

ASIAN IMMIGRANTS IN LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE UNITED STATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADER DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

Cultural identity and resource availability aspects in traditional leadership development literature remain understudied, especially among minority populations like Asian immigrants.

This study explores the leadership journeys of 24 United States immigrants from China, India and the Philippines using a phenomenological approach, primarily with semi-structured interviews. Experiences of 18 additional immigrant leaders published in popular media were also analyzed.

Data from the study reveals that Asian migrants' roads to leadership in U.S. organizations are heterogeneous and characterized by either linear or nonlinear, overlapping phases of leader development where migrant leaders overcome assimilation challenges and leverage their unique, individual human capital to intersect with organizational level capital in order to enhance their chances of success. Findings suggestive of a relationship between leveraged or suppressed cultural traits and leadership styles are also explored.

Drawing from theories rooted in behavioral economics and psychology, the study demonstrates that Asian leader pathways reflect an adaptation process that appears to interact in complex ways with individual, organizational, and societal resources available to them. Theoretical and practical implications are drawn and future research directions are recommended.

Introduction

Workplace demographics has been evolving markedly in the last two decades. Increasing cultural diversity brought about by rising immigration patterns in countries like the United States (U.S.) presents challenges to both leadership scholars and practitioners. To scholars, the challenge is to provide theoretical insights that go beyond traditional perspectives of cultural diversity and leader development. To leadership practitioners, the challenge is how to apply those insights in elevating their cultural competence to manage multiple cultures.

In multicultural organizations that tend to thrive in U.S. cities, minority immigrants landing leadership roles is an uncommon, yet growing, phenomenon. Public interest in immigrants has been recently amplified due to U.S. federal immigration reform, yet relatively few academic scholars have paid attention to leadership diversity and how immigrants make it to leadership positions. Extant theories and empirical studies draw from a narrow sample of leaders, usually white, heterosexual men (Chin Desormeaux & Sawyer, 2016).

The scarcity of scholarly attention on the diversity of leaders and followers in terms of culture has weakened the ability of research and theory to address some of the most provocative aspects of contemporary leadership such as the shaping of leaders' behavior by their dual identities as leaders and members of racial/ethnic groups (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Anecdotal stories of famous immigrants succeeding in business leadership make their way into practitioner magazines, but there is a scarcity of academic research that systematically examines the process by which members of immigrant and other minority groups land those leadership roles in the first place. Such paucity in research foregoes the opportunity to derive implications for leadership development theory and lessons for multicultural management practice from immigrant experiences.

To address these research gaps within the context of leadership development and cross-cultural management, I conducted a phenomenological study on a sample of minority immigrants focusing on three questions:

- How do U.S. minority immigrants experience the process of landing leadership roles?
- How do they cope with challenges in their leadership journeys?
- How do they leverage or suppress their cultural identities when leading organizations?

Three Asian immigrant groups – Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos – were sampled for the study since they belong to the top five immigrants in the U.S. in terms of population (Batalova & Fix, 2017). Exploring the phenomenon of Asian immigrants landing leadership roles in the U.S. can shed some light onto the common (or uncommon) characteristics of these individuals as well as their journeys into accessing leadership positions that are usually occupied by the dominant group. From an academic standpoint, an understanding of minority immigrant career paths, cultural characteristics, challenges and opportunities can enrich the research on effective leaders' skill sets and competencies required in an evolving workforce. From a practitioner standpoint, study findings can help influence corporate initiatives to leverage these skills and competencies to improve business performance. Moreover, data from this research can help inform government policy on immigration reform.

Immigration and Leadership Diversity

The benefits of immigration have been well-documented. A study by Ballmer and colleagues in 2011 reported that more than 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children. These companies generated combined revenues of \$4.2 trillion. A related study

by the White House Council of Economic Advisors in 2007 concluded that immigrants raised American gross domestic product by \$37 billion a year (West, 2010).

Even as far as two decades ago, a systematic review of literature reveals that immigrants already paid \$162 billion annually in federal, state, and local taxes (Moore, 1998). A study by the U.S. National Research Council concluded that the average immigrant paid nearly \$1,800 more in taxes than he or she cost in benefits (Smith & Edmonston, 1997). A review of studies on the economic impact of migration by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2014 also concluded that migrants contributed more in taxes and social contributions than they received in individual benefits. Research by the American Immigration Council found that new immigrants tend to come to the U.S. as young workers, when they are paying taxes and not drawing extensively on public pensions or health care (West, 2010). For example, 24.6 percent of adult immigrants are aged 25 to 34 and 28.3 percent are 35 to 44 years old. Only 4.4 percent are 65 years or older (Immigration Policy Center, 2005).

More recent studies of immigrant distribution by the Migration Policy Institute corroborate the Immigration Policy Center's findings in 2005. This Institute found that the majority of immigrants in 2016 were adults between the economically active ages of 20 and 54. From a collective standpoint, this distribution enhances the economic benefits of immigration (Smith & Edmonston, 1997). Young immigrants are more likely to be taxpayers than to require public services such as health care. They are also likely to become homeowners and to pay property taxes (Painter & Yu, 2008). Even undocumented immigrants pay sales taxes on purchases they make in the same way any consumer would. The Institute on Taxation & Economic Policy found that undocumented immigrants in the U.S collectively pay an estimated \$11.74 billion in state and local taxes a year (Gee, et al, 2017).

Beyond economic benefits, immigrant contributions to American science and sociocultural life are significant. A World Bank study revealed that the number of foreign graduate students in the U.S. raised patent applications by 4.7 percent, university patent grants by 5.3 percent and non-university patent grants by 6.7 percent (Chellaraj, et al, 2005). Nearly a quarter of international patents filed from the U.S. in 2006 were based on the work of foreign-born individuals living in America. Furthermore, over 25% of technology and engineering businesses launched in the U.S. between 1995 and 2005 had a foreign-born founder (Wadhwa, et al, 2007).

Evidence of the value of cultural diversity brought about by immigration reveals itself in U.S. cities where a more multicultural urban environment has been found to make U.S.-born citizens more productive (Ottaviano & Peri, 2006). Through the globalization of food, culture, and artistic expression, metropolitan areas with greater diversity reveal higher wages (West, 2010). Cities with diverse and creative residents tend to be more pleasant and productive places to live, in turn increasing innovation, home prices, the local economy, and civic pride (Florida, 2002).

