

Psychoanalysis of Stereotype Accuracy and Inaccuracy: Commonsense Wisdom and Historical-Political Biases Toward Asians and Asian Americans

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Abstract: Stereotypes are scientifically more complicate than people usually think politically. The EPA (Evaluation-Potential-Accuracy) cubic theory of stereotypes by Lee and colleagues (Lee, Jamnik & Chen, 2023; Lee, Vue, Seklecki & Ma,2007; Lee & Zhao, 2019) helps to address it in this paper. The authors first examine stereotypes as a common-sense wisdom in a daily interaction. Next, they analyze the degree to which the stereotypes of Asian Americans as foreigners or hi-tech slaves (rather than leaders) actually reflect social injustice and discrimination against Asian Americans, including the unfair immigration policy toward Asians and Asian Americans in the past, and the glass ceiling effect against Asian Americans in higher education, business, government settings or other arenas. Historically and statistically, most Asian Americans who did not come to the USA until after the Hart-Cellar Act was passed in 1965, are relatively new (or foreign) and speak English with an accent. While Asian Americans were better educated than other groups with regard to professional or other degrees from higher education, they were least likely to be put in leadership roles. Finally, it is concluded that in order to change negative and accurate-inaccurate stereotypes, we must get unfair social realities and structures changed, which also requires Asian Americans to get actively involved in this change process.

Keywords: Cultureal stereotype accuracy-inaccuracy; Commonsense wisdom; Immigration history and discrimination; Asian American leadership; The Glass-Ceiling Effect

Introduction

People use categorical thinking and stereotypes daily and cannot function without them (Lee, Jamnik & Chen, 2023). Human stereotypes are scientifically more delicate and complicated than people usually think politically. This article first addresses and

elaborates on the EPA (evaluation-potency-accuracy) Theory of stereotypes based on scientific research for decades (Lee, Jussim & McCauley, 1995; Lee, Jamnik & Chen, 2023; Lee & Zhao, 2019). Next, via a social interaction (i.e., a “guess what” case), we see our stereotype sometimes as a common-sense wisdom (not



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racism) by which people are rational and stereotypes may be more accurate than inaccurate. Third, today we have some negative and probably accurate stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans as foreigners or tech slaves. Based on this theoretical model, we inquire into cultural history and social reality and justice about Asians and Asian Americans and get to know why they are perceived stereotypically. That is, we further examine how those stereotypes could be related to the historical immigration policy against Asians and Asian Americans and explain why Asians and Asian Americans could be seen as foreign and tech savvy (in a positive way) and tech slaves (in a negative way) rather as social or political leaders. Finally, we conclude that changing social reality (e.g., the glass ceiling effect) may help to change our negative perceptions or stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans.

1. Stereotype Accuracy and Inaccuracy: The EPA Theory

What is the EPA theory? In the EPA theory, three

dimensions of stereotypes (Lee, Albright and Malloy, 2001; Lee, Bumgarner, Widner & Luo, 2007; Lee, Vue, Seklecki, & Ma, 2007; Lee et al, 1995; Lee & Zhao, 2019) are identified and emphasized. “E” represents evaluation or valence (e.g., stereotypes can range from positive to negative). “P” represents potentiality/potency or latency of activation (e.g., stereotypes can range from automatic activation to little or no activation). Finally, “A” represents accuracy (e.g., stereotypes can range from accurate to inaccurate). Evaluation (positive-negative), Potency (active-inactive), and Accuracy (accurate-inaccurate) are not dichotomous but continuous variables. Every stereotype is comprised of these three dimensions synchronously. Thus, for each stereotype, valence (i.e., evaluation), potency (i.e., activation), and accuracy determine the impact of the stereotype. Below is a cubic model of stereotypes that depicts the constituent dimensions (see Figure 1).

