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Fake News in the American Sociological Review Claims that Asian Americans Don't Really Value Education*

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ABSTRACT

Lizardo (2017) seeks to improve the sociological analysis of culture by conceptualizing the distinction between “nondeclarative” versus “declarative” aspects of culture. Lizardo uses this contrast to critique the view that Asian values have any effects on Asian American educational attainment. We show that Lizardo’s summary of empirical studies of Asian American educational attainment is misconstrued. He misinterprets statistical findings and inadequately considers the Asian values model. Lizardo claims that Asian values do not have effects because not all Asian Americans share a Confucian heritage. However, the Asian values model is applicable to many familistic cultures including some non-Confucian Asian societies. Furthermore, Lizardo’s emphasis on the “nondeclarative” versus “declarative” aspects of culture is of limited relevance to understanding differences in educational attainment among youth. Lizardo assumes that values must be “declarative,” but basic sociology stipulates that children slowly internalize their values over the course of their socialization that is heavily influenced by parental values especially in the case of Asian Americans. Lizardo’s dismissal of Asian cultural effects on Asian American educational attainment is uninformed and unconvincing.

**This paper is a comment on “Improving Cultural Analysis: Considering Personal Culture in its Declarative and Nondeclarative Forms” by Omar Lizardo, American Sociological Review, February 2017, Vol. 82(1), pp.88-115. All opinions stated herein are the sole responsibility of the authors. Direct correspondence to Arthur Sakamoto.*

Keywords:

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Lizardo (2017) seeks to improve the sociological analysis of culture by conceptualizing the distinction between “nondeclarative” versus “declarative” aspects of culture. He refers to the former as “phenomenologically opaque and not open to linguistic articulation” whereas declarative aspects are “phenomenologically transparent and elicited as linguistic reports” (Lizardo 2017:89). Lizardo’s ultimate goal is to enhance the “conceptual toolbox” so as to promote a more enriched cultural analysis of a variety of empirical phenomena (Lizardo 2017:89). A key phenomenon that Lizardo (2017) considers (hereafter, Lizardo) is the educational attainment of Asian Americans.

We applaud Lizardo’s broader objective of promoting the study of culture. We are also pleased that, after a century of excellent academic achievement (Hirschman and Wong 1986), Asian American educational attainment is finally receiving a tiny bit of consideration in the *American Sociological Review*. We are disappointed, however, that the intent of so many American sociologists seems to be to dismiss the possibility that there is any Asian cultural aspect involved in the educational attainment of Asian Americans.¹ In the following, we critique Lizardo’s conclusion that his specialized discussion of cultural theory definitively refutes the view that any Asian values have effects on Asian American educational attainment.

Lizardo seems to be assuming that educational attainment is based on acquired skills and habits that are primarily “nondeclarative.” By contrast, values are said to be “declarative” which means that they are more dependent on “intentional” linguistic usage that may involve “reasoning, evaluation, judgment and categorization” (Lizardo:92). According to Lizardo:91, this distinction between the “nondeclarative” and the “declarative” constitutes “two empirically and analytically distinct forms” of culture.

Lizardo’s refutation of the “Asian values” perspective (Lizardo:102, quotes in original) derives from the presumed disjunction between

the “nondeclarative” and the “declarative.” Doing well in school is dependent upon mainly “nondeclarative” skills that are formed “only via slow learning (habituation and enskillment) processes” (Lizardo:92) whereas stated values are “declarative” which are learned in a totally separated process. Being “empirically and analytically distinct,” acquired skills promoting educational attainment and stated values will not be highly correlated. To assume otherwise would be a “coupling bias” (Lizardo:103).

Lizardo:101 claims that his contrast between the “nondeclarative” and the “declarative” resolves the “achievement-aspiration paradox.” The latter is said to refer to the supposed zero correlation between educational attainment and aspirations across demographic groups which also apparently refutes the “Wisconsin model.” Lizardo:106 concludes by stating that we should “move beyond ‘groupism’” which seems to mean that group differences in culture cannot ever have any explanatory effects on educational attainment despite evidence to the contrary (e.g., Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

