Wesleyan University The Honors College

Asian Americans’ Leadership Experiences

by

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Abstract
Statistics show that Asian Americans are underrepresented in many leadership spaces. In the present study, 12 Asian and Asian American leaders in academia, business, NGO, and politics were interviewed about their leadership experiences, leadership ideals, self-perceptions as leaders, understandings of other Asian American leaders’ experiences, and sources of support. Similar to previous research (e.g. Kawahara, Pal, & Chin, 2013), the present study shows that participants shared a collaborative leadership style with an emphasis on communication. They also viewed support from their communities and mentors as important in their achievement. Additionally, participants indicated both interest and initiative in pursuing leadership roles. They also actively worked toward building a pipeline of opportunities and resources for aspiring Asian American leaders. While they viewed racial stereotypes and biases as major challenges Asian American leaders must overcome, they also acknowledged that factors such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status play an important role in shaping their experiences. Lastly, participants were empathetic toward other racial minorities’ struggles in rising into leadership spaces. Overall, findings from the present study show that the “docile Asian” stereotype is inaccurate and more resources are needed for Asian Americans who are interested in developing leadership.
Introduction: Asian American and Leadership

In an interview in the New York Times, Jennifer Lee and Karthick Ramakrishnan summarized a wide-spread stereotype of Asian Americans: “technically competent”, “diligent”, “quiet”, “too smart”, too academically-focused, and “one-dimensional and lacking personal skills” (“Confronting Asian-American Stereotypes”, 2018). Few of them fit the popular portrait of an American leader. Unsurprisingly, Asian Americans are underrepresented in leadership roles while Asian Americans constitute 5.6% of the American population (New York University Center for the Study of Asian American Health, n.d.). In 2019, Asian Americans make up just three percent of the House of Representatives. Similarly, non-profits and non-governmental organizations are another area in which Asian Americans have little representation. According to Leadingwithintent.org, in the United States, only two percent of chief executives, two percent of board chairs, and two percent of board members of non-profits are Asian Americans.

In 2017, among female leaders at S&P 500 companies, only 2.8% of first/mid-level officials and managers and 1.8% of executive/senior-level officials and managers were Asian (Catalyst, 2017). In 2015, Asians were the largest racial cohort of professionals in Silicon Valley, yet they were also the least likely among all races to become managers and executives (ASCEND, 2017) Similarly, by 2017, only two percent of college presidents were of Asian descents, despite the common conception that Asian Americans are overrepresented in academia. Such data make it clear that Asian Americans are underrepresented in leadership roles in the U.S (American Council on Education, 2017).

Because Asian American leadership is underrepresented, I became curious about why some Asian Americans lead, how they are as leaders, the challenges they
face when trying to pursue leadership roles. In the following literature review, I will briefly discuss the immigration history of Asian Americans as a group and some common stereotypes. Then, I will examine multiple factors that could have contributed to causing the current absence of Asian Americans who are leaders.

**Literature Review**

*Immigration, Yellow Peril, and Model Minority*

In 1763, some Filipinos fled their homeland to escape imprisonment by the Spanish and landed in Louisiana. This was the first documented case of Asian immigration (Chan, 1991). At the beginning of their immigration history, Asians, as a group, faced tremendous pushback. Being an East Asian between the mid 1800s and early 1900s made one the subject of violent crime and racist legislation that both imposed additional taxes and barred entry into the country. Asians got low paying jobs with harsh working conditions (Chan, 1991). Many immigrants from China and Japan worked as farmers, miners, or on the railroads. Despite their hard work, their access to resources including ways to obtain citizenship and public education was limited due to exclusionary legislations (Chan, 1991). They were often labelled as filthy, lowly, and lazy.

Two and a half centuries later, the narrative regarding Asian Americans has changed; at least on the surface, they are no longer viewed as undesirable invaders, but as accomplished, hard-working, and smart: the model minority. The first person to coin the term “Model Minority” was sociologist William Petersen. In his 1966 article “Success story: Japanese American style.”, Petersen attributed Japanese Americans’ accomplishments to their cultural values. Since then, the phrase “Model Minority” has been used to describe a particular minority group that’s able to set itself apart from
other groups by achieving career and financial goals that are otherwise reserved for
the majority group (i.e. Caucasian) (“Model Minority”, 2011).

Nevertheless, “Model Minority” has something in common with “undesirable, filthy, job-stealing yellow peril” in that they are both stereotypes that provide an incomplete picture of who Asian Americans really are. Overtime, not only do people believe in the truthfulness of the stereotypes, but they may also view them as stable, dispositional traits. People who hold stereotypes make assumptions about members of the stereotyped group and fail to acknowledge the diversity and individual differences within the group. Therefore, regardless of a stereotype’s valence, its mere existence creates judgment biases.

Additionally, Asian Americans’ being labeled as over-achievers, although, on its face value, seems to be a positive description, has severe consequences. This label overshadows the needs of many Asian American groups, such as Bhutanese, Burmese, and Hmong, that still suffer from poverty and have high high school dropout rates (“Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population”, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, the popular conception that Asian Americans’ success is due to their cultural values, such as hard work and diligence, implies that, in America, one’s success is largely determined by one’s own actions, and that something intrinsically Asian contributes to Asians’ accomplishment (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2014). This narrative is extremely harmful when the dominant race uses it to justify racial inequality by attributing difficulties faced by other non-Asian minority groups to their own incapacibilities, cultural values, or dispositions.

Another peculiar aspect of Asian American stereotypes is that, although Asian Americans are often considered an example of the realization of American Dream
(i.e. one can improve one’s life through hard work), their minority status can be selectively ignored depending on the dominant race’s needs. Cabrera (2014) interviewed male White college students about their views on their Asian American peers; Cabrera reported that White college students often use their Asian American peers or friends as evidence of the diminished prevalence of racism. However, Whites also attribute Asian Americans’ success to their cultural values of hard work and, furthermore, view Asian Americans as culturally similar to Whites (Cabrera, 2014; Chung, 2014). Additionally, this flawed logic may lead them to believe that other racial minorities are not doing well because they are lazy or they don’t care about working hard. It was also shown that Asian Americans, similar to many other minority groups, are usually held responsible for racial segregation and accused of segregating themselves from their White peers (Cabrera, 2014).

Besides being wrongfully used as counter-evidence against racism and proof of racial diversity, while simultaneously being considered culturally similar to Whites, Asian Americans are also viewed in negative light; they are stereotyped as disloyal, nerdy, non-social, physically undesirable, and sexually inadequate (Pyke & Dang, 2003; Wong, Owen, Tran, Collins, & Higgins, 2012).

Living in an environment immersed in racist stereotypes, many Asian Americans internalized those views. Through in-depth interview with over 180 Asian Americans, Pyke and Dang (2003) found that many Asian Americans try to draw clear boundaries between themselves and ethnically traditional traits and practices, possibly to affirm their Americanized status and distance themselves from negative stereotypes associated with their ethnicities.

In comparison to 200 years ago, the transition in stereotypes of Asian Americans might partially have to do with the change in demographics of Asian
immigrants; rather than laborers and refugees, more and more Asians who immigrate to the U.S. are professionals (Zhou & Lee, 2017). Some researchers link this shift in demographics to hyper-selectivity in immigration legislations.

Hyper-selectivity

Zhou and Lee (2017) argued that, being overachieving is not caused by factors intrinsically Asian, as many American pundits and the public assume. Instead, the demographics of Asian American communities is largely shaped by the hyper-selective immigration law, which favors Asians with advanced education backgrounds and skillsets. Asian immigrants have, on average, better educational/career outcomes than the general public in their heritage countries (Zhou, Lee, 2017). This high level of selectivity is due to various factors, including greater distance between Asian immigrants’ homeland and the U.S. and consequently, the higher cost of immigration (Feliciano, 2005).

According to Zhou and Lee, there are three major consequences of hyper-selectivity. First, the definition of success becomes very specific; the narrow concept of success manifests itself in Asian Americans’ tendency to pursue careers in the fields of law, medicine, technology, and sciences. Second, resourceful Asian Americans invest in various classes and programs to help future generation achieve the ethnic-group-specific concept of success. Third, while stereotypes hold Asians Americans to a higher standard in the labor market, they also make it more difficult for Asian Americans to pursue managerial and leadership positions because they are not seen as being “goal leaders”. Subsequently, the lack of leadership opportunities deprives Asian Americans of evidence to disconfirm that stereotype.
While there has been some literature on the effects of hyper-selectivity (e.g. Feliciano, 2005; Lee, 2015; Tran, Lee, 2018), the concept itself is not widely researched. Therefore, we must examine factors other than the legislative ones to gain a more holistic picture of Asian American leadership.

“Unfit to lead” – Differences in leadership ideals

So far, I have written mostly about some of the challenges faced by Asian immigrants and Asian Americans. However, I have not touched upon another important aspect: leadership. Among leadership researchers, there is substantial disagreement about the definition of the word. In his 1989 review of leadership theories and research, Yukl concluded that: “the numerous definitions of leadership…have little…in common.” Between 2000 and 2013 alone, published studies and research on leadership put forward nearly fifty different leadership approaches and theories (Meuser et al., 2016). In Yukl’s 1989 paper, he cited a quote from the Handbook of leadership: A survey of the literature (Stogdill, 1974) stated: “Four decades of research on leadership have produced a bewildering mass of findings”. Yukl argued that some common difficulties in defining leadership include whether leadership should be viewed as a separate phenomenon from mere social influence or management.

Given the quantity and complexity of the existing leadership theories, it would be impossible to summarize each one of them other than the most prominent and widely agreed upon ones. According to Meuser and colleagues (2016), there are six theoretical perspectives that received the most attention in contemporary leadership research. They are: 1) charismatic leadership, which is when leaders “apply their unique personal assets to exert influence by challenging followers’ minds and hearts
through an inspirational vision coupled with dynamic behaviors that invoke strong reactions (Meuser et al., 2016); 2) transformational leadership, which inspires followers to create a shared group identity and ultimately place the interests of the group above that of individuals (Hater & Bass, 1988; Yammarino & Bass, 1990); 3) leadership and diversity; 4) strategic leadership, which is when leaders “anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes” (Ireland & Hitt, 2005); 5) participative/shared leadership, and 6) trait approaches to leadership.

Asian American Leadership Ideal

In comparison to mainstream leadership theories, there is only a thin body of literature on Asian American leadership and Asian leadership ideals. Nonetheless, existing studies show researchers’ attempts to study Asian American leadership from cultural, political, sociological, and other diverse angles.

Yammarino and Jung (1997) considered four cultural values to be important in understanding Asian leadership ideals: collectivism, high power distance, Confucian dynamism, and group-based reward. They pointed out that, different from conventional western employer-employee relationship, which mainly centers around transactional exchange and reward, Asian leader-follower relationships require employers to care for their employees and employees to show loyalty to their employers. Furthermore, they predicted that, due to high power distance, Asian leaders would have higher power and status than their followers, whereas in western leader-follower relationships, the power and status would be more balanced.