Immigration has also increased the breadth and depth of the talent pool in America. The internationalization of arts and culture has led to an influx of talented directors and performers from abroad. Nine out of 17 Hollywood directors who have received multiple Academy Awards were foreign born (Hirschman, 2005). Increased diversity in athletic talents has also enriched U.S. sports industry. Nearly a third of major league baseball players were born outside the U.S. (Will, 2006). Recent immigration patterns in the U.S. reveal rising human capital. About 48 percent of immigrants who arrived in the U.S. between 2011 and 2015 were college graduates, compared to just 27 percent of arrivals a quarter-century earlier (Batalova & Fix, 2017). The

arrival of highly educated Asian immigrants, particularly from China, India, and the Philippines, drove the overall rise in human capital for immigrants arriving after 2010.

The intersection of this rising human capital and increasing diversity bodes well for development of leaders in U.S. organizations. Developing a diverse leadership pipeline can benefit companies in all sectors, according to a recent article in Harvard Business Review. Firms with the most ethnically diverse executive teams were 33 percent more likely to outperform their peers on profitability, and those with executive-level gender diversity worldwide had a 21 percent likelihood of outperforming their industry competitors (Pace, 2018).

The organizational benefits of diversity have been well documented since the early 1990s. For example, diversity researchers such Cox and Blake (1991) and Morrison (1992) conducted studies that explored the linkages between diversity leadership and organizational performance. Cox and Blake named six factors that support the link between diversity and organizational performance: (1) attracting and retaining the best available human talent, (2) enhanced marketing efforts, (3) cost savings, (4) higher creativity and innovation, (5) better problem solving, and (6) increased organizational flexibility. More recent studies demonstrate that greater board diversity in corporate governance increases firm value (Carter, et al, 2003) and leads to lower volatility and better performance (Bernile, et al, 2017).

Framing the Analysis of Immigrant Leader Experiences

Within the context of immigration's contributions to organizational and sociocultural diversity, the study anchors the analysis of immigrant leader experiences on the framework of phenomenology. A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several

individuals of their lived experiences of a *phenomenon* (Creswell, 2013) which, in this study, is immigrants landing leadership roles in America. Thus, using a phenomenological research design allows us to understand, through immigrant perspectives, how assimilation experiences, education, leader mentorship, cultural factors and other key events in their leadership journeys created meanings and influenced their behaviors and attitudes as leaders. With a focus on these dimensions of immigrant experiences, this study drew from theories rooted in behavioral economics and psychology to: (1) help organize thoughts and ideas about the phenomenon of minority immigrants landing leadership roles in the U.S., (2) generate themes in immigrant experiences and how these relate to their success in landing leader roles, and (3) provide a framework for deriving implications for leader development and multicultural management.

Push-pull theory of migration. One way to understand skilled migrants' motivations and sense of purpose is by the economic push-pull theory of migration (King, 2012) which is based on the idea of utility maximization in behavioral economics. The underlying assumption here is that immigrants seek out employment in another country based on perceived 'push' factors in their home country, such as lack of employment opportunities, societal and/or civil unrest. 'Pull' factors in the prospective host country include increased employment opportunities, financial reward and/or better overall living standards.

Changing identificational assimilation model (CIAM). This model highlights the observation that among new immigrants, processes of racial/ethnic self-identification appear to interact with socio-economic status in complex ways. Ethnic identification does not relate in a straightforward way to social and economic mobility. According to this model, stronger racial and ethnic identification can result from disparate mechanisms such as selective and symbolic. In Brown and Bean's (2006) explanation of this model, selective mechanisms are those immigrant

behaviors that lead them to become more strongly racial or ethnic in some ways more than others to facilitate economic achievement. Symbolic mechanisms are those behaviors that lead migrants to become more prominently but superficially racial or ethnic as a result of achieving success. In analyzing the behaviors of the participants in this study, these CIAM mechanisms have emerged more broadly as racial identification behaviors that went in either direction, meaning, immigrants strongly or superficially identified with the racial majority or their own ethnic origin depending on how they have progressed in socioeconomic status. Using this model, some immigrants successfully assimilated in U.S. society with symbolic ethnicity which emerged from those already largely incorporated economically. Such individuals, usually immigrants with higher education and economic status, tended to rely on co-ethnic networks and expressions of racial/ethnic solidarity less for instrumental reasons than for fulfillment of expressive, individualistic needs (Brown & Bean, 2006). On the other hand, those immigrants who have yet to achieve certain socioeconomic status might selectively identify with either the racial majority or their native ethnic groups to attain professional or personal success.

Stress theory and coping mechanism model. Challenges experienced by immigrants during the assimilation process can be viewed as forms of stressors to which they employ various coping mechanisms. The concept of coping strategies draws from stress theory which purports that coping is a mechanism by which individuals understand, reframe, or react to the experience of a stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The types of coping strategies used to manage stressors have often been classified into two broad categories: engagement strategies and disengagement strategies (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). Tobin, Holroyd, and Reynolds (1984) described engagement coping strategies as attempts to actively manage the stressful situation or event through problem-solving behaviors,

positive cognitive reframing, and emotional support seeking. Problem solving refers to behavioral and cognitive strategies designed to eliminate the source of stress by changing the situation. Cognitive restructuring refers to cognitive strategies that alter the meaning of the stressful event. Emotional support seeking refers to seeking emotional support from people including one's family and friends. Alternatively, disengagement coping is defined as attempts to remove oneself mentally, emotionally, and physically away from stressors, which include problem avoidance, self-criticism, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal (Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989). Problem avoidance refers to the denial of problems and avoidance of thoughts or actions about the stressful event. Self-criticism refers to blaming oneself for the situation and criticizing oneself or engaging in risk behaviors. Wishful thinking refers to cognitive strategies that include denial that an event occurred, reframing, or symbolically altering the situation. Social withdrawal refers to withdrawing from family and friends. The stress and coping model has framed much of the literature on racism and discrimination and mental health outcomes among populations of color (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000). Moreover, research on racial discrimination and Asian American populations has also provided empirical support for coping as a mediator (D. L. Lee & Ahn, 2011; R. M. Lee, Su, & Yoshida, 2005; Yoo & Lee, 2005). Specifically, extant research has shown that engagement coping strategies (e.g., positive cognitive reframing and emotional support seeking) were associated with improved functioning and reduced negative outcomes when used by Asian Americans in dealing with perceived discrimination and racism-related stress (Liang, Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2007; Yoo & Lee, 2005). Conversely, studies have shown that disengagement coping strategies (e.g., avoidant coping and emotion-focused coping) have been associated with

poor mental health outcomes among Asians (D. L. Lee & Ahn, 2011) dealing with acculturative stress, and perceived racial discrimination.

