

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Why do Asian Americans academically outperform Whites? – The cultural explanation revisited[☆]

Airan Liu ^{a, *}, Yu Xie ^{b, c, **}^a University of Michigan, USA^b Princeton University, USA^c Peking University, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 September 2015

Received in revised form 26 January 2016

Accepted 7 March 2016

Available online 10 March 2016

Keywords:

Achievement differences

Asian Americans

Culture

Family SES

Interactive approach

ABSTRACT

We advocate an interactive approach to examining the role of culture and SES in explaining Asian Americans' achievement. We use Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) 2002 baseline data to test our proposition that the cultural orientation of Asian American families is different from that of white American families in ways that mediate the effects of family SES on children's academic achievement. The results support our hypothesis, indicating that: (1) SES's positive effects on achievement are stronger among white students than among Asian-Americans; (2) the association between a family's SES and behaviors and attitudes is weaker among Asian-Americans than among Whites; (3) a fraction of the Asian-White achievement gap can be accounted for by ethnic differences in behaviors and attitudes, particularly ethnic differences in family SES's effects on behaviors and attitudes. We find that Asian Americans' behaviors and attitudes are less influenced by family SES than those of Whites are and that this difference helps generate Asians' premium in achievement. This is especially evident at lower levels of family SES.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Given their higher socioeconomic success than that of other U.S. minority groups and the population at large, Asian Americans have been characterized as a “model minority.” At younger ages, this difference is manifested in Asian Americans' relatively high levels of school performance and educational attainment (Chan, 1991; Kao, 1995). Recent statistics show that, relative to U.S. Whites and other racial/ethnic groups, Asian Americans achieve higher test scores and obtain better grades (Hsia, 1988; Caplan et al., 1991; Sanchirico, 1991; Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Kao, 1995; Fejgin, 1995; Hsin and Xie, 2014), and they are more likely to complete high school and college, to obtain postgraduate degrees, and to attend first-tier universities (Xie and Goyette, 2003; Lee and Zhou, 2014). As educational achievement is highly correlated with labor market outcomes, Asian Americans' academic achievement is viewed as an important factor in their later career success and thus has been of interest to scholars in social stratification.

[☆] This study draws on survey data from the Education Longitudinal Survey 2002 (ELS) conducted by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

* Corresponding author. Population Studies Center, Institute for Social Research, 426 Thompson Street, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106, USA.

** Corresponding author. Department of Sociology, Princeton University, NJ 08544, USA.

E-mail addresses: airanliu@umich.edu (A. Liu), yuxie@princeton.edu (Y. Xie).

Research has established two main explanations for Asian Americans' premium in academic achievement. The first explanation focuses on their advantage in structural resources. Because family socioeconomic status (SES) is perhaps the most important predictor of children's academic achievement (e.g., [Duncan et al., 1972](#)), the relatively high levels of education and income that recent Asian American immigrants have achieved are viewed as an advantage in the provision of educational resources in the home for their children (e.g., [Kao, 1995](#); [Sun, 1998](#); [Sakamoto and Furuichi, 1997, 2002](#)). However, studies have found that family SES alone does not fully account for Asian Americans' higher levels of educational achievement ([Goyette and Xie, 1999](#); [Kao, 1995](#)) and, in particular, that it does not explain the academic achievement of children whose parents immigrated from Southeast Asian countries, most of whom arrived with low levels of human capital and economic resources. Moreover, it has also been observed that even Asian American children from disadvantaged family backgrounds enjoy the Asian premium in academic achievement, suggesting that access to more and better home resources is not the key to their success ([Lee and Zhou, 2014](#)).

The second explanation emphasizes the role of culture. Some scholars have argued that Confucianism exerts an influence on Asian families' strong emphasis on education ([Wong, 1990](#); [Schneider and Lee, 1990](#); [Nagasawa and Espinosa, 1992](#); [Stevenson and Stigler, 1992](#); [Barringer et al., 1993](#); [Jiménez and Horowitz, 2013](#)). Others have posited that the selectivity of recent Asian immigrants to the U.S. contributes to their strong belief in and optimism about the value of education for social mobility ([Sue and Okazaki, 1990](#); [Kao and Tienda, 1998](#); [Xie and Goyette, 2003](#)). It is believed that these cultural differences from Whites shape Asian Americans' behaviors and attitudes in school and equip them with stricter work ethics and higher educational aspirations, all of which benefit their academic achievement ([Hsin and Xie, 2014](#)).

