Hobbesian Men, Gilliganian Women, and Confucian Asians

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Ethics and Leadership: A Comparison of Hobbesian Men, Gilliganian Women, and Confucian Asians

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Academic essays usually fall into two categories. Some essays report certain facts, and some raise questions to make people think; some are a combination of both. The primary goal of this paper is to raise questions. As such, it is meant to be provocative, and, for some people, it may even be outrageous. We want to put forth a hypothesis. If our hypothesis prompts people to ponder the issue we raise, our goal is achieved.

The hypothesis is built on the fact that, while a relatively large number of Asian Americans receive higher education and have a high level of socioeconomic achievement, only a relatively small number of Asian Americans are in the formal authority hierarchy and hold positions of power. We think that one of the possible causes is cultural disadvantage. The Asian American population is not a homogenous group; rather it comprises many groups who differ in language and culture. In this article, we focus on Asian Americans with a Confucian heritage, who can trace their roots to such East Asian and Southeast Asian countries as China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore. We hypothesize that these Asian Americans are culturally disadvantaged in moving up within corporate America, and that this disadvantage is similar to the disadvantage American women face in getting ahead.

It is a known fact that American women do not have their fair share of leadership and decision-making power. One of the reasons for this social inequality is that women follow the ethics of care, and this practice puts women in a disadvantaged position in the political/economic system. We suggest that there is a parallel between care ethics and Confucian ethics; in an individualistic competitive society, such ethics put their subscribers at a disadvantage in their pursuit of occupational success. In the space below, we will first present briefly Asian American’s leadership representation profile. Then we will compare three ethics: justice ethics, care
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ethics, and Confucian ethics. Drawing upon the similarities between care ethics and Confucian ethics, we argue that Asian Americans, especially those with a Confucian heritage, are disadvantaged in their pursuit of leadership positions. Finally we will discuss the implications of the hypothesis.

A Quick Reality Check

Asian Americans do not occupy proportional leadership positions in American society. By leadership, here, we do not mean the occupancy of key academic and research positions, such as leading scientists and medical doctors. Nor do we count as leadership persons like a Mr. Zhao, who owns and runs a small Chinese restaurant in a small Midwest town with the help of his wife and three part-time employees, even though he is technically an owner/manager for U.S. census purposes; or, a Mrs. Kim, a street-corner grocery store owner in California who manages the store with the help of her two teenage children. Instead, by leadership, we mean such roles as elected leaders in government and senior management personnel in public as well as private sectors (senators, governors, mayors, managers, directors, deans, presidents, and corporate CEOs). These positions embody the formal authority hierarchy and carry with them decision-making power in mainstream America.

It is not that Asian Americans are less intelligent or less capable than other Americans. According to the 2000 Census, 28.7 percent of the Asian-Pacific Islander population 25 years and over have bachelor’s degrees and 15.3 percent have advanced degrees, whereas the percentages for the total U.S. population are 17 percent and 8.6 percent respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001). As is demonstrated in recent U.S. Department of Education NCES statistics, in 1998-99, 8 percent of the Master’s degrees and 7.7 percent of Doctoral degrees in the United States were conferred upon Asian-Pacific Islanders, even though Asian-Pacific Islanders comprise only 3.9 percent of the total U.S. population. Despite their higher educational attainment, however, Asian Americans held only 1.7 percent of the federal government’s executive positions during 1990-1999 (U.S. General Accounting Office 2001). Among college and university faculty and professional staff, Asian-Pacific Islanders accounted for 5 percent of administrators and non-administrators, while whites made up 16 percent and blacks 21 percent. That is, for every 100 Asian-Pacific Islander faculty/professional staff members in Higher Education, only 5 were administrators, whereas for every 100 black faculty/professional staff members, 21 were administrators.

These numbers present a clear disparity between Asian Americans’ educational achievement and their share of leadership roles. How can we explain this disparity? There can be many reasons. Previous research pointed to racism, discrimination, and historical disadvantages in explaining such an unfortunate reality. However, beyond these factors, little attention has been paid to the link between Asian

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Americans’ ethical beliefs and their leadership representation. Feminist scholarship argues that there are distinctive gender differences in ethical orientations and that these differences account, in part, for gender inequality in power structure. Recent research on comparative ethics has identified important similarities between feminist care ethics and Confucian Jen ethics. We are particularly interested in extending research on ethics and leadership for Asian American population that practice Confucian ethics. Building upon these two theories, we hypothesize that one of the causes of Asian Americans’ low representation in leadership roles is cultural disadvantage.

