

What Drives Success?

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A SEEMINGLY un-American fact about America today is that for some groups, much more than others, upward mobility and the American dream are alive and well. It may be taboo to say it, but certain ethnic, religious and national-origin groups are doing strikingly better than Americans overall.

Indian-Americans earn almost double the national figure (roughly \$90,000 per year in median household income versus \$50,000). Iranian-, Lebanese- and Chinese-Americans are also top-earners. In the last 30 years, Mormons have become leaders of corporate America, holding top positions in many of America's most recognizable companies. These facts don't make some groups "better" than others, and material success cannot be equated with a well-lived life. But willful blindness to facts is never a good policy.

Jewish success is the most historically fraught and the most broad-based. Although Jews make up only about 2 percent of the United States' adult population, they account for a third of the current Supreme Court; over two-thirds of Tony Award-winning lyricists and composers; and about a third of American Nobel laureates.

The most comforting explanation of these facts is that they are mere artifacts of class — rich parents passing on advantages to their children — or of immigrants arriving in this country with high skill and education levels. Important as these factors are, they explain only a small part of the picture.

Today's wealthy Mormon businessmen often started from humble origins. Although India and China send the most immigrants to the United States through employment-based channels, almost half of all Indian immigrants and over half of Chinese immigrants do not enter the country under those criteria. Many are poor and poorly educated. Comprehensive data published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 2013 showed that the children of Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese immigrants experienced exceptional upward mobility regardless of their parents' socioeconomic or educational background.

Take New York City's selective public high schools like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science, which are major Ivy League feeders. For the 2013 school year, Stuyvesant High School offered admission, based solely on a standardized entrance exam, to nine black students, 24 Hispanics, 177 whites and 620 Asians. Among the Asians of Chinese origin, many are the children of restaurant workers and other working-class immigrants.

Merely stating the fact that certain groups do better than others — as measured by income, test scores and so on — is enough to provoke a firestorm in America today, and even charges of racism. The irony is that the facts actually debunk racial stereotypes.

There are some black and Hispanic groups in America that far outperform some white and Asian groups. Immigrants from many West Indian and African countries, such as Jamaica, Ghana, and Haiti, are

climbing America's higher education ladder, but perhaps the most prominent are Nigerians. Nigerians make up less than 1 percent of the black population in the United States, yet in 2013 nearly one-quarter of the black students at Harvard Business School were of Nigerian ancestry; over a fourth of Nigerian-Americans have a graduate or professional degree, as compared with only about 11 percent of whites.

Cuban-Americans in Miami rose in one generation from widespread penury to relative affluence. By 1990, United States-born Cuban children — whose parents had arrived as exiles, many with practically nothing — were twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to earn over \$50,000 a year. All three Hispanic United States senators are Cuban-Americans.

Meanwhile, some Asian-American groups — Cambodian- and Hmong-Americans, for example — are among the poorest in the country, as are some predominantly white communities in central Appalachia.

MOST fundamentally, groups rise and fall over time. The fortunes of WASP elites have been declining for decades. In 1960, second-generation Greek-Americans reportedly had the second-highest income of any census-tracked group. Group success in America often tends to dissipate after two generations. Thus while Asian-American kids overall had SAT scores 143 points above average in 2012 — including a 63-point edge over whites — a 2005 study of over 20,000 adolescents found that third-generation Asian-American students performed no better academically than white students.

The fact that groups rise and fall this way punctures the whole idea of “model minorities” or that groups succeed because of innate, biological differences. Rather, there are cultural forces at work.

It turns out that for all their diversity, the strikingly successful groups in America today share three traits that, together, propel success. The first is a superiority complex — a deep-seated belief in their exceptionality. The second appears to be the opposite — insecurity, a feeling that you or what you've done is not good enough. The third is impulse control.

Any individual, from any background, can have what we call this Triple Package of traits. But research shows that some groups are instilling them more frequently than others, and that they are enjoying greater success.

It's odd to think of people feeling simultaneously superior and insecure. Yet it's precisely this unstable combination that generates drive: a chip on the shoulder, a goading need to prove oneself. Add impulse control — the ability to resist temptation — and the result is people who systematically sacrifice present gratification in pursuit of future attainment.

Ironically, each element of the Triple Package violates a core tenet of contemporary American thinking.