Yammarino and Jung also thought that Confucian doctrines have profound impacts on shaping Asian Americans’ view of leadership by strengthening the
importance of collectivism, high power distance, and a sense of shame. Lastly, they argued, Asian Americans prefer group-based rewards to individual-based rewards. In sum, Yammarino and Jung argued that, influenced by cultural values, Asian Americans tend to view leadership as group-based: leaders are viewed as individuals, whereas followers are viewed as a collective being. In contrast, Caucasian Americans view leader-follower relationships as dyad-based and involve leaders and followers both as individuals.

Yammarino and Jung focused on hypothesizing group dynamics when Asian American leaders attempt to lead Caucasian Americans and vice versa. The four cultural values mentioned above were examined to develop necessary propositions upon which they later developed their hypotheses. Although not the main foci of the paper, the four cultural values were highlighted after the researchers’ extensive review of literature on Asian and leadership.

Also taking a cultural approach in theorizing about Asian leadership style, some scholars explored the influences of traditional Asian, specifically, Chinese philosophies. One theory is that Asians’ and Asian Americans’ leadership styles are largely influenced by Daoism (e.g., Ma & Tsui, 2015; Lee, Haught, Chen, & Chan, 2013).

The Daoist leadership model incorporates two central ideas of Daoism: Dao and De. Dao could be interpreted as the law of nature or a natural path that humans are confined to (Lee, 2003). De means virtue, influence, moral force, or humanitarianism (Lee, Haught, Chen, & Chan, 2013). In short, people must follow a certain path that is determined by the law of nature and act virtuously. The Daoist Big-Five leadership style is sometimes known as the Water-like leadership; the name
comes from the Daoist doctrine “Shang-Shan-Ruo-Shui (上善若水)”, which roughly translates to “all the best qualities in a person are like those of water.”

Indeed, a closer look at the five central component of the Daoist Big-Five leadership model, defined by Lee and colleagues (2013), shows why this simile makes sense. The five components are: altruism, modesty and humility, adaptability and flexibility, transparency and honesty, softness and gentleness, and persistence and power. In other words, a good leader should be almost non-existent, gentle, humble, and tolerant, but at the same time powerful and persistent in keeping their subordinates on the right paths of being.

Interestingly, Lee and colleagues’ analysis is slightly different from the one of Yammarino and Jung. The former argued that Daoist Big-Five focuses less on the leader being dominating and visible in comparison to the typical Western masculine leadership, whereas the latter emphasized the importance of difference in status between leaders and followers with their person-group model. In addition, the Daoist leadership model is very similar to many feminist leadership styles in their emphasis on making a social contribution and being of help and service to others (Cheung and Halpern, 2010). In other words, Asian Americans may be perceived as unfit to lead because the ways they lead are seen as not masculine enough in America.

There is also some evidence that, besides Daoism and Confucianism, Legalism and Buddhism also influence how Chinese leaders lead, present themselves, and interact with their subordinates (Ma & Tsui, 2015).

While tempting, the flaw in using the differences in leadership philosophies alone to explain why Asian Americans are not perceived as leader-like is obvious: despite having been ingrained in Chinese social values, Daoism and other traditional Chinese philosophy systems are still limited in terms of their influence on Asian
countries besides China and some of its close neighbors. Given the diversity within the Asian American category, it would be hasty to assume that Asian Americans whose ancestors were not from countries other than China and its neighbors share the same cultural values with Asian Americans whose ancestors were.

Researchers have also looked at Asian Americans’ leadership ideals using western leadership frameworks. Studies show that Asian American leaders tend to favor the transformative leadership styles and collaborative leadership style (Lim & Ployhart, 2004; Chin, 2013). It was found that Asian American female leaders also use the “relational and collaborative leadership style” and drive the team to work towards a common vision (Kawahara, 2007).

Another theme in the literature on Asian American leadership addresses the perception of Asian Americans as poor leaders. Research shows that Asian Americans are often perceived as having high technical competence but are unsuitable for sales or leadership positions (Sy et al., 2010). In another study, researchers asked both Asian American and European American participants to compare same-ethnic managers and other-ethnic managers to prototypical, successful managers (Burris, Ayman, Che, & Min, 2013). Results show that while both Asian Americans and European Americans view Asian American managers as competent, they both view Asian American managers as less social. In addition, European American respondents rated Asian American managers as less similar to the successful managers than European American managers are.

Besides reaffirming the stereotypes against Asian Americans in leadership roles, Burris and colleagues’ research was interesting because Asian Americans rated both their same-ethnic (i.e. Asian American) and other-ethnic (i.e. European American) leaders as moderately similar to successful manager prototypes. Also, they
viewed both Asian and European American leaders as less sociable than the leadership prototypes. It is possible that, different from what the aforementioned research on internalized racism suggests, Asian Americans do not perceive ingroup members as less capable leaders. Instead, is it possible that the Asian Americans respondents viewed the successful leader prototype as an ideal that all leaders should work towards, but ultimately too much to achieve? As a result, they consistently viewed Asian- and European-American leaders as only moderately similar to and less sociable than the prototypes.

Overall, research results on how Asian Americans lead and what influence their leadership styles suggest two things. One, Asian cultural values could influence Asian American leaders’ styles but the lack of research makes it impossible to draw any definitive conclusion or generalization about all ethnic groups within the racialized Asian American category. In fact, Asian American leaders do demonstrate leadership styles that are relatively well researched in the field of leadership studies. It would be hasty to rule out the influence of culture and to conclude that there is something intrinsically “Asian” about the way Asian Americans lead that makes them maladaptive in America. Second, the stereotypes of Asian Americans being poor leaders may not be internalized by Asian Americans, so the obstacles they face when trying to pursue leadership positions are more external than internal.

Asian American – Too broad an identity?

On the website of the United States Census Bureau, the term “Asian” is defined as: “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and
Vietnam.” Whether it is reasonable to label people from so many different countries and cultures using one broad term has been subject to debate.

It is well documented that the term “Asian American”, which emerged during the Civil Rights era, was used by mainly Japanese and Chinese Americans to promote welfare for various Asian ethnic groups, unify and provide support to individuals of Asian descents, and raise awareness of racism and discrimination (e.g., Espiritu, 1992; Lien, 2001; Park, 2008; Wei, 1993). The term “Asian American” emphasizes the shared hardship that first- and second-generation Asian immigrants with similar appearance and skin color endure in America, celebrates their bi-cultural lives, and represents how their Asian and American identities are integrated into one (e.g., Hing, 1993).

However, the Asian American label took on a different meaning due to the drastic shift in demographic composition of the Asian immigrant population. Between the 60s and early 2000s, diversity among immigrants drastically increased. Chinese and Japanese, the two most prominent Asian ethnicities in the 60s, made up only 32% of all individuals of Asian descents in 2002 (U.S. Census Bureau). As a result, there is also higher cultural and religious diversity among Asians and Asian Americans. Describing these people with different cultural values, belief systems, languages, and customs using one racialized label became problematic. Instead of unifying all people of Asian descents in America, the term justifies the misconception of cultural similarity, perpetuates stereotypes, and forces an identity label onto ethnic groups that otherwise wouldn’t consider themselves similar to the prominent Asian groups, such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese (Park, 2008).

Some people may argue that Americans of other races and ethnicities rarely protest to being labeled one general term, such as “European American” or “African
American”. Similarly, Americans of Asian descents are likely to identify as Asian Americans. There is a simple way to disprove this line of argument. In a 2003 study, researchers discovered that almost two-thirds of the respondents, all individuals of Asian descent, preferred ethnic-specific identity; only one in every six respondents identified as Asian American. However, nearly sixty percent of the respondents accepted the pan-ethnic term as part of their identity (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2003). It is implied that individuals of Asian descents have to compromise to create an identity label comprehensible to the mainstream American society.

One immediate consequence of the pan-ethnic identity is that for other groups (e.g. Caucasian, African American, Latinx), all Asian ethnic groups can be put into one box and to be spoken for by one or a few representatives. Research shows that Asian American leaders may experience both the inability to speak for all Asian Americans, but simultaneously be blamed for not taking responsibility for all Asian American people by other non-Asian leaders (Chung, 2014). In other words, the racialized label “Asian American” may have made even other ethnic minority leaders overlook the complexity of a racial category that include people with ancestry from at least 19 different countries (National Geographic, 2018).

In the following sections, I would like to examine whether the underrepresentation of Asian American in leadership is in any way associated with their tendency to engage in civic and political activities.

Asian American and Political Participation

Although between 2014 and 2016, the number of Asian American voters increased by 1.13 million, Asian Americans’ voter turnout remains low, with only one third of Asian Americans eligible to vote participating in the 2016 presidential
election (United States Census Bureau, 2017); in comparison, the national voter
turnout was 56% (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

Xu (2002) tried to explain Asian Americans’ political behaviors from the
perspectives of political economy, political sociology, political psychology and
political culture, and institutional effects and discrimination. From a political
economic perspective, Asian Americans get disproportionally little benefit from
political engagement due to local and national candidates’ failing to advocate for
Asian American-related issues. Also, for first-generation, low-income Asian
Americans, who also tend to have a lower level of education, the cost of learning
about and understanding politics is extremely high. It’s worth asking whether
candidates’ indifference toward Asian American-related issues is associated with the
popular stereotype that Asian Americans have “made it” and therefore, do not need
help.

From a political sociological perspective, Asian Americans in neighborhoods
with high Asian American concentration may face cultural boundaries with outgroup
communities, whereas Asian Americans in neighborhoods with low Asian American
concentration have to make “strategic concessions” to the local dominant culture to fit
in. Also, complex histories and even historical rivalries may create conflicts within
Asian American communities. In addition, in comparison to Blacks and Latinx, Asian
Americans are more likely to move into White neighborhoods for better communal
service (a phenomenon which is probably associated with hyper-selectivity). As a
result, social and human capital may be drained out of Asian American communities,
and they are more likely to be politically disorganized.

From the perspective of political psychology and political culture, the way
Asian Americans are portrayed in popular culture, stereotypes, and heuristics
perpetuate the invisibility of Asian Americans in politics. Politics in their homelands may also distract Asian Americans from participating in local politics.

Lastly, Xu also pointed to the effect of discriminatory laws, strict immigration policies, and the naturalization process that European immigrants do not need to go through. There is also discrimination in education, housing, and employment, as well as linguistic isolation.

Asian American and Civic Engagement

Although political participation is low for most, Asian Americans, at least from certain age groups, are very active in civic affairs. The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey collected data on the political and civic engagement of European Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans between the age of 15 and 25 (Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007). It was reported that Asian American youths had the highest tendency to be engaged in civic activities such as volunteerism. In fact, 89.3 percent of the Asian American respondents reported being either engaged (i.e. engaged in between one and nine of the 19 core civic activities listed in the survey) or hyper-engaged (i.e. engaged in over 10 core activities).

