

The Hidden Story of What Drives Success: Institutions and Power

Vivian Louie

“We have been telling and selling the story of ‘good groups’ and ‘bad groups’ for over a century.”

FOR ALL THE COMPARISONS BETWEEN GROUPS, both historical and in the present day — who’s up, who’s down, who’s got the winning formula, who doesn’t — the real point goes missing. The hidden story of what drives success has to do with the power of institutions to shape what opportunities groups have or don’t have, and what they can do. That said, we do not often bring into the dialogue that *institutions and policies do matter*. And that’s why this loop — the fascination with why some groups are motivated to do well and others are not — keeps replaying.

Replaying the Loop

The media headlines seem to have a new shine to them — “Asians as the New Jews?” contrasted with “Jews as the New Establishment WASPS” and “What Drives Success: What Drives Groups to Achieve.” Words like “hard work” and “meritocracy” abound. The story told by this coverage (and some of the responses) is the familiar one that Americans typically tell ourselves — certain groups are motivated to achieve, and others are not. We buy into a common ethnic fallacy, namely, we see the power of ethnicity everywhere and attribute ethnic cultural causes to ethnic patterns of inequality.¹

Let’s begin by recognizing that for all the seeming “newness,” this is a very old story. We have been telling and selling this story of the “good groups” and the “bad groups” for more than a century. The groups seen as doing better have varied along with whom they have been compared to — European Jews v. non-Jewish Europeans,² Asian Americans v. African Americans and Latinos, West Indians v. African Americans,³ and so on.

Biological Determinism and Culture

The reasons attributed to the success of the “good groups” though have stayed remarkably similar. Arguments based on genetics or biological determinism, come around every so often, affirming social inequalities such as racial ranking on the basis of biology.⁴ Aside from the dubious merits of such claims, it is always useful to look at the prevailing social forces that might make such an argument so attractive. As the late Stephen Jay Gould shows, biological determinism was used to justify restrictions upon immigration in the nativist years after World War I, which eventually closed the door to large-scale immigration from 1924-1965. Biological determinism was used to impose quotas to restrict the admittance of American Jews into social, political and educational realms, including elite universities.

And then there is *culture*, the perennial favorite. Perhaps the allure of this argument is that culture *seems* more knowable and more subject to human will, than genetics and the extent to which they can interact with environmental factors. Culture seemed to explain differences amongst earlier waves of European immigrants. That’s supposedly why the children of Jewish immigrants did so much better than the Irish and the Italians back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:⁵ American Jews supposedly had a high regard for education that fueled their rapid upward mobility through schooling. But was it really just culture? Jewish immigrants arriving in the United States after the 1880s had some key advantages, like a middle-class orientation, high rates of literacy that came from the tradition of close reading of the Torah, and job skills that matched what American industries sought.⁶

Flash Forward: 1960s to Today

Flash forward to the mid-1960s right through today: Asian Americans have become the “new” success story, the only group to be accorded a *label*, namely, as model minorities. But despite the “newness,” the story is the same old one — Asian Americans supposedly have a culture of success that offers an implicit contrast to the culture of poverty that African Americans and Latinos supposedly have. Born at a critical moment of rising protests about racial and other forms of inequality, the model minority served as an effective rebuke to anyone who doubted that culture drives success, at least, in America.

The last several decades of research on Asian Americans as model minorities have revealed four key points. All are crucial, and there remains a pressing need to translate the findings into usable knowledge for policymakers, community leaders, and health and education practitioners. Let’s consider each point in turn:

1. Aggregate Success

First, there is an empirical basis for the claims of aggregate success among Asian Americans, if we look at indicators like educational attainment, earnings, and neighborhood. Some Asian Americans are doing pretty well — in how much education they get, how much they earn, where they live, the homes they own, etc. There are caveats — Asian Americans tend to live in areas with high costs of living.⁷

2. Uptown and Downtown Asians

Second, not all Asian Americans are doing that well. This is not a contradictory claim, given how the category of Asian American collapses so many differences, e.g., national origins, ethnicity, language, generational status, socio-economic status.⁸ A look at only first-generation immigrants arriving since the 1960s reveals breathtaking diversity. Immigration has brought uptown Asians with lots of skills, resources and education, who reproduce their middle-class status here; downtown Asians, who are more like the labor migrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and Asians, who enter under extremely difficult circumstances, including Southeast Asians fleeing war and trauma,⁹ and undocumented Fujianese immigrants smuggled in from China.¹⁰ Taken together, these first two points have been well-documented, and some of the findings have informed popular understandings of Asian Americans, although a lot more could be studied and disseminated.

