

Communications

Recently Pan Suk Kim and Gregory Lewis (1994) documented statistical disparities between Asian Americans and nonminority whites in the federal service. They imply that anti-Asian discrimination is a widespread problem, but the data need not necessarily be interpreted in that manner. This commentary elaborates alternative hypotheses based on the concepts of educational devaluation and occupational choice.

This critique of Kim and Lewis's recent article may also have implications for the study of discrimination against other marginalized groups, such as women, African Americans, and Hispanics. Scholars comparing groups quantitatively should take care not to make a priori assumptions that unexplained disparities necessarily stem from discrimination. Statistics can be most helpful in detecting discrimination when they complement data from more direct sources, such as surveys, focus groups, case studies, grievance records, and court documents.

Diminishing Returns from Statistical Analysis: Detecting Discrimination in Public Employment

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In their article, "Asian Americans in the Public Service: Success, Diversity, and Discrimination," Kim and Lewis (1994) note that Asian Americans experience discrimination within the federal service, suggest that the problem is pervasive and serious, and propose remedies. This writer has personally witnessed at least two incidents of employment discrimination against Asian Americans. Neither of these episodes involved federal personnel, but it seems reasonable that the federal service is not totally immune to prejudices evident elsewhere in society. However, Kim and Lewis's statistics shed little light on such discrimination's pervasiveness. Anti-Asian discrimination may not be as important a federal phenomena as their article concludes. Kim and Lewis's lucidly presented statistics can be interpreted in varying ways. The alternative interpretation which follows may also have implications for identification of discrimination against other groups, such as women, Hispanics, and African Americans.

Using 1990 and 1992 statistics, Kim and Lewis describe differences between Asian Americans and nonminority whites. Asian Americans make up 2.6 percent of the civilian work force but constitute less

than 1 percent of municipal officials. There are almost no Asian American mayors or city/county managers. Only .9 percent of the Senior Executive Service is Asian, while 3.5 percent of the federal work force and 4.3 percent of the postal service are Asian (286-287). Twenty-seven percent of white men serving the federal government are supervisors, but only 15 percent of Asian American men hold such positions. Twelve percent of white women in the federal service hold supervisory positions, compared to only 7 percent of Asian women (288-289).

Kim and Lewis also discovered grade discrepancies between Asian Americans and whites. "Asian men [in federal service] tended to be .03 of a grade lower than white men with the same amount of education, federal experience, and age who had the same handicap and veteran status" (288). The disparity between Asian American and white females employed by the service is even greater; Kim and Lewis found Asian women to be .06 of a grade behind white women with "the same, education, seniority, age, veteran status and handicap status" (289).

Kim and Lewis assert, "Because other factors also affect career success, the persistence of grade gaps after controlling for age, education, federal experience, veterans preference and disability status does not prove discrimination, but it does indicate problems that the government needs to investigate" (287). Elsewhere they attribute disparities to discrimination more bluntly. Asian American women are said to "face double discrimination" but be "held

back more by their gender than their race" (287). Kim and Lewis conclude that "even this model minority faces discrimination. Policy makers should not ignore this evidence and assume that the battle against discrimination has been won for Asian Americans" (289-290).

Readers seem to be presented with a stark choice: either envelop oneself in blanket denial of the existence of any anti-Asian discrimination, thus ignoring the "evidence," or designate anti-Asian discrimination as a serious problem requiring responses such as diversity training, special recruitment and placement, and Asian American political mobilization. This writer, however, remains uncertain about the phenomenon's extent; Anti-Asian discrimination may be pervasive within the public service, or it may consist largely of isolated incidents addressable through existing laws and grievance procedures. The statistical disparities cited above shed little light on this issue because plausible alternatives to the discrimination hypothesis can be formulated.