Why do Asian Americans have a high level of civic engagement? Some evidence shows that religiosity seems to play a role (Ecklund & Park, 2005); however, on a closer look, the association between religiosity and civic engagement is moderated by other factors, such as the type of religion, gender, income, and education (e.g., Ecklund & Park, 2005; Ecklund & Park, 2007). It is also plausible that participating in the community manifests collectivistic values of the importance of the welfare of one’s community.
In addition, having peers and family members who are already engaged in civic activities, being interested in learning more about one’s own identity, and wanting to meet other ethnic ingroup members all bolster civic engagement, whereas cultural differences was a barrier to participation (Chan, 2011). Additionally, participants in Chan’s study reported that civic engagement actually benefited them by making them more competent, confident, connected to peers and others, compassionate, and caring.

In general, there have been few studies on the causes and effects of ethnic minorities’ civic engagement. Available research on minority groups other than Asian American shows a similar pattern in motivations for participation in civic activities. Black and Latinx community-based organization leaders report three major motivations for choosing their career paths: 1) religiosity, 2) solidarity with members of their own ethnic groups, and 3) commitment to social justice (Terrana, 2017). In another qualitative study, Jensen (2008) investigated the role of cultural identity in first- and second-generation Indian and El Salvador immigrants’ civic engagement. Jensen identified seven themes in the cultural motives for civic engagement. These themes are: remembering and maintaining one’s cultural identity and traditions, perpetuating a tradition of service, enhancing the welfare of immigrant and cultural identities, providing assistance to country of origin, bridging communities, building new social networks, and lastly, appreciating American democracy.

In summary, available research on whether Asian Americans’ underrepresentation in leadership is associated with their political and civic engagement shows mixed results. While Asian Americans are less likely to be engaged politically, they are more likely to be engaged in civic affairs, which is a way to serve one’s community with potentially fewer barriers. Thus, it would be wrong to
conclude that there are fewer Asian Americans in leadership spaces because they are not interested in being active contributors to their communities.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to build on existing literature on Asian American leadership by exploring four aspects of their leadership experiences. First, how and why do Asian Americans become leaders? Second, in their perceptions, who is a good/ideal leader? Third, what challenges do they face and, in their opinions, are these challenges shared by other Asian American leaders? Fourth, where do they receive the most support from when pursuing and being in leadership roles?

Kawahara, Pal, and Chin (2013) conducted an interview study on Asian Americans’ leadership experiences. In their study, Kawahara, Pal, and Chin explored Asian Americans’ leadership styles, their identities as leaders, factors that influenced their leadership styles and identities, and the impact of race, gender, or ethnicity on their experiences. 14 Asian American leaders’ responses showed seven common themes: a) the important role of common Asian values, b) negotiating multiple identities, c) leadership by necessity, d) group-oriented and collaborative style, e) strong work ethic and excellence, f) expectations and stereotypes based on appearance, and g) support and mentoring by others.

I was interested in if important themes reported in Kawahara and colleagues’ study would be reaffirmed by participants’ responses in the present study. In addition, I hoped to learn more about the challenges Asian American leaders face and their understandings of other Asian American leaders’ experiences.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, there wasn’t a set of hypotheses.
Method

Participants

To recruit participants, I emailed various Asian American organizations. In the recruitment email, I specified that I was looking for people who are over 18-years-old, of Asian descent and American nationality, and hold leadership or managerial positions in their organizations. I also emailed Asian American individuals in business, academia and politics to invite them to participate in the study. Templates of the invitation emails to both organizations and individuals are shown in Appendix A.

I received 15 responses indicating interests in learning more about the study. Among the 15 Asian Americans who responded, one person was not eligible due to the nature of zirs organization. At the end, we recruited three business leaders, six non-governmental organization leaders, three academic leaders, and one political leader. All of them received links to the study information page, which explains the purpose of the study, on Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Those who were still interested after reading the information page could sign the consent form and take the initial survey. Within 48 hours after they had completed the survey, they were contacted to schedule a semi-structured interview with me.

Among the 13 participants who consented and filled out the survey, 12 completed the interview. One participant had to terminate the interview due to personal reason; zirs data were excluded from the analysis.

Initial survey

In the initial survey, the following data were collected: age, gender and biological sex, religiosity, and sexual orientation. Participants were then asked to rank themselves using a modified version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure
(Phinney, 1992) and a modified version of the Motivation to Lead Scale (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Bobbio & Rattazzi, 2006). After that, participants were asked to state the name of their organizations and their positions or roles in it.

**Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (APPENDIX B.1)**

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) contains 15 questions. To make the survey more straightforward for participants, I removed eight questions that were nearly identical to another question in the measure. The modified MEIM asks participants about their effort to learn about their ethnic group, their involvement in their ethnic communities, their understanding of their ethnic backgrounds and identities, and the perceived significance of their ethnic identities. The original and modified scales are in Appendix B.

**Motivation to Lead Scale (APPENDIX B.2)**

The Motivation to Lead Scale (MLS) was first developed by Chan and Dragsaw (2002) as a measure of three predictors of leadership behaviors. The MLS contains 23 questions that assess three aspects of motivation to lead (MTL): affective-identity, non-calculative, and social-normative. When a person takes a leadership role because zie likes it, zie demonstrates affective-identity MTL. When a person leads because zie does not think too much about the cost of being a leader, zie demonstrates non-calculative MTL. When a person leads because zie believes it is the right thing to do, or it is zirs responsibility to lead, zie demonstrates social-normative MTL. The original 23-item scale was later validated and modified by Bobbio and Rattazzi (2006); the modified version contains 15 questions.
Qualitative interview

All interviews were done over the phone or via Skype. At the beginning of each interview session, I welcomed the participant and thanked zir for agreeing to participate in the study. I informed zir about zirs rights to terminate the interview at any time for any reason and then asked for zirs permission to audio-record the session.

The interview contains, in total, twelve questions (appendix B.3). The questions cover five themes. First, what are participants' motivations for becoming leaders? Second, what influenced their leadership styles? Third, from their perspectives, what makes becoming leaders hard for Asian Americans? Fourth, from their perspectives, who are ideal/good leaders? Fifth, where does most of their social, institutional, and financial support come from?

In addition to the scripted questions, sometimes I asked follow-up questions based on participants’ previous responses and individual circumstances; most of the unscripted questions were clarification questions. All the follow-up questions were recorded to avoid biases in the later coding process.

After the interview, participants were debriefed and also received a PDF version of the debriefing form via email.

Transcription and coding

To transcribe the audio records, I used Otter.ai, an automatic transcription application. After each interview, I re-listened to the audio record and edited it manually to correct any errors or missing segments. Both the interviews and the transcript editing took place in a private, enclosed lab space.
Then, I read through participants’ responses to each of the 12 questions and extracted statements. A statement is the most basic meaning unit of a sentence; a sentence could simultaneously contain multiple statements. For a segment to be considered an individual statement, it cannot have a qualifier in other parts of the same sentence or another sentence in a given response. To demonstrate the extraction process more clearly, here are two examples: a) Asian Americans need to step up and work collaboratively with leaders of other ethnicities; b) only when a leader supports her followers, the followers support her in return. In the first example, there are two statements: 1) Asian Americans need to step up, and 2) Asian Americans need to work collaboratively with leaders of other ethnicities. In the second example, there is only one statement, because it implies that the premise of followers’ supporting their leader is that the leader reciprocates that support. Thus, there is only one statement in the second sentence. Both examples are made up for the purpose of demonstration and do not come from any participants’ responses.

After extracting all the statements, I reviewed them once again and grouped them by themes under each question. Then, I counted the frequency of occurrence of each theme; in order to do more in-depth, cross-vocational analyses, I also broke the total frequency counts down into four vocational categories.

*Extremely complicated responses*

In general, to avoid artificially manipulating the frequency counts, I extract the basic statements on a sentence-by-sentence basis, while keeping the wording of the statements as close to the original sentences as possible. However, in some cases, participants engaged in very detailed descriptions of their experiences or went on a tangential path to provide information not necessarily related to the question asked. In
cases where extremely-detailed descriptions were provided, participants tend to break one aspect of their experiences down and elaborate on it that results in high frequency of occurrence of one specific statement. In this case, one person’s experience would weigh more than others’ experiences. In cases where participants went on a tangential path, the information provided is sometimes irrelevant and thus, while always interesting, does not deepen understanding of the issues in question.

When encountered either cases described above, I would discuss each individual response extensively with my thesis advisor until we reached an agreement on what should be done. Most frequently, information we both agreed to be irrelevant would be removed from the statement extraction and grouping process. On the other hand, multiple sentences that do not contain independent statements on their own and only contain one statement would be condensed. It is important to keep in mind that these two situations happened rarely and decisions were ever only made after painstaking, extensive discussion.

Data software and analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of this study and the size of the sample, only a few quantitative statistical tests were conducted. Basic descriptive data such as mean and standard deviations were calculated in Excel. One-way ANOVA analyses were done to detect gender differences in participants’ motivations to Lead, ethnic/racial identification, and ages; one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted using SPSS.

Results
**Demographics**

Among the 12 participants, six were male and six were female. The average age was 34.17 (SD = 7.09); participants’ ages ranged from 24 to 46. The mean ages of female and male participants were almost identical, but the age range was larger among female participants compared to male participants (M<sub>female</sub> = 34.33, SD<sub>female</sub> = 9.03, M<sub>male</sub> = 34.00, SD<sub>male</sub> = 5.40). 25% of participants (n = 3) were religious. 75% of participants (n = 9) were straight or heterosexual. 10 participants were East Asian; one participant was bi-racial; one participant was South Asian. 10 participants were of American nationality (both born in the U.S. and naturalized). I also recruited 2 participants who were Asian rather than Asian Americans to detect any substantial differences in leadership experiences between Asian Americans and Asians who have been in the U.S. for years (in my sample, 3 years to over 15 years).

**Ethnic Identity**

Overall, participants reported a relatively high level of ethnic identification (M = 5.81, SD = 1.02). An independent t-test was performed to detect any gender difference. There was no significant difference in the level of identification between male and female participants, although male participants indicated a slightly higher mean identification score (M<sub>female</sub> = 5.79, SD = 1.08, M<sub>male</sub> = 5.83, SD = 1.15).

**Motivation to Lead (MTL)**

In general, participants indicated a weak agreement with the affective-ideal (M = 4.47, SD = .80), non-calculative (M = 4.95, SD = 1.17), and social-normative (M = 4.60, SD = .84) motivations to lead. In other words, on average, participants thought of leadership roles as desirable, did not think one should only lead when it is not
costly, and would likely take on leadership roles when it is encouraged by others or thought of as socially normative.

