

Effects of Asian Americans' Ethnic capital on Academic Advantage: Upward Assimilation with the Root

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Abstract: This paper discusses the increasing importance of Asian Americans, one of the biggest minority ethnic groups in American society, in mainstream society and the reasons behind their outstanding academic achievements. By mainly building on Jennifer Lee's theory of hyper-selectivity and Min Zhou's theory of segmented assimilation, it investigates the level of upward assimilation of Asian Americans in the context of education. Ethnic capital brings advantages to the success of Asian Americans, and upward assimilation is achieved with their ethnic root.

Keywords: Asian American ethnic capital, assimilation, education

1. Introduction

Asian Americans have a long history of migration in American society. After the migration law passed in 1965, which allowed more Asian Americans to have more civil rights and freedom to enter the society, their population experienced dramatic growth. In 2020, they made up 6% of the total population, and this percentage of the population has increased by 35.5% from 2010 to 2020 [2]. The growing presence of Asian Americans in colleges and the workplace is evident for their more rapid and higher level of assimilation. Only 20% of Asian Americans had college degrees in 1970, but this number increased to 52% in 2010, much higher than the American average [6]. Although Asians only make up 6% of the US population, they make up 36% of the college in prestigious colleges such as UC Berkeley [11].

Why are Asian Americans more academically successful? How well do they assimilate into the US? As a representative ethnic group with an image of "model minority" within a multicultural and pluralistic society, this paper examines how ethnic capital leads to their academic success and further helps them assimilate into the society culturally, institutionally, and psychologically. Lee suggests that both culturalism and the classic status attainment model do not sufficiently explain the effectiveness of ethnic capital on Asian Americans' academic success. She proposes a theory of hyper-selectivity which not only takes into account the education level and the constitution of different ethnic groups but also the common practices within immigrant communities [8]. Their academic achievement enables them to attain higher socioeconomic status and become part of mainstream society. In fact, ethnic diversity might not be the most important factor of assimilation because some cultural traits are more limited to class instead of ethnicity.

Therefore, I will examine which particular common part of Asian Americans' ethnic capital help them excel academically. This investigation will help people develop an overview of how the

exceptional performance of Asian Americans has helped them assimilate upward into the mainstream and, at the same time, remain their original ethnic identity. It can also be used to help understand the assimilation status of other marginalized minority groups.

2. Building Up Ethnic Capital

Borjas defines ethnic capital as "the quality of the ethnic environment in which parents make their investment." It is a skill set specific to and employed only by each ethnicity [1]. Ethnic capital accumulates through acculturation between residents of an ethnic community and between parents and children. It can be seen as accessible resources created by immigrants' families and community members. Thus, ethnic capital incorporates several factors concerning ethnicity. Which type of ethnic capital helps immigrants succeed academically? What makes ethnic capital universally beneficial for everyone in the ethnic group?

2.1. Cultural and Environmental Factors

The traditional cultural perspective believes Asians are essentially influenced by their Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism culture, which explains their diligence and motivation for success. Immigrants hold these traditional values and strive to be intelligent and hard-working. Asians believe effort leads to promising success, and they are self-driven to improve their socioeconomic status because of their cultural base.

It is suggested by Ng, Lee, and Pak that it is not only the traditional culture - "Confucian-style 'rugged individualism'" described by Time and Newsweek – shaping their emphasis on education but also the quality of higher education itself in the US compared to in their original country. Gaining a college degree grants them a much higher chance to attain a better financial status and access to more employment opportunities, which can act as a form of protection for immigrants to withstand racial discrimination and structural inequality [7]. They have much more incentive to challenge the status quo and actively improve their lives.

2.2. Psychological Factors

Language acquisition is significant for immigrant children to learn their parental culture and communicate better with their parents. Children from Asian American immigrant families benefitted from ethnic-language literacy and ethnic self-identification with a sense of belongingness and a better parent-child relationship. Bilingualism is not proven to be more beneficial in school performance directly, but it is the best way of improving family communication. Children are able to get psychological assistance from their parents [5]. Psychological support and reward play a significant role in the early stage of child growth, and the accessibility of family assistance is also part of ethnic capital.

2.3. Structural Factors

In the research of Hirschman and Falcon, the education achievement of immigrants is primarily determined by the educational level of their families. Children with more educated parents are more academically outstanding than children with poorly-educated parents [3].

The status attainment model suggests that within the social hierarchy, a family's socioeconomic status is maintained from generation to generation [13]. Asian Americans are good examples of this model, with more than half of the population with a college degree, which guarantees the socioeconomic status of the next generation. For example, 61.5% of second-generation Chinese

Americans have college degrees. This percentage remains high and becomes even higher than the first generation [6].

2.4. Hyper-selectivity: Success Frame and Institutional Resources

The structuralist perspective of the status attainment model is, nevertheless, not consistent with Asian Americans. Take Chinese Americans as an example. Although they are highly educated, 17% still lack high school diplomas. However, they can still effectively send some of their children to prestigious colleges, even when these working-class Chinese immigrants live in segregated communities like Chinatown. Parents generally have high expectations for their children professionally and educationally. They are well-informed on the practical pathway to gain higher socioeconomic status through schooling, enabling them to achieve class mobility [6].

Tran and Lee suggest a theory of hyper-selectivity, which provides a supplemental explanation for this exception. It is defined as "a unique set of group characteristics that helps immigrants selectively import cultural practices from their countries of origin, fine-tune them, and then recreate those that are most useful for social mobility in their host society [13]." Coethnic resources such as supplemental courses after school can help students boost their performance in school and institutions that help them plan university applications and tailor their portfolios. Furthermore, the close social ties create role models and their corresponding success frames. Asian parents found that studying law, medicine, and science will secure children with well-paid jobs and good social connections; therefore, many Asian children follow these paths too [17].