One alternative could be called immigrants' loss or the educational devaluation hypothesis. Education's contribution to productivity is often contingent upon linguistic and cultural contexts, so immigration can devalue human capital. Obviously, it would be useful to know how many Asians in the federal service are immigrants, in contrast to their non-Asian co-workers. Kim and Lewis do not present this information, which the Office of Personnel Management, in any case, may not compile. Kim and Lewis point out, however, that two-thirds of the Asian American population are foreign-born, in contrast to 6 percent of the population as a whole. Asians in the public service may be less likely than other Asians to be foreign-born; veterans preferences and citizenship rules probably produce such an outcome. Perhaps disparities between Asians and non-Asians regarding immigration exist within the public service but on a smaller scale than occurs in the general population.¹

If a substantial proportion of Asian American public servants are immigrants, educational devaluation could be responsi-

ble for much of the federal pay grade disparity that Kim and Lewis report. To appreciate this possibility let the reader imagine she is a well-established French-and-Vietnamese-speaking attorney practicing in Saigon in 1973. Catastrophe occurs and the attorney finds herself in 1975 seeking work in Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, bar memberships, legal expertise, and related communication skills do not transfer well cross-culturally. After delays spent studying English the attorney may enter the federal service. Even if she encounters no discrimination there her status is likely to be lower than it would have been had she never had to leave Vietnam; and, her grade level may be lower than that of most nonimmigrant co-workers who possess formally equivalent education.

Most foreign-born Asian Americans are not refugees, but educational devaluation can also affect voluntary immigrants. Let the reader imagine he is an immigrant from China studying computer programming at an American university. The programmer graduates and begins serving in the public sector alongside former classmates. After several years this immigrant participates in an assessment process that selects programmers for promotion to systems analyst positions, the next rung of the career ladder. The assessment process consists of paper and pencil solutions to analytical problems, a memo-writing exercise subject to the time constraints systems analysts actually face, and a role-play in which a problem solving dialogue must be established with an irate customer who knows nothing about computers but feels the MIS department charges too much, delays excessively, and does not understand his needs. During debriefing the Chinese American programmer learns he was not selected because others performed more effectively in the memo-writing and role-playing activities. Resolving to improve his writing and customer relations skills, the immigrant becomes confident he will eventually become a systems analyst, but he begins to wonder how much further he will progress. Only a few systems analysts become departmental MIS managers, and our programmer is not sure he wants to perform that role. He watches his department manager intervene when personality conflicts reduce cooperation within the work team and he notes that she occasionally must dis-

cipline subordinates. At other times the manager makes polished presentations to higher-ups and negotiates agreements with other entities. The immigrant programmer admires his boss's exceptional interpersonal skills, but recognizes their cultural specificity. He imagines what would happen if his boss were to emigrate from her native Nevada to China. How quickly could she master her new country's linguistic and cultural nuances? Could she ever do well enough to lead large teams carrying out complex projects?

Circumstances paralleling these imaginary scenarios were documented by Allen and Rosenberg (1981) in the factually based case study, "The Education and Experience Test." In this case a western state relied upon evaluations of education and experience to select accountants, many of whom were recent immigrants from non-English speaking countries. Although knowledgeable about accounting, some of these new hires had great difficulty communicating with co-workers and the public. The point here is not that individual immigrants cannot perform effectively, but rather that linguistic competencies matter.

Educational devaluation may explain some Asian-white gaps, in conjunction with what this writer calls the occupational choice hypothesis. The hypothesis posits that individuals' occupational choices are often influenced by the prior choices made by family members and ethnic counterparts. In other words, occupational choices are not randomly distributed among families or communities. Economist Thomas Sowell (1990, 132-134) cites extensive sociological evidence from around the world to make this point, demonstrating that ethnic groups vary occupationally, even in the absence of discrimination.