We know that group superiority claims are specious and dangerous, yet every one of America's most successful groups tells itself that it's exceptional in a deep sense. Mormons believe they are “gods in embryo” placed on earth to lead the world to salvation; they see themselves, in the historian Claudia L. Bushman's words, as “an island of morality in a sea of moral decay.” Middle East experts and many Iranians explicitly refer to a Persian “superiority complex.” At their first Passover Seders, most Jewish children hear that Jews are the “chosen” people; later they may be taught that Jews are a moral people, a people of law and intellect, a people of survivors.

That insecurity should be a lever of success is another anathema in American culture. Feelings of inadequacy are cause for concern or even therapy; parents deliberately instilling insecurity in their children is almost unthinkable. Yet insecurity runs deep in every one of America's rising groups; and consciously or unconsciously, they tend to instill it in their children.

A central finding in a study of more than 5,000 immigrants' children led by the sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut was how frequently the kids felt "motivated to achieve" because of an acute sense of obligation to redeem their parents' sacrifices. Numerous studies, including in-depth field work conducted by the Harvard sociologist Vivian S. Louie, reveal Chinese immigrant parents frequently imposing exorbitant academic expectations on their children ("Why only a 99?"), making them feel that "family honor" depends on their success.

By contrast, white American parents have been found to be more focused on building children's social skills and self-esteem. There's an ocean of difference between "You're amazing. Mommy and Daddy never want you to worry about a thing" and "If you don't do well at school, you'll let down the family and end up a bum on the streets." In a study of thousands of high school students, Asian-American students reported the lowest self-esteem of any racial group, even as they racked up the highest grades.

Moreover, being an outsider in a society — and America's most successful groups are all outsiders in one way or another — is a source of insecurity in itself. Immigrants worry about whether they can survive in a strange land, often communicating a sense of life's precariousness to their children. Hence the common credo: They can take away your home or business, but never your education, so study harder. Newcomers and religious minorities may face derision or hostility. Cubans fleeing to Miami after Fidel Castro's takeover reported seeing signs reading "No dogs, no Cubans" on apartment buildings. During the 2012 election cycle, Mormons had to hear Mitt Romney's clean-cut sons described as "creepy" in the media. In combination with a superiority complex, the feeling of being underestimated or scorned can be a powerful motivator.

Finally, impulse control runs against the grain of contemporary culture as well. Countless books and feel-good movies extol the virtue of living in the here and now, and people who control their impulses don't live in the moment. The dominant culture is fearful of spoiling children's happiness with excessive restraints or demands. By contrast, every one of America's most successful groups takes a very different view of childhood, inculcating habits of discipline from a very early age — or at least they did so when they were on the rise.

In isolation, each of these three qualities would be insufficient. Alone, a superiority complex is a recipe for complacency; mere insecurity could be crippling; impulse control can produce asceticism. Only in combination do these qualities generate drive and what Tocqueville called the "longing to rise."

Needless to say, high-achieving groups don't instill these qualities in all their members. They don't have to. A culture producing, say, four high achievers out of 10 would attain wildly disproportionate success if the surrounding average was one out of 20.

But this success comes at a price. Each of the three traits has its own pathologies. Impulse control can undercut the ability to experience beauty, tranquillity and spontaneous joy. Insecure people feel like they're never good enough. "I grew up thinking that I would never, ever please my parents," recalls the novelist Amy Tan. "It's a horrible feeling." Recent studies suggest that Asian-American youth have greater rates of stress (but, despite media reports to the contrary, lower rates of suicide).

A superiority complex can be even more invidious. Group supremacy claims have been a source of oppression, war and genocide throughout history. To be sure, a group superiority complex somehow feels less ugly when it's used by an outsider minority as an armor against majority prejudices and hostility, but ethnic pride or religious zeal can turn all too easily into intolerance of its own.

Even when it functions relatively benignly as an engine of success, the combination of these three traits can still be imprisoning — precisely because of the kind of success it tends to promote. Individuals striving for material success can easily become too focused on prestige and money, too concerned with external measures of their own worth.

It's not easy for minority groups in America to maintain a superiority complex. For most of its history, America did pretty much everything a country could to impose a narrative of inferiority on its nonwhite minorities and especially its black population. Over and over, African-Americans have fought back against this narrative, but its legacy persists.

Black America is of course no one thing: “not one or ten or ten thousand things,” as the poet and Yale professor Elizabeth Alexander has written. There are black families in the United States occupying every possible socioeconomic position. But Sean “Diddy” Combs — rapper, record producer and entrepreneur — undoubtedly spoke for many when he said: “If you study black history, it's just so negative, you know. It's just like, O.K., we were slaves, and then we were whipped and sprayed with water hoses, and the civil rights movement, and we're American gangsters. I get motivated for us to be seen in our brilliance.”