Theories in leadership diversity and cultural dimensions. The exploration of cultural traits and social identities that immigrant leaders leverage or suppress required a framework that draws from an understanding of cultural dimensions that influence or shape leadership styles and attitudes. There is a plethora of leadership models in literature. However, they have been criticized by diversity scholars such as Chin & Tremble (2014) as being too ethnocentric and not inclusive, with traits based on those already in positions of leadership and may be biased against those groups who have had poor access to leadership roles. For example, they suggested to reframe the Trait Theory of Leadership to shift to leader identity intersecting with dimensions of social identities instead of focusing solely on personal traits. Thus, the use of leadership theories such as Situational Leadership in this study has been reframed to emphasize adaptability of leaders across diverse contexts, as well as bicultural and cognitive flexibility as a function of acculturation, as suggested by Chin and Tremble.

Studies in cross-cultural leadership conducted by House, et al (2004) utilized a framework of implicit cultural beliefs, values and world views. Based on Hofstede's original cultural dimensions theory, House and colleagues' *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness* (GLOBE) studies found cultural variation in six *Culturally Endorsed Implicit Leadership Theory* (CLT) dimensions. These cultural dimensions were endorsed by leaders across 62 countries, including China and India, via a survey of 17,000 middle managers from 951 organizations in food processing, finance, and telecommunications industries. The six CLT dimensions are (1) charismatic/value-based, (2) team-oriented, (3) participative, (4) humane-oriented, (5) autonomous, and (6) self-protective. These CLT dimensions were based on the

results of GLOBE project's regional clusters that were grounded on nine cultural attributes – performance orientation, assertiveness, future orientation, humane orientation, institutional collectivism, in-group collectivism, gender egalitarianism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Javidan, et al, 2006).

In framing immigrants' cultural traits and leadership styles, this study drew from the GLOBE's CLT dimensions and two additional leadership theories that emerged from the data – Situational Leadership Theory and Servant Leadership Theory.

Situational Leadership is a contingency theory of leadership which posits that a successful leader looks at many factors, including the situation and the motivation and ability of followers, and adapts his or her management accordingly. Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard's original version of the theory maintains that successful leaders use four core leadership competencies – diagnose, adapt, communicate, and advance – to tailor their approach to the maturity of the followers and the situation, or details and environment, of the assignment. By appropriately matching one's leadership style to the situation and the maturity of followers, a leader should be able to foster growth in followers, strengthen working relationships, and successfully manage their team (Campbell, 2015).

Servant leadership is a term used to describe a philosophy and a series of practices based on the concept of the servant-leader, who focuses on being a servant first. Emphasizing the needs of others, servant-leaders in an organization support their team members' interests ahead of their own. The ten characteristics of servant-leaders include listening, empathy, healing (creating environments that support the physical and mental health of team members by ensuring that they have the knowledge and tools necessary to work effectively), self-awareness, persuasion, conceptualization (striving to see the big picture and set goals in developing strategies for their

teams), foresight, stewardship (being accountable for their teams), commitment to people's growth, and building a sense of community (Mazzei, 2015).

Methodology

A phenomenological approach of distilling the essence and common meaning of the experiences of a group of people addresses the research questions well. To explore the phenomenon of minority immigrants landing leadership roles in U.S. organizations, the study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data: (1) phenomenological research interviews of a sample of immigrants from China, India, and the Philippines who became leaders in U.S. companies, and (2) a systematic survey of literature, including academic journals, practitioner magazines, news and social media that featured experiences and biographies of minority immigrant leaders.

Data Collection and Selection of Study Participants. The literature and media survey utilized query words such as “immigrant leaders,” “immigrant leader interviews,” “immigrant managers,” “successful immigrants,” “famous immigrants in America,” AND “immigrant stories.” The search revealed information on 18 immigrant leaders whose experiences and biographies are published in business industry magazines, social media, and respected news media outlets. Table 1 below lists the business magazines, social and news media that yielded positive results for the search of immigrant leaders.

 Insert Table 1 about here.

For the phenomenological interviews, a purposive sampling of participants representing each of the three countries included the following criteria: (1) Adult individual born in China, India, or the Philippines, (2) who lived and worked in the United States, and (3) held a position that

supervised at least one direct report or oversaw at least one manager who is responsible for at least one organizational function. Such position included the ownership of a business enterprise in which the owner has at least one employee. Careful attention was paid to the participants' size of organizations to ensure that about half of them belonged to either a small organization (less than 100 employees or under \$10 million in annual revenues) or a large organization (more than 1,000 employees or over \$1 billion in annual revenues).

Recruitment of study participants was conducted primarily by word-of-mouth and email correspondence to my professional (hospital, pharmaceutical and health insurance industries though sampling was not limited to these industries) and academic networks. A snowball technique in recruitment was also employed where recruited participants were asked if they knew anyone who would be willing to participate in the study. Participants were recruited until theoretical data saturation point was reached with five Chinese, seven Indian, and twelve Filipino immigrants. Table 2 below shows a summary of the recruitment profile. The study underwent a review and approval process by an institutional review board to ensure that provisions were in place to ensure the safety and dignity of the research participants.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Participant interviews followed Seidman's (2013) three-series qualitative research interview structure. Each participant was interviewed approximately 90 to 120 minutes, with every session consisting of three parts, each lasting about 30 to 40 minutes. Interview questions included, but were not limited to, the following:

Part one (demographics and early life history): What was the highest ranked leadership position you have had? What is the cultural composition of your organization? Tell me about your childhood including where you lived and went to school. Who were your role models? What led you to immigrate to the U.S.? What was it like when you first came to live and work in the U.S.? How did people treat you? What were your expectations coming to the U.S.?

Part two (contemporary experience, particularly leadership): What led you to your first leadership experience? What is the process of becoming a leader like as an immigrant in this country? What factors facilitated your development as a leader? Describe the opportunities and challenges you faced as an immigrant leader? How did you get to your next leadership role? How would you describe your leadership style? How would you describe the role of mentors in your development as leader? What has surprised you the most in your U.S. experience?

Part three (personal reflection on culture, meaning of experiences): As a member of the Chinese/Indian/Filipino community, what parts of your culture are you most proud of? Not proud of? Describe the personal and cultural traits that you leveraged or suppressed in your leadership experience. What lessons have you learned from your leadership experience in America? What factors led to your successes/failures? What advantages do you bring as an immigrant leader?

Analytic Procedures. Adapting from Creswell's (2013) phenomenological research procedures and Saldana's (2016) coding methods, meaningful information from the immigrants' experiences was distilled through an iterative process of inquiry, verification, and validation. Inquiry and verification involved bracketing of significant statements from 516 pages of interview transcripts and published biographies, coding and analyzing those statements, analytic memoing, and repeated verification of data from the original transcripts. Validation of the

analysis comprised the clustering of ideas and the categorization of concepts into themes within the context of established theoretical frameworks as well as findings in empirical studies published in literature.

