

# The New Criterion

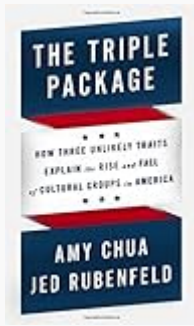
Books April 2014

## A winning combination

by Charles Murray

*America by Amy Chua* *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America*

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Amy Chua*

*The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America*

Penguin Press, 336 pages, \$27.95

Some groups of Americans are conspicuously better than others in certain things. The Jews have been overachievers in the professions, entrepreneurship, and the entertainment industry since they started immigrating in large numbers at the end of the nineteenth century. Blacks became overachievers in sports as soon as segregation ended. In most parts of the country, you can't patronize dry cleaners, liquor stores, or convenience stores without being struck by the proportion of them being run by recent Asian immigrants rather than native-born Americans.

What are the causes of these differences? In academia, there is one, and only one, acceptable answer: injustice. In a world without sexism, racism, classism, and accidents of history, these differences would not exist. Every large group of human beings in a truly fair world would have the same percentages of theoretical mathematicians, wide receivers, and owners of dry cleaners.

To suggest any other answer in a public forum can bring disaster, no matter how eminent you may be. Ask Larry Summers or James D. Watson, whose casual (but empirically accurate) observations about gender differences and race differences cost them their jobs. But they are only the visible examples of the retribution that academia metes out to the heterodox. Thus everyone who might be

tempted to write about politically incorrect causes of group differences has gotten the memo: DON'T DO IT. Except for two Yale law professors named Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, who have produced a book titled *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America*.

Chua is the author of well-received books on international history, but is best known for *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, an in-your-face assault on practically every cherished precept of elite American child-rearing. Rubenfeld is a specialist in constitutional law who has also published two novels. Why are they, who are not specialists in psychology, sociology, genetics, or economics, competent to discuss group differences that involve all of those disciplines? Their own answer is that Chua's work has led her to examine unusually successful ethnic minorities all over the world and Rubenfeld's has led him to explore how Americans' increasing desire to live in the present has undermined the country's ability to live for the future. But surely there's another explanation for this book: Amy Chua is Chinese. Jed Rubenfeld is Jewish. They're married. I'm betting that from their first date, Chua and Rubenfeld traded notes about their experiences and were fascinated by the parallels in their upbringings. In *The Triple Package*, they decided to share their conclusions with the world.

The three traits that explain a group's success—the Triple Package—are a superiority complex shared by members of the group, a shared sense of insecurity, and impulse control. By *superiority complex*, the authors mean “a deeply internalized belief in your group's specialness, exceptionality, or superiority.” They define *insecurity* as “an anxious uncertainty about your worth or place in society, a feeling or worry that you or what you've done or what you have is in some fundamental way not good enough.” Their definition of *impulse control* is “the ability to resist temptation, especially the temptation to give up in the face of hardship or quit instead of persevering at a difficult task,” but their discussion makes clear that another crucial aspect of impulse control is the ability to defer gratification.

The effects of the three elements of the Triple Package are not additive. A group with only one or two of the three will not overachieve. Look at the Amish, the authors suggest. The Amish have all the superiority complex they need (though they are religiously obligated to fight it) and impulse control in abundance. But the Amish have no sense of insecurity and no desire to prove themselves in the eyes of the majority culture. They are content to live in their own world, asking only to be left alone.

Instead of being additive, the authors argue, the elements of the Triple Package interact. First, a superiority complex and insecurity combine to produce a chip-on-the-shoulder mentality that expresses itself as a drive to succeed. It consists of such natural human reactions as “They think they can look down on me and my people? I'll show them.” Second, the superiority complex and impulse control interact to produce a capacity to persevere and endure hardship. In part, exerting impulse control is seen as a virtue in itself, evidence of the group's superiority (“Chinese keep trying as long as it takes; whites give up before we do”). Impulse control is also a mechanism for

authenticating the superiority complex—if you keep trying as long as it takes, you will get superior results.

Chua and Rubenfeld set out to show how their theory comports with the experience of seven American immigrant groups: Chinese, Indians, Jews, Lebanese, Nigerians, Cubans who fled when Castro took over, and Iranians who fled when the Islamic fundamentalists took over. Then they add a native-born group, the Mormons, to demonstrate that a distinctive ethnic legacy isn't essential to their argument. For each group, they present evidence for the existence of all three elements of the Triple Package and—the tricky part—reasons to conclude that these elements are causal. The two main threats to the validity of their examples are genes and selection artifacts.

**G**enes are potentially a problem if an overachieving group doesn't just *think* it is superior, but really is. There's not enough evidence to say much of anything on this sensitive issue about Cubans, Indians, Iranians, Lebanese, or Nigerians. But when it comes to Jews and Chinese, a fascinating technical literature has been accumulating. This is not the place to review it in detail. I will offer my own reading:

Regarding the Jews, the substantially elevated IQ of Ashkenazi Jews, with a mean somewhere between 108 and 115, is thoroughly established. It's a big advantage both for the ability to achieve in intellectually demanding occupations and for impulse control (IQ is positively correlated with the time horizon for calculating outcomes). The evidence that elevated Ashkenazi IQ is largely genetic is steadily increasing.

The Chinese advantage in overall cognitive ability is not nearly as large as the Jewish advantage. It is unlikely to be more than five IQ points, and could be much smaller. But the Chinese cognitive profile is more clearly distinct. They may have verbal skills that are no higher, or even a bit lower, than European verbal skills, but mental tests consistently show significantly elevated Chinese visuo-spatial skills—an advantage in high-tech and scientific occupations. It shows up in Chinese populations everywhere in the world, including among Chinese raised from infancy in culturally non-Chinese environments. In any case, the Chinese have at least as much intellectual capital, and probably a little more, than any other ethnic group in the world except Ashkenazi Jews. The Chinese also probably have a genetic edge in impulse control. Marked differences in the temperament of Chinese and European infants show up as early as the first few days of life, long before cultural socialization can be responsible, and they are consistent with the Chinese belief that they are calmer and more self-disciplined—that they possess more impulse control—than other ethnicities.