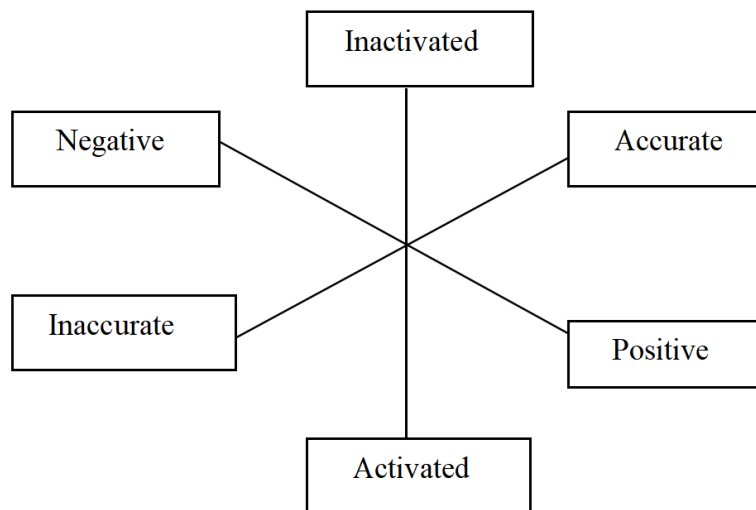


Figure 1. Cubic EPA Model of Stereotypes

For example, we tend to think of happy holidays or birthdays as stereotypes. If people associate holidays or birthdays with happiness, this stereotype is more positive than negative. Perhaps holidays or birthdays in many cultures are very pleasant and joyful. Whether there are most people around the world to celebrate their holidays or birthdays shows a factual accuracy or inaccuracy. Individuals, regardless of age, race gender or nationality, are most likely to retrieve information from their memory of holiday or birthday situations.

It is easier to retrieve information of holidays or birthdays than retrieve other days (e.g., Mondays or Wednesdays). This is a matter of potency.

Ostensibly, the cubic model which is very complex and indirect could be partitioned into two dimensions—i.e., Accuracy and Valence (or Evaluation). If we break it down into two dimensions (evaluation and accuracy), we can better visualize stereotypes (see Figure 2) as follows.

