

A comparative study of family characteristics of Anglo-American and Asian-American high achievers

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The purpose of this study is to examine the similarities and differences in family characteristics of Asian-American and Anglo-American high achievers. Sixty matched parents were interviewed concerning four areas. The findings suggest that the family life of Anglo-American students tend to be less structured and provide less formal educational experience for children after school and on weekends. Similarities between these two groups include high parental expectation, concerned parents, stable family environment and close-knit family relationships.

Family characteristics, high achievers, Anglo-American, Asian-American, comparative study

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, the academic achievement of Asian-American children have been recognised not only by classroom teachers, school counsellors, and administrators, but also by the general public through the mass media. Successful stories of Indo-Chinese refugee children are frequently presented to the public as, for example, on such occasions as the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in 1984 and 1992 respectively. Their high achievement is reflected by their numbers as recipients of merit Scholarships, Westinghouse Science Talent Search Awards, and scholarships from leading universities, and has attracted the attention of many educators, sociologists who are focusing on the potential variables contributing to these accomplishments.

Facts regarding the academic commitment of these Asian-American students and their high scores in mathematics and science tests have been well documented. Asian-American students frequently scored higher than other students, particularly in the areas of mathematics and science (Fretchling et al, 1983; Hsia, 1991; Okada, 1984; and Peng et al, 1994). Several variables have been considered by researchers investigating this phenomenon:- attitude toward, school, parental expectation, cognitive development, gender difference, extra-curricular activities and parent-child relationships (Campbell et al, 1984; Hsia, 1991; Okada, 1984; Peng et al, 1994). Many educators and laymen have speculated that the accomplishments of Asian-American students are contributed to by their unique cultural traits in the above-mentioned areas and their traditional value system, which stresses the significance of education. Some characteristics of the learners, their parents, and their lifestyles have been examined by researchers (Peng et al, 1994). Yet the cause-effect relationship has not been investigated.

In order to determine whether the high achievements of Asian-American students are related to their cultural heritage, especially in the areas of family life, the researcher compared the family characteristics of high achievers of both Asian and Anglo-American students. The hypothesis of this study is that the process behaviours of Asian families producing high achievers are different from those of comparable Anglo families in some manipulable family variables.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

There is a body of research literature that addressed the topic of academic achievement and its relationship to various factors, including motivation, family environment and intelligence quotient. As the United States becomes more culturally varied, questions arise as to whether these relationships are consistent across cultures. This particular aspect of academic achievement research is still in its infancy. Most of the studies focus on either black or white subjects, and their results and conclusions are confined to one ethnic group with little control on the variance of cultural force. Thus, a cross-culture would be desirable to yield more valid information on the factors contributing to children's academic achievements.

Since influences at home are greater than those at school in effecting achievement (Conner, 1984, and Dolar, 1993), the researcher has narrowed the scope of study to the family characteristics of high achievers. From the reviewed literature, some familial elements are found to be influential on high achievers, especially in those of low-income black families.

The attitudes of parents toward education and the expectations of school teachers have made quite an impact on the learning results of their children (Gabel, et al, 1987). Feldman and Theiss' study (1992) reported that the more parents and students expected from school, the higher achievement the students attained. The more the parents expressed concern for their children's progress in school, the more the teacher matched that attitude (Goldman, 1983). Furthermore, the parents' belief in the use of schooling as enhancement for the child's future also contributed to his or her chances of success in school (Durkin, 1994). Parents often kept close contact with their children's teachers to insure the children's higher levels of achievement. The awareness of parents concerning the school program, no matter what their income, is conducive to high achievement (Scheinfeld, 1993; and Shade 1978). This parental contact with the school, however, is not always appreciated by children (Iverson, et al, 1991). Prior to the teenage years, the older the children are, the more they enjoy the extra parental attention. Once in high school, these children prefer to have more self-control and more autonomy concerning their school work.

Besides their expectation of school, the expectation parents have of their children also play an important role in children's achievement (Peng, et al, 1994). Such parental concern for achievement is reflected in pressure from the home and often leads to a close parent-child relationship (Shade, 1978). Shade's study (1978) found that the interaction between parents and their children has more to do with the child's success than does the socio-economic level of the family. The parents' expressions of warmth, support, interest, affection, and encouragement were found to have a great impact on high achievers from low-income black families (Dolan, 1993). The assistance of parents in establishing performance goals and in giving guidance with perceived problems is another trait common to black high-achieving students with a low socio-economic background (Shade, 1978).