Data on a total of 42 immigrant leaders were analyzed initially as distinct data sets – (1) the first coming from information in published interviews and biographies of 18 known immigrant leaders, and (2) the second data set from transcripts of my interviews of 24 study participant leaders. I coded each data set separately to isolate the effects of the targeted interview questions I developed in contrast to the questions in published interviews which targeted a different purpose. Coding, in this study, followed Saldana's (2016) definition of a code which is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion" of the interview transcripts or published biographical articles.

Prior to coding, I read through publications and interview transcripts at least once to obtain an overall feeling of the responses given by the participants. A blend of provisional and holistic coding techniques were used in the first cycle of coding where pre-determined categories were utilized to grasp basic themes from the immigrants' experiences by absorbing them as a whole rather than analyzing them line by line. The second cycle employed pattern and focused coding to further group the summaries from the first cycle into smaller clusters of themes. The two coding cycles facilitated the emergence of themes and clusters which included education, assimilation, leader mentors, key events in career progression, cultural traits, and leadership styles.

Subsequently, analytic memos – reflections on emergent themes -- were derived from the results of the first and second cycles of coding. Data was then analyzed with consideration for previous

empirical studies and through the lens of extant theories such as assimilation and cross-cultural leadership theories. Figure 1 depicts the flow of research analysis and outcomes.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Key Findings

Road to Leadership. The Asian immigrant journeys to leadership in U.S. organizations were complex and heterogeneous. No common formula to achieving success was found.

However, the leaders' pathways can be broadly categorized into two:

- Linear path leaders – individuals who followed sequential career paths from individual contributor to leader. They took on roles of progressively increasing scopes of responsibility. For example, a number of immigrants started as individual contributors, became project managers, then accepted formal manager roles with direct reports, and subsequently got promoted to Associate Directors, Directors, and so on.
- Nonlinear path leaders – those who took broad, lateral swings in their career. They sought or accepted individual contributor roles after having experienced managerial positions, and then moved on to further leadership roles. As an example, one of the immigrants who had been a Director in her previous facility pivoted to an individual contributor role by becoming a consultant for a few years. Eventually, she became VP of her current organization.

In addition to these categories of leader pathways, seven dominant themes surfaced:

(1) *Pursuit of a better life.* As the Push-Pull Theory of Migration had predicted, the immigrants left their native countries in search of better living and employment opportunities which they found in America. Belonging to low- and middle-income families in their native lands, the migrants' 'push' factors included lack of employment opportunities and adverse socio-political climate in their originating countries. 'Pull' factors consisted of promising socioeconomic status, better education, and employment opportunities in the U.S. Leaving their home countries, they overcame adversity, found employment and became leaders in their organizations in America.

(2) *Assimilation.* The Asian immigrants faced common challenges that included language and communication barriers, adjustment to American social norms, initial financial hardship, native-born Americans' lack of awareness of immigrant cultures, and bias and discrimination. Table 3 summarizes these assimilation challenges.

Insert Table 3 about here.

Language and communication barriers were prevalent especially among Chinese and Indians. Challenges ranged from misunderstanding due to accent, difficulty with American idiomatic expressions, speaking and comprehending English, to maintaining conversations when there were "no common talking points". Therefore, developing English proficiency, especially speaking and listening skills, was an important factor that the immigrants worked on in order to facilitate their assimilation process.

Compounding to the communication challenges was the initial financial hardship many of them had to endure. A Chinese study participant recalled living in a run-down Texas apartment with a bullet hole in the window when he first moved to the U.S. He later moved to a better location

when he found a job as a software engineer in a fashion retailer. He worked his way up to become an information technology director in that fashion retail company and eventually became CEO of his own garment store. Similarly, a Filipino study participant who moved to the U.S. primarily to gain access to medicine for her twins' rare blood disorder expressed financial hardship in the beginning. She said, "*Initially, we were living on savings. When I was offered my first job as program manager, my salary was just enough to live by. My husband did not work at that time to oversee the kids.*" She eventually became director in one of America's most prestigious universities.

Beyond language, social norm adjustment, and financial problems, 42 percent of the study participants experienced a range of discrimination events, from subtle to obvious. One of the most blatant events was one experienced by a female Indian immigrant where she and her husband were booted out of a Florida restaurant because her husband was wearing a turban. Another obvious discriminatory treatment was experienced by a female Filipino immigrant who was denied a legal job in a federal organization despite her topnotch qualifications (top 10 percent of her graduating class, former editor of her university law journal, and membership in honor society for law graduates). When she sued the employer for racial, gender, and national origin discrimination, it took two years for her lawsuit to be heard. Fortunately, she won the case and was awarded three years of back pay.

Despite experiencing discrimination, financial obstacles, language barriers, native born Americans' lack of awareness of immigrant cultures, and awkward social situations, the immigrants overcame their challenges and evolved with U.S. society. Many of them expressed a deep appreciation of the opportunities that America has afforded them. During the interview, the

study participants named factors that helped them cope with challenges in their assimilation process and leadership journey. These are discussed under the section on Coping Mechanisms.

(3) High level qualifications. Over 70 percent of the immigrants had advanced education, some of them with two to three Master's degrees and several with Doctorate degrees. As a point of reference, only 13 percent of individuals who are over the age of 25 in the U.S. have a graduate degree (Bureau of Census, 2017). In addition, close to 60 percent of the study participants had professional work or supervisory experience in their native countries prior to migrating to the U.S. For example, a Chinese participant who became Vice-President (VP) of one of America's largest banks had a Master's degree in Aircraft Manufacturing & Engineering and two years of professional experience in China prior to her first U.S. job as a software engineer. Filipino immigrant who became Deputy Division Chief in a U.S.-based global monetary organization had been a Division Chief at the national economic development authority in her country, a senior lecturer in public economics in a top Philippine university, and over 10 years of experience as practicing macroeconomist. An Indian immigrant who became Chief Operations Officer of an electronics company had a Master's degree in biochemistry and a banking job experience in her country. She had to pursue an MBA and join an internship program to start her career in the U.S.

(4) U.S career entry. Despite their advanced degrees and prior supervisory experience, all study participants started their careers in the U.S. at entry level, individual contributor roles. The fields of entry were varied. Half of the study participants were trained in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The other half were in non-STEM fields such as education, economics, humanities, law, accounting and business. Over half of the STEM-trained leaders went on to lead their companies at the VP or Chief Executive level. The non-STEM trained leaders were high achievers themselves. Two of them head their own companies, one

became deputy division chief of one of the world's leading global monetary organizations, another became director of a top U.S. academic institution, two were elected city councilors, one became a City Mayor, and the rest lead their organizations at the VP, Senior Director, Director, or Manager level.

