

Critical Perspectives on Asian Pacific Americans Series

GLASS CEILINGS AND ASIAN AMERICANS

The
New
Face of
Workplace
Barriers



BY DEBORAH WOO

**GLASS CEILINGS
AND
ASIAN AMERICANS**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS SERIES

Critical Perspectives on Asian Pacific Americans aims to educate and inform readers regarding the Asian Pacific American experience, and to critically examine key social, economic, psychological, cultural, and political issues. The series presents books that are theoretically engaging, comparative, and multidisciplinary, and works that reflect the contemporary concerns that are of critical importance to understanding and empowering Asian Pacific Americans.

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THE NEW FACE OF WORKPLACE BARRIERS



DEBORAH WOO



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*To Freida and Trish,
and in memory of Howard,
whose insights about the world
I've come to appreciate*

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INTRODUCTION

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GLASS CEILING ISSUES

New York City, symbolized in the popular imagination by the Statue of Liberty, has been a major port of entry to a diverse immigrant population and long the most populous city in the United States. In 1996 many immigrants still intended it as their place of residence.¹ In 1990, more than one of every four persons in New York City had been born outside the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census July 1993). Other major metropolitan areas, nevertheless, have surpassed New York City with their own sizeable foreign-born populations. Among the top five, Miami, Florida, ranks number one, with three out of five (60%) of its residents foreign born. The four remaining cities with large immigrant populations are in California: Santa Ana (51%), Los Angeles (38.4%), San Francisco (34%), and Anaheim (28.4%) (Gaquin and Littman 1998:lxvii).

Racial or ethnic diversity is not a new phenomenon, having its beginning long before the founding of this nation, when diverse indigenous tribes inhabited the North American continent. The Algonquians, for example, who along with the Iroquois resided in the New York Bay area, comprised several hundred tribes, speaking fifty languages. Frenchman Jean de Crèvecoeur settled on a farm in what would become the state of New York, and observed the medley of European nationalities immigrating at the time—the English, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, German, and Swedish. His essays and news articles were recognized for their remarkable details of early colonial life, and his forecast for the future was optimistic: “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (Spindler and Spindler 1990:42–44). Slaves from West Africa were also a major presence, not only in the southern plantation economy but also in New York and other northern and mid-Atlantic colonies. Their integration into American society would be more problematic, even though they are more likely than all other groups, including *whites*, to be U.S.-born and to have English as their primary language (see tables I.1 and I.2).

As one of the most racially diverse states, and the state with the largest foreign-born population, California presently surpasses New York in diversity and has the daunting task of “assimilating” an immigrant population that is linguistically and culturally unlike any that the United States has ever seen.² Specifically, California is home to the largest number of Asian Americans in the country and has been predicted to be so at least until the year 2020 (“Growing Into” 19 January 1997). As the second largest minority population in the

Table I.1. Year of Immigration to the United States by Race/Ethnicity (California).

Race/ Ethnicity	US- born	1987- 1990	1985- 1986	1982- 1984	1980- 1981	1975- 1979	1970- 1974	1965- 1969	1960- 1964	1950- 1959	Before 1950
Chinese	30.2	12.1	7.2	10.0	9.5	12.7	6.3	4.6	2.6	2.2	2.6
Taiwanese	16.3	17.9	11.9	21.4	8.0	14.9	5.2	3.4	0.6	0.6	-
Filipino	30.4	10.7	8.0	9.4	7.5	12.2	10.1	5.8	2.0	2.3	1.7
Japanese	67.5	8.9	2.3	2.0	1.3	2.8	3.0	2.8	3.3	4.6	1.5
Korean	18.6	14.4	8.4	12.9	11.6	17.5	11.3	2.6	1.4	0.8	0.1
Vietnamese	16.8	13.6	6.9	12.9	20.2	26.8	1.9	0.6	0.1	0.1	0.1
Cambodian	22.1	8.5	16.5	21.0	22.1	8.6	1.0	0.1	0.1	-	-
Laotian	24.5	16.5	9.4	9.8	29.1	8.1	0.8	0.2	0.5	0.3	0.1
Hmong	34.6	20.1	6.0	4.9	20.8	13.6	0.1	-	-	-	-
Thai	24.3	11.2	4.6	8.6	7.5	16.0	19.4	8.0	0.5	-	-
Indian	22.1	14.8	11.2	10.8	9.3	14.1	10.7	4.6	1.7	0.5	0.2
Other Asian	37.3	12.8	7.9	8.0	7.8	8.8	5.0	2.7	6.0	3.2	0.5
White	86.4	2.2	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.9	1.3	1.0	1.1	1.4	1.4
Black	94.4	1.0	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.1