An independent t-test was performed to detect any gender differences in these three aspects of motivation to lead. Statistical analyses reveal that there were no significant gender differences at a .05 level. However, as a trend, female participants scored lower on the affective-ideal ($M_{female} = 4.37, SD_{female} = .38, M_{male} = 4.57, SD_{male} = 1.08$) and social-normative ($M_{female} = 4.40, SD_{female} = .94, M_{male} = 4.80, SD_{male} = .82$) MTL scales, and higher on the non-calculative ($M_{female} = 5.03, SD_{female} = 1.30, M_{male} = 4.87, SD_{male} = 1.20$) MTL scale.

**Interview: Asian American leaders’ experiences of rising into leadership positions**

The interview contained two questions that aimed at understanding Asian American leaders’ experiences. The two questions were: “can you tell me about how you became the (participant’s position) of (name of the organization)?” and “what are some of the most important responsibilities you have as a leader?”

**Actively pursued vs. Passively chosen**

Nine participants (NGO = 3, politics = 1, business = 3, academia = 2) reported actively pursuing their positions or, in two cases, even created the company or program from scratch; three participants (NGO = 2, academia = 1) reported being passively appointed or asked.

Across all four vocational groups, participants often reported that their career paths were not entirely linear. While they viewed past experiences of working in related or similar positions as crucial to their transitions into the discussed positions,
previous experiences of working in highly different positions were actually discussed more frequently.

Several participants talked about the importance of mission when I asked them what motivated them.

One participant mentioned, that in his previous role, although he succeeded in supervising and stabilizing his team during a merger, he decided to make a parallel shift in position in order to do racial justice work, which drew him to the world of non-profit in the first place:

“...I decided to make the shift in my career that I wanted to do, which has moved from a communications, public relations, digital marketing that type of role to more of a programmatic role, you know, working in racial justice work...I knew that I wanted to be in public service, that I wanted to do social justice work, and specifically, racial justice work.” [Participant #6]

Another participant discussed how her passion for her subject of study made her step up to lead a program although it was highly unconventional and often advised against for people in her situation; in return, her taking up the leadership role brought her more opportunities in the long run:

“...There was nobody who really wanted to take over the unit, and so as somebody who was very invested in [the area of study], I actually took on the leadership position of the institute, which is something that is not recommended for [people in my position]...it was...that investment of interfacing with other faculties to build a unit that made the possibility of moving into the upper admin[istration] a possibility.” [Participant #4]

Furthermore, the same participant also reflected on the role of mission in pushing her to pursue another leadership role:
“I really feel that in upper administration, there are very few people from my area of study in those positions at the institution… it’s an upper administration position that still affords me some kind of ability to have close relationships with people and to advocate for changes that otherwise would not be.” [Participant #4]

Similarly, one Asian participant also viewed mission as a crucial drive in his career:

“I started my career after graduating from college… in the corporate world for, I think, around four or five years before thinking that I wanted to make a change and pursue a career that has had some kind of a mission or civic impact…” [Participant #7]

Several participants also viewed issues specific to Asian American communities as motivations for pursuing leadership positions:

“…I heard [the issue that motivated me to start my own company] many times. I see that happening with a lot of my [Asian and Pacific Islander] friends and family, my community.” [Participant #8]

“…I [pursued the position] because the mission spoke to me; the mission of [the organization] was important to me, as someone who grew up in New York and the organization who, you know, did work around organizing immigrants.” [Participant #3]

Support from others was also a crucial factor in participants’ decision to take on leadership positions. Some stated that they received considerable support from peers, colleagues, and senior leadership. Others reported that they actively pursued or applied for the positions only after people or mentors encouraged them to apply.

Participants who reported being passively appointed or asked to take over the positions were asked whether they thought of pursuing the positions prior to being
approached. If they did, what stopped them from pursuing? If they did not, why? One participant reported that, prior to being approached, people were already wondering whether she would be the one to fill the position, so she had the opportunity to imagine whether or not that would be a possibility for her.

The other two participants reported that they thought about pursuing but one person felt he did not fit the typical leadership demographics of his organization, and the other person simply never vocalized their interests in pursuing:

“Yeah, the organization itself [is] really well established… And so there are a lot of people involved in the leadership of the organization that are actually quite older than I am. So in many ways, I didn't necessarily feel like it was appropriate for me to, to pursue, I guess, the national leadership position at the time directly.”

[Participant #2]

“…I didn't say I was interested or vocalize that I was interested in applying. So I guess a lot of people didn't know I was interested.” [Participants #5]

**Crucial leadership responsibilities**

Content analysis revealed the five most important responsibilities the participants had as leaders: a) communicating goals to the team and providing guidance and direction; b) empowering, grooming, and supporting their employees and staff; c) opening up and maintaining channels of communication; d) maintaining the organization’s smooth-running and fulfilling basic job duties; e) taking responsibilities, in the order of the highest to the lowest frequency; the last two themes have the same frequencies.

Many participants’ agreement on the importance of clarity in instructions and goals is highlighted in one participant’s response:
“…If any part of that one team wasn’t fully functioning, it wouldn’t be a success.” [Participant #5]

Participants viewed opening up channels of communication as a way to maintain a productive team; they also considered it to be important to provide a safe, supportive, and compassionate space where people could express themselves:

“I never make a recommendation or over-determine a conversation during the conversation. Instead, I always stress that this is a start of a conversation, not the end of one. And that introduces a dialogic aspect to [a] meeting or a collaboration.” [Participant #4]

“So the trick is to…honor those stories and those narratives, but also to try to figure out, okay, how do I take this yucky experience and think about what to do if there is anything to do from the perspective of the person who is talking about it.” [Participant #11]

It is interesting to see that empowering staff and providing support for employees’ professional and personal growths was ranked as one of the most important leadership responsibilities by many participants. One participant stated that it is important to him that at some point, his employees will be able to rise up and take over his position. He emphasized that it should be those whom the organization aims to serve who should be running the organization and making decisions. Several participants talked about the importance of creating environments in which employees could achieve their potentials. Similarly, one female participant described how she volunteered to take minutes during meetings to undermine the unwritten convention that the person with the least amount of power should take notes; from this simple action, she wanted to weaken the effect of a traditional workplace stereotype that is often also gendered.
Lastly, participants viewed taking responsibilities as a big part of their jobs. By taking responsibilities, they meant not only fulfilling tasks in their job descriptions, but also making difficult choices and decisions that affect many:

“…If something went wrong, that was also our fault when things went wrong. Yeah, so I would say taking responsibility of others is the primary, most important and heaviest thing we had to carry.” [Participant #3]

“…I do feel a sense of responsibility towards the larger movement…[this is] a very rare, special opportunity that I was given; our success really will impact how others can get funding through similar kinds of work.” [Participant #1]

Interview: Self-perception and leadership ideals

Four questions were designed to examine participants’ perceptions of their own leadership styles, where they drew inspirations from, and their leadership ideals. They were: “How would you describe yourself as a leader?”; “What, in your opinion, influences or helps you shape the way you lead?”; “How do you define leadership?”; and “What character traits, in your opinion, are most important in a leader or someone who aspires to become one?”

Describe yourself as a leader

The four most frequently occurring themes in participants’ responses were: a) collaborative with an emphasis on shared work; b) good at listening; c) wanting to empower, groom, and support their staff; and d) transparent and honest.

Many participants considered themselves collaborative in the sense that they share at least some of the work their staff does. One participant stated that it is important to “carry a bit of the burden”. Interestingly, when explaining why they were
collaborative, participants discussed consciously choosing a collaborative leadership style while being aware that it is not necessarily the most convenient style for them. Participants mentioned that a collaborative leadership style could sometimes be costly and frustrating. However, they still employ a collaborative style, sometimes due to beliefs in the ineffectiveness of authoritative or punishment-reward leadership models and/or the importance of developing employees’ leadership skills. The desire to develop others’ leadership could also be related the desire to empower, groom, and support the development of staff. One participant said that, although she believes it’s her responsibility to “paint a vision and to carry out, execute, and move the team towards that vision”, she often put her staff in charge and followed their leadership.

An Asian participant echoed the importance of nurturing the growth of staff in his response as well:

“I would hope that people would see me as very supportive as a leader, that I’m very engaged in the work of the people around me, and looking for their success as much as…anything that I succeed in.” [Participant #7]

What influences or shapes the way you lead?

There are two frequently mentioned themes in participants’ responses when asked what shaped their leadership style: a) past experiences and b) empathy, compassion, and consideration for others.

While participants from all four groups talked about the importance of learning from their past mentors, their predecessors, and past supervisors, only participants from the NGO and academic subgroup discussed the role of compassion, empathy, and consideration for others.
Knowledge of both the weight and challenge of one’s job plays an important role in participants’ decisions on what the best ways to lead should be. For example, one NGO participant reported that the advocacy and changes he hoped to bring through his work at the organization made it clear that he could not employ an authoritative or top-down leadership style because that would be contradictory to the mission of his work, even though being collaborative could be frustrating and time consuming.

Many participants were convinced that people’s experiences are very diverse. One participant talked about the importance of being respectful to people’s taking the time to voice their opinions when their investments might be alien to the leader:

“…you need to understand that they make the time to have a meeting because they're really invested…And it's also an acknowledgement that even though I don't agree initially, that these individuals [are] making the time to express an opinion that is formed from experience…” [Participant #4]

Similarly, another participant reported that with the understanding that people’s life experiences could be so different depending on their gender, racial identity, or sexual orientation, he became very conscious of how he socialized and led in workplace. He gave an interesting example:

“…what I've learned here at [the organization] is, how can we systematize equity a bit more in our internal policies and practices?…Let's say you supervise a team of 10, and [you] want to build culture and organization...so, you invite people out to have drinks after work, but what are the equity considerations?...What about mothers who have children that they can't just go to the bar for an hour after work, because they got to go pick up their children, or perhaps your employees that work two jobs, so, you know, they go here, nine to five, and then they also afterwards have
to do this other gig just to make ends meet, you know; perhaps people don't drink. And these types of considerations often fall across gender and race as well. So it's like all the things that we do as managers to create space, culture, policies, who gets seen, who gets a valued or not, all of those things fall differently across people in your organization, people that you supervise.” [Participant #6]

**How do you define leadership?**

Participants’ definitions of leadership had several themes that we have seen in previous analysis. These are, from highest to lowest frequency: a) empowering, supporting, and grooming staff, b) unifying the team to work toward a common goal, and c) executing a vision. It is also worth noting that there were no statements that fell under theme b) and c) from the academic subgroup and no statements that fell under theme c) from the business subgroup. On the other hand, another theme “Compassion and empathy” had four statements from the academia subgroup and zero statements from the other three groups.

Once again, many participants thought of empowering and grooming their staff and employees as an important part of leadership. For instance, one participant stated:

“…I think the biggest part of being a leader is that you can groom other leaders. If you're a leader who doesn't do that, [I don't think you're a] leader at all.” [Participant #12]

The need to unify the team is usually viewed as necessary to getting the organizations’ objectives fulfilled both in the short-term and in the long run.

