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Asian children's verbal development: A comparison of the United States and Australia

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ABSTRACT

Using longitudinal cohort studies from Australia and the United States, we assess the pervasiveness of the Asian academic advantage by documenting White-Asian differences in verbal development from early to middle childhood. In the United States, Asian children begin school with higher verbal scores than Whites, but their advantage erodes over time. The initial verbal advantage of Asian American children is partly due to their parent's socioeconomic advantage and would have been larger had it not been for their mother's English deficiency. In Australia, Asian children have lower verbal scores than Whites at age 4, but their scores grow a faster rate and converge towards those of Whites by age 8. The initial verbal disadvantage of Asian Australian children is partly due to their mother's English deficiency and would have been larger had it not been for their Asian parent's educational advantage. Asian Australian children's verbal scores grow at a faster pace, in part, because of their parent's educational advantage.

1. Introduction

Asian Americans have been heralded as "model minorities" because of their educational and economic success (Sakamoto et al., 2009; Goyette and Xie, 1999). This perception is largely rooted in the academic success of Asians Americans in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields. Specifically, prior studies have consistently shown that Asian American students score higher on standardized tests of mathematical abilities, enroll in four year universities in higher rates, are overrepresented in STEM fields; and have higher rates of college completion (Eaton and Dembo, 1997; Kao and Thompson, 2003; Xie and Goyette, 2003). The Asian academic advantage is generally attributed to the socioeconomic status of Asian parents and to Asian immigrant culture, which assigns greater symbolic and instrumental value to education (Kao, 1995; Sakamoto et al., 2009; Sue and Okasaki, 1990).

Interestingly, the verbal performance of Asian Americans follows a different pattern. Specifically, studies show that Asian American children start out with a verbal advantage over White children at the time of school entry, but this advantage declines during the first few years of elementary school (Fryer and Levitt, 2004, 2006; Goyette and Xie, 1999; Han, 2008; Stiefel et al., 2003). By the time they reach high school, Asian American children are doing less well than Whites from similar socio-economic backgrounds (Glick and White, 2003). With few exceptions, this trajectory of verbal development is observed consistently across different Asian subgroups in the United States, although there is considerable heterogeneity

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in modes of incorporation and consequent socioeconomic conditions within the Asian American population (Han, 2008). The absence of a clear Asian academic advantage in verbal performance suggests that Asian children – even those who are socioeconomically advantaged and living in a country with immigrant admission policies conducive to higher levels of English proficiency- may be at a relative disadvantage in terms of their verbal development because they are more likely than Whites to grow up in families where English is not the primary language.

Despite great interest in the academic performance of Asian Americans, including their verbal development, the question of why Asian American children lose their initial advantage in verbal performance has remained largely unexamined. In addition, most studies of Asian children's academic performance have been conducted in the United States, and thus, we do not know if the pattern of verbal development observed in the United States extends to other countries as well.

To address this gap in the literature, we use growth curve models to compare the trajectories of verbal development of children born to native-born White and Asian immigrant mothers and to ascertain the role that parent's socioeconomic status and English proficiency play in explaining their trajectories. Specifically, we ask (1) whether differences in parents' socioeconomic status can account for the advantage of Asian American children at the time they enter kindergarten, (2) whether differences in parents' English proficiency can account for the relative decline of Asian children during elementary school, and (3) whether the patterns observed in the United States extends to Asian children born in Australia. All analyses are conducted separately for the various Asian subgroups (i.e., East, Southeast, and South Asians) in recognition of the vast heterogeneity in socioeconomic conditions and academic outcomes of children who belong to the various Asian subgroups.

Australia is the selected country for our cross-national comparison. As former British colonies, the United States and Australia share the same cultural and historical roots, including the use of English as their official language. Moreover, Asian immigrants in Australia and the United States are generally high skilled immigrants who originate from similar regions within Asia, although their socioeconomic standing and English proficiency may differ due to variations in the immigrant admission criteria of the two countries.

2. Background

Scholars have recently begun to study the academic performance of Asian American children during early childhood as a way to gain insights into when the Asian academic advantage emerges and how it changes over time (Fryer and Levitt, 2004, 2006; Han, 2008; Wang, 2008). This body of work finds that Asian children have a verbal advantage over their White counterparts at school entry, but this advantage fades over time (Fryer and Levitt, 2004, 2006; Han, 2008; Sun, 2011; Wang, 2008). Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), Fryer and Levitt (2004, 2006) find that Asian American children score considerably higher than White children in reading assessments at the time they enter kindergarten. The gap, however, has become smaller by first grade, and has disappeared entirely by third grade (Fryer and Levitt, 2004, 2006). Han (2008) disaggregates the population of Asians into regional subgroups and finds that the pattern of White-Asian difference in verbal development is similar across Asian subgroups despite the considerable heterogeneity in modes of incorporation and consequent socioeconomic differentials across these groups. In fact, the only difference is observed in the size of the initial disadvantage as well as the pace of growth.

2.1. Do differences in parents' socioeconomic status explain the advantage of Asian American children at school entry?

The Asian-American academic advantage is generally attributed to the socioeconomic status of Asian parents (Kao, 1995; Sakamoto et al., 2009; Sue and Okasaki, 1990). According to this explanation, Asian parents are better educated and have higher income than parents in other race/ethnic groups because Asian immigrants are typically recruited into the United States as high-skilled laborers (Xie and Goyette, 2004; Sakamoto et al., 2009). Asian children perform better in school than children in other groups because their parents' more favorable socioeconomic background gives them greater access to educational resources and shields them from the environmental toxins and maternal stressors arising due to economic hardship (Duncan and Magnuson, 2005; Kao and Thompson, 2003; Sakamoto et al., 2009).

Empirical work, however, provides mixed accounts about the extent to which differences in parents' socioeconomic status account for the verbal advantage of Asian American children at school entry. A study conducted by Sun (2011) using the ECLS-B shows that differences in parent's socioeconomic status (e.g., parent's education, family income, maternal employment) explain a portion (i.e., 15 percent) of the gap in verbal performance between Whites and East Asians at age 4, but East Asian children continue to have an educational advantage over Whites even after accounting for differences in socioeconomic status. In contrast, studies conducted by Fryer and Levitt (2004, 2006) find that socioeconomic differences (e.g., SES composite scores, mother's WIC receipt) account for very little of the gap in verbal scores between Whites and all Asians at the time of entry into kindergarten. The contrasting accounts may be due to the fact that Sun's study only includes East Asians, while Fryer and Levitt's study includes all Asians. Han (2008) shows that while parent's socioeconomic characteristics explain a considerable portion of the differences in verbal performance between White and East Asian/Indian children, but they account for little of the differences in verbal performance between White and Southeast Asian children. In recognition of the heterogeneity in the impact of parent's socioeconomic characteristics on verbal differences between Whites and Asian subgroups at the time of school entry, our study disaggregates Asians into various subgroups,