(5) *Value demonstration.* The immigrants' landed their first leadership roles in America after cycling through a few individual contributor roles in one to five companies within an average time of seven years (range = 1 to 16 years). They either sought or exposed themselves to highly visible projects which gave them the opportunity to work with teams, lead people, and successfully deliver on project goals. In all instances, promotions to leadership positions occurred after visible contributions and demonstration of impact to their respective organizations.

(6) *Mentorship.* Majority of the immigrants, especially those who became leaders in large organizations, expressed the important role of mentors and supportive managers in facilitating their success. Their mentors provided opportunities and encouragement to showcase the migrants' talents and skills. Significant statements that the participants gave to describe their mentors included individuals who "*impressed certain values that inspired them to form their own company*", "*cared about the team members' families*", "*saw people for what they bring to the table*", "*told them to believe in themselves*", "*taught them to think outside the box*", and "*pushed them to believe that there was much more in their capabilities*".

(7) *Risk taking and adaptation.* The immigrant leaders tended to take risks and go beyond their comfort zones. For example, a study participant from the Philippines summoned the courage to teach in a college in his early years in America, despite being told that U.S. students could be challenging. He knew that, while teachers in the Philippines were regarded as the authority, the

teachers' level of influence in the U.S. could be a bit attenuated as students in the latter country were more assertive. Still he went out of his comfort zone and succeeded. He later established his own law firm and got elected Council President in a northern U.S. city. Similarly, a study participant from China took a calculated risk in buying a wholesale store while he was working full-time at a large fashion retailer in Texas. He worked nights at the store which he gradually built into his own garment business. When he saw that the odds for career progression at his employer were not working in his favor, he left his job and focused on his own company.

Coping mechanisms. A distinguishing characteristic of the Asian immigrant leaders who participated in this study is their sole use of strategies that Stress and Coping Theory (Tobin, Holroyd, and Reynolds, 1984) would view as positive engagement mechanisms such as emotional support seeking, cognitive reframing, and problem-solving. None of them expressed the use of disengagement mechanisms. In coping with assimilation challenges, a top resource for emotional support that the immigrants relied on was their family and relatives in America. Whether it's a spouse, parent, sibling, aunt, or uncle who was already assimilated in America, the presence of family support unequivocally promoted faster assimilation for the immigrant leaders. Many participants also described positive cognitive reframing to help them assimilate, as exemplified by one Filipino immigrant leader's statement:

“We conditioned our minds to be ready for the transition – embrace the fact that this was a different country with its own culture, work environment, and rules. I told my husband that we should be prepared to start from ground zero. We conditioned ourselves to understand that we were going to be second class citizens.”

An Indian leader in an electronics company said, “I had to mold myself to match Americans rather than expect them to be molding themselves to me or my needs.” A Chinese leader in a

pharmaceutical explained this mindset as “having the curiosity to learn and melt into the American culture.”

Other immigrants elected problem-solving behaviors such as connecting with the Caucasian majority and engaging in civic and cultural activities in order to transition faster into their lives in America. A Chinese study participant, who later became a Senior Director in a biotech company, said that he purposely joined American majority student groups in his university in order to blend in and “do things that locals did.” A Filipino participant who became City Mayor actively immersed himself in socio-political issues – the Vietnam War, Watergate hearings during former U.S. President Nixon’s administration, etc. -- while participating in Filipino-American associations in order to keep himself grounded with his cultural roots while flourishing in the wider community. An Indian leader of a technology firm spoke about connecting with the American majority:

“I came here with the expectation of taking on the responsibility of reaching out and making connections with people. We never isolated ourselves from the community and we came in with the notion that we're going to intermingle and be part of this society.”

At the individual level, the immigrants’ use of only positive engagement mechanisms in coping with challenges and the adaptive way they leveraged both ethnic and American cultures to lead their organizations increased their chances of success. Additionally, their adaptive utilization of organizational capital (mentorship and project opportunities) and societal resources (cultural and civic networks) helped them in landing leadership positions. This adaptive capability is the ability to flexibly use available tools depending on the situation and the emotional intelligence to know when to leverage or suppress different cultural aspects. Such capability, in combination

with advanced education and strong work ethic, appears to be a key ingredient in the Asian immigrants' successful ascent to leadership and demonstrates a lesson to other groups as well.

Cultural Traits. The top cultural traits leveraged by the Asian immigrants when leading their organizations included family orientation, close-knit community, strong work ethic, and the value of integrity. Top cultural traits suppressed were gender inequality (especially bias against women), lack of assertiveness, conflict avoidance, and hierarchical tendencies. Using the GLOBE's CLT dimensions, servant leadership and situational leadership as bases for leadership style categories, the Asian immigrants' top preferred leadership styles included servant leadership, charismatic/value-based, participative, and humane-oriented. Among the Chinese, servant leadership style was particularly strong, while participative leadership was a top choice among Indians. For Filipinos, it was a toss-up between charismatic/value-based and servant leadership styles. The combination of these leadership styles and cultural traits reflects collectivist attitudes that exist in Asian cultures. For example, a Filipino immigrant who leads a large U.S. federal health care network integrates family orientation in the way he manages his team:

"I treat the folks that work closely with me as family members. I care for what happens to their lives because if I don't, then they will not give 110% of themselves to our vision. That has helped me in achieving what I have achieved so far and in maintaining that culture in which we are working together. We're watching out for each other".

Furthermore, collectivist tendency was reflected primarily in leaders' statements about having a sense of belongingness to their community – a group of individuals who are "willing to help and stick out for each other" (Filipino '*bayanihan spirit*'), "who come together from different places and have a 'molding' through cultural, religious and social events" (Indian). They value respect

for and within the family, and “have close ties with the community that translate into respect for society” (Chinese).

When asked about suppressed cultural traits, gender inequality surfaced strongly, especially among female Indian leaders. One study participant, a Chief Operations Officer (COO) of a biotech company, expressed how she tries to address the gender bias that originates from her ethnic culture.

“There is still the mentality of prioritizing males over females. At dinner, kids eat first, guys eat second, and women eat last. Indian women are brought up to be dependent on their husbands. I have a lot of conversations with females of the younger generation. I tell them to be independent, learn to be self-sustaining and have a voice at the table.”

In her career so far, she felt that she had to work two to three times harder just to have a seat at the table and be taken seriously because she is a woman and an immigrant. *“I work so hard to know every data so well that I could really stand behind it, and people could take me seriously and respect me.”* She organized a diversity program for high potential individuals to help build skill sets for the next generation of leaders.

Differences existed in how linear and nonlinear leaders viewed other cultural traits and preferred leadership styles not ranked in the top four. On aggregate, the three Asian groups shared similar preferred leadership styles including servant leadership, charismatic/value-based, participative, and humane-oriented. However, situational leadership was a preferred style expressed by nonlinear leaders but not by linear leaders. Due to limitations inherent in the research design and sample size, the degree and direction of the relationship between cultural traits and leadership styles could not be established. Such relationship could be an informative area of future research.