Immigrants are not necessarily representative of the societies they leave behind. Emigration is probably most attractive to individuals whose occupations are most transferable across cultural chasms—farmers, laborers, entrepreneurs, engineers, and chemists, for example. Attorneys and labor mediators have less incentive to relocate because their skills depend more on national and cultural contexts. Politics is a very difficult occupation to transfer cross-culturally, requiring extraordinary rhetorical, interpretive, and interpersonal skills. Politicians specialize in obtaining trust

from others, but many societies are wary of first-generation immigrants seeking political dominance. The provision of the United States Constitution restricting the presidency to native-born citizens reflects this sentiment.

Unless they experience catastrophe or persecution, aspiring politicians are probably less likely than members of other occupational groups to emigrate to the United States. In any case, first-generation immigrants experience disadvantages in the political arena. It would not be surprising if relatively few immigrants enter the public service's most political areas, such as city management and the Senior Executive Service. Less politicized realms, such as the postal service, may attract more immigrants. Occupational choices and political orientations are transmitted within families, so patterns forged by immigrant experiences may affect subsequent generations, albeit in accentuated form.

These arguments are speculative, but so is the contention that otherwise unaccounted for disparities indicate discrimination. Scholars analyzing such data should take care to avoid succumbing to what Sowell calls "the randomness assumption." He elaborates:

To know how one group's employment, education, or other pattern differs statistically from another's is usually easy. What is difficult to know are the many variables determining the interest, skill, and performance of those individuals from various groups who are being considered for particular jobs, roles, and institutions. What is virtually impossible to know are the patterns which would exist in a nondiscriminatory world....The idea that large statistical disparities between groups are unusual—and therefore suspicious—is commonplace, but only among those who have not bothered to study the history of racial, ethnic, and other groups in countries around the world (129, 132).

Not everyone agrees with Sowell's criticisms of American affirmative action policies, but public administration scholars should find his recent cross-national book useful (1990). Drawing upon data from such disparate settings as Jim Crow America, Afrikaner South Africa, Malaysia, and India, Sowell asserts that preferential poli-

cies exacerbate group conflict. Even if that proposition were only partially correct it would nonetheless merit attention because managers must increasingly foster cooperation within diverse work units.

This writer believes group statistics can occasionally yield insight about discrimination within public agencies, provided the numbers are interpreted cautiously and complement persuasive data from more direct sources such as surveys, focus groups, case studies, grievance records, and court documents. Interestingly, 15 percent of a survey of federal employees reported having been denied a job or job reward based upon "race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, handicapping condition or marital status" (Ban and Redd, 1990). Unfortunately, that survey did not identify those respondents by gender or ethnicity. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) did collect ethnic data from federal personnel specialists, however, when it asked if they had observed any persons being subjected to any of the forms of discrimination listed above. Failure to distinguish among the various forms of illegal discrimination reduces the value of OPM's data, but it is nonetheless interesting that only 14 percent of white personnel specialists reported observing dis-

crimination, in contrast to 28 percent of their Asian counterparts. Hopefully, OPM will improve its methodology. It would be useful to know what percentages of federally employed women, white males, African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans, and disabled individuals perceive themselves to be discriminated against on the job. Perceptions of discrimination are not always rational, but they inevitably have an impact on esprit de corps.

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Note

1. The possibility exists that Asian Americans within the public service are no more likely than others to be immigrants, but if true this would have startling implications. Kim and Lewis reported Asian American proportions of the civilian labor force (2.6 percent), the federal service (3.5 percent), the postal service (4.3 percent), the Senior Executive Service (0.9 percent) and municipal officials (1 percent). These percentages can be interpreted as indicating moderate nonrandomness, in a purely statistical sense. Suppose, however, we assume that nearly all Asian Americans in the public service have been drawn from the one-third of

that work force which is born in the United States. This assumption would invalidate the educational devaluation hypothesis, while tripling the statistical representation of those Asians born in the United States, making them proportionately represented within the SES and municipal officialdom and overrepresented fourfold in federal employment and fivefold in the postal service! This writer believes, however, that the proportion of immigrants among Asian American public servants is substantial, although probably less than the two-thirds figure applicable to Asian Americans in the general population.

References

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