

An Examination of the Roles of Cultural Capital and Schools in the Achievement of Minority Youth

Introduction

A large body of literature has explored the high academic achievement of Asian Americans. Scholars have largely attributed the success of Asian Americans to cultural beliefs and practices that value hard work and foster a strong work ethic. It is argued that the family structure and the educational resources available at home are conduits for the high academic performance of Asian American youth (Kao 1995). Furthermore, because of discrimination and structural barriers in the US labor market, Asian families heavily emphasize the importance of scholastic achievement as a means to upward mobility, motivating the high achievement of their children (Xie and Goyette 2003). As a result of cultural beliefs and values and perceived limited mobility in the United States, Asian immigrant parents have high scholastic expectations for their children, and these parental expectations are in turn internalized and shared by Asian American children (Goyette and Xie 1999). In fact, compared to their white counterparts, Asian American parents have higher educational aspirations for their children, and Asian American youth have higher expectations for themselves (Kao 1995).

Educational expectations are a good predictor of future achievement (Sewell et al 1969), and as such, are a crucial piece in the status attainment process. Because of the higher than average expectations of Asian American youth and their parents, it is convincing that the cultural beliefs and values of Asian Americans are a key contributor to their academic success. However, upon further investigation, while the high aspirations of Asian Americans are correlated with high achievement, educational expectations alone do not explain the academic attainment process of students. When we compare Asians and Whites with the same level of educational aspiration, Asian youth have higher academic performance than whites (Kao 1995). The role of educational expectations in predicting academic achievement is complex and controversial, as evidenced by findings that indicate that students have much higher levels of aspiration than their actual achievement (see Kao and Thompson 2003). The role of cultural beliefs and values is further muddled when Black inner city youth are taken into account. While scholars have attributed the low achievement of Black inner city youth to their deleterious “culture of poverty” and the “oppositional culture” that they allegedly embody (e.g. Fordham and Ogbu 1986), recent qualitative works have demonstrated that Black inner-city children do not necessarily suffer from poor values. On the contrary, Black inner city children do possess such “mainstream” values as belief in hard work and the importance of education for future success (Newman 1999, Edin and Kefalas 2005). The disparate outcomes of the “high-achievers” and the “low-achievers” who both possess mainstream values invite the question of why Asian American youth are able to capitalize on these cultural beliefs and values and translate them into actual academic success. Since the Asian “model minorities” and the so-called inner-city “oppositional” youth alike have positive values, the mechanism between race and achievement does not appear to be beliefs and values, per se, but perhaps the translation of these values into practice.

Theoretical Issues

The main theoretical motivation for this study is the concept of cultural capital. Studies have argued that the so-called “Asian effect” or “Confucian effect” is the reason why Asian Americans have fared so well academically. There is something about the culture – the values, beliefs and attitudes – of Asian Americans that facilitate their academic success. Bourdieu (1986), in his seminal work, distinguishes

between three different types of cultural capital (i.e. embodied, objectified and institutionalized, of which, this research focuses on the first two). The first form of cultural capital – the embodied – is acquired through “cultivation,” “embodiment” and “incorporation.” An individual’s way of thinking, beliefs, values and attitudes are all instantiations of his embodied cultural capital. In the objectified state, the cultural capital is, as the term suggests, “objectified in material objects.” Lastly, the institutionalized state is in the form of credentials and qualifications, where one’s cultural capital is formally recognized through institutionalized standards. Cultural capital encapsulates all forms of “widely shared, high status cultural signals,” including “attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials” (Lamont and Lareau 1988:156).

In sociological work, the two states of cultural capital are often separated and presented in isolation. On the one hand, as detailed above, there are works that document the embodied state (e.g. cultural beliefs), and on the other, there are works that focus on the objectified state in the form of high-brow cultural activities experienced by advantaged youth (e.g. DiMaggio 1982, De Graaf 1986). To get a better understanding of why Asian Americans are able to successfully transfer their beliefs into achievement, we need to consider the two states of cultural capital together.

We argue that Asian Americans are able to translate their work-oriented beliefs to actual achievement because they not only have properties of embodied cultural capital but they also possess the necessary objectified capital. In other words, the mechanism linking the academic expectations and the academic achievement of Asian American youth is through the consumption of objectified cultural capital, namely in the form of better schools. Studies have shown that Asian American families, irrespective of socioeconomic status, seek out good schools for their children (Louie 2001). The placement of students in better schools is likely to be a governing mechanism in that better schools have more resources and afford students with more “high brow” activities and practices that in turn lead to higher achievement. Perhaps the reason why other minority inner city youth are not able to translate their embodied beliefs into high achievement is that they do not have the correct objectified cultural capital to “consume.”

Research Questions

In the first part of our study, we ask the following questions that have already been substantiated by past research:

- 1) Do Asian American children have higher academic aspiration than other racial groups given the same SES?
- 2) Do students who have higher academic aspirations have higher standardized math and reading test scores?

In the second part of our analysis, we turn to our theoretical framework and test that the mechanism governing Asian American “cultural values” and academic success is the placement of Asian American students into better schools. We ask the following research questions:

- 3) Do Asian Americans attend “better” schools than other racial groups given the same SES?
- 4) When it comes to standardized math and reading scores, are cultural beliefs (i.e. expectations) still statistically significant once we control for the “quality” of school?