Discussion and Analysis

Reflecting on the sociocultural and assimilative aspects of the immigrants' leadership journeys, certain individual and organizational level factors reveal clues to the type of effective skill sets and qualifications that multicultural organizations might require in order to effectively manage diverse groups. Organizational level factors such as mentorship programs and visible projects gave immigrants the opportunity to develop skills in leading people and managing projects. Individual level factors such as advanced graduate education, strong work ethic, risk-taking, cultural adaptability, and relevant international work experience also contributed to successful leader development among Asian migrants. Cognitively, harnessing these factors meant that the immigrants had to understand their own ethnicity while learning the American culture and use what they learned to spur their dreams. Behaviorally, using these factors to their advantage also meant that they had to take specific actions such as finding a mentor, mastering the "expression of ideas in English", focusing on project goals, and establishing a consistent reputation of delivering excellent results.

Synergies between the two levels of factors seemed to exist. For example, if the immigrant was provided an opportunity to participate in a highly visible organizational project (organizational level factor), then that person likely leveraged his or her unique set of immigrant human capital (individual level factors such as advanced degrees, strong work ethic, relevant experiences from another country, a different cultural perspective, and risk-taking and adaptation) in order to demonstrate his or her value to the organization. The chance of succeeding appeared to be enhanced by the presence of mentors and supportive managers.

A key element in the migrants' successful leveraging of the factor synergies was the development of adaptive capability. This element of adaptation became evident when the

experiences were analyzed along the lines of linear path leaders versus nonlinear ones.

Differences existed in the ways the linear path leaders adapted to assimilation challenges when compared to those of nonlinear leaders.

Nonlinear leaders, facing relatively more bias and discrimination challenges than linear leaders, tended to use more problem-solving strategies in coping with assimilation challenges. Linear leaders, facing more language and social norm types of difficulties, tended to use more emotional support mechanisms. The graphs in Figure 2 (Use of Stress Coping Theory Mechanisms: Linear vs. Nonlinear Paths), depicting near-mirror images of each other, demonstrate these differences in the type of coping strategies that the linear and nonlinear path leaders utilized. Nonlinear leaders also used slightly higher levels of cognitive reframing mechanisms than the linear leaders did.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

When viewed through the lens of Changing Identificational Assimilation Model (Brown and Bean, 2006) the top factors facilitating the immigrants' assimilation process could be classified as either selective or symbolic mechanisms. Selective mechanisms are those strategies where the immigrants identified with either their ethnic group or the racial majority in order to facilitate socioeconomic achievement. For example, one of the Chinese immigrants interviewed in the study found himself immersing with his Caucasian colleagues in Texas when he needed sales people to sell products for his startup company. At the same time, he also identified with his Chinese networks as he needed them to obtain supplies from China.

On the other hand, symbolic mechanisms are strategies in which immigrants relied on co-ethnic networks and expressions of racial/ethnic solidarity less for instrumental reasons than for fulfillment of expressive, individualistic needs. As an example, an Indian study participant whose parents had successfully established business in a Philadelphia suburb assimilated with her Indian neighbors in their local community church by virtue of her parents' religious membership. For her, racial or ethnic identification had become relatively optional.

Figure 3 depicts that the linear path leaders used symbolic mechanisms in their assimilation process more than selective actions. On the other hand, nonlinear path leaders were more selective than symbolic in their coping mechanisms.

Insert Figure 3 about here.

The selective choice for nonlinear path implies that this group of leaders took actions which had an instrumental meaning in their successful landing of leadership roles. Examples of these actions included networking with ethnic and civic organizations, filing a discrimination lawsuit, and other problem-solving strategies. In contrast, the actions adopted by the linear path leaders took a more symbolic meaning to them than being instrumental to their success. Examples of such actions were connecting with the majority, joining student associations, and accepting positive cultural stereotypes (e.g. Asians are good in math).

Additionally, advanced education and mentorship both appeared to play a role in the path chosen. Those who took a linear path possessed more advanced degrees (78 percent versus 60 percent) than those who followed a nonlinear path. About 86 percent of those who were on a linear career ascent described mentors at work, compared to 70 percent of those who took a

nonlinear path. These experiential differentiation among linear and nonlinear path leaders points to an adaptation process at work, a concept that is understudied in leadership literature.

Leadership development literature has traditionally focused on intra- and inter-personal content, and process issues such as personality development, social mechanisms, and feedback, respectively (Day, et al, 2014). While this study does not refute these issues, its data suggests that two additional dimensions are at play in leader development – (1) an adaptation process that occurs along the leadership development path and (2) the availability of resources (individual coping mechanisms and other human capital factors, organizational support such as mentorship programs, and societal resources like civic-cultural organizations). The interaction of these dimensions appears to facilitate or moderate an immigrant's track to leadership.

Risk taking behavior, a component of adaptive capability, complemented the availability of organizational factors such as mentors, managerial support, and project opportunities in honing the migrants' leadership skills. For example, an Indian study participant took a risky move of acknowledging to his upper management team that his department's customer contact technology system duplicated another system within the company. His authenticity and risk-taking earned the trust of a supportive leadership team who subsequently awarded him with higher level responsibilities within the organization.

Further complementing risk taking and adaptive capabilities are various cultural experiences that inherently imbue immigrants with a different perspective that is highly valuable in creating diversity. In turn, diversity has been linked to promoting creativity and innovation in organizations (Cox, 1993; Nemeth, 1986; Triandis, Hall & Ewen, 1965). Thus, multicultural

organizations that aim to compete in an evolving global marketplace might benefit in seeking adaptive capability and bicultural flexibility in leaders they hire and develop.

At an organizational level, companies can leverage this adaptive capability when hiring, selecting, and developing their leaders. Immigrants' use of positive engagement mechanisms in coping with challenges is an important element that can be incorporated in leader development training programs. It would benefit companies to harness the information on migrant's cultural traits and preferred leadership styles to match strategic and operational contexts within their organization's cultures. Specifically, the knowledge gained from this study about Asian cultural traits that are leveraged and suppressed is important information that companies can use to enhance cultural competence among their leaders as well as followers.

Conclusions and Implications

The underlying theme that wove together the Asian immigrant experiences is the process of adaptation. In this process, migrants employed their individual human capital (advanced degrees, international job experiences, differing cultural perspectives) as well as available organizational capital (mentorship, project opportunities) and societal resources (cultural networks, civic organizations) in an adaptive way in order to meet the challenges in their leadership journeys.

