

CALL FOR ARTICLES

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ASIANS IN AMERICA BEYOND EDUCATION: CAREER CHOICES, TRAJECTORIES, AND MOBILITY STRATEGIES

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The Supreme Court struck down race-based affirmative action in university admissions earlier in 2023, in large part due to allegations that Harvard University had engaged in racial discrimination against Asian Americans. Amidst mixed evidence of bias against Asian applicants in Harvard's admissions process, SCOTUS ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. Asian Americans are not underrepresented in university classrooms, however, including at Harvard. They account for 7.2 percent of the U.S. population, yet 29.9 percent of Harvard's incoming class. Charges of bias against Asians have focused mainly on university admissions with scant attention to its more widespread and insidious forms, including in the workplace where they would benefit from affirmative action.

Research on Asians in America has focused disproportionately on their exceptional educational achievement. In spite of social scientists' explanations of these patterns, the narrow focus on education has had the unintended consequence of reifying the perception that Asians are the advantaged minority or the so-called "model minority." While Asians outpace all groups in education, they lose their advantage in the workplace. That Asians do not maintain their advantage in the labor market makes this domain worthy of inquiry. Hence, we go beyond education and invite research proposals that address questions about the labor market choices, trajectories, mobility strategies, cultural orientations, and family-related behavior of Asians in America.

Unlike in education, evidence of Asians' labor market attainment and mobility is more mixed. Some studies show that U.S.-born and U.S.-college-educated Asians have reached parity with Whites, while others suggest that the parity might stem primarily from the "over-education" of Asians. Still other research shows persistent wage differences between Asians and Whites that are unexplained by traditional human capital theory, especially after adjusting for education-related factors like field of study. Additional research attempts to account for this "over-education" by

positing that Asians strategically adapt to the labor market by attaining elite credentials and acquiring hard, marketable skills that convey competence in order to pre-empt bias. And finally, other studies point to Asians' entrée into self-employment and entrepreneurship—from small business ownership to venture capital—as a means to combat bias, seize opportunities, and achieve mobility.

But where Asians—regardless of nativity—clearly lag behind all other racial and ethnic groups is in promotion to managerial and executive ranks. In spite of their education, work experience, and job performance, Asians are underrepresented in leadership positions, including in the boardroom and the C-suite. A mere [2. percent of the CEOs](#) of Fortune 500 companies are Asian, two-thirds of whom are South Asian. Even in fields in which Asians are overrepresented—such as technology, medicine, the natural [sciences](#), engineering, and law—they are rare in leadership. For example, recent reports of [top technology firms](#) in Silicon Valley show that White men and women are twice as likely as Asian men and women, respectively, to advance into the executive ranks. A similar pattern emerges in [law](#) in which Asians comprise 10 percent of graduates of the top 30 law schools, but only 6.5 percent of all federal judicial law clerks. While Asians are the largest non-White group in major law firms, they have the highest attrition rates and the lowest ratio of associates to equity partners of all groups at 3 to 1, compared to 2 to 1 for Blacks and Hispanics, and parity for Whites.

Many Asians in America—particularly East Asians—find themselves hitting a “[bamboo ceiling](#)” akin to the glass ceiling women face. Some argue that racial and gender [stereotypes](#)—technically strong but socially weak, mathematically and scientifically inclined rather than verbally gifted—hinder Asians' advancement in the workplace. Employers may recognize Asians for their hard work, dedication, and effort without seeing them as innately brilliant, visionary, or skilled to lead. [Asian American women](#) are doubly disadvantaged in this regard: they are the least likely group to be promoted to leadership positions and to be perceived as fit for leadership roles, regardless of their education, experience, and behavior. While White women are breaking through the glass ceiling, Asian American women are not.

Where do these stereotypes come from? A new strand of research points to differences in [culture](#), and, more specifically, differences in [verbal assertiveness](#) between East Asian and White Americans. Western corporate culture prizes assertiveness and individual achievement, whereas [East Asian culture](#) promotes harmony and the stability of interpersonal relationships. To buttress this point, researchers find that [South Asians](#) are more verbally assertive than East Asians, and South Asian men are even more likely than White men to attain leadership positions—pointing to a unique pattern of “South Asian exceptionalism.”

However, leadership is only one measure of occupational attainment and intragenerational mobility in the labor market. It may be that East Asians achieve stronger labor market outcomes compared to other groups over the life course, especially when focusing on metrics other than promotion to leadership positions. For example, compared to White Americans, East Asian Americans may be more likely to believe in the importance of effort—that is, one should be well-prepared and thorough before one speaks up. In this vein, communication—especially with authority figures—should reflect what comes from one's best effort rather than one's initial impulse to be assertive simply for the sake of being so. Hence, what is considered a disadvantage for managerial or executive positions may be an advantage in more general work settings where evaluation depends on “harder” criteria such as a thoughtful and thorough brief or report,

consistently meeting deadlines, or other job performance criteria, in which improvement through effort matters and pays off.