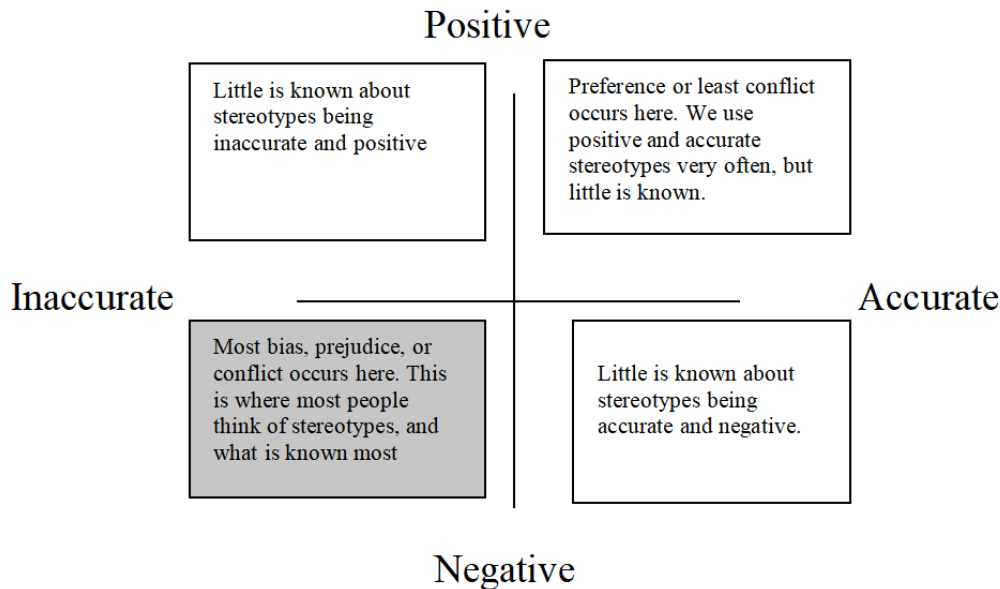


Figure 2. Valence (or Evaluation) and Accuracy of Stereotypes

Whenever we think about stereotypes, we typically mean the bottom-left quadrant—i.e., inaccurate and negative stereotypes. However, according to Lee, Jussim and McCauley (1995, p.17; Lee, McCauley & Jussim, 2013) social scientists need to understand mental representations of social groups in the other three quadrants, which is essential. This is because stereotypes are not necessarily negative or inaccurate (i.e., prejudice). Prejudice is not equal to stereotyping but just a small portion of it—namely, negative and inaccurate stereotypes. Positive and accurate perceptions about individuals in certain groups or categories could help us to understand and appreciate human differences. Even negative but accurate perceptions of certain individuals may help us to deal with some social problems more realistically and effectively rather than deny that the problems exist. For example, how much do we understand stereotypes being positive and accurate (see the upper-right quadrant—e.g., “professors as knowledgeable”) and being accurate and negative (see the bottom-right quadrant—e.g., “college students as financially poor”)? Will it be more helpful and effective in solving social problems when we realistically face accurate and negative stereotypes (e.g., “ethnic minorities disproportionately put in prison” than simply deny negative and accurate stereotypes?

Consider a negative and probably accurate perception—i.e., stereotyping “a winter season as cold in the north.”

This is more negative than positive. If we travel to North America or North China or Europe, it is more accurate that residents or travelers feel cold than in the south. People can easily retrieve the information or feeling of being in a cold situation when thinking about coldness in winter in the north than in the south. We apply the EPA theory of stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans below.

2. An Informal Social Interaction and a Commonsense Wisdom-Guess What?

During one of the weekends before Covid 19, the first author of this article Y-T went to work out at a gym of a Midwest university where he ran into two European American male colleagues on campus (later known as Chuck and Jeff). One of them, Chuck, greeted Y-T with “*ni hao*” in Chinese, which means “hello” in English. Y-T was surprised but happily replied with “*ni hao*” and also said, “You speak Chinese! You are amazing!” Chuck told Y-T that he could speak a few words. They continued to chat casually. He asked Y-T about what Y-T did for living. Y-T replied that he was a professor.

“What do you teach?” Chuck was curious.

“Can you guess?” Y-T said.

“Do you teach hard sciences, physics, mathematics, chemistry, engineering, computer science or information technology?” Chuck guessed. Y-T told Chuck that Y-T’s academic field began with a letter “P.” He cheered up and said, “You are a physicist?”

“No”

“You are a physician or medical doctor?”

“No”

“Well, many Asians here are hard scientists, technicians, medical doctors.”

“Surely, you are smart and intelligent enough to guess it. It has much to do with brain and mind.” Y-T pointed at his head with an amusing smile.

“Haha, you are a psychiatrist!”

“Yes, you are almost right. I am a psychologist,” Y-T finally told Chuck and also shook hands with Chuck.

Another White man, Jeff, who is Chuck’s friend, said with a smile, “Chuck, you are a racist!” Y-T immediately interrupted, “Not really. Chuck actually is very intelligent. He uses a common sense or basic statistics when he makes a judgment. His judgment is largely accurate.”

Y-T continued, “Even though I am not a hard or physical scientist, there are many Chinese who are hard or physical scientists at many American universities or colleges, such as physicists, mathematicians, chemists, engineers, medical physicians or other technical specialists. There are very few people like me who are psychologists or in the field of humanities or social studies. Chuck’s perception of me may not be 100% correct, but his stereotypical thinking or categorical judgment was by and large rational and accurate.” Both Chuck and Jeff nodded with a smile.

This anecdote has reminded readers of stereotype research by Lee and his colleagues since 1995 in the book on *“Stereotype accuracy: Toward appreciating group differences”* (Lee, Jussim, and McCauley, 1995). The book was advertised and promoted by the American Psychological Association. People who first saw the title of the book were shocked and sent Y-T Lee, one of the book authors and editors, email messages, accusing them of racism and sexism. Instead of arguing with them, Lee and his colleagues simply invited them to read the book. Some indeed purchased a copy of the book and read it. After they read the book, they came to understand that the objectives of studying stereotype accuracy are twofold. First, studying stereotype accuracy helps us effectively to deal with **social conflict and social problems in a realistic way**. Second, it helps us to **understand and appreciate group identities and human differences** (see Lee, Jussim, & McCauley, 1995, pp. 18-19). Thus the

purpose of this article is to examine the accuracy and inaccuracy of stereotypes, which will hopefully help us to learn how to deal with social injustice realistically and effectively rather than deny them.