Adaptive capability, cognitive and bicultural flexibility as a result of acculturation, advanced graduate degrees, strong work ethic, smart use of positive engagement coping mechanisms, and ethos for demonstrating tangible contributions – qualities found among Asian immigrants – are ingredients of human capital that companies can harness to diversify and strengthen their organizational capital in order to compete in an evolving, global marketplace. Aspiring managers

can glean lessons from the same qualities in modelling behaviors for their own leadership development.

The finding that the migrant leaders manifested only positive engagement mechanisms to cope with assimilation challenges and not a single one of them expressed any disengagement mechanism is one of the greatest lessons gleaned from the immigrants' journeys. Positive cognitive reframing is an especially powerful mechanism. Starting with an appropriate mindset in dealing with the socio-economic realities of living and working in a new environment has a positive impact on a migrant's experience, which can then lead to downstream positive outcomes in the leadership journey. Such a strategy is also applicable to non-migrant workers in coping with new work environment challenges.

Investing in a graduate degree is another strategy that future leaders can implement to enhance their chances of career success. A Master's or a Doctorate degree, together with a strong work ethic and an appropriate cognitive framing, enriches leaders' human capital which they can use to compete in an increasingly competitive workforce. But an additional layer to immigrants' human capital that separates them from non-migrants is their accumulated experiences and cultural endowments from their originating native countries. These endowments give them a different perspective that puts them in a position to contribute and potentially enhance the diversity of the organizations that they join, thus promoting innovation and creativity. Moreover, the lessons they learn from their assimilative process where they imbibe the "best of both worlds" further contribute to the uniqueness of the immigrant's human capital. This study highlighted the fact that beyond the immigrants' human capital, they had to visibly demonstrate tangible contributions to organizations in order for them to get ahead in their careers. Value

contributions to the organization, however, applies not just to immigrants but to all aspiring leaders.

Individual human capital, no matter how strong, may not be sufficient to face challenges in assimilation and the leadership journey. This study has revealed the strong role of mentorship, family support, community networks and student or professional associations – organizational and societal resources -- have contributed immensely in complementing the migrants' individual human capital to achieve success. The study participants confirmed that family and relatives who have already established domicile in America helped them tremendously in the early phases of their assimilation process. This has important implications to government policies that separate migrants from their families. Notwithstanding the human and social impact of such policies, this study suggests that the physical presence of family and their support provide positive outcomes to immigrant populations, a part of America's or any country's human resources who are potential organizational leaders of the future.

From an academic standpoint, this study contributes to leadership and diversity literature by extending the current thinking on process issues in leader development. Research in leadership development over the last 25 years have addressed process factors such as 360-degree feedback, leadership training, job assignments and action learning from others (Day, et al, 2014). However, none of the studies or theories specifically investigate the role of adaptation and assimilation in shaping the rate or pattern of development. This study has revealed that the adaptation process that occurs during assimilation and/or the journey to leadership may have an important relationship with human capital, organizational resources, and societal factors in immigrant

leaders' development. The interaction of the adaptation process and the available resources may be what helps shape the adaptive capability of a leader. Further exploration of this relationship between process and resources in future studies might prove fruitful for both theory and practice.

Future research

This study has assumed that leveraged or suppressed cultural traits have a relationship with leadership styles. However, such assumption may not hold true under all organizational contexts. Previous cross-cultural leadership studies have tested such assumptions using observable cultural dimensions at the societal or national level. A future research direction could be to investigate the relationship between leadership styles and cultural dimensions at a more proximal level such as the organization. First, researchers need to address the question: What is the relationship between leveraged/suppressed cultural traits 'inherited' by leaders at a societal/national level and their leadership styles? Then they need to address a related question: In what organizational cultural contexts are these leadership styles most effective?

On the topic of immigrant assimilation, previous assimilation theories have focused on the socioeconomic and cultural aspects of migrant assimilation into the host society. This study has posited that integrating psychosocial coping mechanisms with socioeconomic and cultural dimensions helps researchers and practitioners to better understand how leader behaviors are shaped as a result. This proposal of an integrated approach needs to be methodically and systematically tested to hold theoretical ground. For example, none of the immigrant leaders in this study confessed to having used disengagement strategies. While such a finding associates these leaders with positive psychosocial coping mechanisms in facing socioeconomic and cultural assimilation challenges, future research needs to systematically examine the rationale,

compare behaviors with a control group, and develop alternative interview questions to explicitly explore the presence or absence of disengagement coping among different groups.

Moreover, this study has found the median and range of time it takes for Asian immigrants to become leaders in the U.S. While previous studies have investigated time as a variable in the temporal, dynamic, emergent, and recursive aspects of leadership, none of these studies have explicitly provided a benchmark for the optimal duration of leadership development. Studying differences in duration among various groups of leaders and the impact of such duration (along with other factors) on leader effectiveness could be beneficial for practitioners.

Most importantly, investigating further the effect of leaders' adaptation process to their leadership development, including teasing out the degree and direction of relationships between cultures, available organizational and societal resources, and leadership styles may be a fruitful path for future leadership development research.

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Tables

Table 1. Media Sources of Immigrant Leader Information

Source Type	Description	Name
Business industry magazine	Publications intended for business and industry audiences; unlike academic journals, they are not peer-reviewed or refereed but typically have editorial staff that curate the content.	Fortune magazine Forbes magazine
Social media	Internet-based tools and platforms that increase and enhance information sharing through the transfer of text, photos, audio, and video among social groups that now increasingly include business practitioners, professionals, and academics alike.	You Tube Linked In Business Saga
News media	Outlets that provide news and information including newspapers and more recently the Internet.	The New York Times USA Today

Table 2. Study Participant Recruitment Summary

Nationalities	Organizational Size		TOTAL
	Small	Large	
Chinese	1	4	5
Filipinos	5	7	12
Indians	4	3	7
TOTAL	10	14	24

Table 3. Summary of Assimilation Challenges

Type of Challenges	Count of Leaders Who Expressed Challenges			
	Chinese n = 5	Filipinos n = 12	Indians n = 7	Total n = 24
Language and communication barriers	4	1	4	9
Native-born Americans' lack of awareness of immigrant culture	1	4	3	8

Initial financial hardship	1	5	1	7
Adjustment to social norms	1	3	5	9
Bias and discrimination	1	6	3	10