Like many sociologists, we welcome new and useful additions to the “conceptual toolbox.” Deriving one’s own conceptual distinction, however, does not entitle one to misconstrue empirical studies. In the case of Asian Americans in regard to the supposed “achievement-aspiration paradox,” Lizardo:101 states matter-of-factly that Asian American youth have “relatively modest aspirations” in contrast to their actual high educational attainments. To the contrary, every study based on data from probability samples finds that Asian Americans have, on average, higher academic aspirations than other groups (Kao 1995; Kao and Tienda 1998; Goyette and Xie 1999; Xie and Goyette 2003; Hsin and Xie 2014; Liu and Xie 2016) which is entirely consistent with decades of many qualitative studies reaching similar conclusions (e.g., Caudill and De Vos 1956; Kitano 1976; Schneider and Lee 1990; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013; Lee and Zhou 2015).² For example, in

Table 1 showing “students’ educational aspirations,” Kao and Tienda (1998:363) report that among boys in the tenth grade, *the percentage aspiring to obtain a graduate degree is 40.3% among Asian Americans, 24.7% among whites, 19.7% among African Americans, and 19.3% among Hispanics.* Lizardo:101’s puzzling citation of Kao and Tienda (1998) to claim that Asian American youth have “relatively modest aspirations” is contrary to the known facts presented in that reference and many others over the past several decades.

Accordingly, Hsin and Xie (2014) conclude that Asian Americans’ educational advantage over whites in terms of test scores and GPA is due primarily to academic effort in classroom behavior and attitudes as assessed by teachers. Their results support the hypothesis that Asian cultural values emphasizing educational attainment improve the performance of Asian American students. Lizardo argues that Hsin and Xie’s (2014) findings are statistically flawed in light of Harris and Robinson (2007). According to Lizardo:105, “Statistically adjusting for differences in previously accumulated (middle school) academic skills accounts for the bulk of the differences in schooling performance between black and white high-schoolers....” That is, Lizardo argues that the conclusions of Hsin and Xie (2014) are erroneous because of their supposed failure to control for “previously accumulated (middle school) academic skills” which purportedly eliminates the Asian academic advantage.³

Lizardo’s discussion of these statistical results is misleading. Even if we were to assume that Harris and Robinson’s (2007) model specification is more informative, the finding that Lizardo:105 cites pertains to African Americans. *One cannot assuredly claim that a finding about African Americans clearly refutes a hypothesis about Asian Americans.* In fact, Lizardo omits noting that in the same statistical tables, Harris and Robinson (2007:147,149) report that controlling for prior skills sometimes results in the advantage to Asians actually *increasing* (not

decreasing as in the case of African Americans).⁴ Thus, the Asian educational advantage remains clearly evident in Harris and Robinson’s (2007) results even after controlling for prior skills.

More fundamentally, Harris and Robinson’s (2007) statistical approach is less informative because it uses a cross-sectional model that treats high school test scores as the outcome with prior skills being an exogenous independent variable (i.e., a standard regression model). Their measure of prior skills is simply the lagged values on the dependent variable itself. A lagged value of the dependent variable is obviously not an exogenous independent variable as assumed for Harris and Robinson’s OLS estimators to be unbiased. Harris and Robinson’s approach is akin to claiming that because one’s current income is highly correlated with one’s income last year, then some other categorical variable (such as level of educational attainment) has no significant effect on income.⁵

A more appropriate approach is to use a longitudinal model to estimate trajectories over time (i.e., to “control” for “prior skills” over the entire span of the data). This is precisely what Hsin and Xie (2014) do, and they use more years of data (compared to Harris and Robinson) ranging from kindergarten to grade 12. Unfortunately, Lizardo rejects the much stronger statistical methods used by Hsin and Xie (2014) in favor of the weaker statistical methods used by Harris and Robinson (2007). Lizardo is also being inconsistent by deriding the data and measures used by Hsin and Xie (2014) but heartily endorsing those used by Harris and Robinson (2007) because the two studies use the same data set and many of the same variables.

Lizardo discussion is analytically perplexing because it leaves unanswered the lingering question of why Asian American youth have higher prior skills (or why African American have lower prior skills) in the first place after controlling for socioeconomic background

variables. Lizardo:112 admits that these differentials exist, but he argues that they cannot derive from any real differences in culture. With neither class nor culture being considered adequate explanations, the logic of Lizardo's discussion might seem to suggest some sort of "innate" or genetic origin to these net differentials. Indeed, although now popularly held in disdain by academics as being politically "neoconservative" (Lee and Zhou 2015:12), "culture of poverty" theories were actually considered politically liberal in their day because they sought to reject deterministic biological and psychobiological explanations of poverty which were commonplace at that time (Rainwater 1970:367). In contrast to Lizardo, Hsin and Xie (2014:8417) explicitly report that the Asian-white differential on a measure of academic achievement in kindergarten (when accumulated cultural effects are presumably less consequential) is zero.