Source: *Pacific Rim States Asian Demographic Databook* (Oliver et al. 1995:4–10), from 1990 Census (Public Use Microdata).

state, following Chicano/Latinos, the Asian population is highly differentiated in terms of time of arrival to the United States and the relative numbers of those who are foreign born or native (U.S.) born. In 1990, for example, 67.5 percent of Japanese were native-born citizens as opposed to 16.3 percent of Taiwanese (see table I.1).

In 1988, Daniel Rosenheim, city editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, observed that the Asian American population, typically associated twenty-five years ago with “nineteen square blocks of San Francisco Chinatown,” had long spilled beyond these borders, encompassing immigrants from “sixteen separate nations.” Characterizing San Francisco as “the largest single Asian-descended population in the world outside of Asia,” Rosenheim labeled this special *Chronicle* report as “the first, comprehensive look at North America’s first full-fledged Pacific metropolis” (“Asian Growth” 5 December 1988).³ By 1994, Asians made up an estimated 29 percent of San Francisco’s population, and across the bay in Oakland, about 15 percent of that city’s population (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census 1997:46–47).

This ethnic diversity is made further complex by language diversity. According to a recent survey, eighty-one languages and dialects are spoken in Sunnyvale, a city of about 128,000 people and one of the few cities in Silicon Valley that has established a municipal “language bank” staffed by volunteer translators (“Labor of Language” 15 July 1998). Among Asians, the ability to speak English varies, with 50 percent of Indians (from the Indian subcontinent) claiming this as their primary language, as compared with 8.6 percent of Taiwanese-born immigrants (see table I.2).

As increasing numbers of Asians have streamed into the United States, their adjustment has been perceived as an affirmation of the ongoing viability of the American Dream—the

Table I.2. Ability to Speak English by Race/Ethnicity (California).

Race/ Ethnicity	As Primary Language	Very Well	Well	Not Well	Not at all
Chinese	20.6	29.8	24.3	18.0	7.3
Taiwanese	8.6	34.8	37.0	14.6	5.1
Filipino	43.5	18.0	4.7	0.4	0.4
Japanese	18.9	13.5	9.4	1.3	1.3
Korean	29.4	23.8	22.4	6.0	6.0
Vietnamese	28.5	33.3	21.3	5.4	5.4
Cambodian	21.2	23.4	28.1	10.7	10.7
Laotian	18.3	26.9	27.3	10.2	10.2
Hmong	18.2	22.0	25.7	14.3	14.3
Thai	34.2	31.8	10.5	1.6	1.6
Indian	50.1	15.1	7.3	2.6	2.6
Other Asian	32.8	15.8	8.1	1.4	1.4
White	82.5	9.6	3.6	2.9	1.4
Black	94.4	4.7	1.1	0.8	0.2

Source: *Pacific Rim States Asian Demographic Databook* (Oliver et al. 1995:4–16), from 1990 Census (Public Use Microdata).

notion that anyone who works hard can be successful. The Horatio Alger genre of success stories first appeared in the nineteenth century and fueled imaginations for several generations. However, during the Great Depression of the 1930s the magnitude of social distress weakened the belief that individual inadequacies, a lack of effort or character, were the primary causes of poverty. This shift in thinking led to the creation of social policies and safety nets consistent with this understanding (Quadagno 1994). Corporate downsizing and its accompanying social dislocation of hundreds of thousands of workers have similarly created fertile soil for more structural explanations of the increasing social inequalities that mark the present (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; *New York Times* 1996). Within this milieu, Asian Americans have surfaced as the new Horatio Algers, thereby reopening the door to *cultural* explanations of racist inequality, while other immigrants, such as Latinos in California and Texas, have been scapegoated for social problems and met with the argument that they “deserve” to be at the bottom of the social and economic order.⁴

