Asian-American Students and Academic Achievement Motivation

Anh Tran, Ph.D.
Wichita State University

Abstract

This article proposes a unified perspective on academic achievement motivation among Asian-American high achievers. It is contended that an integration of the achievement goal construct and the factors of ethnic identity is needed to provide an adequate answer to the question of how to motivate Asian-American students and hopefully other minority students in learning.

Introduction

Research on Asian-American achievement motivation started in the early 1970s, and different suggestions and tentative hypotheses provided isolated explanations as to how the students were motivated. I propose that, to fully understand how Asian-American students are academically motivated, a new perspective consisting of the achievement-goal construct and factors of ethnic identity might work. In this unusual approach to the subject, I will then reflect on my own son's school life from this perspective. I start first with an overview of relevant research findings.

The Achievement-Goal Construct

First of all, academic achievement motivation among Asian-American students is believed to derive from their mastery orientation, a desire to achieve success. Whang and Hancock (1994) suggest that Asian-American students are more mastery-oriented than non-Asian students, and their academic accomplishments might be partly explained by their mastery-oriented nature. Yan and Gaier (1994)'s sample of Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans attribute their academic success more to effort than to ability, and attribute failure to lack of effort. Other explanations for academic achievement among Asian-Americans can be grouped under the concept of effort: high attendance rate (Peng, Owings & Fetter, 1984) and more time spent on studying (Tsang & Wing, 1985).

The concepts of mastery orientation and effort found in research findings reveal that the Asian-American achievement motivation has been examined from a psychological framework called the *achievement-goal construct*. Started by Dweck and Nicholls in the 1970s, this construct has been a dominant approach in the current literature on academic motivation (Elliot, 2005). According to Nicholls (1984), there are two types of goal orientation: *task-involved* and *ego-involved*. A task-involved goal seeks to develop one's ability by task mastery, but an ego-involved goal seeks to demonstrate one's ability by outperforming others. Dweck (1986) shares the same idea but uses

different terms: *learning* for task-involved and *performance* for ego-involved. Dweck and Leggett (1988) link learning-goal orientation to the belief that ability is malleable, and performance-goal orientation to the belief that ability is fixed. Dweck and Molden (2005) further link the impact of two self-theories to goal achievement—the incremental theory and the entity theory. The former, is related to the idea that, since effort can increase ability, students with this view would tend to follow mastery-goal orientation. The latter, on the other hand, is related to the idea that, since ability is fixed, students with this view would tend to follow performance-goal orientation.

The Impact of Ethnic Identity

Researchers on ethnic identity also identify factors that promote academic achievement among Asian- American students. Oyserman, Harrison and Bybee (2001) posit that ethnic identity has three components: connectedness, awareness of racism and embedded achievement.

Connectedness refers to positive in-group identity and pride in one's ethnic group. Studies find that students who have strong connection with traditional family values and a high degree of personal involvement in their ethnic community tend to receive high grades and score high on academic orientation (Bankston & Zhou, 1996).

Awareness of racism refers to an ethnic group's perception of prejudice, racism and exclusion from opportunities by the majority group. Goyette and Xie (1999) argue that Asian-Americans use education as a means to overcome racism and move upward.

Embedded achievement refers to the extent to which academic success is considered to be a part of one's ethnic group. According to Steinberg, Dornbush and Beown (1992), this includes the Asian American students' family expectations and the perceptions of their obligation to parents. Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997) point out the link of obligation to student success to procurement of welfare, pride and honor to the family. Moreover Asian-American students are found to have pragmatic beliefs about the direct benefits of education. In Okagaki 's 2001 research findings, for example, if they don't believe hard work in school is associated with the benefits of education, their academic motivation will be low. Examining the Vietnamese-American students' academic achievement, Saito (2002) concludes that the motivational behaviors that contribute to academic achievement may be mediated by the values and beliefs associated with the Vietnamese American ethnicity.

A Personal Case of Academic Achievement Motivation

For the sake of focus, the following discussion concerns the younger one of my sons who was born several years after my arrival to the U.S. His school life started with a drawback: He did not have the level of English as any native child normally does. However, after spending some time in a Head Start program, he quickly got adapted to the new learning environment. He enjoyed going to kindergarten, and on one occasion, though a little sick, refused to stay home and made his grandma take him to school on

foot. When he was older and started to have some homework, my husband or I sat down with him, asked him what he did at school and checked his work for correctness. I believe effort, time and motivation are what a person needs to master a certain skill. For this reason, it became a habit for my son to stay on task until all homework was done. After that he was free to do what he liked. Usually he played with his brother. He seemed to take discipline seriously, even before he went to kindergarten. Once he ran to me, tears in eyes, asking me to do something because his brother said he would write his name on the board! Luckily, I never had to figure out any disciplinary measure to deal with him throughout his school life. Everything went smoothly from K to 12.

The unwritten law of "study first then play" was faithfully carried out. He made me happy because during his middle school years, he brought home principal's awards for his straight-A academic achievement. I rewarded him with what he treasured the most: in-line skating boots and street hockey equipment. One day he asked my husband to take him to a video arcade. Knowing that this request was due to peer pressure, my husband still took him and his brother to an arcade. He gave them a bag of coins, wished them a good time and waited outside. A couple of hours later, they returned, gave him the bag back and said that they had spent $2.75, and "We don't want them to rip off your money." That was the first and the last time the words "video games" were mentioned in my house.