“Leadership is the concept of being able to inspire and motivate people to do XYZ things or to get tasks accomplished.” [Participant #8]
“No matter how big the team is, you would just be the guy who can glue everybody together, who can pull everything together.” [Participant #9]

“I feel like leadership should be people willingly follow you, and they trust you so they [can] follow you to do the things you want.” [Participant #10]

Most important traits in a leader or any person who aspires to become one

Two major themes emerged in participants’ responses: a) communication and the ability to bring everyone together through communication, and b) empathy, compassion, and the ability to acknowledge others’ special circumstances. Due to the strong similarity between responses to this question and those to the previous three questions, I will not go into detail to avoid redundancy.

Interview: Asian Americans in Leadership

I asked participants five questions to understand whether their racial identities played a role in their leadership experiences and also to learn about their perceptions of other Asian American leaders’ experiences. The questions were: a) Do you think Asian Americans have a strong drive to lead?; b) If an Asian American wants to pursue a leadership position, do you think it is harder for them than for people of other ethnicities? c) 1) (If participant actively pursued leadership position) What challenges did you face when you tried to pursue your position, and do you think that experience is shared by other Asian American leaders? What makes it hard for Asian Americans to develop leadership in Asian American communities? What makes it hard for Asian Americans who try to lead in non-Asian American communities? 2) (If participant was passively chosen to be the leader) What challenges did you face in
your position, and do you think the experience is shared by other Asian American leaders? The same follow-up questions were asked.

Due to the complexity of each participant’s experiences, sometimes I asked participants to describe both challenges they faced in pursuing the positions and after they had achieved the positions. I will report the number of people within each category that were asked before reporting the findings to ensure the validity of each section of the analysis.

The two Asian participants’ responses will be discussed separately from the Asian American participants.

Asian American participants

Do Asian Americans have a strong drive to lead?

Four participants gave a definitive yes (NGO = 3, Politics = 1), three participants gave a definitive no (NGO = 1, Business = 2), and three participants reported that they weren’t sure or never answered this question directly (NGO = 1, Academia = 2).

This section of analysis was very complicated due to the almost identical distribution of participants’ responses in each of the three categories. Due to the small number in each category and the unique justification each participant gave, it is difficult to observe a general trend. Therefore, I decided to report all themes that were discussed by more than one participant, regardless of their frequency.

Among participants who answered affirmatively, two participants pointed out that Asian Americans’ drive to lead is rarely due to race alone.

For instance, one participant observed that class is usually involved when an Asian American decides to lead; Asian Americans from the lower and higher ends of
the class spectrum may both be more likely to lead, but their motivations could be very different:

“I think the working class experience and trauma are what drive us to want to lead. I think the other part of what drives people to lead are people who come from more privileged spaces, so like upper class Asian Americans might have more ability because [they] had the experiences in their lives [such as] accessing good schools, accessing good education and good training to be able to get them into that position.”

[Participant #3]

Participants who thought Asian Americans do not have a strong drive to lead often cited cultural factors as an important reason.

For example, one participant [#8] answered that previous generations of Asian Americans may conceptualize success strictly as “[getting] a good 9-5 job at a big company”.

Another participant [#9] characterized Asian Americans and Asians as “shy to take [up] leader[ship] role than [non-Asian Americans].”

One participant [#2] viewed the non-Asian parts of his family as his personal drive to take on leadership roles; he observed that his Japanese biological mother had very different views about leadership compared to his Caucasian stepfather:

“…[my mother] kind of had the typical Tiger Mom ambitions…I at least always had this pressure to excel in what I did as I grew up, but I think it doesn’t necessarily translate into being a leader in the way that I define as far as being integral and coordinating action between parties.”

Participants who did not give definitive yes-or-no answers often explained that they thought that there are so many factors besides race that are at play that to give a one-size-fits-all answer is impossible.
One participants [#6] said that:

“*It's different based on how you cut it. If you cut it from first generation, second generation, I think there might be some differences, there probably will be some differences across ethnicity, I'm not sure. I think there are certainly biases at work against Asian Americans and particularly Asian American women.*”

Another participant [#11] responded, besides the fact that the drive to lead could really depend on the individual that Asian Americans may also view the time or opportunity as not right for them or more suitable for another person of color:

“*So, just yesterday I was talking to some Asian American women who were saying they often don’t feel like they should vocalize their perspectives when there are people of color whom they want to give that space over to…So I can imagine a similar kind of feeling in terms of taking advantage of leadership opportunities, where one might choose not to because they want to see those opportunities to, let’s just say, other women of color.*”

Participants in this group also thought it is important to keep in mind that Asian Americans have to face biases against them from both outside and inside Asian American communities.

One participant [#4] discussed the effect of the Perpetual Foreigner stereotype on Asian Americans’ leadership experiences:

“I don’t want to make a relativist, cultural, problematic arguments. But I do think that the conditions of racial formation in the United States where Asian Americans are viewed as perpetual foreigners does actually contribute to a lot of people who don’t want to make waves. And then that actually [has] some profound impacts on who actually applies for positions, right? It's very rare to see Asian
Americans apply for leadership position[s]. Even though they're capable, there is this expectation that they can't lead.”

Another participant thought, even without ill intention, everyone inevitably holds stereotypes to some degree, and this includes some Asian Americans in positions of power and authority. He used himself as an example and said that factors such as accent may still influence his hiring decisions even though he is an Asian American. He added that, the first thing that needs to be done is to be aware of our own biases before we are able to work on eliminating them.

Is it harder for Asian Americans to pursue leadership positions than people of other ethnicities?

Among all participants, all NGO participants answered that how difficult it is to pursue leadership positions for Asian Americans is context-dependent; all participants from the business and academia subgroups answered that it is more difficult; the participant from the politics subgroup answered that Asian Americans face barriers just as all people of color, except for Whites. It is the first question in which I saw a clear-cut, cross-vocational difference.

Participants who thought it is harder for Asian Americans to pursue leadership roles often discussed the following themes: a) there are fewer Asian American leaders in non-Asian American organizations; b) there are stereotypes and prejudices against Asian Americans; however, c) attributing everything to race could make us overlook other important factors.

Almost all NGO participants observed that there are simply not that many Asian American leaders in non-Asian American organizations such as government, mainstream corporate spaces, and even multi-racial organizations:
“so many Asians that I’ve grown up with definitely felt like [leadership] was skewed for, first, Whites, obviously; then blacks, then Latinos; and Asians were last.”

[Participant #1]

Another participant [#5] said that when she applied for a job at a predominantly White company she got into the final round of interviews, but did not get the job. She recalled that, she was aware of how, as an Asian American, she was “shocked and stunned” by how she was the only minority among all interviewees and felt out of place:

“So I think there are still companies out there that are doing great things, but are still a little bit maybe more traditional, or still care about who they hire. But it's, in a sense, it's because they've always been like that. And it's like a cultural fit for them.”

Several participants in NGO also observed that are relatively few Asian Americans in their field. In addition, when they are, they tend to join ethnic organizations or organizations that work on Asian American-related issues. As a result, when organizations want to promote an Asian American leader, they have a relatively small pool of candidates to choose from. In this situation, it could be easier for Asian Americans to be promoted into leadership positions.

Several participants believed that Asian Americans are often overlooked for leadership roles in mainstream or multi-racial organizations because they are not expected to be leaders. However, they also believed that it is important not to attribute all the difficulties to race or assumes the experiences are the same for all members in Asian American communities.

For instance, one participant stated:
“I think it plays out differently, because, you know, we are also more than just our race...we also have other markers, sexual orientation, ability, class as well, that impacts whether or not these [opportunities] are even made available to us.”

[Participant #6]

The participant explained that it is important not to oversimplify all Asian Americans’ experiences as the same because it fuels the misconception that there are some fixed, rooted, cultural reasons that leads to the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in leadership:

“I think that perhaps there could be some patterns that we see across Asian ethnicities around the culture. But then I think what I'm tired of sometimes is that, [then] the argument then [becomes], ‘Okay, well, Asian people need to change.’, and I'm like, no, I think we need to change systemic barriers to opportunity to leadership to, I guess, socioeconomic success.”

Among participants who thought it is harder for Asian Americans to pursue leadership, they also gave similar description of prejudice and biases that Asian Americans have to face or overcome:

“I think that it is really difficult for Asian Americans, because, like, for those who actually pursue those positions, often times, you will be evaluated according to stereotypes of like, being quiet, right?” [Participant #4]

“So when we think about stereotypes and assumptions that society has about Asian Americans which are, I think, you know, currently, that they are quiet. Then if we're up against those and leadership is often seen as not quiet, [it's harder] for Asian Americans to kind of do the uphill battle.” [Participant #11]
“So in positions sometimes involve more customer-facing roles, then that's where people, I think, assume that Asians are not as strong as other ethnic groups when they have options to choose from more than one candidate.” [Participant #9]

In addition, they reaffirmed NGO participants’ observations that there are relatively few Asian Americans in multi-racial and mainstream organizations. Often time, the consequences of such underrepresentation include not having role models to look up to or having answers to common questions faced by anyone who wants to develop leadership:

“My number one question was like, how can I make [my parents] feel like I'm making the right move? How can I make them feel at peace with my decisions?...Right? And I think it was so hard for me to find that answer, because there's just such a lack of like, Asian American kind of entrepreneurs but also leaders.” [Participant #8]

One participant stated that Asian Americans don’t necessarily have to overcome more challenges when trying to pursue a leadership role than people of other ethnicities. The participant believed that, first, Asian Americans must not overlook the barriers faced by all other ethnic/racial minorities; second, in some instances, other minorities may actually face more systemic barriers to leadership than Asian Americans do; third, the barrier to leadership maybe more cultural rather than systemic for Asian Americans since, on average, Asian Americans do have the opportunities compared to other communities of color. He added to his last point that it is important to not overlook the power of internalized stereotypes and biases of Asian Americans themselves, which may lead to an inability to imagine being in leadership positions.
What challenges did you face in pursuing leadership positions?

Again, participants discussed a diverse range of difficulties when answering this question so there were no themes that were shared by more than two people. Many of the obstacles were unique to participants’ own circumstances, companies, or organizations. Some examples include having to wait to pursue the position due to an ongoing merger, going through a drastic transition in skillset in the new position, learning how to network, or work with an age group that is not technologically sophisticated in general.

Several participants also stated that they faced no hardship in pursuing their positions; this is especially common in situations where they were previously recommended by peers or senior leadership to apply for the positions.

What challenges did you face in your positions?

Two themes were common in participants’ responses: a) communication and coordination, and b) challenges that occurred were not related to their Asian identities.

Many participants reported that it was challenging to figure out how best to communicate the team’s objective to its members, make people buy into a particular initiative, and getting people on the same page with information and instructions. This theme also appeared in participants’ responses to some of the earlier questions regarding leadership ideals and leadership styles.