Parents' expectations of education, teachers and children, and their relationships with their children, directly or indirectly often affect the type of extra-curricular activities a child engages in after school (Shade, 1978). Peng and others (1994) have found that Asian students were more likely to participate in honorary or subject matter clubs than in vocational educational clubs, church activities or athletics. In addition, Asian children tend to make friends with people who have similar racial and cultural backgrounds, a tendency that becomes stronger with age (Hsia, 1991). The type of after-school activities a child engages in and the friends a child associates with naturally have a considerable degree of influence on academic performance. For example, Asia subjects in Peng's study were likely to out-perform their white counterparts. The study of Riley-Johnson and others (1993) indicated that children who watched less television tended to have

better grades in school and developed higher IQ's thus parents could contribute to their children's academic success by limiting time spent watching television.

The effects of time spent on homework after school, like television watching, is another controversial issue debated by many educators. Keith (1992) reports, "An increase in time spent on homework has a positive effect on a student's grades in high school." By studying successful black readers in urban schools, Durkin (1994) has found that these children had help from family members, usually mothers and older siblings.

The maintenance of some structure and order for children is conducive to their school performance (Shade, 1978). Regularity in daily life and family stability can be considered part of this variable. However, divorce is not found to be as detrimental to children's achievement as previously thought. Hommand (1989) reports that divorce only affects boys' mathematics scores. For immigrants, the length of time living in the United States also affected their verbal skills and scores on all tests. Peng et al (1994), found that children are usually able to overcome the language barrier after residing in the United States or six or more years.

Other variables such as parents' education and number of siblings might also affect children's achievement in school. However, no conclusive results have been reported.

METHOD

In order to examine possible cultural factors, this study set out to compare the family characteristics of both Asian and Anglo high achievers whose scores on achievement tests were over the ninetieth percentile.

Sample

In order to control the socio-economic factor, all the subjects were selected from three schools located in a middle and upper class suburban neighbourhood. In this particular school district in north-east Texas, over 10 per cent of the student body is Asian-American. Stratified random sampling was employed and 30 students were first selected from the Asian-American population in the ninetieth percentile or above on their *Texas Assessment of Academic Skills*. Anglo students were then chosen to match with the Asian sample according to sex, grade level and scores on achievement tests. All 60 students were selected from Grades 5 through 11 with the average grade level of 7.4. The students consisted of 32 girls and 28 boys. The Asian-American sample was made up of students of Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese and East Indian extraction. Sixty per cent of the mothers of those in the sample were employed outside the home at the time of the interview. Half of the Asian-American subjects were foreign born with an average of 5.3 years on arrival in the United States. Two-thirds of the sample had only one sibling. Coincidentally, six Asian families and six Anglo families were headed by a single mother.

Procedure

The data were collected through structured interviews of selected children's parents held at either the sample's home or the researcher's office as they preferred. In the Anglo sample, two-thirds of the interviews, 17 were with mothers only, seven were with fathers only and six were with both parents.

All the interviews were conducted without the children. The researcher was always well-received, and parents were very co-operative in answering each question in detail. The interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes. Some of the parents were so concerned about education that they took advantage of this opportunity to discuss the educational needs and problems of their offspring.

Instrumentation

In addition to the demographic data form, the researcher used an open-ended questionnaire for the interview. This questionnaire consisted of 17 items related to (a) parents' attitude toward education, their expectation of school, teachers and their children; (b) parents' contact with schools and interaction with their children; (c) children's after-school activities; and (d) lifestyle of the family.

Limitation

Since the subjects were selected from a homogenous middle and upper-class environment, a majority (60%) of the families were headed by well-educated parents with a double income. It is possible that the results of this study are affected by the socio-economic status of the interviewed parents. Since parents participated voluntarily, those who declined to be interviewed may have been less concerned with their children's education. Such lack of voluntary participation is often seen in social science research studies and is unavoidable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented according to the areas covered by the reviewed literature and the 17-item questionnaire.