Lizardo:101 refers to the "modest" "self-assessments of competence" among Asian American students as further evidence in support of the supposed "empirical mystery" that is interpreted to constitute prima facie evidence against the view that Asian cultural effects improve their educational achievement. This glib conclusion is devoid of any consideration of Asian American families and the social psychology of educational attainment (Markus and Kitayama 1999; Tao and Hong 2014). Self-assessments of competence are influenced by one's standards particularly when the latter are so heavily inflated by parental expectations (Hsin and Xie 2014:8421). Because Asian Americans have much higher (some might say exorbitant) educational aspirations due to parental expectations, having less confidence in actually achieving them is a realistic concern (i.e., Asian Americans are raised by their parents to be what mainstream American educators would informally call "over-achievers"). In other words, Asian American students are likely to be less "selective" at higher educational levels due to their pronounced over-representation (Mare

1980; Maia, Sakamoto and Wang 2015). Lizardo:101 is unaware that this supposed "paradox" is entirely consistent with the "Asian values" perspective (Tao and Hong 2014).

Lizardo:101's dismissal of the "Wisconsin model" (e.g., Jencks, Crouse and Mueser 1983) is unwarranted. We know of no research that claims that parental socioeconomic status and resources are unrelated to offspring's educational and socioeconomic attainments or that the latter are unaffected by respondents' aspirations and expectations (e.g., Guo et al. 2015). Evidence for some variations in these relations by race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status and other characteristics do certainly indicate potential measurement issues, selectivity, social networks, discrimination, and cultural factors that need elaboration (e.g., Farkas et al. 1990), but they do not constitute adequate evidence for the wholesale rejection of the basic status attainment model. Lizardo:101's claim that measured aspirations are completely uncorrelated with "future behavioral outcomes" such as education and incomes is especially inaccurate for the case of Asian Americans (e.g., Goyette and Xie 1999; Xie and Goyette 2003; Hsin and Xie 2014) which is ironic because Lizardo is seeking to critique the "Asian values" perspective.

Lizardo:103 argues that the "Asian values" perspective is a "failure" due to its "analytical weakness" but Lizardo offers no model of child development, educational psychology, family relations or socioeconomic resources. Lizardo focuses on arguing for the distinction between nondeclarative versus declarative aspects of culture, but that contrast is not a theory of educational attainment nor does it explain the reality of group differentials. "Over-achieving" in educational attainment requires years of persistence and typically involves significant psychic, emotional, and social costs (Lee and Zhou 2015; Chung 2016) which are ignored by Lizardo's dismissal of the role of values in motivating human behavior. By contrast, a fairly organized model of Asian American

educational attainment is provided by Schneider and Lee (1990), Sun (1998), and Tao and Hong (2013). Contrary to Lizardo's claim, his opaque discussion of culture thus entails far more "analytical weakness" than the "Asian values" explanation.

More specifically, Lizardo's emphasis on the supposedly hard distinction between "nondeclarative" versus "declarative" culture is actually of dubious relevance to understanding the educational attainment of youth. As demonstrated by Hsin and Xie (2014), the Asian educational advantage arises over the course of many years of childhood under the guidance of parental influence. Babies are obviously not born declaring their value in education and their committed faith that it leads to upward social mobility. Children slowly internalize their values over the course of their socialization which is heavily influenced by parental values (Persell 1990) especially in the case of Asian Americans (Asakawa 2001). Developing disciplined academic study habits over the course of years under parental guidance (as Asian Americans do more than other groups which leads to better academic performance [Farkas et al. 1990; Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Hsin and Xie 2014]) does resemble Lizardo's description of "nondeclarative" culture. But the higher aspirations for educational achievement among Asian American youth are likely promoted at first in a nondeclarative fashion until at some stage in their schooling, the priority placed on education becomes more "declarative." Rather than being "empirically and analytically distinct," socialization transforms the educational values of youth from initially being "nondeclarative" to becoming more "declarative." By the time they are undergraduates, Asian Americans have likely internalized more of their parents' values as evidenced by Asian American college students being much less likely than other groups to consume alcohol, marijuana or illicit drugs even after controlling for parental SES and residence in a fraternity or sorority (Martin 2017).