Participants pointed out that the hardships they face may not have to do with their race. Some participants explicitly stated that they have not experienced any challenges that are specific to their culture and ethnicity; some other participants implied that the hardships they faced did have to do with their racial identities, but at
the same time, were far more complicated than that. One participant [#3] talked about her struggle as a female leader who did not have the stereotypical experience of attending an elite school:

“…Because internally and externally or internally more, people didn't respect me on stuff; I always had to go the extra mile to prove myself…And that eventually changed. But I definitely think being a young, Asian woman in that role [was] part of it. And also being projected to be a caretaker: like a lot of women in leadership positions are projected to be caretakers…while we are caring, you know, we are still responsible for holding people accountable into moving a work plan.”

She moved on to discuss the roles of race and educational background in her leadership experience:

“I definitely think that all of it, me being a woman, Asian young working class, all of it didn't give me any credibility…over time, I earn people's respect. But in the beginning, you know, I wasn't thought as strategic; I wasn't thought as smart or smart enough because I didn't, you know, have the same type of like Ivy League education, and I struggled through school. So I think it's a mix of all of that.”

When I asked her whether she also perceived her experience as applicable in organizations that are different from hers, which is an ethnic organization that targets Asian American issues. She replied:

“Oh yeah, that's where you have to like pump up your masculinity to be heard. That's what I think is probably the issue in those places…they definitely are more heavily dominated by men, White, even White men…Unions, for example, men, white men and men of color, and [if] Asian American folks or women in particular are trying to enter those places…[they have to] perform a lot of more hyper-masculine to [be] seen [as] credible.”
Understanding of other Asian American leaders’ experiences

The three most frequently mentioned themes in participants’ responses were: a) the need to overcome stereotypes both within and outside of Asian American communities, b) lack of Asian American representation in leadership, and c) there are few opportunities and resources available to help Asian American leadership development.

In addition to the quiet, docile, shy stereotypes that were already mentioned in some participants’ responses, participants also discussed other factors that make Asian Americans’ leadership experiences even more complicated.

For instance, one participant [#4] discussed the effect of Asian Americans being model minoritized:

“…it's really remarkable to me that there are certain things that are invisible because Asian Americans are model minoritized. So we never think, for example, that the second largest undocumented population [in American] is Asian; we don't really consider how hate crimes [has] now gone up 400% against Asian Americans after 911, all of that is really obscured. So within dynamic, [especially] if you're doing diversity work, you constantly have to remind people that Asian Americans are part of that conversation.”

Another male participant [#1] said that he knew female Asian American leaders who had a difficult time getting male subordinates to follow rules or orders:

“…I don't know if it's in part because we have embraced this notion of Asian docility and therefore, some folks are challenging that? Or whether or not gender was a factor here where they disrespect the leadership of an Asian woman? Or a combination of factors?”
The lack of Asian American representation in leadership was also discussed previously in sections where participants reflected on their personal experiences. Another related, although less frequently mentioned theme was the lack of opportunities and resources for Asian Americans who want to develop leadership:

“…there aren't that many programs geared towards getting Asian Americans into these positions but there are increasingly more programs that are geared towards African Americans and Latinos.” [Participant #4]

“I think within the community, the challenges have to do with attention and keeping people engaged and making sure there're opportunities because the community is big but it's also not as big as other communities in this country.” [Participant #12]

Interestingly, Participant #12 also discussed that sometimes within Asian American organizations, people who are in leadership tend to stay in those roles for many years. As a result, he felt there is less space for the younger generation of Asian Americans to grow and lead.

Asian Participant

I felt it was necessary to create a separate section for the two Asian participants due to their unique backgrounds. One participant [#7] has been in the U.S. for over 15 years and is bi-racial. The other participant [#10] came to the U.S. three years ago.

Do you think Asian Americans have a strong drive to lead?

Both participants answered affirmatively and said that based on their interactions with Asian Americans, they certainly felt that Asian Americans are motivated to lead. Interestingly, one participant made a distinct comparison between
her perceptions of a typical Asian and a typical Asian American personality; she described Asian Americans that she has met as having a “stronger” personality, more outspoken and confident, and “more like American”. When I asked her to clarify what the opposite of that would be, she answered:

“…the opposite is more like a traditional kind of Asian personality. Kind of more introvert. I feel, in general, like people from China like me, [we] don't -- how do you say that -- we don't [really] express our opinion like the western people do.”

When I asked her for some clarification on what she meant by a western way of expressing, she explained that she thought Asians express less directly and less frequently. Furthermore, she attributed this way of expression to an educational system that does not encourage people to ask questions, to think there could be multiple answers to one question, or to engage in critical thinking:

“…So that's why I feel, for Asians, we're more like, even if we have questions or thoughts we will keep them to ourselves more. Or unless we're really confident [that] something is wrong, [then] we will speak up. But we usually don't speak up if we're not confident, or I mean, [I] feel a lot of us [have] a fear like I'm saying something stupid, so we won't speak up. But I feel in Western culture, [it's] not like that. Like everybody can say whatever you have in mind, and no questions are stupid.”

Is it harder for Asian Americans to pursue leadership positions than people of other ethnicities?

Both participants answered that they didn’t perceive there to be much hardship in pursuing leadership for Asian Americans. However, one response stemmed from
personal experiences in pursuing leadership roles, whereas the other came from observation of other Asian Americans.

One participant answered that he didn’t feel it was hard possibly due to his bi-racial appearance:

“I don't know how they really categorize me…I think for me, that has not been the case. But I don't know if that's because of the way I look, or the way I present myself.”

In contrast, the second participant did not think it would be harder for Asian Americans to pursue leadership positions than for people of other ethnicities due to her observation of her Asian American classmates being head of student organizations and joining the army.

What challenges did you face in your position? 

One participant answered that for her, the biggest challenge was to express herself because her position requires her to speak up, think critically, and stand her ground. Furthermore, she did not think these would be challenging for Asian Americans.

The other participant stated that it was challenging for him to get people to understand tradeoffs. He also discussed the need to be a strong communicator in order to make people understand the rationales behind decisions when everyone has a different take on issues due to zirs background. He added that an additional challenge

1 Both participants were categorized as having actively pursued their positions, so they were both initially asked what challenges they faced when they tried to do this. However, one participant described challenges she faced in her position. The other participant, even though he applied for the position, explicitly stated that he did not view himself as having actively pursued the positions (in this case, I followed up by asking him what challenges he faced in those roles.
was to find the right amount of time to spend with each team member in a thoughtful way.

Understanding of other Asian American leaders’ experiences

One participant answered that she learned that Asian Americans may not be seen as real Americans and reported that she has seen Asian Americans questioning whether they were discriminated against on social media platforms. When I asked her to what extent she thought her observation applies, she said that she thought it depends on the community and the culture; she used the example of her company, a big multinational organization, and said that Asian Americans don’t face this challenge at her company due to its diversity. However, she stated that she had heard that in industry such as investment banking, Asian Americans have a harder time.

The other participant declined to answer this question because he didn’t feel comfortable doing so.

Interview: Support

I asked participants two questions to understand sources of support that were important to them both when they were trying to pursue their positions and when they were in those roles. The first question was “Where did you get the most support from in achieving the position you are in today?”; the second question was “Where do you get most of your support from now?” If the participant had already left the position by the time of the interview, the second question focused strictly on zirs experiences in that position.

Among the 12 participants, two people misunderstood the question and their responses were not included in the analysis.
Where did you get the most support from in achieving the position you are in today?

The top three sources of support people mentioned were: a) social support from peers, colleagues, and people from similar social status or in similar situations; b) mentorship; and c) institutional support.

Participants reported that from peers, colleagues, and people around them, they felt supported in pursuing the positions, gained knowledge on what the jobs entail, and felt backed by a social network of others doing similar work. Although several participants mentioned the significance of having other Asians or Asian Americans supporting them, social support from those who don’t identify as Asian or Asian American was perceived as highly beneficial as well. In fact, most people mentioned the importance of being backed by people from their organizations, schools, or companies.

The second most-frequently discussed source of support was mentorship. Participants reported that it was important to have mentors or people in more senior positions who saw their potentials, respected and trusted them, and were willing to teach them. This is the one area in which the role of identity became slightly more salient. Several participants mentioned the importance of having a mentor or supervisor who was a person of color.

Statements that fall under the “institutional support” category usually have to do with educational resources and training opportunities provided by participants’ organizations, schools, or companies. Interestingly, one participant also mentioned the importance of ally-ship from people in more senior positions who came from a completely different background but actively tried to mentor people of color, especially women of color:
“…I have benefited from people like that, who are not briefly aligned with me, who are not my same gender, sexuality, but who actually saw the value of having somebody like me around, you know, so it's like a profound ally-ship that is all too rare…he never looked at me as a representation, but rather, as an individual who could contribute.” [Participant #4]

Sources of support in your position

Most participants reported that support from peers, colleagues, and people around them and mentorship were the two important sources of support after they had achieved leadership positions.

In addition, several participants in the NGO and academia subgroups brought up how circumstances change as they took up leadership roles; they shared a sense of aloneness/loneliness and felt there were fewer people whom they could consult or even just talk to:

“…it's such a lonely position in being a leader, nobody really understands the level of responsibility that you go through or how much you give up of your life…” [Participant #3]

“…what has changed is that there are fewer and fewer mentors out there. And there's an isolation, right?...Because I've achieved a position that is a bit higher than most my colleagues, I really don't have people to talk to, [and] that's a bit of a struggle…” [Participant #4]

“…I think [as you] become more senior, you know, there's a level of discretion involved. And sometimes there are fewer people you can talk to about certain things so that to still have some kind of a network to provide support and confidence is a good thing.” [Participant #7]
Discussion

An interesting sample group was obtained in the present study. There were an equal number of male and female participants and there were no significant gender differences in terms of participants’ rank within their organizations. While participants’ affiliations ranged from international companies to regional organizations, it is almost always the case that for every female participant, there was a male counterpart in a leadership position at a similar level. This is different from the sample in Kawahara, Pal, and Chin’s study (2013), in which male participants tend to be older and further along in their careers. It is possible that participants’ ranks were similar across gender in the present study because they were younger on average than those who participated in Kawahara, Pal, and Chin’s study.

In addition, the participants’ backgrounds were diverse; the sample group contained natural-born citizens, naturalized citizens, one bi-racial participant who has been in the United States for longer than one of the naturalized citizen participants, and one participant who has been in the U.S. for only three years.

In general, participants reaffirmed many of the themes documented in Kawahara and colleagues’ 2013 study. They felt support and encouragement from both peers and people in more senior positions were important factors in their taking up leadership role. They preferred a group-oriented and collaborative style (Lim & Ployhart, 2004; Chin, 2013; Kawahara, Pal, & Chin, 2013; Kawahara, 2007). They often have to overcome expectations and stereotypes due to their Asian identities. Lastly, they viewed mentorship as incredibly important in their experiences.

On the other hands, a number of themes were not seen in the present study. For instance, participants did not explicitly associate common Asian values with their leadership styles. Instead, they usually drew inspiration from their past supervisors,
professors, and predecessors; in addition, personal values and beliefs that are not culture-specific strongly influence their leadership styles as well.

