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Abstract

Asian American parents espouse higher academic expectations relative to parents from other ethnic groups, yet these high expectations predict greater self-doubt in children who fall short of expectations. In the present study, 69 Asian American and 33 Latino undergraduate students discussed their parents' expectations, how supportive they felt their parents were with their choice of major and school performance, and their feelings about their own academic performance. Differences between both groups emerged: Asian students perceived more pressure to do well academically than Latino students did. Asian students with more pressuring parents also expected them to be the most upset if they were to earn a C, saw them as less supportive, and ultimately felt less satisfied with their academic performance. In contrast, Latino students with more pressuring parents expected them to be upset (but not to the same degree as Asian parents), yet still felt more supported and satisfied with their academic performance. High parental expectations may impose self-critical evaluation of performance among Asians, while they foster more parental support among Latinos.

Keywords

parental expectations, academic achievement, Asian American, Latino

Educational attainment is predicted by numerous factors, including ethnic background. In particular, Asian Americans are the largest ethnic group to hold degrees in higher education (e.g., 52% earned a bachelor's degree), while Latinos have the lowest levels of educational attainment (e.g., 14% earned a bachelor's degree; U.S. Census, 2010). One common explanation for these differences is that Asian parents hold higher academic expectations for their children relative to other ethnic groups (Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009). Although greater parental expectations may lead to academic achievement, what are the consequences, if any, of strong academic pressure from parents? The present study examines how parental academic pressure for both Asian and Latino students relate to perceived parental support and academic satisfaction.

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Parental academic expectations are partly determined by parental educational achievement. In particular, Asian parents typically hold the most extreme academic expectations and are the most pressuring relative to other groups. They expect their children to complete more years of education (Spera et al., 2009) and to comply with their career preferences (Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). Asian parents also exhibit much more direct involvement such as helping with homework, structuring study time, and limiting playtime (Schneider & Lee, 1990). Asian children, in turn, recognize their social and moral obligations to be successful (Yu & Yang, 1994). Yet these extremely high expectations may do more harm than good, and this may be especially true for Asian children who worry about falling short of parental expectations (Costigan, Hua, & Su, 2010).

Latino children are also motivated to do well and please their families (Ramirez & Price-Williams, 1976), but the expectations of Latino parents are much less extreme. For example, Latino parents expect their children to go to school and do well academically, but they cannot always offer direct help with schoolwork. Instead, Latino parents are more likely to offer moral support through words of encouragement and admonitions to work hard (Auerbach, 2006). Because educational attainment among Latino parents is low, parental expectations may reflect the need to stay in school and finish earning a degree. On the other hand, educational attainment among Asian parents is high, so the focus is not on degree completion but on parents' desire for the best grades possible and pursuit of certain career paths.

In the present study, we examined how university students' perceptions of parental academic pressure were associated with perceptions of parental support, the student's academic performance, and the student's satisfaction with his or her own academic achievement. First, we predicted that the structure of parental expectations would differ between the two groups (as measured by how upset a parent would be if their child earned a C, and how supportive the parent is of the child's choice of major or career path). Second, we examined how high parental academic expectations impact *actual* performance and *perceived* performance. We predict that high parental academic expectations will be negatively associated with the students' satisfaction with their own academic performance and this will be especially true for Asians.

Method

Participants

Participants were 102 undergraduates (50% female) from the University of California, Riverside. There were 69 self-identified Asian Americans (30% Chinese, 17% Korean, 16% Asian/Asian American, 4% Japanese, and 16% other Asian), 42% were foreign-born (mean time in the United States = 12 years). There were 33 self-identified Latino/as (70% Mexican, 24% Hispanic/Latino, and 18% other Latino); 21% were foreign-born (mean time in the United States = 16 years).

Materials

Life history interview. Participants discussed their current college academic performance, their satisfaction with their current grade point average (GPA) and choice of major, and their perceptions of their parents' academic expectations during a semistructured life history interview that was part of the Riverside Accuracy Project—Phase II (RAP-II) (see Fast & Funder, 2010, for another study using data from the life history interview). Participants also consented to have the registrar release their current GPA and their parents' level of education reported on their college application.

Coding. Two groups of three research assistants (who were blind to the participants' ethnicities and the hypotheses of the study) read the transcribed sections and were asked to form subjective impressions based on each of the participants' responses. Table 1 includes the interjudge reliability (alpha) for the three coders in each group. Group 1 coded the *Parental Academic Expectations* and *Parental Attitudes* questions, and Group 2 coded the *Student Satisfaction* questions of Table 1. Alpha reliabilities for each coded question were .70 or higher.