For middle-class Asian immigrant parents in America, it is easy to find strategies for their children to enter better private schools, live in more elite communities, and obtain better career opportunities because of the information web in their ethnic group. However, even the working class can achieve academic success with these resources. Without the support from their ethnic group, low-income Asian American families would share the similar experience of other less advantageous groups such as Black and Hispanic Americans [8].

3. Upward Assimilation with the Root

3.1. Theories of Assimilation

Upward assimilation can be achieved by gaining more capital, and this process is taken place in various ways. According to Bourdieu, among different types of capital, cultural capital is embodied by certain lifestyles as different classes distinguish themselves from each other in daily practice. It requires a relatively slow process of acquisition and socialization because it cannot be attained through a more straightforward process as economic capital does. In the context of immigration, gaining cultural capital from the mainstream society helps immigrants assimilate. Education is the perfect ground for this process to happen.

In traditional assimilation theory by Gordon, assimilation happens as the conversion and substitution of identity. New identities replace immigrants' original ethnic identities with the qualities and lifestyles shared by the people in the host society. It is almost a one-way process that immigrants abandon their old culture to eliminate boundaries and differences between ethnic groups and further achieve assimilation. Warner and Srole also view assimilation as a process of "unlearning inferior culture"; otherwise, they will not be entirely accepted by the mainstream - an ethnic hierarchy exists. They suggest that the final stage of assimilation must be intermarriage and having a dominant position in significant institutions. Also, they must not live in a segregated community and become part of the American white community, which is considered the top group of this hierarchy [15].

However, segmented assimilation theory suggests that assimilation happens multi-dimensionally in a complicated process. Taking economic status and level of acculturation as the indicators, they might happen at a different pace, but this process must be composed of different segments. The class identity of people is merely determined by socioeconomic status, and it can be achieved in a shorter time; however, since acculturation is a slower process, it might happen much later. Possible assimilation factors include individual-level factors and contextual factors. Full assimilation can only be achieved through the interaction between these two aspects of factors [16].

3.2. Assimilation Through Education

Asian Americans have been portrayed as the "model minority" since the 1960s by the media. This stereotype correlates with their higher attainments in education, professions, economic status, better mental health, and lower possibility of criminality than other ethnic groups in the US. Noticeably, they have higher intergenerational mobility in socioeconomic status, and education is an essential part of their success. In the US, people with college degrees have a much higher median income and lower unemployment rate than people with lower education levels [12].

At school, different ethnic groups assemble in this same place, and the original connections of immigrants to their home countries are weakened. School is the place where acculturation rapidly happens. Children can be exposed to different races outside of their ethnic group [9]. Behavioral assimilation and acculturation happen.

Education can be a way for immigrants to assimilate more easily into society; however, it is also at risk for less economically advantaged families. Children might experience getting exposed to high-risked behaviors such as juvenile crime and street gangs during acculturation. There is a steady rise in the number of Asian American Children involved in gang activity, and their advantages fade away after "Americanization." It is shown that ethnic capital could prevent these immigrant children from downward mobility and achieve upward assimilation in the future [4]. With higher education achievement, children can outgrow this kind of detrimental environment. Thus, ethnic capital can indirectly and directly help children achieve upward assimilation.

Through education, Asian Americans are able to break the ethnic barrier and assimilate into mainstream society with exceptional academic achievement. It fulfills the multidimensional development of segmented assimilation that both socioeconomic status and acculturation can be improved. Ethnic capital creates tremendous advantages in this as the work of Emi Tamaki suggests that the level of assimilation of immigrants is not only not at odds with their level of attachment to their original country but assisted by it. Their original ethnic identities remain while assimilating upward into the host society [10].

Although some Asian Americans still suffer from the psychological pain of long studying hours, social isolation, and the identity of "otherness." High academic achievement comes at a cost. They attach more importance to academic and career success than White Americans, and their family usually have a narrower focus on achieving higher socioeconomic status in society, which at the same time can be very stressful. The identity itself as "Asian American" makes them "forever foreigner" - only structural change would bring transformation for the prejudice of the entire society towards an ethnic group [14]. Nevertheless, admittedly, Asian Americans' success path has already been very effective despite these "costs."

4. Conclusions

To understand the exceptional academic achievement and successful upward assimilation of Asian Americans, this paper addresses their shared ethnic capital: the resources and agency given by their family from the original country and their general cultural influence. As easily accessible resources

within Asian communities, ethnic capital provides a good starting point for immigrants. It suggests that their assimilation happens with the aid of ethnic capital, and the ties to the home country do not necessarily hinder their adaption to the mainstream US society.

Although cultural, psychological, and structural factors can also be important determinants, hyper-selectivity most effectively explains the success of most Asian Americans despite their socioeconomic backgrounds. Even working-class immigrants can take advantage of the shared information on modeled success frames and accessible educational resources. Education has provided opportunities for immigrants to develop multidimensional assimilation as their economic status would improve. However, they are also able to acculturate to mainstream society and accumulate cultural capital to become a member of the dominant social group.

Noticeably, institutional changes in immigration law and civil rights legislation are probably equally significant to the highly-educated demographic structure of Asian Americans and their decreasing barrier of entering mainstream society. Education attainment can even be a subsequent result of it. Further investigation should be drawn to build a connection between these institutional changes and their success in education and assimilation.

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