Most existing studies on Asian Americans' achievement premium treat SES and culture as two discrete factors. Implicit in this approach is an assumption that SES and culture influence Asian Americans' achievement in independent and additive ways. However, culture and SES's effects can be interactive rather than additive. Specifically, culture can serve as a moderator of the effects of family's SES on children's educational achievement, which makes family SES's effects on children's educational achievement incomparable across Asian Americans and other groups. In fact, recent qualitative work has hinted at this possibility. For example, [Lee and Zhou \(2014\)](#), in their most recent study, observed that even Asian American children from disadvantaged family backgrounds enjoy the Asian premium in academic achievement, suggesting that the effects of family's SES on achievement may be less significant among Asian Americans than among Whites. Nevertheless, to our best knowledge, no quantitative work has yet systematically examined the potential interactive relationship between culture's and SES's effects on Asian Americans' achievement premium.

In this paper, we propose that cultural factors and family's SES influence Asian Americans' achievement premium interactively and that the cultural orientation of Asian Americans compared to that of white Americans acts as a moderating factor in the effects of SES on educational achievement. In our work, we do not measure culture by variables pertaining to beliefs and values, as has been done in previous research, but we capture the influence of culture by looking at the relationship between family SES on the one hand and achievement and education-related behaviors and attitudes on the other hand. Drawing on prior work by psychologists [Stevenson and Stigler \(1992\)](#), we conjecture that SES has weaker effects on academic achievement for Asians than for Whites in the U.S. If this is true, the achievement difference between Asian Americans and Whites is larger at low than at high levels of SES.

Our study fills a gap in the current literature by examining the heterogeneous effects of family SES on children's academic achievement across Asians and Whites in the U.S. We argue that the weaker association of SES and achievement among Asian Americans relative to Whites epitomizes cultural differences and accounts for much of the observed overall achievement gap. To test our hypotheses, we analyze data from the 2006 Educational Longitudinal Studies (ELS).

2. Family SES vs. culture: two explanations for the Asian-White achievement gap

Currently, there are two main sociological explanations for the achievement differences between Asian-Americans and Whites. The first explanation attributes Asian-Americans' academic success to the socioeconomic, or the structural, advantage of their families and parents. Though most immigrants from Asia to the U.S. prior to World War II arrived to meet low-wage, low-human-capital labor needs, changes since then in immigration laws and in the demand for scientific and technical personnel have meant that more recent Asian immigrants are likely to be well-trained professionals ([Cheng and Bonacich, 1984](#); [Nee and Wong, 1985](#)). While this selection may contribute to the educational achievement of high-SES Asian American immigrants' children ([Barringer et al., 1993](#)), it fails to account for the high levels of achievement among children whose parents immigrated from Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, often arriving with little economic or human capital. In addition, recent studies have found that academic differences between white and Asian American children persist even after controlling for family structural characteristics such as parental education, household income, and family composition ([Harris et al., 2008](#)).

The view that Asian Americans' advantage in educational achievement is rooted not so much in family SES as in the high value placed on education in Asian cultures has gained traction in recent studies. Researchers have presented evidence that Asian American immigrants carry their home countries' pro-educational cultural values with them and that these beliefs shape their daily home practices to the educational advantage of subsequent-generation Asian Americans ([Portes and Zhou, 1993](#); [Zhou and Bankson, 1994](#); [Portes and Fernández-Kelly, 2008](#)). For example, evidence indicates that, compared to parents in other U.S. racial/ethnic groups, Asian American parents are more highly motivated to make sacrifices for their children's education, to put more emphasis on educational effort and attainment, and to have higher standards for children's academic

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/955587>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/955587>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)