Figures

Figure 1. Schematic of Research Analytic Procedures & Outcomes

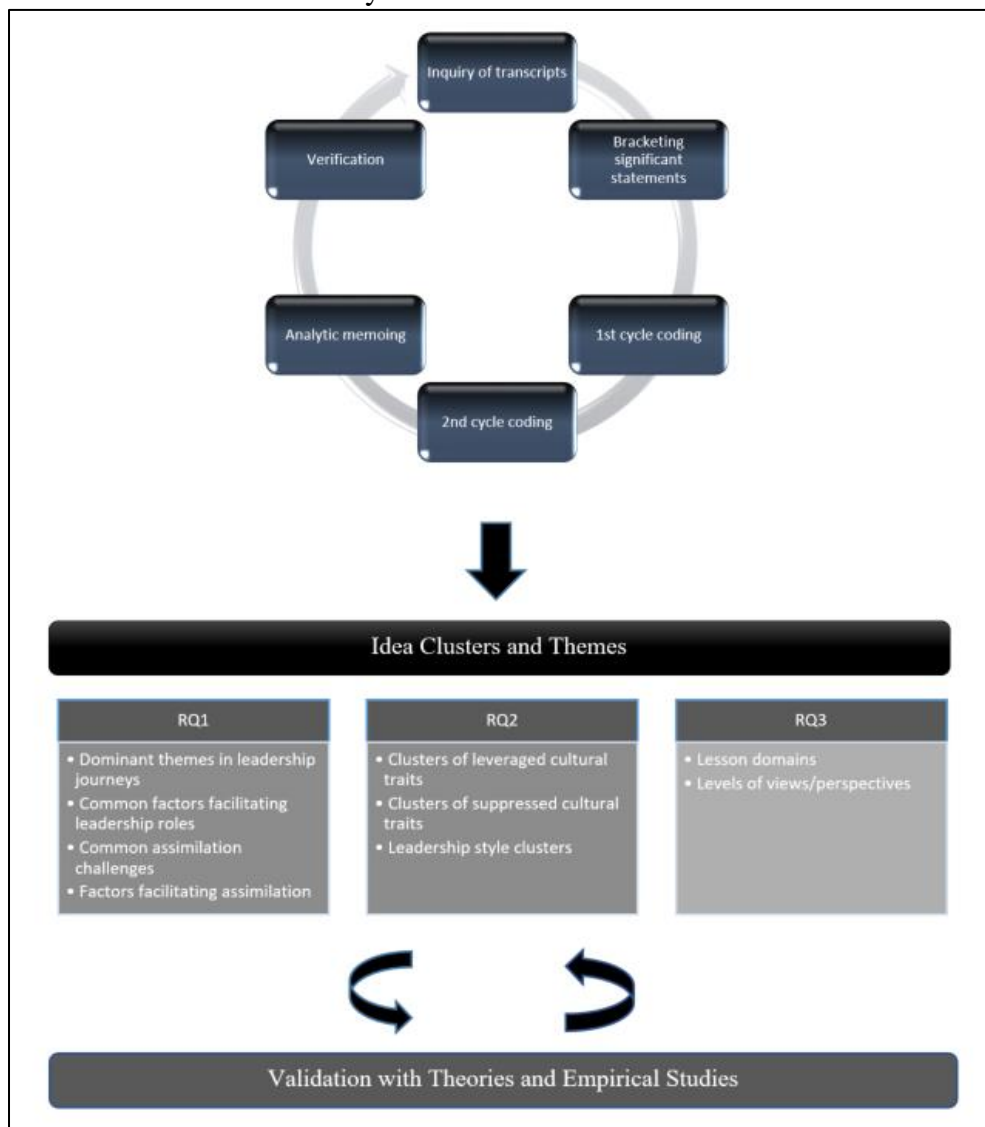


Figure 2. Use of Stress Coping Theory Mechanisms: Linear vs. Nonlinear Paths

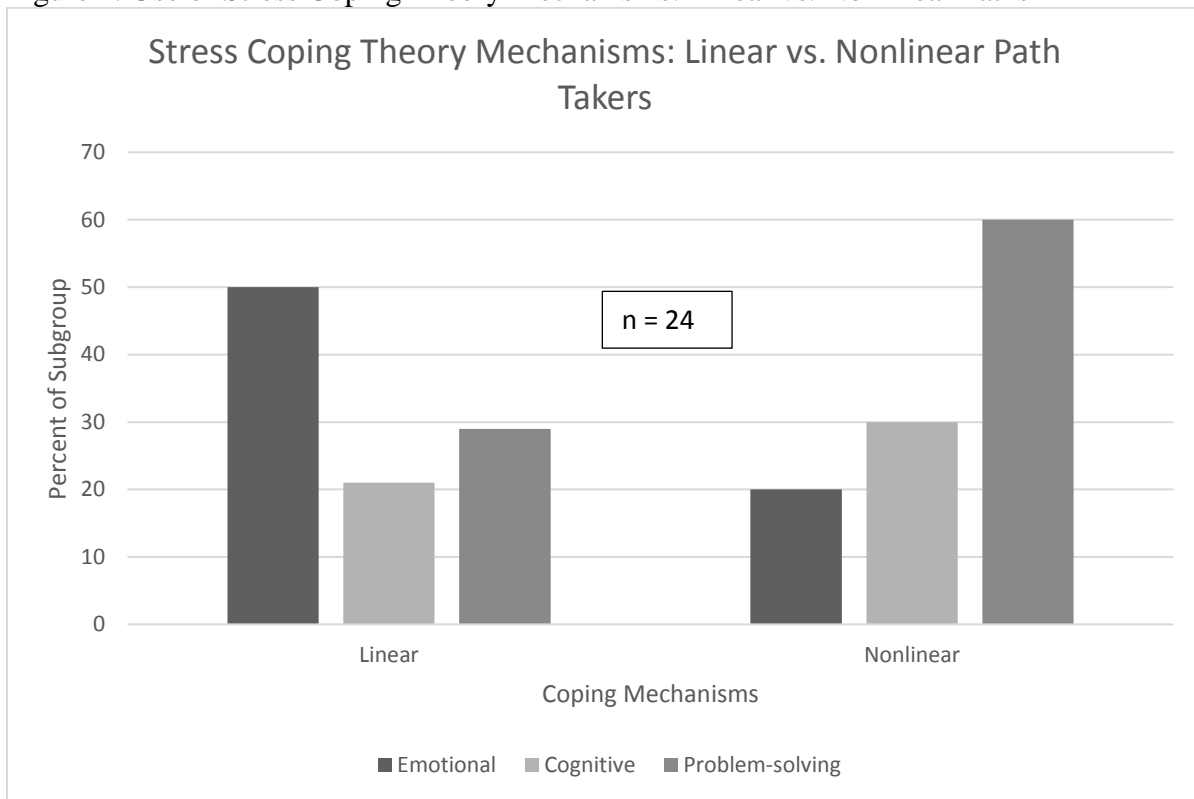


Figure 3. Use of CIAM Mechanisms: Linear vs. Nonlinear Paths