3. Stereotypes of Asian Americans as Foreigners and Hi-Tech Savvy/Slaves: Learning about American Immigration History and Social Reality

If we ask college students or ordinary citizens on the street about “what comes to your mind when you think of Asians and/or Asian Americans?” and also ask them to list as quickly as possible three to five things on their mind regardless of its positive or negative connotations, chances are Asian Americans are seen as “foreigners”, “speaking English with an accent,” “smart or technology savvy,” or “technology slaves,” “good workers or colleagues, but not leader or manager material,” “Chinese food,” “Indian motels,” “Korean dry cleaners,” “obedient or submissive,” “physically unaggressive,” “politically docile,” “bad drivers,” “accommodating,” and “model minority.” All these stereotypes are in fact reported in various studies (Kang, 1993; Lee et al., 2023; Lee & Ottati, 1995; Lee, Vue, Seklecki, & Ma, 2008; Li, 2005; Sue & Katani, 1973). While analyzing all these stereotypes is beyond the scope and nature of the article, it is quite important and necessary to focus on a couple of them—i.e., Asian Americans as “foreigners,” as “tech savvy,” “tech-savvy” and/or “not as leaders”

First, Asian Americans are seen as foreigners. Regardless of how many generations an Asian American’s family has been in the United States, a person of Asian descent is often seen to be “an immigrant, visitor, foreigner” (Kang, 1993, pp. 1931-1932). Second, as model minorities, Asian Americans are good in their jobs as technicians or technical workers but not good leaders. The conventional wisdom in this country was that Asian Americans are the model minority at schools, workplaces or other arenas (Li, 2005). Are these stereotypes (e.g., foreigners or hi-tech slaves) more negative than positive? Are these stereotypes inaccurate than true or accurate?

We may get a clear answer to these questions by examining American immigration history in the past for hundreds of years in the USA. The modern history for Asians to come to Americas is very short while

there is a long history of Asians coming to America (see **Footnote 1**).¹ There have been very few Asians in Americas in the early times. This has much to do with Europeans who were in positions of power and control. They influenced immigration policy in a negative way against Asians—i.e., prohibiting Asians from entering the USA (Lee, Quinones- Perdomo, & Perdomo, 2003). After the USA was founded in 1775 USA immigration policies favored those from Europe. Asians were excluded because they were seen as strangers from a different shore (Takaki, 1989). Genetically, they look different from those from Europe. Also their cultural and geographical backgrounds are different.

For example, in the middle of the nineteenth century Chinese immigrants began coming in ever larger numbers to the United States. The Chinese came to the U.S. partially due to the discovery of gold in California and partially due to the industrial development of the United States which called for a large labor force (Cao & Novas, 1996). With respect to the latter, by the end of the nineteenth century Chinese laborers worked long hours and received less pay than their competitors. Many Caucasians considered the Chinese to be yellow devils that should be driven into the Pacific Ocean (Joshi, 1999). Personal accounts of Chinese immigrants give witness to their special experiences (Rico & Mano, 2001). Although Ellis Island in New York was seen as a symbol of freedom for Europeans, Angel Island in San Francisco is seen as a place of imprisonment where Chinese immigrants were jailed as can be seen below:

So, liberty is your national principle;
 Why do you practice autocracy?
 You don't uphold justice, you Americans,
 You detain me in prison, guard me closely.
 Your officials are wolves and tigers,
 All ruthless, all wanting to bite me.

¹ Research demonstrated that Asians or East Asians came to the Americas over 8000 years ago (Jefte, 1992, Mertz, 1972), although more research and investigation is needed. There is much research to demonstrate that American Indians share much in more common with East Asians than with Europeans genetically, archeologically and culturally (Lee & Wang, 2003; Turner, 1994; Yang, 2000, p. 78). Other evidence showed that in the 5th Century, a Chinese Monk Hui Sen came to North and Central America (Mentz, 1972). Even a British author wrote a book on 1491 (to show that Chinese came to the America , Menzies, 2002).

An innocent man implicated, such an injustice!