Parents' Attitudes Toward Education and Expectations of Those Involved

All the parents interviewed express a deep interest in their children's school and valued education highly. Six Anglo parents even indicate their support of the "back to the basics" movement in Texas. Asian parents are less vocal about the educational goals and policies in the United States. In general they are pleased with what schools have offered their children and what teachers have taught in the classroom. All of them indicate that their children are interested in school and learning. Such comments are voiced by 80 per cent of the Anglo parents. Twenty per cent of the Anglo parents complain that their children become bored in class due to poor teaching techniques and unchallenging learning materials. Such discrepancy can be the result of the different cultural background; Asian parents tend to respect teachers more than the Anglo parents do and avoid a challenge to the teacher's authority. However, Asian parents show stronger feeling than Anglo parents concerning the value of education for their children's success because they were willing to commit all their resources to insure the best education available for their offspring.

Different degrees of parental expectation for their children are found between Asian and Anglo-American parents. All Asian parents report that they expect their children to make an average grade of "A". Only two-thirds of the Anglo-American parents expect straight "As" from their children, while the remaining one-third are willing to accept "Bs" as the minimum grade. Four Anglo-American students reportedly are not serious about their report cards. All the Anglo parents are pleased with their children's performance in school, while half of the Asian parents feel that their children do not perform well all the time. This might demonstrate that Asian parents are more demanding and have a higher expectation for their children. It is possible that this attitude relates to the educational level of these parents; all the Asian parents have college degrees as compared with 56 per cent of the Anglo parents.

In the areas of career choice, some variations are found between Asian and Anglo parents. Nearly half of the Asian parents (46%) hope their children would choose the medical field compared with 29% of the Anglo's. It is possible that due to their experience as immigrants the Asian parents realise that jobs in the medical field would be more secure and would encounter less interpersonal conflicts. When the parents were asked whether they had attempted to direct their children toward

certain occupations, only two Asian parents and 12 Anglo parents said, "No". It would appear that most Asian parents still preserve the traditional attitude that parents would play a major role in their children's education and career choice (Stigler, et al, 1992). therefore, they try very hard to assert their opinions and to exert an influence on their children's future occupation. On the contrary, individualism is highly marked and valued by Anglo parents and personal choice is generally well respected.

Parents' Interaction with School and Children

Both Asian and Anglo parents are well informed and knowledgeable about what is going on in school, such as school work, projects, social activities, and various academic competitions. this is a major factor in children's success in school (Dolan, 1993). Yet Anglo parents make more school visitations and contracts with teachers than Asian parents. this is a very desirable phenomenon as the study of Gabel and others point out (1987). It seemed that Anglo parents are more active in school functions than Asian parents who assume a supporting role. the busy working schedule of both immigrant parents, the language barrier and a reserved of shy cultural nature all contribute to these behavioural patterns.

Nevertheless, these minor differences seem to have little impact on the relationship between parents and their children. Half of the Asian parents indicate that they are always involved in their children's homework and projects while only one-third of the Anglo's are so involved. Fifty-seven percent of the Anglo parents express the opinion that their children are either very independent or are only given assistance as needed. Only a little over one-third (36%) of the Asian parents consider that their children belong in this category. Asian parents traditionally feel obligated to assist their children in any way they can (Stigler, et al, 1992). This parental commitment carries over into non-academic activities as well.

When the selected parents were asked "In what area(s) do you feel that your child is more influenced by peers than by you?", 45 per cent of the Asian parents claim none. Thus, thanks to close parent-child "team-work", these parents still have an influence upon their children's social development and maintain more control than do the child's peers in the areas of clothes, courses of study, food preference and extra-curricular activities. Eighty-six per cent of the Anglo parents reveal that their children are more influenced by their peers in the area of clothing. It is interesting to note that only 50 per cent of the Asia parents give the same response. In general, Asian parents seem to maintain more control over their children than Anglo parents do. Such a behavioural pattern contradicts the findings of Scheinfeld (1993). His research indicate s that low-income, black low achievers have more maternal constraints. it is very possible that parental SES plays a part in such differences.