While a growing body of literature has examined Asian Americans' earnings, these studies primarily rely on a snapshot or single point-in-time measure rather than life-course earnings trajectories. Moreover, studies of the intragenerational mobility of Asians draw on a limited set of labor market outcomes, particularly the likelihood of job promotion. And although reports provide invaluable descriptive data on the dearth of Asians in leadership positions, research to date has not developed a dynamic view of the life course career development of Asians in America. Altogether missing are transition or trajectory models to explain Asians' social mobility, the absence of which is glaring in light of the depth of research on the long-term earnings, wage, and wealth gaps among non-Hispanic White, Black, and Hispanic Americans. How can we understand race, which is so central to American social structure, and indeed, the whole American project, if we do not incorporate the experiences, trajectories, and mobility strategies of Asians in America?

Also missing is research that addresses questions about the possible differences in cultural and/or psychological traits and behaviors between Asians and other racial and ethnic groups, as well as how societal biases, stereotypes, and perceptions of Asians—including in-group perceptions—affect labor market choices, trajectories, and strategies. We also point to the scarcity of research that examines how gender, familial, and household practices—such as extended family co-residence, assortative mating and later marriage, as well as divorce—affect the labor market decisions and trajectories in ways that set Asians apart from other Americans.

Studying the choices, trajectories, and mobility of Asians in America beyond education carries significant implications for U.S. ethnoracial relations at a time when affirmative action in higher education has been dismantled, anti-Asian violence and racism have surged since the onset of COVID-19, and the geopolitical threat of China continues to loom. Understanding Asians' career choices, strategies, and practices in these contexts is not only timely but it is urgent. New research is needed to inform organizations and policymakers on how to identify and remove race-based barriers to mobility, thereby providing more equal opportunities for not only Asians in America but for all U.S. workers.

Call for Articles

We invite papers that address questions about the labor market choices, career trajectories, and mobility strategies of Asians in America. We welcome evidence-based proposals from all social science disciplines and all methodological approaches.

Below, we offer a list of (non-exhaustive) examples illustrative of the kinds of thematic questions and approaches that are well suited for this issue:

Life Course Perspectives

- *Longitudinal Studies* that document the changing disparity in labor market outcomes between Asian, White, and non-White workers over the life course. Previous research rarely examined Asians' labor market positions from a life course perspective due to data limitations. Widely used longitudinal surveys, such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, contain very few Asians in their samples. We welcome

studies that use non-traditional data sources, big data, and administrative data to address limitations in previous research. The [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) has just begun publishing monthly and quarterly labor force statistics for detailed Asian groups from the Current Population Survey, with data going back to at least 2013, which could be a new data source to analyze.

- *Transition to Work and Mobility Models* to explain Asians' career development. Potential outcomes of interest may include, but are not limited to, Asians' employment and economic trajectories, from their initial entry into the workforce to their progression through different career stages. New research may help elucidate the phenomenon of blocked mobility, wherein Asians, despite their educational credentials, qualifications, or experience, may face barriers to advancement in the labor market.
- *Causal Mechanisms* that explain how nativity, place of education, field of study, college quality and type, and other mediating factors affect college-educated Asians' earnings vis-à-vis their White counterparts. Previous studies of Asians' socioeconomic outcomes have predominantly relied on descriptive analyses. New analytical approaches based on methods such as randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental designs, and causal inference for observational data can help validate some of the stylized facts from previous research and generate new insights.

Strategies and Practices

- *Strategic Adaptation*. Research shows that Asian Americans seek to pre-empt bias in the labor market by acquiring elite educational credentials that signal hard skills, merit, and competence. Their strategic adaptation begins with pre-college education, continues with college choice and major, and into the labor market. How do Asian individuals and families make decisions that enhance their own and their children's educational prospects with an eye toward their future career outcomes? How might this strategy fall short of obviating bias altogether?

Gender, Family, and Work

- *Gender*. Research shows that native-born Asian women, on average, are unique among non-White women in that they do not experience an earnings disadvantage compared to White women with similar levels of education. Despite this, Asian women also represent the demographic group least likely to be promoted into leadership positions. Studies that examine gender differences between Asian men and women, and/or racial differences between Asian and White women, are welcome.
- *Family and Work*. Prior research has shown that Asian American women, on average, earn more than White women, in part, due to their lower tendency to withdraw from the workforce after transitioning to motherhood. Because they are less likely to reduce their labor supply, Asian women accumulate more work experience than White women, and therefore, enjoy more earnings growth over time. However, we know little about how patterns of extended family co-residence, marriage timing, divorce, or assortative mating affect the labor market earnings and trajectories of Asian women and men.

- *Familial and Household Practices.* More broadly, how do Asians' familial and household practices set them apart from other Americans in ways that affect labor market decisions, trajectories, and career mobility? How do such practices change over the life course and influence the social mobility of the next generation?

