



Asian Pacific American College Students on Leadership: Culturally Marginalized from the Leader Role?

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In April 2001, a national survey found that more Americans were most uncomfortable voting for a presidential candidate who is Asian American (24 percent) than for someone is African American (15 percent), female (14 percent), or Jewish (11 percent) (ABCNews.com, 2001). Evidence such as this seems to indicate that Asian Americans (and Pacific Islanders) - in this case, at the national level - may not meet the standards and expectations for a prototypical leader. Moreover, there also may be some indication that these images may also exist on our college campuses (Balón, 2003). In a 2001 examination of the top positional leaders of college campuses, Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) comprised only 1.2 percent of the nearly 3,848 college presidents in the United States (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2003). In reflection, Roy Saigo (1999), former president of Auburn University Montgomery, remarked about being one of the few APA presidents, "Although we are in the classroom - both in the seats and at the lectern - we are not often found in the dean's chancellor's, or president's offices." These obvious observations prompt us to ask how college students - our future leaders - perceive their own fitness for and identification with leadership and leader roles.

It is especially important to seriously consider these questions as the emphasis on structured leadership experiences has become increasingly salient for administrators, faculty, staff, and students on many college campuses (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). At the same time, more attention has been given to the changing populations in college that reflect greater racial/ethnic diversity and a corresponding need to consider the applicability of these leadership programs, which - most often unintentionally - tend to privilege White, male prototypes for leadership (Balón, 2003, 2004; Ortiz, Ah-Nee, Benham, Cress, Langdon, & Yamasaki, 1999; Roberts, 2003). To investigate this question of college student perceptions towards the concept of leadership and identification with the "leader" label, data was collected from a representative sample of first-year undergraduates (N = 1964) before starting their first semester at a large, East Coast, public, research university. The researcher in this study used multivariate analyses of covariance to measure group differences by race [Asian Pacific Americans (n = 270); Black/African Americans (n = 193), Latina(o)/Hispanics (n = 92), White/Caucasians (n = 1409)]. The covariate in this study (i.e., the controlling independent variable) was the level of diversity awareness, measured by the Universal-Diverse Orientation (UDO) scale (Fuertes, Miville, Mohr, Sedlacek, & Gretchen, 2000).

Survey items were part of the University New Student Census (UNSC), an institution-wide instrument that had been administered for over 40 years to incoming first-year students. The items solicited data regarding perceptions towards leadership and culture; leader label self-identification; and leadership from a social change and social justice perspective. Significant differences were found on several comparisons, which are summarized below.

Asian Pacific Americans relate to other minority groups in terms of diversity awareness and appreciate differences

In terms of level of diversity awareness (the covariate in this study), first-year Asian Pacific American college students (n = 270) were not statistically different from either Black/African Americans (n = 193)

or Latina(o)/Hispanics (n = 92). Similarly, White/Caucasians (n = 1409), who had the lowest diversity awareness when compared with other first-year students of all other races, were significantly lower than APAs.

APAs believe in the importance of culture in leadership

Taking levels of diversity awareness into account, APAs in this study were not significantly different than either Latina(o)/Hispanics or Black/African Americans, and they were **more** likely than White/Caucasians to believe that effective leadership requires cross-cultural skills and learning about "one's own culture."

APAs do not see themselves as leaders

APAs were **less** likely than both Black/African American and White/Caucasian students to identify members from their own racial/ethnic background as "excellent leaders." Statistical analyses also showed that APAs were the **least** likely of all races in this study to: categorize themselves with the leader label; self-identify with being the leader in racially diverse settings or unspecified group settings; and relate to the most common definitions of "leadership."

APAs view themselves as slightly less empowered than other races

Controlling for levels of diversity awareness, APAs were no different than other groups on their perceptions of the roles of social justice and social change; all groups seem to value its relative high importance in the leadership process. Interestingly, however, in analyses that did not consider the diversity awareness covariate, APAs were no different from other people of color and concurrently **more** likely than White/Caucasians to believe in the importance of social change in leadership, indicating the intervening nature of diversity awareness on the perception of making a difference (i.e., social change). On the other hand, on attitudes toward social justice in leadership, diversity awareness did not seem to be a significant mediating factor for explaining this difference between APAs and White/Caucasian perceptions.

On feeling empowered to make a difference in the community, APAs were marginally (but not significantly) less confident than Black/African Americans and White/Caucasians. Notably, when not controlling for the diversity awareness variable, White/Caucasians were no different than APAs; both racial groups were **less** confident than Black/African Americans in making a difference; this finding again may indicate the significant intervening role of diversity awareness on this self-perception of APA college students making a difference in the community.

Conclusions

Findings in this study suggest that APAs may have internalized the images of the "model minority" or "perfidious/perpetual foreigner" and thus, may feel culturally marginalized from leadership and the leader role. Further, this study confirmed the idea that "leadership" is a concept that is socially constructed, culturally based, and related to social change. Also, there is evidence of the mediating role of diversity awareness (i.e., UDO) in racial differences on leadership perceptions, particularly for APAs.

These findings also suggest there may be cultural differences that influence these perception differences.

Consider Differences between Asian/APA and Western intergroup behaviors*	
Asian Intergroup Strategies	Ideal Western Leadership Behaviors
Conformity/Obedience	Manage/control/organize

Emotion withdrawal	Motivate/influence/persuade
Passive resistance	Strengthen/defend position
Role adherence/formality	Challenge the process/Pioneer
Shame/Guilt	Confront directly
Silence	Express verbally/Take action

*Balón, D. G. (2004). *Racial, ethnic, and gender differences among entering college student attitudes toward leadership, culture, and leader self-identification: A focus on Asian Pacific Americans*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Maryland, College Park.

While it is important to point out the cultural differences that may exist, it is insightful to highlight the prevailing conceptualizations of these terms for Western (i.e., predominantly White/Caucasian) groups. And, clearly, there seems to be some connection between the differences in perceptions found in this study and the social positions that APAs - as a racial group - maintain in mainstream society. The findings of this study confirm the truth that responsible social construction of "leadership" is dependent upon not only cultural sensitivity (i.e., increased diversity awareness) but also an intentional mindfulness to the prototypes that are established by leadership program coordinators and administrators. For sure, effective leadership may begin with how we define our leaders and leadership.

Future Directions

This question of how the concepts of "leadership" and "leader" are perceived and interpreted is an ongoing question that has been a part of the leadership literature for decades (Rost, 1991). Similarly, while there may be hundreds of definitions for these terms (Bass, 1990), it is clear that leadership and leader self-identification are socially constructed and may be especially salient for Asian Pacific American students who are beginning their college experiences. Research on leadership categorization theory (Lord, Foti, & Vader, 1984; Lord, Foti & Phillips, 1982) may prove insightful to better understand the relationship between one's self-identification with the leader role and how this may contribute to self-efficacy and leadership effectiveness. Critiques of prevailing student development theories that consider Asian American experiences (Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002) are beginning to spotlight the ways in which students may not see themselves in the current models. Unquestionably, more research on both the needs of APA college students and our prevailing models needs to be done. (See also the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs for more information on applications of leadership in diverse settings and for diverse populations.)

On college campuses, APAs continue to be misunderstood as the "model minority" and subsequently are underserved in higher education. Limited research on APA students has left a void in understanding how APAs may relate to current leadership and student development approaches, many of which are based in Western cultural paradigms (Balón, 2003). Therefore, it is our absolute responsibility to consider how we as administrators, faculty, and practitioners construct and activate our positionally based notions of leadership and the leader label.

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