When can I get out of this prison and free my mind?
 (Rico & Mano, 2001, p. 261)

This poem was cited from *The Gold Mountain Poems*, anonymous works written by early Chinese immigrants to the United States. It was not until several generations later that the poems were edited and published. The above poem expresses the hardship and discrimination the Chinese immigrants faced when arriving in America.

American immigration policy has been seen as racist or at least race-preferred (Cao & Novas, 1996; Takaki, 1989). The Page Laws of 1875 stopped Chinese women or family members from entering the USA. The first anti-immigration law in the history of America was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (Cao & Novas, 1996; Takaki, 1989). These acts made it impossible for the Chinese to stay in the USA. This Chinese exclusion act was not repealed, or abandoned, until 1943. A 1901 “gentleman’s agreement” slowed the immigration of Japanese laborers. In other words while millions of Europeans immigrated to the USA, very few Asians were allowed (i.e., Asiatic barred zone—which occurred before the 1965 Hart-Celler Act was passed).

Statistically, for example, there were only 61,711 Chinese in the USA from 1881-1890. On the other hand, there were approximately 1.5 million people from Germany, 800,000 people from Great Britain, 655,000 people from Ireland, 353 people from Austria-Hungary, 307,000 from Italy, 250,000 from Demark and Norway, and 391,000 from Sweden (see Dinnerstein, Nichols, & Reimer, 2003). By World War I, almost 25 million Europeans who came to the USA automatically became American citizens; very few Asians were allowed to enter the USA and those in the USA were not allowed to become citizens, retaining their “foreign” status.

In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act allotted 170,000 visas to immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere, with no more than 20,000 visa going to a single country regardless of its size. In other words, it has been around 50 years since many immigrants came from Asia. Most of them are the first generation of immigrants. Historically, culturally, geographically, and genetically they are different from European immigrants; most of those Europeans came here in the 19th century. It is no wonder that Asian Americans are considered “foreign,” which is an accurate characterization.

4. Why are Asian Americans Seen as Hi-Tech Slaves/Savvy rather than as Leaders or Managers?

Perhaps three explanations can help us to understand why Asian Americans are seen as hi-tech slaves rather than leaders or managers. There is a history of discrimination against Asian Americans; predominant interest in physical sciences and engineering in China and in India; Asian culture that encourages one's own success rather than communal success; and lack of leadership or management opportunities, or the glass ceiling effect in the USA.

First, historically, Asian Americans were not allowed to immigrate into the USA until after 1965, when the Hart Cellar Act was passed. For those early immigrants, Asian Americans were not allowed into certain professions (Sue & Katani, 1973, Tong, 2003). Most of them worked as coolies or laborers (railway builders), on the farms, in restaurants, or in laundry businesses. (There were certain professions that Asian Americans could not be allowed to enter (Sue & Katani, 1973; Tong, 2003). For example, at the end of the 19th century, California denied an American born Mamie the right to a public education because of her Chinese heritage (Fong & Shinagawa, 2000, p. 141). In other words, they were not allowed to play an important role in various areas or occupations.

Second, in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, or after 2000, thousands of students from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India and other parts of Asia came to the USA to study in the areas of sciences (Chemistry and Physics), technology, engineering, mathematics or applied science areas (including medicine, computer science or information technology or IT). In China and India, sciences and engineering, including computer science or information technology or IT are greatly supported and encouraged. Many students performed well in mathematics. For example, in China, you can succeed in the world if you study well in mathematics, physics and chemistry. Very often parents in Asian American communities encourage their children to study sciences, medicine, computer science or information technology or IT, engineering, and perhaps business more than to study arts and humanities, social sciences, or laws. Thus more Asian American students are in the field of science and technology. This makes them more likely to become technicians or tech-slaves

rather than managers or leaders. Being a public leader means self-sacrificing and taking responsibilities. Some Asian Americans tend to be more self-centered than community-interested. While they take good care of their own families or small businesses, many Asians may be less interested in the larger ethnic or social community or public affairs in American society (Woo, 2009/2024).