Neither high IQ nor high impulse control is determinative. Repeating my favorite analogy, courtesy of the sociologist Steven Goldberg, they are like weight in an offensive lineman in the National Football League. The best offensive linemen are not necessarily the heaviest. But almost every NFL offensive lineman weighs at least 300 pounds. Similarly, high IQ and high impulse control are necessary but not sufficient raw materials for certain kinds of accomplishment. There

are reasons to think that Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese have more of those raw materials than other peoples, and their disproportionate levels of accomplishment reflect those advantages to some degree.

The other major threat to the validity of the Triple Package theory is selection artifacts. They make me extremely cautious about interpreting the experience of the Cubans who fled Castro and the Iranians who fled the Ayatollah Khomeini. Both sets of refugees were heavily weighted toward the best-educated and most affluent members of their respective societies. The refugees often didn't bring their wealth with them. As the authors point out, many had to start over from scratch. But as a group they inevitably brought with them personal qualities of intelligence and impulse control that are correlated with high levels of education and affluence. Indian and Lebanese immigration have not been directly fed by a specific event such as a revolution, but selection artifacts are still likely to be at work—just the decision to pull up stakes and move thousands of miles to a strange culture selects for risk-taking and self confidence. There's no way of telling how much that might explain the conspicuous accomplishments of these groups.

Immigration from Nigeria has probably also been skewed toward the best and brightest, but my main problem with using Nigerian immigrants as evidence for the Triple Package theory is that they don't stand out in comparison with the rest of Americans. Their mean income is fractionally higher than the national median, but on all the other measures of Nigerian accomplishment—college attendance, numbers of lawyers and physicians, employment at Goldman Sachs—the Nigerians perform well only in comparison with native-born African Americans. Chua and Rubenfeld don't hide this, but neither do they call attention to it. I speculate that either the authors or their publisher really, really wanted to have a black group among the examples of overachievers. Their data on Nigerians, read carefully, do not have the intended effect.

**D**espite these complications, the authors' core arguments about the effects of the Triple Package carry a lot of weight. They not only have collateral support in the technical literature, they have face validity. Forget about the Cubans, Iranians, Indians, Lebanese, and Nigerians. They're interesting, but we just don't know enough about them. Let's focus on the Jews, Chinese, Mormons, and America as a nation.

Start with the Chinese and Jews, about whom we have the most data and about whom Chua and Rubenfeld write most persuasively. When they're discussing the other groups, they are carefully, respectfully, and a little tediously multicultural. When they discuss the Chinese and the Jews, you can almost feel them shrugging off that burden—being politically correct does not sit well with either of them—and their voice becomes at once affectionate, exasperated, and intimately knowledgeable.

The superiority complexes of Jews and Chinese are different from all others. The Jews have seen themselves as God's chosen people for thousands of years and the Chinese are the descendants of those who created and sustained the most advanced civilization in the world for thousands of

years. Those heritages must convey a sense of specialness that goes to the bone. The authors' examples of how they interact with insecurity and impulse control, producing extraordinary drive to succeed and willingness to persevere, are convincing and not to be explained away by the advantages in IQ and temperament that Jews and Chinese may enjoy. Those advantages surely enhance the effectiveness of the drive and the perseverance, but they don't explain the intensity of the motivation.

The Mormons strengthen the authors' argument by offering a natural experiment. There's no reason to think that white Mormons as a group have a genetic advantage in either IQ or impulse control compared to other Americans of British and European descent, but the authors make a persuasive case that they do still have the Triple Package, and that this accounts for the Mormons' conspicuous rise in recent decades.

The concluding chapter, which takes up the question of the Triple Package as it applies to America as a nation, is also convincing. We Americans once were exemplars of the Triple Package, and our performance reflected it. Now we are not. I read Chua's and Rubenfeld's account of the one-time reality of the American Triple Package, and its loss over the last several decades, nodding in agreement all the way through.

Finally, face validity. Surely everyone who has known highly successful people must have some immediate attraction to the Triple Package theory. Without exception, successful individuals whom I have known possessed self-discipline and a capacity for hard work miles above the population mean, and they have quite often carried chips on their shoulders, or have talked about chips that they used to carry when they were younger. For that matter, I see the authors' theory applying to my own life, the first eighteen years of which were spent in a small town in Iowa. I can easily remember my real pride in being from God's country when I got to Harvard—and my deep insecurity about being seen as a naïf from the sticks. "I'll show *them*" is a motive I understand.

Chua and Rubenfeld have not given us a theory that explains everything. Their theory of extraordinary levels of accomplishment should be read alongside others (including, I dare to suggest, my own in *Human Accomplishment*). But in the social sciences, a theory doesn't have to explain everything to be helpful. It's enough that it gives us a way to assemble more pieces of a large jigsaw puzzle, as *The Triple Package* does.

And *The Triple Package* may end up serving another purpose as well. We are on the cusp of a revolution in the social sciences, after which I fear that genetic explanations of group differences will go from being taboo to being far too fashionable. Today, *The Triple Package* has gotten a lot of press because it dared to give us explanations of differences among groups that are not grounded in oppression based on race, class, and gender. In a decade or so, *The Triple Package*'s enduring contribution may be to remind us that culture does indeed explain many important socioeconomic phenomena independently of genes.

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