My son was accepted into an International Baccalaureate program (IB) in high school. According to him, his study loads were quite demanding and challenging. Consequently he spent more time on study. Although he still skated or played hockey with his friends on weekends, he gradually weaned himself from watching TV. Reasons: "There's nothing to watch; just a waste of time" (In fact, he still watched *The Simpsons, Smallville,* and college basketball playoffs). Again, he was a straight-A high-school student. I had to admit that I did not know what kind of grade he got in college. When he returned home for Christmas, he assured me, "Don't worry, mom. I know what I need to do." I had a reason to worry: From his brother, I knew that he had switched from bodybuilding workouts to practicing Thai martial arts and Brazilian wrestling. Right after he got his B.A. degree, he was accepted into a medical program. Time had gone by so fast: He is now flying across the country to get interviewed for his residency. Based on the goal-achievement construct, his academic achievement can be explained by his mastery-oriented nature.

Now it's time to look at his academic achievement from the perspective of ethnic identity. First, it turns out that though he was born here, and spent his early life in a Vietnamese home environment, he keenly felt he was a Vietnamese. He was proud to be a Vietnamese, and believed that whatever he did could affect the Vietnamese community either negatively or positively. For example, if he became a good physician, he reasoned, then he positively contributes to the Vietnamese community. Secondly, he never felt that he had to study hard to overcome the barrier of racism though he was aware that racism exists. I believe that the third factor of ethnic identity—embedded achievement—is most relevant here. He agreed with his parents' "refrain" that education is the key to a good life. He also felt that he had an obligation to fulfill his parents' "second refrain" that his

academic achievement is a source of pride and happiness for them. Throughout his school life, we reinforced our expectations with numerous small things: asking about his school work over dinner, turning off our TV so it would not distract his learning, sometimes giving him no house chores so that he could have more time to finish school assignments, never raising my voice with him, sending him back to school after Christmas with his favorite home-made foods and bear hugs, etc.

When I was writing this essay, Amy Chua (2011) was criticized for her Chinese parenting style described in her memoir. Using her time, patience, money and effort, the self-styled Tiger Mom has produced at least one daughter who excelled in academics and played piano at Carnegie Hall when she was fourteen. Even though my parenting style is different from hers in some ways, I count her academic achievement motivation as another case study in my exploration of the role of ethnic identity in education.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed academic achievement motivation mainly from the learner's side. It is clear that, first of all motivation must come from the learner. Parents, however, can affect their children's motivation either positively or negatively, and both sources of motivation vary across cultures. Even though this paper is concerned with academic achievement motivation among Asian-American students, I hope that the proposed perspective on this kind of motivation could be applied to other cultures, too.

References

Bankston, C., & Zhou, M. (1996). The ethnic church, ethnic identification, and the social *Battle hymn of the tiger mother*. NY: Pe adjustment of Vietnamese adolescents. *Review of Religious Research, 38*(1), 18-37. Chua, A. (2011).Penguin.

Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist, 41*, 1040-1048.

Dweck, E. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social cognitive approach to motivation and personality, *Psychological Review, 95*, 156-173.

Dweck, C. S., & Molden, D.C. (2005). Self theories: Their impact on competence motivation and acquisition. In A. J. Elliot & C.S. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation* (pp. 122-140). NY: The Guilford Press.

Elliot, A. J. (2005). A conceptual history of the achievement goal constructs. In A. J. Elliot & C. S. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation* (pp.52-72 NY: The Guilford Press.

Goyette, K., & Xie, Y. (1999). Educational expectations of Asian American youths: Determinants and ethnic differences. *Sociology of Education, 72*, 22-36.

Nicholls, J.G. (1984).Achievement motivation: Conception of ability, subjective experience, task choice, and performance. *Psychological Review, 91*, 328- 346.

Okagaki, L. (2001). Triarchic model of minority children's school achievement. *Educational Psychologist, 36*, 9-20.

Oyserman, D., Harrison, K., & Bybee, D. (2001). Can racial identity be promotive of academic efficacy? *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 25*, 379-385.

Oyserman, D & Sakamoto, I. (1997). Being Asian American: Identity, cultural constructs, and stereotype perception. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 33*, 435-453.

Peng, S., Owings, J, & Fetter, W. (1984). *School experiences and performance of Asian American school students*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Education.

Saito, L. T. (2002). Ethnic identity and motivation: Socio-cultural factors in the education achievement of Vietnamese American students. NY: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.

Steinberg, L., Dornbush, S. M., & Beown, B. B. (1992). Ethnic differences in adolescent achievement: An ecological perspective. *American Psychologist, 47*, 723-729.

Tsang, S. L., & Wing, L. C. (1985). Beyond Angel Island: The education of Asian Americans. NY: ERIC/CUE.

Whang, P. A. & Hancock, G. R. (1994). Motivation and mathematics achievement: Comparisons between Asian-American and non-Asian Students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 19*, 302-322.

Yan, W. F. & Gaier, E. L. (1994). Casual attributions for college success and failure: An Asian American comparison. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 25*(1), 146-158.