Results and Discussion

Are There Differences in Perceived Parental Expectations?

We conducted independent-samples *t* tests comparing the Asian and Latino participants on all of the variables of interest (see Table 1). As predicted, Asian students perceived their parents as holding higher expectations for them, felt that getting good grades was important, and felt more pressure to do well academically, all $t_s(99) > 2.16$, $p_s < .05$. We averaged these three items to form the "academic pressure" composite (the alpha reliability of these three items was .93). We replicated that Asian children perceive their parents to hold higher academic standards for them relative to parents from other ethnic groups, Latinos in this case; $t(99) = 2.62$, $p < .05$.¹

How Does Parental Academic Pressure Differ Between Asians and Latinos?

Based on the students' self-reports, we examined their perceptions of their parents' grade expectations and how supported they felt in their choice of major. We first tested if perceived parental expectations moderated ethnic differences in how upset students believed their parents would be if they earned a C. There was a main effect of parental academic pressure ($\beta = .78$, $p < .05$), suggesting that those parents applying high academic pressure were more likely upset if their child earned a C (the mean level difference is reported in Table 1). This main effect was qualified by an Ethnicity \times Academic Pressure interaction ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$), which showed a significant increase in variance explained, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 91) = 7.46$, $p < .01$. Although students operating under higher parental pressure thought their parents would be upset if they earned a C, Asian students expected their parents to be the most upset, much more so than Latino students. Asian and Latino students of less pressuring parents did not expect their parents to be as upset with a C.

Next, we examined the relationship between parental pressure and level of support for choice of major. There was a main effect of ethnic group ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .05$), suggesting Asian parents were less supportive of their children's choice of major; however, this main effect was qualified by an interaction ($\beta = -.34$, $p < .01$), which showed a significant increase in variance explained, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $F(1, 91) = 10.47$, $p < .01$. Asian parents applying high academic pressure were the least supportive of their child's choice of major. In contrast, Latino parents seen as applying high academic pressure were also seen as the *most* supportive of their child's choice of major. Asian and Latino students of less pressuring parents felt equally supported in their choice of major.

These results suggest that Asian and Latino students who feel pressured to do well academically are actually operating under a different set of parental expectations. Asian students believe their parents would be upset with low grades and would support them less in their choice of major. In contrast, Latino students believe their parents would be upset with a C (but not as upset as an Asian parent) yet feel supported in their choice of major. Do these different types of academic pressure have implications for student performance?

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Parental Academic Expectations, Parental Attitudes, and Student Satisfaction

| Variables of Interest | alpha | Asian | | Latino | |
|---|-------|-------------|-----|-------------|-----|
| | | M (SD) | | M (SD) | d |
| <i>Parental academic expectations</i> | | | | | |
| Do the parents have high expectations regarding making good grades? | .79 | 3.26 (.92) | >* | 2.82 (.97) | .46 |
| How important is it to the parents for their child to get good grades/do well academically? | .74 | 3.74 (.74) | >** | 3.28 (.93) | .56 |
| Does the student feel pressured to get good grades? | .76 | 3.33 (.89) | >** | 2.76 (1.06) | .58 |
| Academic pressure (three-item composite) | .93 | 3.43 (.81) | >** | 2.95 (.95) | .54 |
| <i>Parental attitudes</i> | | | | | |
| If their child received a C, how upset would the parents feel? | .76 | 2.91 (1.19) | >* | 2.30 (.98) | .56 |
| Do the student's parents seem supportive of the student following whatever path (major/career/occupation) s/he chooses? | .83 | 3.91 (.88) | = | 4.20 (.94) | .32 |
| <i>Student satisfaction</i> | | | | | |
| How satisfied is the student with his/her college GPA? | .77 | 2.72 (.86) | = | 2.69 (.87) | .03 |
| How satisfied is the student with their major? | .81 | 3.93 (.74) | = | 4.16 (.74) | .31 |
| Students' current GPA | | 2.83 (.62) | = | 2.80 (.45) | .06 |

Note: Asian $n = 71$, Latino $n = 37$. Ratings were made on a 5-point scale. GPA = grade point average. d = Cohen's d effect size.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

How Is High Academic Pressure Associated With Student Performance?