In the third part of our analysis, we employ a multilevel analytical strategy and ask

- 5) How much variation is there within and between-schools? In other words, is it the unequal quality of schools that is differentiating the students, or does culture prevail and persist?

Data and Methods

We use the baseline survey of the Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS:2002) to conduct this study. This study is a nationally representative survey of high school students who were in the spring term of their sophomore year at first interview. The ELS consists of over 15,000 students and the parents of these students. The dataset also contains teacher interviews and school administrator interviews, which allow for school-level analyses. Around 750 schools were randomly chosen, and then students were chosen randomly from within each school. The ELS is an ideal dataset for this study because it oversampled Asians to ensure a large enough sample of Asians for comparison.

To answer each question, we employ different analytical strategies. For question (1), where the dependent variable is the academic expectations of minority youth, we use ordered logistical regression to answer this question. The main explanatory is the background (i.e. SES) of the students. For question (2), the main explanatory variable is the educational expectations of the students, and the dependent variable is standardized test scores. For this question, we use OLS regression.

In questions (3) and (4), we ask how the schools the surveyed students attend affect their standardized test scores. The main explanatory variable is the quality of schools and we operationalize this concept by the highest salary paid to teachers in each school. We assume that schools that pay their teachers' higher salaries are schools in wealthier school districts, and that these schools are the same schools that provide a wealth of high brow opportunities for their students. We run OLS regression for these questions and run the models for standardized math and reading test scores separately.

Lastly, we run multilevel models to answer question (5), where we model two equations simultaneously. The first equation models individual level characteristics and the second level models school-level characteristics. The individual level equation models the effects of individual characteristics on the student's standardized test score (reading and math scores are run separately). Following the Raudenbush and Bryk (1986) notation, the equation is as follows:

$$Y_{ij} = B_{j0} + B_{j1}X_{ij} + B_{j2}X_{ij2} + \dots + B_{jK-1}X_{ijK-1} + R_{ij} \quad (1),$$

where

Y_{ij} = individual student i 's standardized test score (reading or math) in school j

X_{ijk} = values on individual-level characteristics of student i in school j , and

k = independent variables in first-level model.

In the second level, the coefficients in level 1 (B_{jk}) are allowed to vary by school-level characteristics, yielding this second-level equation:

$$B_{jk} = \theta_{0k} + \theta_{1\lambda}Z_{1j} + \theta_{2\lambda}Z_{2j} + \dots + \theta_{p-1,k}Z_{p-1,j} + U_{jk} \quad (2),$$

where

θ_{pk} = regression coefficients for school variables,

Z_{pj} = values on school-level characteristics, and

p = independent variables in second-level model.

Through these methods, we hope to ascertain the mechanism governing the translation of beliefs into action. We expect to see some of the effect of “culture” work through the quality of schools. However, the placement of children in schools of higher quality could be a proxy for and confounded with other mechanisms, such as parental investment, involvement and supervision. If the findings show that the within-school variations are greater, we could draw the conclusion that the effect of culture on achievement is persistent and prevalent. However, if the multilevel model shows that much of the variation is between schools, then we could surmise that attending better schools is a mechanism by which Asian American students materialize their values. In that case, it would be worthwhile to investigate the mechanisms by which Asian American parents are able to seek out and place their children in schools that are of higher equality (e.g. informational channel, social networks).

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” Pp. 241-58 in *Handbook of Theory and Research of the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press.
- DeGraaf, Paul M. 1986. “The Impact of Financial and Cultural Resources on Educational Attainment in the Netherlands.” *Sociology of Education* 59(4): 237-46.
- DiMaggio, Paul. 1982. “Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of status Culture Participation on the Grades of US High School Students.” *American Sociological Review* 47(2): 189-201.
- Edin, Kathryn and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fordham, Signithia and John Ogbu. 1986. “Black Students’ School Success: Coping with the ‘Burden of Acting White.’” *The Urban Review* 18(3): 176-206.
- Goyette, Kimberly and Yu Xie. 1999. “Educational Expectations of Asian American Youths: Determinants and Ethnic Differences.” *Sociology of Education* 72(1): 22-36.
- Kao, Grace. 1995. “Asian Americans as Model Minorities? A Look at Their Academic Performance.” *American Journal of Education*. 103(2): 121-59.
- Kao, Grace and Jennifer S. Thompson. 2003. “Racial and Ethnic Stratification in Educational Achievement and Attainment.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29: 417-442.
- Lamont, Michelle and Annette Lareau. 1988. “Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments.” *Sociological Theory* 6(2): 153-168.
- Louie, Vivian. 2001. “Parents’ Aspirations and Investment: The Role of Social Class in the Educational Experiences of 1.5 and Second-Generation Chinese Americans.” *Harvard Educational Review* 71(33): 438-74.
- Newman, Katherine S. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Raudenbush, Stephen and Anthony S. Bryk. 1986. “A Hierarchical Model for Studying School Effects.” *Sociology of Education* 59(1): 1-17.
- Sewell, William H., Archibald O. Haller and Alejandro Portes. 1969. “The Educational and Early Occupational Attainment Process.” *American Sociological Review* 34(1): 82-92.
- Xie, Yu and Kimberly Goyette. 2003. “Social Mobility and the Educational Choices of Asian Americans.” *Social Science Research* 32(3): 467-498.