Culture is never all-determining. Individuals can defy the most dominant culture and write their own scripts, as Mr. Combs himself did. They can create narratives of pride that reject the master narratives of their society, or turn those narratives around. In any given family, an unusually strong parent, grandparent or even teacher can instill in children every one of the three crucial traits. It's just much harder when you have to do it on your own, when you can't draw on the cultural resources of a broader community, when you don't have role models or peer pressure on your side, and instead are bombarded daily with negative images of your group in the media.

But it would be ridiculous to suggest that the lack of an effective group superiority complex was the cause of disproportionate African-American poverty. The true causes barely require repeating: They include slavery, systematic discrimination, schools that fail to teach, employers who won't promote, single motherhood and the fact that roughly a third of young black men in this country are in jail, awaiting trial or on probation or parole. Nor does the lack of a group superiority narrative prevent any given individual African-American from succeeding. It simply creates an additional psychological and cultural hurdle that America's most successful groups don't have to overcome.

At the same time, if members of a group learn not to trust the system, if they don't think people like them can really make it, they will have little incentive to engage in impulse control. Researchers at the University of Rochester recently reran the famous marshmallow test with a new spin. Children initially subjected to a broken promise — adults promised them a new art set to play with, but never delivered — almost invariably “failed” the test (snatching the first marshmallow instead of waiting 15 minutes for a promised second). By contrast, when the adults followed through on their promise, most kids passed the test.

The same factors that cause poverty — discrimination, prejudice, shrinking opportunity — can sap from a group the cultural forces that propel success. Once that happens, poverty becomes more entrenched. In these circumstances, it takes much more grit, more drive and perhaps a more exceptional individual to break out.

Of course a person born with the proverbial silver spoon can grow up to be wealthy without hard work, insecurity or discipline (although to the extent a group passes on its wealth that way, it's likely to be headed for decline). In a society with increasing class rigidity, parental wealth obviously contributes to the success of the next generation.

But one reason groups with the cultural package we've described have such an advantage in the United States today lies in the very same factors that are shrinking opportunity for so many of America's poor. Disappearing blue-collar jobs and greater returns to increasingly competitive higher education give a tremendous edge to groups that disproportionately produce individuals driven, especially at a young age, to excel and to sacrifice present satisfactions for long-term gains.

THE good news is that it's not some magic gene generating these groups' disproportionate success. Nor is it some 5,000-year-old "education culture" that only they have access to. Instead their success is significantly propelled by three simple qualities open to anyone.

The way to develop this package of qualities — not that it's easy, or that everyone would want to — is through grit. It requires turning the ability to work hard, to persevere and to overcome adversity into a source of personal superiority. This kind of superiority complex isn't ethnically or religiously exclusive. It's the pride a person takes in his own strength of will.

Consider the story of Sonia Sotomayor, who was born to struggling Puerto Rican parents. Her father was an alcoholic, she writes in her moving autobiography, "My Beloved World," and her mother's "way of coping was to avoid being at home" with him. But Justice Sotomayor, who gave herself painful insulin shots for diabetes starting around age 8, was "blessed" with a "stubborn perseverance." Not originally a top student, she did "something very unusual" in fifth grade, approaching one of the smartest girls in the class to "ask her how to study." Soon she was getting top marks, and a few years later she applied to Princeton — though her guidance counselor recommended "Catholic colleges."

The point of this example is not, "See, it's easy to climb out of poverty in America." On the contrary, Justice Sotomayor's story illustrates just how extraordinary a person has to be to overcome the odds stacked against her.

But research shows that perseverance and motivation can be taught, especially to young children. This supports those who, like the Nobel Prize-winning economist James J. Heckman, argue that education dollars for the underprivileged are best spent on early childhood intervention, beginning at preschool age, when kids are most formable.

The United States itself was born a Triple Package nation, with an outsize belief in its own exceptionalism, a goading desire to prove itself to aristocratic Europe (Thomas Jefferson sent a giant moose carcass to Paris to prove that America's animals were bigger than Europe's) and a Puritan inheritance of impulse control.

But prosperity and power had their predictable effect, eroding the insecurity and self-restraint that led to them. By 2000, all that remained was our superiority complex, which by itself is mere swagger, fueling a culture of entitlement and instant gratification. Thus the trials of recent years — the unwon wars, the financial collapse, the rise of China — have, perversely, had a beneficial effect: the return of insecurity.

Those who talk of America's "decline" miss this crucial point. America has always been at its best when it has had to overcome adversity and prove its mettle on the world stage. For better and worse, it has that opportunity again today.

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