Feminist Ethics of Care and Traditional Ethics of Justice

Feminist studies of ethics suggest that there are gender differences in fundamental value orientations, such as the relative importance attached to justice principles versus care principles and individual well-being versus collective well-being. In her path-breaking work on human ethics, Carol Gilligan argued that women tend to follow a different ethics than men.2 While men usually follow what has been called the ethics of justice and adopt a “rights perspective,” women tend to follow the ethics of care and value a “relationship perspective.” A major difference between the two ethics is that while the ethics of justice places more emphasis on individual well-being, the ethics of care attaches more value to collective well-being. Distinguishing between these two ethics, we do not claim that all and only men practice the ethics of justice, nor do we mean that all and only women follow the ethics of care. There are many “Margaret Thatchers” who, being biologically female, follow as much the ethics of justice as men do. There are also men who tend to follow the ethics of care. The standpoint adopted by many feminist scholars, as we understand it, is that women usually tend to follow the ethics of care, whether this is due to biological (e.g., “mothering” experience), or historical (e.g., social oppression), or cultural (e.g., gender roles socialization) reasons.3 According to these studies, men tend to see themselves as separate individuals while women tend to see themselves as related to others; hence, men are more likely than women to be individualistic, and women are more likely than men to be caring toward others.

Research on gender differences in value orientations demonstrates a gender gap in social relationships. Women are more likely than men to express concern and responsibility for the well-being of others. Women are also more supportive than men of education, health programs, social welfare, and reconciliation and peace. Other evidence shows that women are involved more extensively in caregiving than men, both at home and at the workplace. Women are the primary providers of emotional support at home and are more likely to aspire to and be employed in jobs that require interpersonal skills and the provision of social-emotional support. Research on work values also shows that women attach more
importance than men to jobs that are worthwhile to society and involve helping others.\textsuperscript{4}

Some feminist scholars have pointed out that the ethic of care has many limitations.\textsuperscript{5} In competition with people who follow the ethic of justice, people who follow the ethic of care are disadvantaged. In a society that highly values individuality and masculinity, a care ethicist, who values interpersonal relatedness and is tender-minded, is less likely to gain recognition than one who values individuality and is tough-minded. In a competitive society, a person must be able to utilize one's own rights in order to get ahead. It may be argued that, in our society, the typical men are Hobbesian men: they view themselves as individuals laden with individual rights and individual interests. They are rational and disposed to fighting for their rights, usually following socially established rules and principles. In contrast, we may say that typical women in our society are Gilliganian women: they are more likely to be others-regarding and less concerned with their own individual rights; they are more likely to yield to others and less likely to compete with others. In a competitive world, it is the Hobbesian men, not the Gilliganian women, who are more likely to get ahead.

Take a case in which a man and a woman fall in love and get married. Let us suppose that the man follows justice ethics and the woman follows care ethics. As years pass and they have children, they both have some decisions to make. Following justice ethics, the man considers it his own duty to provide for the family because he has chosen to enter the marriage of his free will, and he also considers it his sacred right to pursue the career that he loves. Following care ethics, the woman also loves her work, but she sees her self as relational, rather than individual; she sees her life as being inseparable from her husband and children. It is in the best interest of her entire family that she stays home to care for her husband and children. Life is good for everyone in the family; the man's career takes off, the children are well cared for, go to good schools, and start their own careers and families. If the marriage continues to be healthy, the woman gets a lot of satisfaction in her choice. In our society, however, it is the man, not the woman, who receives more recognition and credit. Imagine that due to no one's fault, the marriage goes sour and the couple gets divorced. The man still has his job and career, while the woman is left with few marketable skills for paid work. The man does not have to feel guilty because he did not force her to quit her job many years ago; she chose to quit in order to make a comfortable home for her career-oriented husband and to stay home with their small children.

This does not necessarily mean that one ethics is superior to the other. It simply illustrates that the two ethics are different in nature and yield two different social consequences for people who prescribe to them. The values of these two ethics are analogous to the hand gestures in the children's game of "rock-paper-
scissors." In this two-person game, each person is to show his or her hand at the same time the other does. The hand gesture can be a fist ("rock"), a flat hand with five-fingers open ("paper"), or a fist with only two fingers sticking out ("scissors"). The rule is that "rock" is superior to "scissors," "scissors" are superior to "paper," and "paper" is superior to "rock." Each gesture is superior or inferior depending on the gesture with which it is paired. "Rock" is inferior to "paper," but it is superior to "scissors." In a similar way, it is possible that the ethics of care may fare better in winning (getting ahead) when it goes side-by-side with some other ethics, even though it does not get the care ethicist ahead when it goes side-by-side with justice ethicists.

Thus, the ethics of care by its very nature requires self-sacrifice, and it does not guarantee fairness in life. The ethics of justice sometimes also requires self-sacrifice, but it demands fairness in return. In the ethics of care, every one is called upon to help others, but it guarantees no negative sanctions if one does not reciprocate care. In the ethics of justice, on the other hand, it is assumed that one can decide freely to enter or not to enter a contract. If one chooses to enter a contractual arrangement, one is obliged to honor one's obligations. Negative sanctions are enforced if one fails to meet these obligations. Therefore, when people who follow the ethics of care and people following the ethics of justice work together, the latter is more likely to get ahead. In competing for societal recognition and for leadership positions, Hobbesian men are more likely than Gilliganian women to be successful. This may explain partly why, in our society, more men than women occupy leadership positions.