Lizardo:103's other critique of the "Asian values" model is the commonplace observation that a Confucian heritage is not shared by all Asian Americans. Space constraints prevent us from detailing the history of Asian immigration, ethnic variations in socioeconomic characteristics, and the educational outcomes of the second generation. Suffice to say here that the "Asian values" perspective does not argue that only culture matters and that socioeconomic resources do not matter. It only hypothesizes that, in addition to socioeconomic resources, the extent to which parents value and prioritize maximizing their children's educational attainment (by "firm control" [Kagitçibasi 1996:93]) is a significant variable that may differ, on average, across various sorts of groups (Fuligni et al. 1999).⁶

The key issue is not Confucianism per se but the extent to which parents are motivated and successful in making increased social and economic investments in their children (Sun 1998). This investment process is typically enhanced when families have a greater sense of collectivism which fosters concern about family "status," the children are more heavily influenced by parental expectations due to Asian childrearing practices, and education is emphasized as an end in itself or as a means towards upward mobility (Kagitçibasi 1996; Asakawa and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Asakawa 2001). A relevant childrearing practice that is common among Asians is co-sleeping which reduces the child's independent sense of self and thereby promotes greater emotional dependency of children upon their parents (Caudill and Plath 1974; Sakamoto, Kim and Takei 2012). The co-dependency that is common in Asian families facilitates a greater transfer of parental aspirations and values to their children (Chung 2016). This cultural configuration is certainly consistent with Confucianism (Sun 1998) but it is also evident in other Asian societies (including India) that have a stronger collectivist cultural heritage than the U.S. (Stewart et al. 1999).

Conclusion

“She [America] has given me an education befitting of kings.”

—Mike Masaoka (1941)

All social behavior involves culture in one way or another. Social behavior is never fully explained by biology, and economic sociology has concluded that institutions and related “structures” are always embedded with culture in some way (e.g., Granovetter 1985; Sewell 1992). For these reasons, the study of culture should not become the intellectual property or monopolized academic capital of practitioners of so-called “cultural theory.” All sociologists—regardless of their particular paradigms, theoretical approaches, and research methods—should be concerned with considering why, when and how culture might matter for their particular research question.

In conclusion, we concur with Collins (1986:1355) who argues that “the dangers of our world of 10,000 sociologists are that we overparticularize our knowledge and we polemicize the localistic ideologies that masquerade as our basis of methodologies and metatheories. We have a pathological tendency to miss the point of what is happening in areas of sociology other than our own. We fail to appreciate what has been accomplished, to select out what parts are of most use, and to head forward instead of dwelling on what is easiest for us to criticize....” We regret that Lizardo’s uninformed dismissal of Asian cultural effects on Asian American educational attainment illustrates the pitfalls alluded to by Collins.

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¹ Lee and Zhou (2015:6), for example, emphasize “hyper-selectivity” and “class-specific cultural institutions” in explaining the educational attainment of Chinese and Vietnamese Americans.

² Lizardo:101’s reference to Kao (2000) in generalizing about Asian Americans’ aspirations is unconvincing because that study simply reports Kao’s (2000) own personal interpretation from focus groups methods based on a convenience sample of 8 Asian Americans.

³ Hsin and Xie’s (2014) estimated Asian advantage is actually methodologically conservative because their analysis controls for school fixed-effects. However, due to a greater parental concern for enhancing superior educational attainment, Asian American children are more likely to be in better schools in the first place (Lee and Zhou 2015).

⁴ The one case where where the Asian coefficient does not increase is in regard to math scores probably because the Asian advantage on that test is already so extremely high (Harris and Robinson 2007:154). In addition, Harris and Robinson’s use of percentages to assess changes in a regression coefficient after adding control variables is misleading because in absolute value the coefficient remains much larger for African Americans (Harris and Robinson 2007:147,149).

⁵ Although beyond the scope of our focus, Lizardo’s summary of the literature on “oppositional culture” is also limited (e.g., Farkas 2008; Fryer and Torelli 2010).

⁶ As discussed by Sakamoto, Kim and Takei (2012), the phrase “for the sake of the children” (e.g., *kodomo no tame ni*, in Japanese) reflects a normative cultural understanding in many Asian and Asian American families reflecting their more collectivist values compared to mainstream Americans. Along with parental education and parental income, whether a family has had a divorce is usually interpreted as being a “background” or “socioeconomic” factor by American sociologists (Kao and Tienda 1998; Harris and Robinson 2007). However, the lower divorce rates among Asian and Asian Americans in part reflect their greater cultural commitment to the well-being of their children in the first place, and are thus not only “socioeconomic” in nature (Sakamoto, Kim and Takei 2012); people do not suddenly suspend their values when deciding whether to divorce.