3. Blocked Opportunities

Points three and four, however, have not been as extensively researched, although there has been important work here too, and many of the findings have not made it into the popular discourse. The third point: Some of the highly-achieving Asian Americans face blocked opportunities. Consider their under-representation at elite private universities, especially the Ivy League, where Asian Americans are about 12 to 18 percent of the student bodies, despite the stellar academic and extracurricular records found among the applicant pool;¹¹ their under-representation in the ranks of higher education leaders (only 1 percent of college and university presidents are Asian American); and the glass ceilings they confront in other parts of the labor market.¹²

4. How Social Class Matters

And finally, the fourth point: the reasons for the success of those who are successful. We would definitely expect the children of middle-class Asian Americans to do well in school since we know that social class matters.¹³ We might even expect that for the children of downwardly mobile immigrants (folks who were middle-class in Asia but have working-class jobs in the United States, e.g., typically because they do not know enough English to get work in their fields). How do we account though for the academic success of children of immigrants who have been working-class or poor, both here and in Asia? Although we might not expect this pattern, this kind of Asian American exceptionalism nonetheless exists.¹⁴

Refocusing the National Conversation

The existing research however does not help us refocus the national conversation on what drives success in the United States. That's because groups are still at the center of the conversation, namely, the debate remains fixated on whether Asian Americans are one of those "good" groups that are really successful. And if so, is the success of Asian Americans a function of having "uber" useful pan/ethnic cultural traits (e.g., an ability to work hard, delay gratification)? In the end, when we talk as if success has so much to do with groups, our conversations inevitably lead us to believe that the fate of groups rests with the groups themselves, that they're the central actors or even the solo stars of the story. But that's a dead-end because groups do not have that kind of power, e.g., to advance thanks only to pluck and perseverance.

The big and often hidden piece of the story is institutions and the power *they* have to create opportunities and constraints for people. Let me be clear: we need to continue the dialogues expressed above, and indeed, call more attention to them, along with other worthy inquiries that do not have to do with Asian Americans as model minorities at all. There's more to life for any group than just academic or material success.

At the same time, I think we need to pose, quite pointedly, another research question: While there are clearly ethnic patterns in achievement, does that mean ethnic culture is driving these differences? Certainly, the more talk in the media about whether Asian Americans are the new Jews or Jews are the new WASPs, or just filling in the blank with another group, the more power the ethnic culture explanation gains. This kind of narrative only throws us off track.

Post-1965 Immigration: Asians and Latinos

Let's look at the Asian and Latino contrast that has emerged in the wake of large-scale post-1965 immigration. The arrival of newcomers from so many different kinds of backgrounds, including social class, have expanded the scope of the national conversation about which groups are doing better or worse academically. But the explanation has remained largely the age-old one of ethnic cultural values. A lot of attention has been paid to Asians (the high achieving group with the "good" cultural values) and Latinos (the low achieving group with the "bad" cultural values). Even when taking into account the in-group variation in educational outcomes found in both groups, there is still an achievement gap. Socio-economic differences likely have a role, as that gap between Asian and Latino immigrants is even greater than the one between native whites and blacks.¹⁵ But beyond the issue of selectivity, e.g., who is migrating to the United States, are there other issues that we need to consider, and what does ethnic culture have to do with any of this?

That's the question I have taken up in my comparative research on the children of urban, working-class Chinese, Dominican and Colombian immigrants.¹⁶ Contrary to all the talk of Asian cultures of success, the *similarities* across ethnicity were striking and many. Interviews with adult children, who had all transitioned to some form of higher education, revealed the key role of parents with encouraging them to do well in school and making sure they had the books and supplies they needed. What the parents could not really do was help with homework, the college application process, or meet with teachers. This finding is not surprising since most parents were not fluent or even proficient in English, did not have much formal schooling, and did not know how the American educational system even worked.¹⁷ Eager to succeed, the children soon recognized they were on their own with school. What made the difference? The children of immigrants were able to connect with sources of institutional support, often from teachers and other adults, when they needed it most. They were able to get referrals to a gifted class, a better middle school, after-school programs, and quality college-counseling.

A crucial difference was *how* immigrant families were able to connect with these supports. Again, ethnic culture *seems* to be the likely answer, given that the children mostly grew up in ethnic neighborhoods, like Manhattan's Chinatown and its post-1965 satellites, Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens, or Manhattan's Washington Heights with its Dominican character, and Jackson Heights, Queens where many Colombians and other Latinos live. The mainstream media has made much of the Chinese run and serving academic preparatory businesses, preparing children for the SAT and other tests.¹⁸ Of course, not every

immigrant parent can afford the price tags of these schools.¹⁹ But every immigrant parent can learn about the city's high performing specialized high schools, along with other information, just by tuning into an ethnic radio station or reading the Chinese newspapers.

There is a lot going on here though that does not have anything to do with ethnic culture. First, the Chinese tend to be less residentially segregated from whites, having access to better public schools, a big advantage over the Latinos. Second, ties between the uptown and downtown Chinese, and investments from abroad in the post-1965 era, are driving the ethnic businesses, those that have to do with education and those that do not, e.g., real estate, professional services.²⁰ So one can be working-class and poor in these communities and still get useful information about American schooling.