The parent-child relationship is also disclosed when the parents describe their daily routine activities. Ninety per cent of the interviewed families have supper together, except when there is a scheduled conflict involving sports practice or music lessons. In two families from East India the father regularly eats separately. No other significant differences are found between the Asian and Anglo families with respect to daily activities. in comparing weekend activities, it is found that Asian families tend to be more regular, rigid, and task-orientated than the Anglo families. Cultural activities, private music lessons and language school are mentioned more by Asian parents as a major portion of their children's weekend activities. Anglo parents tend to provide children with a larger variety of experiences which are not only flexible but also fun, such as shopping, going to movies, boat repair, and so on. However, regardless of the specific nature of weekend activities, it is found that both Asian and Anglo, at least one of the mentioned activities involve the entire family.

Children's After-School Activities

The extra-curricular activities listed by the interviewed parents are different for the Asian and Anglo children. Music lessons rank first among Asian sample followed by sports. Sports are first for the Anglo children followed by church activities. It appears that Asian children follow a more individualised pursuit while Anglo children lean towards group-orientated venture, such as drill team, debate and swimming.

Confucianism greatly influences the Asian culture, since it values the mind more than the body. Efforts to refine an individual's mind have won greater attention. Some intellectual pursuits of Asian children are related to their ethnic heritage. The Asian children's individualised extra-curricular experience may have a certain effect on interaction with friends after school. If the frequency of phone calls from or visits by peers is any indication, the Asian child has less social contact than the Anglo child. An explanation for this might be the busy after-school schedule which limits the social life of the Asian child. The cause-effect of Asian children's social skills is not clearly identified, yet it is often observed by teachers (Campbell, et al, 1984).

All but one of the parents consider homework the major after-school activity, with the number of hours spent varying according to the age of the child. Some of the children start their homework right after school while others wait until evening. Since homework is given priority, television watching is limited to an average of one hour per day for all children, much the same for Asian or Anglo. This result supports the reviewed research on homework and television watching (Keith, 1992).

On weekends, the activities engaged in by Asian and Anglo students include all cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains with a different degree of emphasis in each domain; Asians tend to engage in activities related to cognitive learning while Anglos are more interested in affective and psychomotor development. Although all children are expected to help with household chores, Asian children are usually assigned less responsibilities than their Anglo counterparts. This difference reflects the cultural characteristics of both groups; since disciplining the mind is the top priority for educated Asians, one's labour is considered less worthy. In fact, Asian parents tend to avoid bothering children with household chores and would rather they spend more time in study (Stigler, 1992).

Lifestyle

Regardless of parents' marital status, most of the families are very stable; 30 per cent of the families had not moved while ten per cent had moved twice since the child began school. It is interesting to note that eight out of 12 single mothers do not intend to remarry during the child-rearing process; they want to avoid any more major changes in the children's lifestyle. Actually, Fowler and Richards (1988) pointed out that the father's absence did not have a great impact on children's academic achievement.

Children benefited from a regular lifestyle with a feeling of stability and sense of control. Similar results have been found in studies on black high achievers (Durkin, 1994). The children studied tended to set goals and plan for their future. Even on weekends, most of them (63%) vary their bedtime by only one hour. Their regular lifestyle is consistent concerning meal times as well. Most of the children (95%) have breakfast every morning; the exceptions are two Anglo girls; one wants to control weight and the other often left no time for breakfast after fixing her hair. Generally speaking, no significant difference was found between the Asian and Anglo families in this area.

CONCLUSION

Although minor differences and variation in parenting style are found in child rearing, basically both Asian and Anglo parents in the United States share a similar value system; actually there are more similarities than differences. Both groups are concerned, warm, interested and supportive parents and work to maintain a close relationship with their offspring. Divergence in parental expectation and control seems to have little impact on children's achievements. It is unclear whether the parental expectations asserted by the Asian parents have actually promoted their children's achievement. In other words, it is questionable whether those identified Asian high achievers could have reached the academic excellence without parental push and assistance. According to several studies, children's grades can be improved with parents' support and assistance (Comer, 1984; Gabel, 1987; Goldman, 1983). Perhaps this explains why the selected Asian children are over-achievers. A stable lifestyle might be another major contributing factor to high achievement in school. In this study, parents have demonstrated their concern and support by making a special effort to maintain an even lifestyle for their children.

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