The Parallel between Confucian Ethics of Jen and Feminine Ethics of Care

In an article on comparative ethics, Chenyang Li outlined three important parallels between feminist care ethics and Confucian ethics. First, Jen and care, as the highest moral ideals of each ethical system, emphasize tenderness toward others. In each system, persons are seen primarily as relational and morality is primarily measured by what one does for others. This is in sharp contrast with human relations in contractarian theories, which view human beings as rational individuals who enter society on a voluntary basis, as if one has signed onto a social contract with the other members of society. In such a contractual society, individuals look out for their own interest and reciprocate favors according to the "contract." Second, compared with Kantian and utilitarian ethics, both Jen and care ethics are not as dependent on general rules. Without rigid rules, beneficial effects between individuals cannot be quantified and cannot be calculated on a contractual basis. Third, based on their common notion of the relational self, both Jen and care ethics believe in care/love with gradations, in contrast with Kantian ethical universality. That is, persons have more moral obligations toward those with which they are in close relationships. Accordingly, a moral person
ought to sacrifice more for one's family and loved ones. Because of these common understandings of morality, Confucians' sense of moral behavior is much like that of the Gilliganian women. They emphasize personal interrelatedness and mutual obligation rather than individual rights. They see society as a big family in which members are bound together and are to care for one another, instead of contractual incorporation in which each individual is to look out for one's own interest.

If Li is correct in his argument, then Asians who follow Confucian ethics may find themselves disadvantaged in similar ways as women are in competing with white males in today's American society. The practice of Confucian ethics, therefore, may explain partly why there are a relatively small number of Asian Americans in leadership positions.

This is not to say that Confucians cannot lead. Obviously, there have been many, many leaders in Confucian societies. Our point here is that when people who practice Confucian ethics and people who practice justice ethics live in the same society, the former are disadvantaged in similar ways as care ethicists are.

In a book on gender dynamics in the modern workplace, Gail Evans, a CNN executive, writes about different approaches to opportunities between men and women:

One scenario:

Situation: A job opens up in the Paris office.

His Move: Asks for it.

Hers, typically: Hints at it.

Game Plan [Evans' solution for women]: If you want something, go for it.

Another scenario:

Situation: The big boss is touring the hallways.

His move: Steps out, introduces himself, and mentions his newest project.

Hers, typically: Stays at her desk, confident that her good work will speak for itself.

Game plan: Take credit for your accomplishments.  

Evans argues that boys learn early on to stand out any way they can and suggests that women should learn to blow their own horn. Because women tend to see themselves as part of a large team ("relatedness") and tend to be tender-minded,
However, they are usually less likely to stand out; even if they believe that they deserve something, they tend to be more modest and less aggressive. As a result, women are less likely to be recognized even though they do as good a job as men do.

In this regard, Chinese Americans are like Gilliganian women. They value teamwork, relatedness, and modesty. They believe solid work performance speaks louder than words. Confucius specifically said that morally superior persons do not talk much; they use their actions to show what is right. In today’s society, however, such an approach simply does not help them advance in organizational or corporate hierarchies. They are more likely to remain just that: “a good team worker,” not a team leader.

Can Asian Americans Lead?

In this paper, we have articulated a hypothesis as to why Asian Americans do not lead in our society. This hypothesis is built on three major assumptions. The first is the validity and applicability of Carol Gilligan’s and Nel Noddings’ theory of care ethics. The second is the accuracy of parallels drawn between women’s care ethics and Confucian Jen ethics. The third is the belief that Asian Americans follow Confucian ethics. The falsification of any of these assumptions can falsify this hypothesis. However, if all three assumptions are as true as they appear to be, then we will have a lot to think about as both scholars and employees. As we have stated at the beginning of this paper, we are fully aware that some people will not feel comfortable with this hypothesis and that some may be outraged by it. Moreover, some Confucian people may even feel it degrading to be compared to women. But, we will leave it to our readers to decide if there is any virtue in this hypothesis.

Where does this hypothesis leave us? That Asian Americans do not lead does not necessarily mean that they cannot lead. But, can Asian Americans lead if they continue to follow Confucian ethics? It seems that Asian Americans face a similar situation as women do in America. Today, women can become leaders by following justice ethics, that is, by becoming “Margaret Thatchers” or “Hobbesian women.” That way, they can be competitive and get ahead in competition with men. Or, they can change the American culture to make it friendlier toward non-individualistic practices. In the same way, in order for Asian Americans to take their share of leadership positions in this society, they will have to make changes in many ways. A growing number of Asian Americans have run for elected offices in recent elections. This increase indicates that changes are taking place. However, as far as culture is concerned, it would seem that Asian Americans either have to abandon their traditional Confucian ethics to become more individualistic and hence more competitive, or to change society’s way of thinking to make it friendlier toward non-individualistic practices. Our hope is the latter.
NOTES:


7 Gail Evans, Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman: What Men Know About Success that Women Need to Learn, (New York: Broadway Books, 2001).