And the Latinos? Dominican families can only live in poorer, more socially isolated communities. The Dominican communities here have little wealth of any kind. They face poorly-performing neighborhood schools, and are not typically aware of better public school options. Catholic schools (which they know from Latin America) seem to be the ticket out of the public school system, but they charge tuitions that the families cannot typically afford.²¹

The Colombians are somewhere between the Dominicans and the Chinese. Like the Chinese, they are less residentially segregated than the Dominicans, and immigrants from Colombia have been both working- and middle-class. There is a hard line though dividing the uptown and downtown Colombians — due to a lack of trust stemming from the drug wars, racism and regional factionalism back in Colombia.²²

Given these differences in community wealth and ties between the downtown and uptown (if it existed) populations, what kinds of supports do the Dominicans and Colombians have? Their supports tend to come from *non-ethnic* sources.²³ These include a teacher or guidance counselor, or the federal TRIO program Upward Bound, a community-based organization that might have an ethnic orientation or not.²⁴

A Broader Conception of Educational Policy

What can institutions do to improve the odds of academic success of working-class and poor children across groups? It seems that the push for universal pre-kindergarten is finally bearing well-deserved fruit, especially in New York City and New York State. Still, history has shown us that when fiscal times are bad, public education, which is where most Americans get their schooling, is among the first budget lines to be cut back, even while the importance of educational credentials has grown in the labor market. A lot of attention has been paid to test scores, but given that learning is a *process*, we also need to be thinking about how teachers can focus on their students, and on themselves as learners. They should know the children they are teaching, not only as individuals, but also their cultural histories and developmental stage, since that influences how individuals learn. Teachers also need to know themselves — their own stage of human development, and how their own experiences shape how they teach and view the children in their classroom. Developmental science theories, typically missing from teacher training programs, are a key pathway to this kind of teacher preparation.

Similarly, a lot of attention has been paid to claims that teaching of ethnic studies in public schools is the same as teaching ethnic separatism, especially the recent upholding of an Arizona law that banned Mexican American Studies in Tucson, Arizona public schools.²⁵ I have had a rather different experience. I have been teaching mainly master's students, but also some undergraduates and high school students, for nearly a total of fifteen years, and have been struck by how much they did not know about the Asian Exclusion Laws (1882–1943), discriminatory national origins immigration quotas (1924–1965), America's slow response through immigration laws to admit Jews seeking to escape the Holocaust and later, antisemitism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries, Jim Crow segregation in the American South (indeed, what segregation even means), and the Civil Rights Movement. Certainly, we know that the state of education of the Civil Rights Movement in public schools is disheartening, to say the least — in 16 states, there is no requirement to teach this topic, and in another 19, there is only minimal coverage required.²⁶

And yet, educational policy is not only about schools. It is clear that out of school programs help children, especially from low-income and poor families. We need to invest in these programs along with tools to evaluate and improve them. The more complex factor has to do with public policies that do not have anything to do with education per se, but can often run counter to educational policies and create problems that public schools are not equipped to handle. These include how poor and working-class people are limited to the poorest of housing stock, schools, and quality of neighborhoods, and in some cases, find themselves pushed out of their neighborhoods with the social forces of gentrification, where jobs are located and where poor and working-class people can live (often far from the jobs), and how much poor and working-class people get paid for the jobs they do.²⁷

A Need for More Coherent Immigrant Integration Policies

If we look at immigrant populations, then we need to consider that national policies have tended to focus on control of who is coming in, rather than how immigrants and their children actually experience America and the kinds of supports they might need. Because of this federal void, much of the energy and efforts with immigrant integration have taken place at the local and state levels, but the people and organizations doing similar kinds of work for different immigrant groups do not typically know one another. Some direction and funding initiatives from the federal government could help structure the vibrant but piecemeal efforts in immigrant integration, for instance, through providing channels for knowledge sharing and collaboration between different community-based organizations.

Ethnic Achievement and Public Discourse: The Future

This commentary is a small start to answering the question of what's ethnic about ethnic patterns of achievement. Research, policy, and practice, of course, are not the only domains. Public discourse is another. Here, let's be upfront about the fact that there is an uneven playing field for some immigrant and native minority groups. There is always a lot of talk in the media about meritocracy, but there is nothing meritocratic about residential segregation and how this puts poor and working-class children, who have the most needs, in the schools least equipped to provide them. This inequality starts early in the pipeline and builds on itself. And if some Americans are comfortable leaving behind another generation or two, then let's be upfront about that too. I do not happen to be so inclined. I would rather work towards building an America where we talk less about ethnic cultures as a driver of success, and more about institutions. Then perhaps success for all groups will be more of a reality.

Notes

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