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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship between students' level of interest in maintaining their cultural identity and their academic achievement. Subjects were 105 United States-born Chinese-American and Korean-American high school students attending two public high schools in Southern California. The two groups represented the largest minority group in the community. Subjects responded to a questionnaire on their family background and their interest, awareness, and views on cultural identity. Results indicate that those who valued the acculturation process, adapting to the mainstream culture while preserving their heritage, had a superior grade point average to those who were most interested in the assimilation process, adopting the values and lifestyle of the dominant culture. It is concluded that curriculum and instruction should focus on helping students develop within their culture while exposing them to new ideas. Contains 21 references. (MSE)

The Relationship Between Cultural Identity and Academic Achievement of Asian American Students

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Abstract

This study attempted to answer the question: Is there a relationship between the students' level of interest in maintaining their cultural identity and their academic achievement? The subjects for this study were 105 United States-born Asian-American students attending public high schools in Southern California. The study found that those who valued the acculturation process, adapting to the mainstream culture while preserving their heritage, had superior grade point average than those who were most interested in the assimilation process, adopting the values and lifestyles of the dominant culture. This study has important implications in education--that curriculum and instruction should focus on helping students develop in their culture while exposing them to new ideas.

The Relationship Between Cultural Identity and Academic Achievement of Asian-American Students

Despite vast cultural differences among Asian-Americans, the American society has generally regarded Asian-Americans as a homogenous group. In the minds of many Americans, Asian-Americans are either immigrants or refugees, who share common values, interests, and orientations amongst themselves. The typical perception of Asian-Americans is one based on the generalization that Asian-Americans defy trends in American culture, opting to maintain their cultural heritage.

There is a prevalent stereotype in the American society that Asian American students are high achievers; hence, the term, model minority. Although it is true that Asian-Americans are generally more successful in education than other minority groups--measured in terms of SAT scores and the percentage of Asian-Americans in higher education--there is growing evidence to suggest that not all Asian-American students are doing well in school. Rumbaut and Ima (1988) found that among the Southeast Asian students, the Khmer and the Lao had a grade point average (GPA) below that of the majority (white) students, whereas the GPA of the Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese students was well above the average of the majority students. Recent studies (e.g., Trueba, Cheng, & Ima, 1993) seem to point in the direction that there is a need to clarify conceptual findings by examining intragroup differences within the Asian-American population. That is, academic achievement of Asian-Americans can no longer be predicted based simply on the notion that all Asian-Americans share a common culture. The implicit message is that socio- and psycho-cultural dynamics of Asian-American students are as complex as any other ethnic groups. As such, studies related to educational achievement of Asian-American students must go beyond the rudimentary task of developing conceptual framework based on collective descriptions.

The term "model minority" used in reference to Asian-Americans, emerged during the 1960s in the midst of the civil rights movement (Osajima, 1988; Sue & Kitano, 1973). The term was coined as a hegemonic devise, attempting to divert attention away from the racial and ethnic tension of the period to laud the economic successful of Asian-Americans who were excluded from the movement. The term was not used to recognize the important contribution of Asian-Americans to the American society. On the contrary, the model minority stereotype was propagated by the media to subdue the increasing challenges and demands from the African-American and other minority groups for equal rights. The most common rhetoric in this debate was that racial inequality was really not the cause of social hierarchy. The media often cited Asian-Americans as an example of a model group who achieved educational and social prosperity in the absence of government assistance or intervention in the schools and in employment. Thus, Asian-Americans were used to delegitimize the issue of racial inequality by representing them as a model group who were able to seek educational and employment opportunities through individual effort without the need for improvements in the educational and social systems of the United States.

