still a lot of work to be done.

The idea of cultural diversity in the workplace is a popular one, generating much discussion about the inclusion of and affirmative action toward minorities. However, these conversations rarely involve Asian Americans, who despite above-average levels of educational achievement, household income, and employment, find themselves underrepresented in and shut-out of upper-level management positions, a phenomenon known as the "bamboo ceiling."

Objectives

The objectives of this project were:

- 1) to investigate the stereotype of East-Asian Americans as a model minority (created by non-Asians)
- 2) to find out why, in spite of or in contrast to this stereotype, East-Asian Americans are underrepresented in upper-level management in corporate workplaces

Methods

I explored a variety of scholarly sources that analyzed the historical implications of the "model minority" stereotype as well as factors believed to contribute to the aggregation of Asian Americans in technical rather than managerial roles in the workplace.

Results

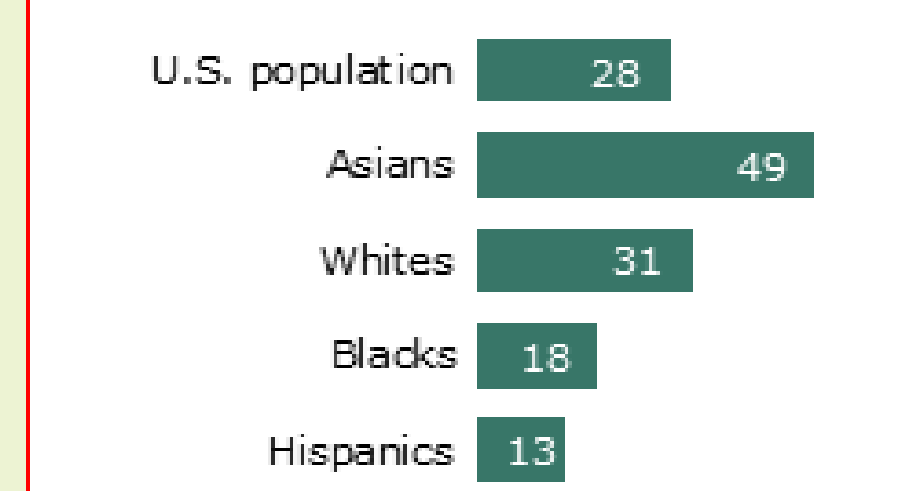
Perceptions

In contemporary American society, Asian Americans are perceived to be doing extremely well—they have a tendency to achieve higher test-scores and better grades than other groups. They are also more likely to get bachelors or postgraduate degrees than any other racial group in the United States.

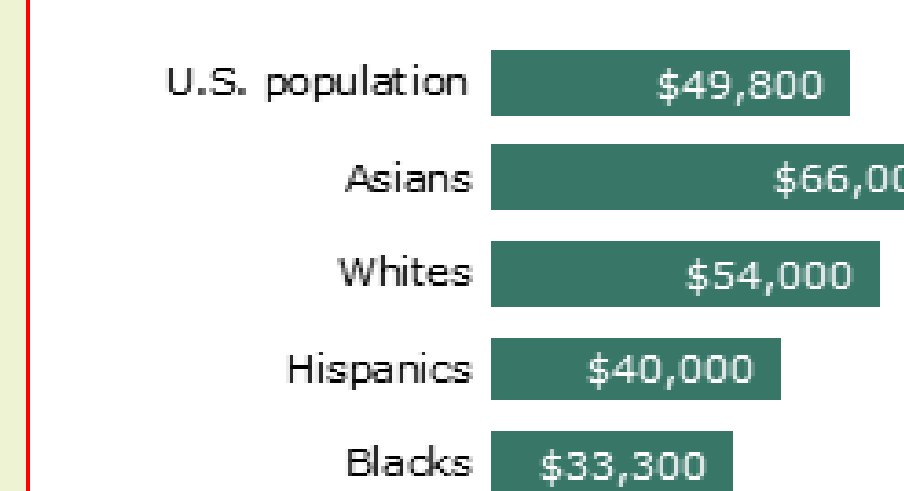
It was found that Asian Americans appear to earn more than their white counterparts with similar education levels; however, this can be attributed to their concentration in metropolitan areas, where incomes are proportionally higher, to account for the higher cost of living.