The experience of having to negotiate multiple identities in different contexts (e.g. work versus family) was also not discussed as extensively by participants in the present study as those in Kawahara et al.'s study. In addition, while all participants obviously worked hard to achieve their positions and were result-oriented, only a few participants explicitly mentioned a strong work ethic or hard work as an important element of their self-perception as leaders or their leadership ideals. Instead, they focused much more on communicating with and listening to team members, empowering others, transparency, and honesty. However, it is possible that the way the questions were structured in the present study prompted participants to focus more on their roles as the overseer of a team rather than individuals striving for personal achievement or excellence.

In addition, an overwhelming majority of participants in the present study actively sought out leadership roles, which is different from what Kawahara and colleagues found in their study. While others’ recommendations and support were a big factor, whether the missions spoke to them was considered a more important factor. However, the importance of support and mentorship from others was also vital and participants didn’t only acknowledge the importance of support and mentorship from others but also put tremendous effort into creating a pipeline of support structure for future leaders. They did so by delegating and sharing leadership responsibilities with subordinates, mentoring and advising people, and setting up resources within their organizations or institutions for generations to come.

Although participants in most cases actively pursued leadership roles, interestingly, only a minority of them thought that Asian Americans, in general, have
a strong drive to lead. However, one should not rush to reach the conclusion that even Asian Americans do not think they have a strong drive to lead. Instead, several participants stated that it is impossible to make a generalization since they did not view the impulse to lead as necessarily associated with one’s race or they believed a combination of factors other than race motivates Asian Americans to lead. While there certainly were participants who viewed cultural values and customs as what cause the lack of motivation, there were just as many participants who cited previous generations of Asians’ tough immigrant experiences as crucial in shaping their preference for security and the desire to blend in and keep a low profile.

As discussed in the literature review, stereotypes, prejudice, and expectations associated with the racialized Asian American identity remain a major obstacle in Asian Americans’ leadership development. Participants reflected that the stereotypes and prejudice not only come from outside of the Asian American communities but may have also been internalized by Asian Americans themselves. Not only do outgroup members not expect Asian Americans to lead, but Asian Americans may also be reluctant to pursue leadership. Participants also observed that from their experiences, there are few Asian American leaders in non-Asian American spaces. This lack of representation makes it difficult for outgroup members to see Asian Americans’ leadership potentials and for aspiring Asian American leaders to find role models and mentors.

While many participants view stereotypes and biases as major challenges Asian Americans must overcome to gain credibility and be taken seriously, they also emphasized that it is important to not attribute everything to race. They stressed the need to acknowledge the diverse experiences people have within the community. Factors such as ethnicity, generation, geographic location, gender, age, sexual
orientation, and socioeconomic status all determine how accessible leadership spaces are to an Asian American. Gender was one factor besides race that was discussed extensively by several male and female participants. Participants observed in their personal experiences and their interactions with other female leaders that female leaders, due to their gender, are often assumed to be nurturing, caring, soft, while still having to fulfill people’s expectations for a leader. In addition, it was reported that female leaders sometimes are not taken seriously by male subordinates, peers, and people with more authority or seniority. The traditional gender role women are expected to fulfill in Asian cultures could also make Asian American male subordinates disrespectful to their female supervisors instead of celebrating a fellow Asian woman’s success in entering leadership spaces.

With few exceptions, participants, in general, reported little difficulties in pursuing leadership. Furthermore, they viewed the challenges they faced in their positions as unique to their own circumstances and not shared by other Asian American leaders. Perhaps this discrepancy between their understanding of Asian American leaders’ general experiences and their own careers is due to the demographics of this sample. Half of all participants worked in ethnic organizations or places that focus on Asian American-related issues. In these spaces, it may be easier for them to rise to the top due to less competition and an environment favorable to fostering Asian American leadership.

Communication remains a crucial part of participants’ self-perception and leadership ideals. They viewed communication as necessary to keep a functional, collaborative, and equal team. Also, they valued the experiences of interacting with and listening to people around them because they thought it is important as leaders to have empathy and compassion for others. Although they are aware of the difference
in status between leaders and followers/subordinates, they strived to understand people’s diverse experiences because they felt people may just need the space to express themselves and they want to know how best to aid others’ in achieving their potentials. It was fascinating to see that both male and female participants discussed the importance of doing this. Also, taking the time to understand the needs of staff and those affected by the work of the organization shifts the spotlight away from leaders to their followers. In other words, many participants preferred a follower-oriented style of leading.

Lastly, having two Asian participants in my sample group allowed me a special opportunity to explore their perceptions of Asian American leaders. In the present study, both Asian and Asian American participants acknowledged the distinction between the two populations; however, the two groups are often lumped together by outsiders.

First, the two participants who were naturalized at different ages expressed different opinions about Asian Americans’ motivations to lead. The participant who was naturalized in early childhood believed that Asian Americans are motivated to lead and leadership and rebellion in face of injustice have been a crucial part of Asian history. On the other hand, the other participant who was naturalized in early adulthood believed that Asian Americans are on average not motivated to lead.

What about the Asian participants? Both Asian participants believed that Asian Americans have a strong drive to lead; in addition, the Asian participant who has been in the country for only a few years stated that Asian Americans are more motivated to lead because they are more “American”. This Asian participant described Asians as quiet, introverted, play-by-the-book, and not wanting to speak up unless they are hundred percent sure. It was fascinating because these are all terms
used to stereotype Asian Americans. In fact, the participant who was naturalized later in life viewed Asian Americans as such and considered all other racial groups to have more cultural similarities than with Americans of Asian descents.

It is tempting to conclude that this must be because as Asian Americans assimilate more into the American society, they give up certain habits that are “Asian” and pick up others that are more American. However, it is important to look at the participants’ reasoning to gain a more holistic picture. The naturalized-later Asian American participant never once explicitly stated that Asian Americans tend not to take up leadership roles due to cultural reasons (although I recognize that there is the possibility that this was what he meant); similarly, the Asian participant attributed traits she observed in Asians (instead of Asian Americans) to the educational systems in Asian countries. Once again, she viewed the cause of these traits habitual rather than characterological.

In addition, I observed that, while it may be true for other participants as well, these two participants both showed a shared conception of what being “American” means, such as not introverted, good at communicating, and outspoken. Although they gave two different answers, their responses were based on the same concept of “Americanness”. It was possible that they were simply focusing on different parts of the Asian American label: the naturalized citizen was focusing on the Asian part of this identity, and the Asian on the American.

However, it must be kept in mind that this study has a very small sample size that it would be wrong to draw any definitive conclusion or generalization based on a few participants’ answers. It is entirely possible that if the study had a larger sample of 30 to 40 people, there would be many naturalized Asian Americans with years of exposure to the cultures and systems in their countries of origin who believe Asian
Americans are very motivated to lead; there may also be Asian participants who believe Asian Americans actually become quieter than their Asian counterparts because the former have internalized the Asian American stereotypes.

Limitations

There are several limitations in the study. First, the sample size was very small; as a result, whenever there is a theme shared by a few participants, it may weigh more than it would in a larger sample. Second, due to the exploratory nature of the study and the lack of literature to provide a strong theoretical foundation for me to develop my interview questions, the differences between questions in each section may not be salient to the participants. Failure to differentiate the purpose of each question may lead participants to either not answer a given question accurately or not understand why redundant questions were asked. Third, due to the lack of resources, I could not have a second coder to ensure inter-rater reliability. As a result, depending on my level of energy, mood, or state of mind, despite my best effort, the way in which statements were grouped and interpreted could be biased. Fourth, due to the small number of scales available to measure Asian Americans’ motivation to lead, I employed a scale developed originally to measure motivations to lead in Singapore. This scale has been validated in an Italian context (Bobbio & Rattazzi, 2006) but, to my knowledge, there has been no study validating it in the U.S. Fifth, it was difficult to recruit leaders who are in politics which resulted in my having only one participant in this subgroup. In combination with the small numbers of participants in the business and academia subgroups, it was virtually impossible to explore any cross-vocational differences.
Future research

First and foremost, future researchers must obtain a larger sample to test the findings from this study. Second, the present study suggests that, similar to some African American and Hispanic American leaders (Terrana, 2017), Asian Americans often lead out of solidarity with their ethnic group members and commitment to social justice, whereas religiosity does not play an important role in their decisions to lead. Future researchers should examine whether this difference persists when a larger sample is used or when there are more religious participants. Third, there should be more studies on female Asian American leaders. Participants pointed out that Asian Americans are often viewed as submissive, quiet, and shy in the mainstream American society; these are traits often associated with femininity. In addition, several participants discussed the complication of their experiences caused by gender. However, relatively few studies have examined Asian American women’s experiences in leadership when they must deal with the interplay of both racism and sexism (e.g. Liang, Peters-Hawkins, 2016; Ng, 2017). In a time when more and more women and women of color are stepping up and taking on leadership roles in politics, education, the corporate world, and technology, Asian American women should be part of the movement as well. Fourth, future studies need to break down the Asian American umbrella term and examine differences between various Asian subgroups. Although they rarely discussed this point during the interviews, a few participants stated after the interviews that it is necessary to conduct research on Asian subgroups (e.g. East Asian, South Asian) due to their diversity.
Conclusion

In conclusion, leaders who participated in this study offered important insights. In a society where Asian Americans are often not welcomed in leadership spaces, they demonstrated initiative in taking on responsibilities and leading especially when they felt the organization or the society could benefit from their doing so. They were well aware of the stereotypes and prejudices Asian Americans face and worked actively toward defying them. They were grateful for the support they have received along the way and were enthusiastic in passing the same encouragement and mentorship to the generations to come. The leaders also acknowledged factors besides race that make Asian American experiences complex. They are unafraid of taking a critical perspective toward their own ingroup when discussing issues such as internalized stereotypes and biases that must be addressed before any progress can be made. Furthermore, they are empathetic to other racial minorities; they acknowledge aspects in which Asian Americans, on average, are more advantaged in comparison to groups such as African Americans and Latinx and feel strongly that systemic barriers must be lifted for all.

Besides gaining valuable insights on the research topic, I personally benefited from correcting my own biased view that Asian Americans are not interested in leading. I truly hope that by shedding some light on the topic of Asian American and ethnic minority leadership, I helped show the importance of setting up educational programs, scholarships, and policies that aim at bolstering Asian American and other minority leadership. More actions need to be taken to aid us in developing a voice and having a place in the American leadership.

Sadly, I anticipate that much more research needs to be done before the American public realizes the leadership potential in Asian Americans. Ideally, they
would no longer make cultural or dispositional attributions but rather take the group’s immigration history and social and political factors into consideration before rushing to the judgement of what Asian Americans are and are not capable of. Even after that, a long journey needs to be taken to develop efficient programs and policies to catalyze leadership development in Asian American communities.
References


APPENDIX A
EMAIL TEMPLET

TO INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Subject line: An invitation to participate in unpaid Asian American leadership research

Dear ____,

My name is Shujianing Li. I am a psychology major at Wesleyan University and am currently writing an undergraduate honors thesis about Asian Americans’ leadership experiences with the supervision of Professor Robert Steele. For my thesis, I want to interview 20 Asian Americans who work in managerial or leadership positions in non-governmental organizations, business, politics, and academia. I would like to learn about their reasons for becoming leaders, the challenges they’ve overcome, and other aspects of their leadership experiences.