Finally, and most importantly, there are fewer opportunities for Asian Americans to become managers or leaders than any other groups. According to S. B. Woo (2009/2024), Asian Americans have the least opportunity to enter the management field and the slowest growth rate toward acquiring equal opportunity despite their high rate of higher education. There is obviously a glass ceiling effect against Asian Americans in the USA. For example, 2.99% of Asian Americans received doctorate degrees while the national average was 1.2%; 2.71% of them received professional degrees while the national average was 1.5%; 10.5% received masters degrees while the national average was 6.31%. On the other hand, Asian American is the group that is least likely to be promoted as leaders or managers. Asian Americans were least likely to be hired as officials or managers (SB Woo, 2009/2024). That is, there were only 3.5% of Asian Americans likely to be hired as officials or managers, whereas 65.3% of White males and 34.7% of White females were hired as managers and officials. The ratio of Asian American managers and officials over the Asian American actual professional, technicians, and workers, was shown to be lowest--i.e., 0.17 while the White ratio was 0.34 (see S. B. Woo, 2009/2024).

Similarly, in higher education, Roy Saigo (2008), President emeritus at one of the biggest state universities in the Midwest area, pointed out that while there are more professors or staff members in American institutions, there has been no progress to promote the Asian American as administrators. As he pointed out, "In 2005, the proportion of minority professors in the United States who held full-time positions was 16.5 percent, up from 12.7 percent in 1995, according to Education Department figures. The proportion of Asian/Pacific Islanders was 7.2 percent, up from 5 percent." Of 109,964 minority scholars in 2005, 48,457 were Asians and Pacific Islanders.

What about leaders or administrators in American

higher education? “Some groups have substantially increased their representation in academic leadership. A 2006 survey of college presidents conducted by the American Council on Education found that 23 percent were female, up from 9.5 percent 20 years ago. Among minority presidents, Hispanics saw the biggest increase: They held 4.6 percent of presidents’ jobs in 2006, up from 2.2 percent. Asian-Americans held 0.9 percent of top jobs, up from 0.4 percent.”

Interestingly, Roy Saigo wrote an article on “*Academe Needs More Leaders of Asian-Pacific Heritage*” which appeared in the April 23, 1999, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. By Year 2008, there has been almost no progress that has been made, and Roy Saigo had to write another article to address the exact same unfair situation in American higher education. The trend remains unchanged even today (Woo, 2009/2024). From Woo’s data (2009/2024) to Roy Saigo’s article (2008), Asian Americans are still “foreignized” (i.e., “marginalized as foreigners”). They are still seen and treated as hi-tech slaves, without being given leadership opportunities in higher education and other areas.

Further, the COVID 19 situation makes Asians and Asian Americans experience more discrimination due to negative stereotypes. For example, American politics and mass media or social media often used the phrases ‘China virus’ and ‘Kung Flu’ to describe the coronavirus (i.e. negative stereotypes of Asians or Asian Americans), in contradiction to World Health Organization (WHO) guidance (Huang et al., 2023), leading to increased hate crime or violence against Asians in the USA or Asian Americans.

Conclusion

The EPA theory of stereotypes helps to understand the complexity of human stereotypic perceptions. In certain situations, stereotypic perceptions may be a commonsense wisdom. In other cases, Asian Americans are seen as “foreigners”; they are seen as “hi-tech savvy or slaves, not leaders or managers.” These stereotypes are not simply irrational or inaccurate independent of positive or negative evaluation. They indeed actually reflect social problems and historical injustice. Shall we deny the fact by simply stating that stereotypes are inaccurate rather than changing social reality and dealing with this social problem realistically and effectively? To a greater extent, in American society

and American immigration history, Asian Americans have been unfairly treated by mainstream European Americans for the past hundred years, a fact which cannot be denied.

On the other hand, if Asian Americans themselves want to change these negative and accurate stereotypes, they also must be active in fighting for their own rights and be more involved in community, social, and public life. Negative stereotypes or the glass ceiling effect will never change unless social reality has changed (McCauley & Lee, 2004; Lee & Jussim, 2010). Therefore, we acknowledge that studying stereotype accuracy may help us to understand and appreciate cultural and group differences (Lee, McCauley & Jussim, 2013). However, two changes are in order. First, we must change the unfair system or social structure unfavorable toward Asian Americans. Second, Asian Americans must change themselves, from being foreign to being native; from being slaves to being leaders.

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