Racial Bias, Stereotypes, Attitudes, and Perceptions

- *Racial Bias and Stereotypes.* According to the stereotype content model, Asian Americans—regardless of nativity and immigrant generation—are perceived as competent but cold. This perception is evident not just in public opinion but is also portrayed in popular culture. In the workplace, this perception translates into views of Asians as technically strong but socially weak, quantitatively inclined but not verbally gifted, hardworking and diligent, but neither innately brilliant nor visionary. Asian American women are perceived as the least fit to lead. How might observational and experimental approaches help inform how racial and gendered biases and societal stereotypes help or harm Asians at different points in their career trajectory? We also welcome research that focuses on Asians in the labor market whose career choices and trajectories do not conform to dominant stereotypes about highly educated Asians.
- *Attitudes and Perceived Inequality.* How might attitudes toward Asians—including in-group attitudes among Asians—affect their career choices, aspirations, and strategies for upward mobility? How is Asians' labor market disadvantage portrayed, discussed, and interpreted in the media and popular culture? Compared to numerous studies on racial inequality in labor market outcomes, much less is known about perceived inequality—namely, the subjective aspects of inequality, including individuals' beliefs, ideologies, attitudes, opinions, and perceptions—and how these perceptions diverge from the actual levels of inequality among or within racial groups. How do Asians view inequality, meritocracy, mobility, and equality of opportunity? Are their views distinct from those of other ethnoracial groups? And how have their attitudes changed over time?

Culture and Effort

- *Effort.* Prior research has underscored the role of effort in explaining Asian Americans' educational advantage over Whites. Asian American students exert greater academic effort compared to White students, stemming from cultural differences in their parents' beliefs regarding the positive link between effort and academic achievement. How might differences in effort—including beliefs about the connection between effort and labor market outcomes—affect Asians' labor market choices, trajectories, and mobility?

Politics, Policies, and COVID-19

- *Affirmative Action.* Affirmative action in the workplace paved the way for White women to shatter the glass ceiling. The debate about Asian Americans and affirmative action has narrowly focused on elite university admissions. Missing are studies that examine how affirmative action policies in the workplace have helped (or hindered) the labor market outcomes, career choices, and opportunities for advancement of Asians in America.
- *Immigration Policies.* Given that three in five Asians in the U.S. are immigrants, we invite papers that examine the effects of changes in immigration policies—including those that

favor high-skilled immigrants as well as refugee resettlement policies—that influence Asians’ career paths, trajectories, household strategies, and mobility.

- *The Geopolitical Threat of China.* After President Trump launched the China Initiative in 2018 to thwart espionage by the Chinese government, more than two dozen academic scientists, most of whom were of Chinese origin, faced federal charges. After 4 years of investigations, the Department of Justice—under a new administration—announced in 2022, that the China Initiative would come to a formal end. The China Initiative has already produced a chilling effect on U.S.–China scientific collaborations and has generated feelings of fear and anxiety among Chinese-origin scientists in the United States. Not only are Chinese-origin scientists less likely to apply for federal grants as a result of this federal policy, but some are even considering leaving the United States. Studying the impact of geopolitical relations, tensions, politics, and policies on the careers of Asian scientists, including those of Chinese-origin, has far-reaching implications.
- *COVID-19 and Anti-Asian Hate.* During the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 6 Asian adults experienced a hate crime or hate incident, 1 in 3 worried “all the time” or “often” about being victimized because of their race, and 1 in 3 changed their routines because of the worry. How did the surge in anti-Asian violence and concerns about being victimized affect Asians’ labor market decisions and strategies? When given the opportunity, for example, were Asian workers more likely to choose to work remotely, and how have these decisions affected their career prospects and mobility? How were Asian-owned businesses affected by the pandemic compared to non-Asian-owned businesses?

Disaggregated Analyses of Asians in America

- *Disaggregated Analyses by National Origin, Nativity, Immigrant Generation, and Citizenship Status.* While studies have shown that race and national origin may not be the first-order cause of Asian Americans’ outcomes and mobility in the labor market, most prior research did not disaggregate the Asian category. Thus, the socioeconomic status of Asian Americans may be characterized best by a “high average and a large dispersion.” Disaggregated data is critical to studying the differences among Asians, which may be greater than the differences between Asians and other U.S. ethnoracial groups. Such disaggregated analyses can account for factors like nativity, immigrant generation, citizenship status, national origin, and ethnic ancestry.
- *Multiraciality, Phenotype, Colorism, and Accent.* We also note that disaggregation also includes the study of multiracial Asians (those who identify with more than one race) as well as other markers of difference among Asians such as phenotype, skin color and colorism, as well as accent, which have been shown to affect the labor market outcomes of other groups, including Black and Hispanic Americans.
- *South Asian Exceptionalism.* While East Asians are the least likely group to be promoted to managerial and leadership positions, South Asians are even more likely than Whites to attain leadership position. Leadership is only one measure of occupational attainment and career mobility. Does this conclusion hold true for other labor market outcomes? What are other potential explanations, beyond verbal assertiveness, that might account for South Asian exceptionalism?

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on December 11, 2023, to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

NOTE that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline. All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsf.fluxx.io> will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org. **Do not email the editors of the issue.**

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **June 7, 2024** (with a group dinner the night before). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 5/3/24**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 10/2/24. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 1/8/25. The full and final issue will be published in the fall of 2025. Papers will be published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.