I am wondering if you would be interested in participating in a short online survey and a Skype interview. The survey will take no more than five minutes, and the interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes. Your participation will contribute to our understanding of factors associated with Asian Americans’ taking up leadership roles in different vocations.

If you are interested in learning more about or participating in the study, please contact me (sli02@wesleyan.edu) or Professor Robert Steele (rsteele@wesleyan.edu). You will then receive a link to the study’s information page with an overview of the procedure and be contacted to set up an interview.

If you are over 18 years of age, of Asian descent and American nationality, and identify as a leader in your organization, please consider participating in our research. Your taking part in the study is important to bolstering understanding of Asian Americans’ leadership development.

Thank you so much for reading this email and please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Shujianing Li
Cell: 1(516)450-1745
E-mail: sli02@wesleyan.edu
TO ORGANIZATIONS

Subject line: Asian American Leadership Research – Volunteer, Unpaid Participant Needed

Dear ____,

My name is Shujianing Li. I am a psychology major at Wesleyan University and am currently writing an undergraduate honors thesis about Asian Americans’ leadership experiences with the supervision of Professor Robert Steele. For my thesis, I want to interview 20 Asian Americans who work in managerial or leadership positions in non-governmental organizations, business, politics, and academia. I would like to learn about their reasons for becoming leaders, the challenges they’ve overcome, and other aspects of their leadership experiences.

I am wondering if it would be possible for you to forward this email to your members and see if anyone would like to participate in a short online survey and a Skype interview. The survey will take no more than five minutes, and the interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes. Their participation will contribute to our understanding of factors associated with Asian Americans’ taking up leadership roles in different vocations.

Those who are interested in learning more about the study and/or participating can contact me (sli02@wesleyan.edu) or Professor Robert Steele (rsteele@wesleyan.edu). They will then receive a link to the study’s information page with an overview of the procedure and be contacted to set up an interview.

We invite anyone who is over 18 years of age, of Asian descent and American nationality, and identify as a leader in their organization to participate in our research. Their taking part in the study is important to bolstering understanding of Asian Americans’ leadership development.

Thank you so much for reading this email and please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Shujianing Li
Cell:1(516)450-1745
E-mail: sli02@wesleyan.edu
APPENDIX B

MEASURES USED IN THE INITIAL SURVEY & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Individual differences measures

B.1 Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Shortened version of Phinney, 1992)

INSTRUCTIONS: Please rate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements [0 to 6 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree]

1. I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.
2. I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.
3. I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership.
4. I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me.
5. I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.
6. I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group.
7. I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.

B.2 Motivation to Lead Scale (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Bobbio & Rattazzi, 2006)

INSTRUCTIONS: Please rate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements [1 to 7 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree]

Affective-Identity MTL
1. Most of the time I prefer being a leader rather than a follower when working in a group.
2. I believe I can contribute more to a group if I am a follower rather than a leader.
3. I usually want to be the leader in the groups that I work in.
4. I am the type who would actively support a leader but prefers not to be appointed as leader.
5. I have a tendency to take charge in most groups or teams that I work in.

Non-Calcultative MTL
1. I will never agree to lead if I cannot see any benefits of accepting that role.
2. I would want to know “what’s in it for me” if I am going to agree to lead a group.
3. I never expect to get more privileges if I agree to lead a group.
4. If I agree to lead a group, I would never expect any advantages or special benefits.
5. Leading others is really more of a dirty job rather than an honorable one.

Social-Normative MTL
1. I feel that I have a duty to lead others if I am asked.
2. I agree to lead whenever I am asked or nominated by the other members of a group.
3. It is appropriate for people to accept leadership roles or positions when they are asked.
4. It is not right to decline leadership roles.
5. I would never agree to lead just because others voted for me.

### B.3 Interview questions

**Opening:** Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in today’s interview. I will ask you a few questions regarding your experience as the (participant’s position) of (the organization’s name). The interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes and will not cover topics of sensitive nature. However, if you would like to take a break or stop the interview at any time, please don’t hesitate to let me know.

May I have your permission to audio-record today’s interview? The content will only be reviewed by my advisor, Professor Robert Steele, and myself and any information that appears in my undergraduate thesis will be confidential and not linked to any name.

1) Can you tell me about how you became the (participant’s position) of (name of the organization)?
   a) **If the participant actively pursued current position**: What drove you to become the leader of your current organization?
   b) **If the participant was passively chosen or was asked to take over**: Before you were appointed, did you think about pursuing it?
      i) **If the participant thought about pursuing**: What stopped you from pursuing it?
      ii) **If the participant did not think about pursuing**: Why didn’t you think about it?

2) How would you describe yourself as a leader?

3) What are some of the most important responsibilities you have as a leader?

4) What, in your opinion, influences or helps you shape the way you lead?

5) How do you define leadership?

6) Do you think Asian Americans have a strong drive to lead?

7) If an Asian American wants to pursue a leadership position, do you think it is harder for them than for people of other ethnicities?

8) (If participant actively pursued leadership position) What challenges did you face when you tried to pursue your position, and do you think that experience is shared by other Asian American leaders?
   a) **If participant did not discuss it in previous response**: What makes it hard for Asian Americans to develop leadership in Asian American communities?
   b) **If participant did not discuss it in previous response**: What makes it hard for Asian Americans who try to lead in non-Asian American communities?

9) (If participant was passively chosen to be the leader) What challenges did you face in your position, and do you think the experience is shared by other Asian American leaders?
   a) **If participant did not discuss it in previous response**: What makes it hard for Asian Americans to be leaders in Asian American communities?
   b) **If participant did not discuss it in previous response**: What makes it hard for Asian Americans to be leaders in non-Asian American communities?
10) What character traits, in your opinion, are important in a leader or someone who aspires to become one?

11) Where did you get the most support from in achieving the position you are in today?
   a) If participant did not discuss it in previous response: What about institutional support and financial support?

12) Where do you get most of your support from now?
   a) If participant did not discuss it in previous response: What about institutional support and financial support?
Dear potential participant,

You were sent the link to this information page because you indicated interest in learning more about this study.

The purpose of the study is to understand Asian American leaders’ experiences, what drove them to become leaders, what influenced their leadership style, and what challenges they face due to their race and/or ethnicity.

To participate in this study, you must:
- Be at least 18 years of age
- Be of Asian descent and American nationality
- Identify as a leader

You will first complete an initial survey. The survey will ask for some basic demographic information, such as your age, gender, and sexual orientation. Then, you will rate yourself on two scales: your level of identification with your racial ethnic group and the strength of your self-concept as a leader.

Within 48 hours after you have completed the survey, you will be interviewed by the primary investigator via video conferencing.

The survey should take no more than 5 minutes, and the interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes.

No identifying information will appear in the final thesis, but you will need to input your name in the initial survey so the researcher can match your survey responses to your interview answers.

Although you won’t be financially compensated for from participating in this study, your participation will contribute to our understanding of factors associated with Asian American leadership. Deeper understanding of why Asian Americans lead may bolster Asian Americans’ participation in leadership roles.
Informed Consent

I am over 18 years of age and agree to participate in a research study being conducted by Shujianing Li, a Psychology student at Wesleyan University. The study is conducted under the supervision of Professor Robert Steele of the Psychology Department at Wesleyan University. The focus of this research is Asian Americans’ experiences as leaders. I understand that the risk involved in this study is not greater than that found in everyday life.

I understand that this study has been approved by the Wesleyan University Psychology Ethics Committee. I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded with my permission and later transcribed by Shujianing Li. I understand that all of my responses will be held in strict confidence and will not be identified in any publication of the results. Specifically, I understand that the data collected from this research will be stored in a password-protected laptop and that only Shujianing Li and Professor Robert Steele will have access to the data. The data will be de-identified so as not to identify me by name and will be destroyed by 2024.

I understand that I will receive no monetary compensation for taking part in this study. I further understand that participation in this research is voluntary, that I may ask questions, and that I am free to withdraw from the interview at any time. I understand that if I choose to withdraw during the interview, there will be no consequences or questions from Ms. Li. I further understand that I should keep a copy of this consent form for my own records. Finally, I understand that if I have any comments, questions, or concerns following the interview, I may contact Shujianing Li by telephone (516-450-1745) or via email (sli02@wesleyan.edu) and/or Professor Robert Steele by telephone (860-685-2852) or via email (rsteele@wesleyan.edu). I may also bring complaints about the study to Professor Matthew Kurtz, Chair of the Wesleyan Psychology Department (860-685-2072).

Name of participant (print clearly): ____________________________________________

Signature of participant: ___________________________ Date: ________________
Debriefing form

Thank you for participating in today’s interview. Now, we would like to give you some background information about the study.

In this study, we aim to answer four questions: 1) What are Asian Americans’ reasons to lead? 2) What challenges do they face when trying to become leaders? 3) From their perspectives, who is a good/ideal leader? 4) How does social and financial support from others contribute to their becoming leaders?

You first completed a survey. In the survey, you provided some basic demographic information. You also rated yourself on two scales: your level of identification with your racial/ethnic group and the strength of your self-concept as a leader.

It should be noted that we are aware that the term “Asian American” is a very broad umbrella term that, to some, fails to reflect the diversity among all people of Asian descent in America. We used this term because research has shown that the majority of U.S. residents of Asian descents identified as Asian Americans (Park; 2008); therefore, it is most likely that participants self-identify as Asian Americans and/or understand the meaning of the term. However, to avoid forcing an identity label onto you, we asked you to input the racial/ethnic group that you identify with in the ethnic identity scale section.

Then, you participated in a semi-structured interview with us. The questions were about your reason(s) for becoming a leader, your experience as a leader, some challenges that you faced, your understanding of leadership experiences of other Asian Americans, and where you received the most social and financial support.

This work is part of my honors thesis in the psychology department at Wesleyan University. If you feel any discomfort or have any questions as a result of your participation in the study, please don’t hesitate to contact me or my thesis advisor, Professor Robert Steele. Our contact information is listed at the end of this debriefing form.

Thank you again for participating in my study.

Contact Information

Shujianing (Coey) Li:
Tel: (516)450-1745
Email: sli02@wesleyan.edu

Dr. Robert Steele:
Tel: (860)685-2852
Email: rsteele@wesleyan.edu

Dr. Matthew Kurtz
Psychology Department Chair
Tel: (860)685-2072
Email: mkurtz@wesleyan.edu
# APPENDIX D

## Statistical Analysis Results

### D.1 Group Statistics

| Gender | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error
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### D.2 Independent Sample t-test

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## APPENDIX E
### PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

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