

# From Public Engagement to Publication


Jennifer Lee

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## Abstract

This essay responds to an invitation by the editors of *Sociologica* to write about publication strategy.

**Jennifer Lee:** Columbia University, NY (United States)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5872-6187>

 [lee.jennifer@columbia.edu](mailto:lee.jennifer@columbia.edu);  <https://sociology.columbia.edu/content/jennifer-lee>

Jennifer Lee is Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, and the author of four award-winning books, including *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, *The Diversity Paradox*, *Civility in the City*, and *Asian American Youth*. Her most recent project focuses on Asian Americans' attitudes of affirmative action in higher education and the workplace.

## 1 Introduction

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Pulitzer-Prize winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) claims that all wars are fought twice — the first time on the battlefield, and the second, in our collective memory. Our collective memory of the Vietnam War is constructed from manifold narratives, but most are told from the point of view of the majority — in this case, White Americans. Nguyen points out that that the majority enjoys narrative plentitude; most of the stories focus on them, and they are told from their perspective. Minorities, by contrast, experience narrative scarcity. Relatively few stories are told about us, and even fewer are told from our perspective.

Minority groups want narrative plentitude, but we can only achieve this when we have influence over all levels of narrative production. Nguyen has stated that individual writers and artists cannot achieve narrative plentitude on their own, but I would add that, as social scientists, we can work toward narrative plentitude by contributing to narrative production. This involves all facets of social science research from designing projects to collecting accurate data to publishing our findings in the top journals and university presses.

I would add another component to narrative production — public engagement — which entails publishing beyond the boundaries of academia, and writing for and engaging with a broader, more diverse, and more inclusive audience. It involves a willingness to make one's research accessible and relevant beyond the gatekeepers of academic publishing: book and journal editors, editorial board members, reviewers, and our academic peers. This is especially germane for minority groups who must not only fight to relay our narratives, but also fight against the narratives that distort us.

Public engagement is a skill that I never formally learned nor was encouraged to develop, yet I have found, quite serendipitously, that it has enhanced my academic research and writing. This came as a surprise because I often heard the opposite — that public engagement and rigorous research and writing are incompatible — so I never sought public engagement. Nevertheless, public engagement found me.

The narrative scarcity of Asian Americans — exacerbated by popularly held myths and misconceptions about them — propelled me to override my reticence and fear, and embark on a path for which I felt woefully unprepared.

## 2 Declawing the Tiger Mom

In February 2014, I received an inquiry from *CBS News*, inviting me to appear on a segment featuring Amy Chua (better known as the “Tiger Mom”) and her husband Jed Rubenfeld. The network wanted a social scientist to provide expert commentary on their highly anticipated book, *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America* (2014), which had yet to be publicly released. My research was cited by the authors, so the producers contacted me. The central argument in *The Triple Package* is simple: certain groups are successful because they possess a “triple package” of cultural traits, including a superiority complex, insecurity, and impulse control.

After reading the advanced copy given to me by the producer, I found glaring flaws with their argument, the most obvious of which is by reducing success to a trio of cultural traits, the authors simply re-framed the “culture of poverty” thesis into a “culture of success” anti-thesis. Cultural traits are touted as both the dependent and independent variables to explain the success of ethnic groups like Chinese and Jews — who happen to be the groups with which Chua and Rubenfeld identify, respectively.

Armed with a slew of “talking points,” I arrived at the *CBS* studio fully prepared for the interview. When the segmented aired the following day, I was stunned to find that my hour-long detailed critique was reduced to a single quote: “It’s certainly not social science. The traits in themselves don’t explain group success.” The first lesson I learned about public engagement was a brutal one: hours of judicious preparation can be reduced to a few seconds of air time.

The few seconds on air, however, caught the attention of an editor, who invited me to write an op-ed about *The Triple Package*, which I approached with a renewed purpose and clearer direction. Rather than focus on a critique of Chua and Rubenfeld, I would highlight social science research. And rather than offering a slew of detailed critiques, I would focus on two: *starting points* and *hyper-selectivity*.

### 3 Reframing Success: Starting Points and Hyper-Selectivity

I began with a question. Who is more successful: a second-generation Mexican whose parents immigrated to the United States with less than an elementary school education, and who now works as a dental hygienist? Or a second-generation Chinese whose immigrant parents have Ph.D. degrees, and who now works as a doctor?

Chua and Rubenfeld would claim it is the latter. They argue that certain American groups (including Chinese, Jews, Cubans, and Nigerians) are more successful and have risen further than others because they share certain cultural traits. The couple bolsters their argument by comparing these groups' median household income, test scores, educational attainment, and occupational status to those of the rest of the country.

But what happens if you measure success not just by where people end up — the cars in their garages, the degrees on their walls — but by taking into account where they started? Comparing second-generation Chinese, Vietnamese, and Mexicans in Los Angeles, I came to a conclusion that flies in the face of the Tiger couple: Mexicans are L.A.'s most successful immigrant group (Lee, 2014a).

Like Chua and Rubenfeld, I found that the children of Chinese immigrants exhibit exceptional educational outcomes that exceed those of other groups, including native-born Whites. In Los Angeles, 64 percent of Chinese immigrants' children graduated from college, and of this group 22 percent also attained a graduate degree. By contrast, 46 percent of native-born Anglos in L.A. graduated from college, and of this group, just 14 percent attained graduate degrees. Moreover, none of the Chinese dropped out of high school.