First, we examined whether perceived parental academic pressure predicts better academic performance as measured by the students' GPA. Notably, perceived parental academic pressure did *not* predict better academic performance, and this did not differ for Asians or Latinos; there were no significant main effects or interactions (all β s $< .07$, $ps > .57$). Next, we predicted how satisfied the student was with his or her current GPA from ethnic group, perceived parental academic pressure, and their interaction (controlling for actual GPA). After controlling for current college GPA ($\beta = .44$, $p < .01$), there was an Ethnicity \times Academic Pressure interaction ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .01$) that showed a significant increase in variance explained, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $F(1, 96) = 11.10$, $p < .01$. Figure 1 depicts the interaction between ethnic group and perceived parental academic pressure predicting the students' satisfaction with their GPAs (using 1 SD above and below the mean to plot high and low values). Asian students operating under higher perceived academic pressure felt the *least* satisfied with their GPAs while Asian students operating under lower academic pressure felt the *most* satisfied. Latino students' satisfaction was not affected by their perceptions of their parental academic pressure.

Parental expectations look different within Asian and Latino cultures. In line with prior research, Asian students feel more academic pressure from their parents than Latinos do. Asian students fear disappointing or angering their parents both by earning poor grades and by choosing an unapproved career path. Prior research suggests that Asians' motivation to do well is driven by social components, such as familial expectations and obligations (Yu & Yang, 1994). This familial obligation might encourage a very critical examination of one's own academic

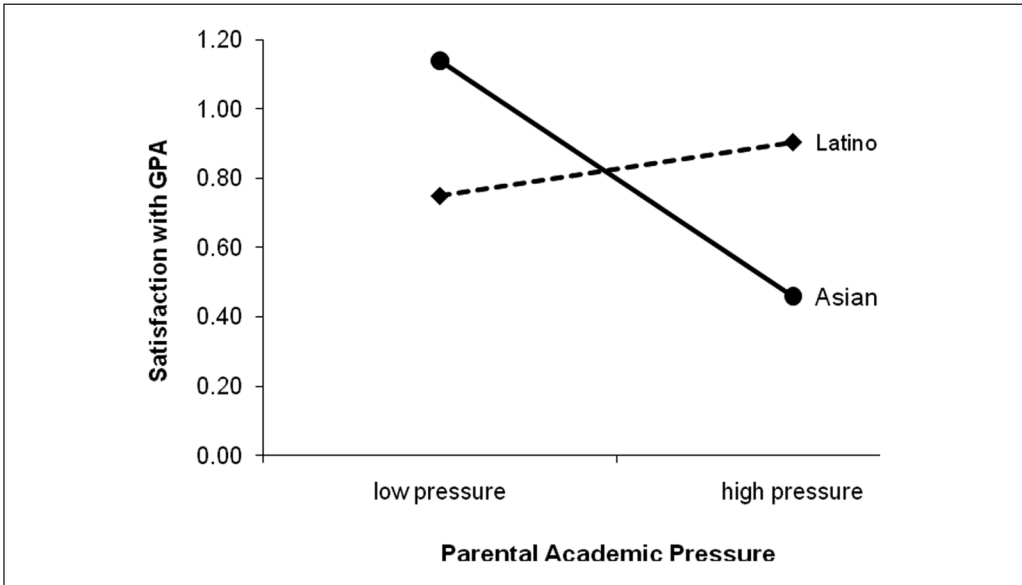


Figure 1. Ethnic Group and Parental Academic Pressure Moderate Child's Satisfaction With Grade Point Average (Controlling for Actual GPA)

performances. For Asian children, it may be helpful to reframe parents' critiques of their performance as a concern for the student's improvement. If Asian children can internalize their parents' high standards as something they themselves want to achieve, they are more likely to feel confident in their academic success (Kawamura, Frost, & Harmatz, 2002).

In contrast, Latino students who feel pressured to do well academically do not experience the same consequences as Asian students. It appears that they are operating under less extreme standards. Although Latino students felt their parents would be unhappy with a C, it was not to the same degree as Asians. Latino parents may feel less capable to offer help with homework, so they are less likely to expect very high grades. Instead, parents can offer encouragement to work hard and stay in school (Auerbach, 2006). Our data support this notion: Latino students felt more supported by their parents with respect to their choice of major. Latino parents (many of whom did not attend college) may be happy just to see their children achieving a level of education higher than themselves, supporting any chosen career path. As a result, Latino children are less likely to feel like failures and evaluate their performance in a more critical way.

Limitations of this study include a small sample size and correlational design. Future research could examine if these effects hold across all Asian and Latino nationalities or if effects change with acculturation to U.S. norms. Another avenue of research could examine how parents use rewards and punishments to make their expectations known or examine how children cope with academic successes and failures in light of their parents' expectations.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. We replicated prior research demonstrating that parental education level was significantly related to perceived academic pressure: the greater the parents' educational attainment, the higher the expectations the students reported that their parents held, $r(102) = .27, p < .01$. We included parental education level as a covariate in all analyses, but all effects held even when including parental education level, so this variable will not be discussed further.

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