According to many scholars (e.g., Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Hsu, 1971; Kitano, 1969; Mordkowitz & Ginsberg, 1987; Sung, 1987) Asian Americans are more successful in school because their culture emphasizes the value of education. In addition, the family-oriented nature of Asian cultures in which academic success is equated with upholding the family honor is seen as facilitating conditions for educational success. Suzuki (1980), one of the first to examine educational achievement from a historical cultural perspective, posited that academic success of Asian-Americans was a reaction to social stratification that existed in the United States: Exclusion of Asian-Americans from social participation forced parents to push for education for their children to overcome the barriers. More recent studies (E.g., Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Mark & Chih, 1982;

Sue & Okazaki, 1990) seem to support Suzuki's theory that perception of education as a key to social mobility is a contributing factor in academic achievement of Asian-Americans. S. Lee (1996) found that among the different Asian-American student groups, the group that held the highest regard for education as the most essential for social success had superior academic achievement than those groups who did not see school as the key to upward mobility in the society. Whereas the former group felt obligated to do their best in school, the latter group placed little interest in education.

In explaining the different academic achievement among minority groups, Ogbu (1989) distinguished between voluntary and involuntary minorities. According to this theory, voluntary immigrants do better in school because they accept the host culture. This theory also posits that voluntary immigrants believe that their future is determined by their ability to overcome social and economic hurdles through academic success. Studies by Mark and Chih (1982) and Lee (1996) seem to support this theory: They found that parents of Asian-American students often reminded their children to excel in school to overcome racial prejudice and discrimination. In other words, empowerment through education was perceived by Asian-American parents as most essential for social mobility. Considering that a relatively high percentage (5.3%) of Asian-Americans enter colleges and universities, Asian-American parents seem to have a great influence on their children's educational interests. Involuntary immigrants are thought to reject the dominant culture because they perceive the mainstream culture to be a threat to their own identity. Thus, according to this theory, involuntary immigrants may regard school success as giving up their culture at the expense of assimilating to the dominant culture, to which school is associated with.

Common in literature related to academic achievement of Asian-Americans is the assumption that Asian-Americans are a monolithic group. For example, in explaining intergroup differences in academic achievement, Ogbu classifies all Asian-Americans as

belonging to one group. That is, according to Ogbu's framework, fifth-generation Asian-Americans are no different from the recent immigrants, including refugees from Southeast Asia--both belong to the voluntary immigrant group. Although this framework provides interesting insights to the relationship between culture and academic achievement, it fails to consider intragroup and individual differences. That is, why are some groups within the Asian-American population, presumably who came to the United States voluntarily to seek improved livelihood, doing better than others? And, why do some Asian-American students excel while others barely make it through high school? Are we to assume that all Asian-Americans will be successful because they were/are voluntary immigrants?

Caudill and De Vox (1956) were among the first to examine educational achievement of Asian-Americans from a cultural perspective. Based on their research on Japanese-Americans, they reported that Japanese-Americans are more successful because their cultural characteristics are those highly regarded by the mainstream society. Kitano (1969) and Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore (1991) all concluded that Asian-Americans are more successful in the schools because of compatibility of their culture with the middle-class American culture. Although these postulations provide interesting perspectives, they seem to reinforce the "model minority" stereotype by assuming that all Asian-Americans share similar cultural backgrounds. For example, what do Hmong culture have in common with Korean or Japanese culture? Or, do middle-class Americans really have high regard for Cambodian culture? Studies based on the stereotypical treatment of Asian-Americans as a homogeneous group ignore the importance of adaptive strategies and other psychological and social variables that may influence the learning experiences of Asian-American students.

Gibson (1988) observed that among Punjabi students, there was a positive correlation between their arrival in the United States and school success: the longer the

students have been in the United States, the better the performance. Gibson's studies clearly suggest that appropriate behavior cannot be the most important determinant factor of academic achievement. That is, considering that assimilation is more likely for those students who have been exposed longer to the dominant culture than those who have recently arrived to the United States, or at the least, there would be more cultural similarities between mainstream students and those students who have been in the United States longer than with the newcomers to the United States, theories based on behavior and cultural compatibility do not adequately explain the educational achievement of Asian-American students. For example, if we were to accept the notion that Asian-American students do better in school than other minority students because there is "cultural match" with the mainstream culture, it predicates not only that Asian-American students share the same culture, but that there is no transmission of Asian and Asian-American culture from one generation to another. This is unlikely to be the case as culture transforms over time, particularly when one culture comes in contact with another culture.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between cultural identity and academic achievement among Chinese-American and Korean-American students. That is, this study attempted to answer the question: Is there a correlation between the students' level of interest in and awareness for cultural heritage and the level of academic achievement? Despite the model minority image often purported by the media, not all Asian-Americans are successful in school. In fact, Lee (1996) observed a growing number of "new wave" Asian-American students who expressed very little interest in education. This study investigated the possibility that educational achievement may be related to the students' involvement, interest, and awareness of their ancestral culture.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 105 male and female students of Chinese (n = 57) and Korean (n = 48) heritage enrolled in two high schools in an upper middle-class community of Orange County, California. All the subjects, between the ages of 15 and 17, were enrolled in regular classes. Both schools offered courses in Chinese and Korean as foreign language classes. The two groups represented the largest minority group (approximately 20%) in the community. All subjects were born in the United States.

Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of the following 10 closed-ended (yes or no) questions were distributed in classes prior to beginning their lessons. Questions surveyed the subjects' background, interest, awareness, and views on cultural identity.

1. Have you attended a Chinese or Korean language/culture school for more than one year while you were in middle or high school?
2. Do you know much about the history/culture of China or Korea?
3. Have you studied Chinese or Korean for more than one year at your high school?
4. Do you regularly attend (at least once a month) Chinese- or Korean-related cultural events/activities, including religious functions?
5. Do you speak Chinese or Korean in the home and/or with relatives/friends?
6. Are you interested in learning more about your cultural heritage?
7. Do you feel it is important for you to maintain your cultural identity?
8. Do you feel your culture/heritage contributes to the American culture/heritage?
9. Do you feel there should be diverse cultures represented in the U.S.?
10. Do you feel people should have a greater interest in their own ethnic culture/heritage than in the mainstream culture?

In addition to the questionnaire, Asian-American students were observed and interviewed during lunchtime for a total of approximately 20 hours.

Procedures

A research assistant distributed and collected the questionnaires. The research assistant also provided instructions prior to administering the questionnaire. The investigator personally observed and interviewed the students. Interviews were recorded on a cassette tape with the subjects' permission.

Results

Responding "yes" to the questions on the survey indicated orientation towards acculturation, an additive process of adapting to the mainstream culture while preserving the heritage culture. Conversely, responding "no" on the survey suggested orientation towards assimilation, adopting the values, behaviors, beliefs, and lifestyles of the dominant culture.

The subjects' GPA in relation to the number of affirmative responses were as below.

Table 1

GPA in Relation to Number of Affirmative Responses

Subjects (N = 105)	No. of "Yes"	GPA (M = 3.54)
2	0	3.17
2	3	2.98
6	4	3.19
10	5	3.25
17	6	3.27
23	7	3.58

19	8	3.76
17	9	3.78
9	10	3.81

Although there was a wide range, 0-10, the majority of the subjects (about two-thirds) responded affirmatively to six to nine questions. Using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) to find the strength of the relationship, at the critical value of .05 level, at 96 degrees of freedom (df), the correlation (r) was .94. Thus, the statistical analysis indicated that there was a strong correlation between the students' GPA and the extent to which the subjects showed an interest in their cultural heritage. The level of significance for a two-tailed test at this level for a sample size of 105 is .201. Hence, the results revealed that students who had a greater awareness for and interest in developing biculturalism had superior grade point average than their counterparts who had less interest in their heritage. The correlation was very significant, statistically.

It is interesting to note that least number of subjects (38%) indicated that they knew much about the history/culture of China or Korea. This is in sharp contrast to the 90% who responded that they were interested in learning more about their cultural heritage. This strongly suggests that Asian-American students were not receiving adequate amount of exposure to Asian history and culture in and outside the home.

Discussion

As one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States, Asian-Americans are expected to account for 10 percent of the total population of the United States by 2040 (Gonzalez, 1990). In California, Asian-American students already outnumber African-American students. Yet, the model minority stereotype seems to have desensitized the need for inclusion of Asian-Americans on discussions of race and education: Asian-Americans are often treated as outsiders needing no special

consideration. The results of this study seem to suggest that there are indeed intragroup and individual differences in academic achievement among Asian-American students. The study found that there was a strong correlation between the students' cultural interest/identity and their academic achievement.