Although race and ethnicity are very much a part of our consciousness, a major thesis of this book is that the majority of glass ceiling barriers involve subtle biases, sometimes imperceptible or ineffable, quietly or unconsciously reproduced. Some are embedded into the routines or practices of institutions, others reflected in attitudinal orientations, which over time chisel racially contoured outcomes into the workplace experience, even when there is no discriminatory *intent*. Although forms of prejudice or racial animosity still exist, the threshold of societal tolerance for *explicitly* articulated racial or ethnic discrimination is low, with exposure bringing shame and rather relatively swift punishment.

In 1994, six Texaco employees brought a discrimination suit against their employer on behalf of themselves and at least 1,500 other African American employees (*Roberts v.*

Texaco, Inc.). Settled in March 1997 for \$176.1 million, the case represented the largest settlement of a racial discrimination suit in U.S. history to date. It also represents an exceptional case of disclosure, where the racial biases of senior executives had been secretly caught on tape. For any journalist, researcher, or other outsider attempting to uncover and disclose such discriminatory behavior, the generally “locked-door” nature of “closed-door” discrimination inhibits such detective work.⁵

It was such backstage discrimination in the workplace that prompted the first efforts at affirmative action.⁶ Yet while tape recorders, hidden cameras, e-mail monitoring, and wiretaps might be the only way to document certain discrimination, and even if their use did not violate other civil rights, only the most blatant of biases would be captured.

For one, biases may inhere not in persons but in institutional practices. One notable example comes from a page in the history of college admissions. As Jews began to enter the nation’s universities and colleges in significant numbers at the turn of century, admissions criteria were adjusted to weed out this “undesirable” element. From the 1920s to the 1940s, bureaucratic measures were set in place with the explicit intent to discriminate, and were justified on rational or meritocratic grounds.⁷ Institutional biases may produce artificial barriers even when the intent to discriminate is problematic. Thus, Rosener (1995:26–44) explained how American corporations following the idea of the “one best model” have largely organized themselves along the lines of a top-down, “command-and-control model.” This implicit gender bias leaves little room for the “interactive leadership model” that women tend to prefer. For such reasons, although affirmative action was originally concerned exclusively with *racial* desegregation, it eventually expanded to encompass gender bias.⁸

Second, though the absence of minorities and women from senior-level management positions is based on individual performance evaluations, there is frequently a level of subjectivity to these assessments that is simply unavailable for review. Furthermore, to ascertain whether discrimination has occurred, one would need to have access to the personnel files of comparable candidates. In the world of academic employment, only recently have individual faculty gained the right to read redacted versions of personnel files. This privilege resulted from a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1990 (Leap 1993:151–56). Although this decision partially removed certain barriers to disclosure, the tenure review process continues to allow subjective judgment, and thus biases, to play an important role. As attorney Dale Minami (1990:84) notes, adversaries of women and minorities will “simply document their biased opinions better.”

Even where gender discrimination has been found (e.g., Chevron Corporation, State Farm, and Home Depot), the prescriptions for change are not clearly defined. As with suits alleging racial discrimination (e.g., Texaco, Denny’s, and Freddie Mac), judges have fined corporations and told them to “do something” about the problem so that it will not occur again in the future.⁹ But, according to one attorney who attended a meeting on corporate responsibility at the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of California, Berkeley, the issue often boils down to deciding which of the adversarial lawyers the judges are going to believe:

This is heretical what I’m saying, so don’t quote me [the individual] but judges “don’t know what to do, whereas practitioners have had their own agenda [focused on defending or prosecuting].” Although Title VII was instituted in 1964, it is still