Asian Americans Lead Others In Education, Income

% with a bachelor's degree or more, among ages 25 and older, 2010



Median household income, 2010

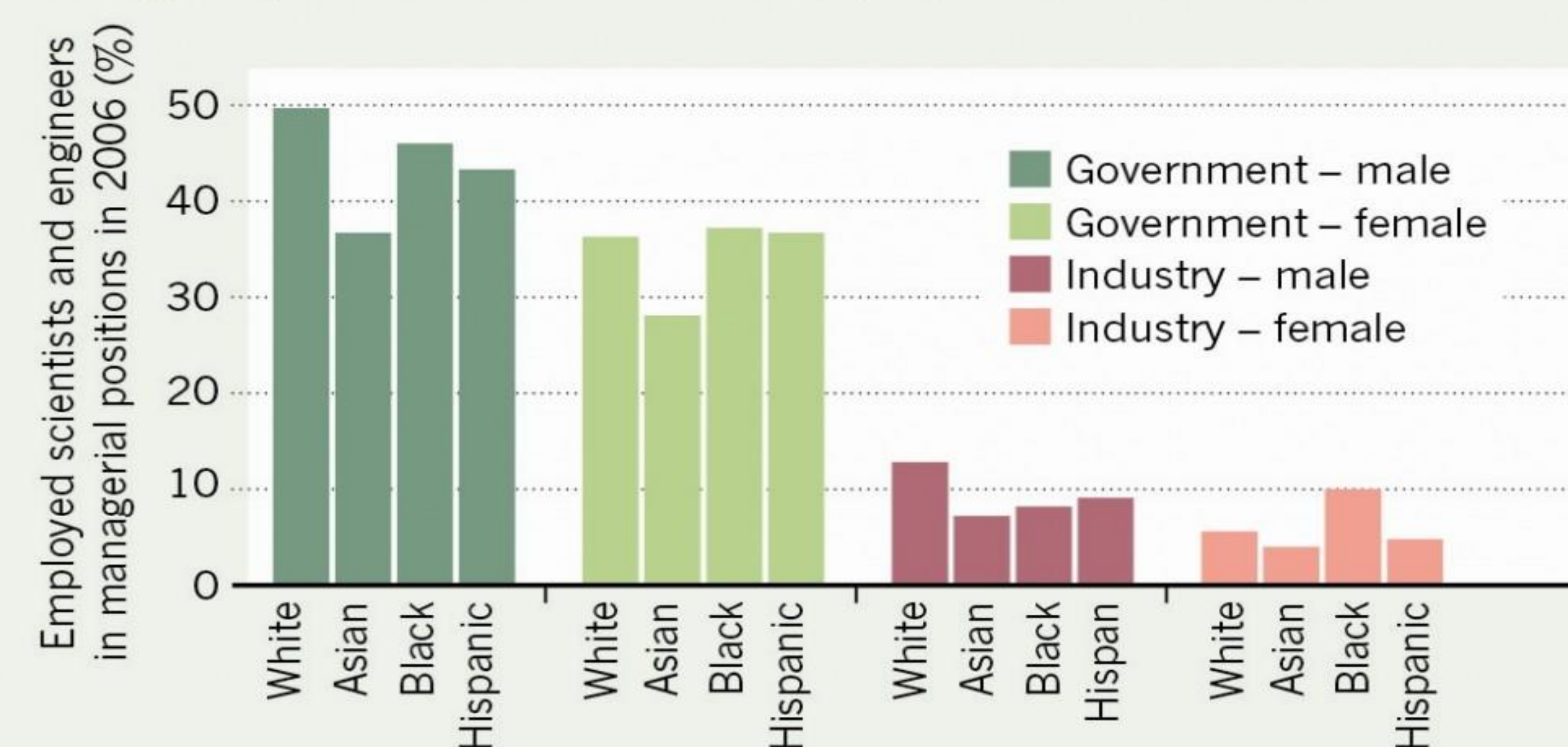


Note: Asians include mixed-race Asian population, regardless of Hispanic origin. Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Household income is based on householders ages 18 and older; race and ethnicity are based on those of household head.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2010 American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) files
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Reality

UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Asian men and women in US science and engineering jobs are reaching managerial positions at a lower rate than people of other ethnicities.



Source: US National Science Foundation Scientists and Engineers Statistical Data System.

Why?

Asian Americans are consistently stereotyped as perpetual foreigners with poor language and communications skills, and they are excluded from networking, mentoring, and training pipelines to promotions to management. These systematic barriers result in a "bamboo ceiling," preventing East-Asian Americans from proportionally rising to management or major decision-making roles within an organization.

Conclusions and Further Study

Despite their extraordinarily high levels of education and qualifications, Asian Americans as a group are less likely to hold management positions and receive promotions. This demonstrates that the model minority stereotype is erroneous—when level of authority in the workplace is used as a measurement, Asian Americans are worse-off than any other racial group.

The Asian American experience and ensuing model minority myth is strongly tied to America's poor history with prejudice and discrimination against racial minorities. The aim of this project is to bring attention to the role of implicit and institutional discrimination in hiring and promotional practices within American corporations as they concern Asian Americans, who are not traditionally considered victims of racial and ethnic discrimination. My research has also shown that the "model minority" stereotype is a harmful myth that masks deep-seated social and racial issues that continue to plague our nation today. I hope that continued dialogue concerning stereotyping and discrimination will bring more awareness to the issue and contribute toward the attainment equality for all.

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