These figures are impressive but not surprising. Chinese immigrant parents are not only the most highly educated, but they are also “hyper-selected” (meaning that they are doubly positively selected). They are more likely to have graduated from college than their non-migrant counterparts in China, and also more highly educated than the U.S. mean. About half of Chinese immigrants in the United States has a B.A. or higher compared to only 4 percent in China, and 28 percent of the U.S. population. In other words, Chinese immigrants in the United States are twelve times as likely to have graduated from college than their non-migrant counterparts in China, and nearly twice as likely as the U.S. mean.

In Los Angeles, over 60 percent of Chinese immigrant fathers and over 40 percent of Chinese immigrant mothers have a B.A. or higher. The children of Chinese immigrants begin their quest to get ahead from more favorable “starting points” than other immigrants because they benefit from their parents' human and financial capital, giving them a boost in their quest to get ahead. This boost — which includes resources like after-school programs, SAT prep courses, and tutoring — is not limited to the middle class. The children of working-class Chinese parents employed in restaurants and factories benefit from capital and resources that are made widely available to other Chinese Americans.

At what seems to be the other end of the spectrum, the children of Mexican immigrants had the lowest levels of educational attainment of any of the groups in our study. Only 86 percent graduated from high school — compared to 100 percent of Chinese and 96 percent of native-born Whites — and only 17 percent graduated from college. But their high school graduation rate was more than double that of their immigrant parents, only 40 percent of whom earned diplomas. And, the college graduation rate of second-generation Mexicans more than doubles that of their fathers (7 percent) and triples that of their mothers (5 percent).

Parental legal status is key. On average, the children of Mexican immigrants whose parents are undocumented attain 11 years of education. Those whose parents migrated here legally or entered the country as undocumented migrants but later legalized their status attain 13 years of education on average. This two-year difference is critical in the U.S. education system because it divides high school graduates from high school drop-outs, making undocumented status alone a significant impediment to social mobility. But even accounting for this additional obstacle for children of undocumented parents, there is no question that, when we measure success as intergenerational mobility, second-generation Mexicans come out ahead.

Yet this point is often lost on many Americans who rely on status markers like our college degrees, jobs, cars, homes, zip codes, and (if you live in Los Angeles) area codes to measure success. Americans also like to believe that those who are successful earned it through hard work, cultural traits, and grit.

After all, this is how we justify why some people and groups are more successful than others.

But many Americans work hard, are smart, and exhibit grit in spades. In spite of this, we do not graduate from college at the same rates because we begin the race at different “starting points.” Moreover, some get extra boosts during the race to help them speed across the finish line, including members of “hyper-selected” immigrant groups. So before we measure someone’s success by their diplomas, jobs, or zip codes, we should first ask about the diplomas, jobs, and zip codes that came before them.

## 4 From Public Engagement to Publication

The editorial and others that followed became the basis of the introduction of the book manuscript, which was published in the following year as *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (2015). The exercise of writing this and subsequent editorials pushed me to convey my central arguments clearly, convincingly, and succinctly in under 800 words — a challenge for academics (myself included) who often bemoan having to trim our manuscripts to under 10,000 words.

Soon after, I would engage with other reporters, do radio interviews, and appear on television again, and each opportunity presented an occasion to be clearer, more thoughtful, more convincing, and more succinct. While public engagement never came easily nor naturally to me, knowing that I was armed with social science research helped me to overcome my fear, doubt, and insecurity, and also exercise my growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

Public engagement also helped me to complete my book manuscript in a timely manner. By writing editorials, doing interviews, and giving public talks, I quickly learned what points resonated most strongly, and how to deliver those points most powerfully. My media “talking points” became the bases of book chapters, and the feedback from the public engagement was immediately incorporated into the revisions of the book manuscript.

Without question, I became a more effective writer, researcher, speaker, mentor, and instructor because I engaged with a more diverse audience, and pushed myself to lay bare my arguments without shrouding them in the academic lingo that often makes our writing more elusive than need be. In the process, I helped to place the study of Asian Americans as a central research problematic in the discipline of sociology, which is especially meaningful in light of the narrative scarcity of Asian Americans.

The synergy between public engagement and publication continues in my current research, including a timely project on Asian Americans’ attitudes of affirmative action — a hot button issue that is fueled by myths, misconceptions, stereotypes, and narrative scarcity. Presumed competent, Asian Americans are also presumed to uniformly oppose affirmative action, but this myth is a far cry from reality.

Dismantling the misperception in steps through a variety of editorials, radio interviews, and public lectures has helped me to craft a compelling and nuanced argument that forms the basis of several academic papers that I have written with my co-author, Van C. Tran. In these papers, we show that there is no single, uniform stance on affirmative action, and, surprisingly, there is more diversity in opinion among Asian Americans than between Asians and other racial groups. Moreover, we unveil how out-group stereotypes and perceptions of “moral deservingness” shift attitudes among Asian Americans, underscoring their malleability of opinion. And again, not only has public engagement helped to frame this research project, but it is also contributing to narrative production and narrative plentitude in the process.

## 5 Coda

I would be remiss if I did not mention that regardless of the medium in which you aim to publish, you will get rejected. Many times. No matter how prolific the author, she, too, has been rejected many times. Keep in mind to divorce the substance of comments from the tone of the criticism. Take what you need, and leave the rest. Make your work better, and try again. Persistence is key to publishing.

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