Suzuki (1980) stated that Asian-American students receive favorable evaluation from their teachers due to compatibility between the Asian culture and the teachers' expectations. That is, certain Asian cultural characteristics, such as obedience, conformity, and respect for authority were looked upon favorably by teachers. In fact, Suzuki argued that teachers may assign good grades to Asian-American students based on behavior rather than on academic performance. Both Goldstein (1985) and Lee (1996) found that teachers' evaluation of Asian-American students were often based on observable characteristics and not on actual academic achievement. According to E. Lee and M. Lee (1980), acculturation vis-a-vis assimilation plays an important factor in academic achievement of Asian-American students because it allows them to exhibit those behaviors favored by teachers. Although these studies are helpful in understanding how behavior can influence teachers' assessment of students, they seem to discredit the achievement of Asian-American students by generating yet another overly-simplified proposition--that behavior is what sets Asian-American students apart from other students. These findings do not substantiate (a) why some Asian-Americans fail while other Asian-Americans are successful, (b) why Asian-Americans generally score higher than other minority students on standardized tests in which observable behavior has no influence on the outcome, and (c) why grades based on behavior are Asian-American-specific.

The results of this study have revealed that there are indeed intragroup differences among United States-born Asian-American students. Those students who had greater experience and interest in developing biculturalism had higher academic achievement

than those who were less interested in their cultural heritage. Thus, the deeply-rooted stereotype of Asian-Americans as a group who adheres to common cultural values and practices has been invalidated by this study: Some students placed a high value on acculturation while others were interested primarily in assimilating to the mainstream culture. Interestingly, the results revealed a positive correlation between the students' cultural identity and their academic achievement.

This study was an attempt to examine educational achievement of Asian-Americans from a cross-cultural perspective. That is, rather than attempting to devise an overly-simplified concept based on collective treatment of Asian-Americans as a group, this study examined the issue of educational attainment from a psycho-cultural perspective of Asian-Americans as individuals. This study has found that Asian-American students' cultural experiences and interests vary, and that these differences may influence their academic performance. Thus, the implication from this study is that the educational community must recognize the significance of cultural diversity within the Asian-American population. The assumption that all Asian-Americans share a common culture can potentially pose problems for those students who do not conform to the stereotypical views. Also, schools must embrace the positive qualities of the Asian and Asian-American culture. Asian and Asian-American culture have been virtually ignored in the educational system. This study has found that students who exhibit a greater interest in their heritage tend to do better in school.

There is no doubt that inclusion of Asian and Asian-American experiences, as well as recognition of the importance of their presence in the schools will empower Asian-American students' participation in the learning process. It is hypothesized that students who had greater interest in their cultural identity had higher academic achievement than their counterparts not because of their behavior but because they had greater motivation for diversified learning experience and interest. That is, these students

had superior cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective strategies to help them do better in school. Hence, rather than emulating their peers to conform to the norm of the dominant culture (cultural compensatory strategy), these students were interested in empowering themselves by developing awareness and pride in their heritage while undergoing personal experiences in the mainstream culture (cultural enrichment strategy). Thus, in this dichotomy, students utilizing the cultural enrichment strategy draw upon the positive qualities of at least two cultures from which to adapt to the learning needs of the classroom. On the contrary, cultural compensatory strategy is one in which students are placed at a disadvantage due to their interest in assimilating to the mainstream culture at the expense of losing their heritage. Thus, cultural compensatory strategy tends to devalue one's ancestral culture while placing a high priority in adopting the mainstream culture.

As diversity within the Asian-American community increases, so is the likelihood that students will come to school with varying interests in their cultural heritage. In 1992, approximately 41% of Asian-Americans were foreign born (Wong, 1992). By year 2000, this percentage is projected to increase to about 50%. The increasing presence of Asian-American students in our schools will inevitably demand that institutions of learning prepare themselves to be able to provide facilitative instruction in which bilingualism and biculturalism are encouraged and promoted for all students, including Asian-American students. This study has shown that the issue of culture in academic achievement is more than a collective interpretation of similarities and differences between two cultures: It is about accepting and supporting the students' culture while allow them the opportunity to experience diversities in thinking and practice.

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