

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG ASIAN CANADIANS

Racial stereotypes have characterized the North American Asian population ever since these ethnic groups began arriving on the continent in large numbers (Lee 2000). The earliest stereotypes emerged with the rapid influx of Chinese immigration to California and British Columbia during the 19th century, and were guided by the white population's xenophobia attitudes and fear that Asians would eventually displace the dominance of European ethno-cultural groups in the overall population. Throughout this historical period, the most common perception among white North Americans was that Asians and Asian immigration represented a threat to the existing social and economic order. The white majority reacted by excluding Asians from their society through racist immigration policies, social segregation, economic discrimination, and even violence. Since this time, how Asians are perceived in the popular imagination has changed, but stereotypical attitudes and misconceptions remain. While the crude image of the "pigtailed coolie" is fortunately no longer influential, the "model minority" stereotype is now commonplace (Wong 1980).

The model minority stereotype, which started to become popular in the 1970s, is based on the wide-spread belief that Asians are inherently intelligent, hard-working, and reserved over-achievers (Wong et al. 1998). On the surface, the assumptions behind the model minority concept appear to harbour positive ethnic stereotypes (what minority group would resent being described as intelligent and hard-working?) that are rooted in empirical trends within the US population. For example, Asian Americans have greatly out-performed the majority population since the 1930s in educational attainment (Hirschman and Wong 1986). Indeed, according to recent US Census data, Asian Americans generally attain higher education at exceptionally high

rates: among individuals aged 25 years and over, 44 percent of Asian Americans have completed post-secondary degrees (including bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and other professional qualifications), compared to 27 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 14 percent of African Americans, and 10 percent of Hispanics (Nishioka 2003).

The model minority image presents a novel set of problems for sociological investigation. Prior literature raises concern over this seemingly complimentary stereotype (Lee 1996; Wong et al. 1998). Foremost, Asian American success stories have been invoked within the hegemonic discourse to discredit demands for social justice and to generally downgrade the hardships ethnic minorities commonly experience (Suzuki 1989). According to this perspective, the success of Asian Americans, especially in educational achievement, implies that North American society provides equal opportunities, and thus implicitly blames unsuccessful ethnic and immigrant groups for their socioeconomic problems. For our purposes, this image is troubling because it treats Asians as a homogeneous group, when they are actually distinguished by ethnicity, immigrant status, and social class. Hence, the popular portrayal of Asian success stories has suppressed important differences between and within Asian ethnic groups and created false expectations for all ethnic minorities in terms of educational and occupational achievement.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The present study interrogates the model minority hypothesis through an examination of educational attainment, a robust indicator of overall socioeconomic success. Given that the Asian population is ethnically diverse, the model minority characterization may not accurately describe this population in general (Goyette and Xie 1999). Hence, we divide the Asian population into

six groupings to examine whether educational attainment (compared with whites) is similar or variable across these groupings. Our empirical analysis identifies any gross differences in educational attainment and how these are modified by major factors such as nativity, gender, and metropolitan residence. We conduct additional analyses that separately examine immigrants and non-immigrants because ethnic differences in educational attainment may represent a selection effect in the international migration process or the opportunities available to second and higher order generation immigrants (Rong and Grant 1992; Schmid 2001).

DATA AND VARIABLES

Our data source is the 1996 Canadian Census public-use microdata file (PUMF-96). The PUMF-96 on individuals is based on a 2.8 percent sample of the population covered by the Census, and includes information on individual-level demographic, social, and economic profile (see Statistics Canada 1996 for details). The target population includes all Canadian citizens, landed immigrants, and certain non-permanent residents. The data file excludes institutional residents, foreign residents, some residents of Indian reserves, and foreign visitors. We restrict our study sample by focusing on individuals aged 25-35 years. Accumulation of education varies substantially by age since education has become increasingly accessible since the 1960s. Hence, focusing on the younger side of the age spectrum will presumably give a more precise illustration of future trends than a more inclusive study sample could offer. With this restriction, our study sample contains 137,865 women and men.

We consider two dependent variables. The first is a continuous variable measuring educational attainment in 12 levels, ranging from less than Grade 5 to a university (Bachelor's)

degree or higher. The second is a dichotomous variable identifying individuals holding any university degree including and beyond Bachelor's qualifications. Our primary independent variable is ethnicity. Based on self-identified categories, we disaggregate the Asian Canadian population into six ethnic groupings: Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, other Southeast Asians, South Asians, and West Asians. For comparative purposes, the remainder of the study sample is divided into white Canadians (reference group) and other visible minorities. Our study also considers immigrant status, school enrolment, gender, age, official language (English or French) knowledge, major urban area residence, and age at immigration.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Our preliminary results confirm that some Asian Canadians are indeed comparatively well-educated. The mean educational attainment of the white population is roughly equivalent to trades or other non-university certification. Chinese Canadians have a group average about one level beyond white Canadians. Further, Chinese Canadians have proportionately more university graduates than white Canadians (38 percent compared to 19 percent). The educational attainment of Filipino Canadians is the highest among all Asian groupings when compared with white Canadians, although proportionately fewer (31 percent) are university graduates compared to Chinese Canadians and other Southeast Asian Canadians (36 percent). Other Southeast Asians are also better educated than whites. These advantages persist even after controlling for nativity, school enrolment, gender, age, official language knowledge, and metropolitan residence, but the sizes appear to become more narrow.

However, the model minority image is misrepresentative of Vietnamese, South Asian, and West Asian Canadians. Vietnamese Canadians are particularly disadvantaged, having a mean cumulative amount of education well below the white population average. In addition, Vietnamese Canadians have the lowest proportion of university graduates, a meagre 11 percent. Our gross results indicate that both South and West Asians appear to be better educated than white Canadians. But, in terms of total educational attainment, this advantage disappears when immigrant status is controlled. Indeed, South Asian Canadians have a significantly lower educational attainment level than white Canadians after immigrant status is held equal. On the other hand, both South Asian (27 percent) and West Asian (29 percent) Canadians have greater proportions of university graduates than white Canadians.

Another notable pattern is evident from our preliminary results. The educational attainment differences between Asian and white Canadians varies by immigrant status. For example, the variation between Chinese and white immigrants is much smaller (one whole level) than the difference between Chinese and white non-immigrants. The great disadvantage of Vietnamese Canadians may be largely an effect of immigration, for non-immigrant Vietnamese Canadians have a similar group educational attainment level as non-immigrant white Canadians. A reverse pattern obtains for other Southeast Asians. Non-immigrant Southeast Asian Canadians have significantly more education than their white Canadian counterparts, but the difference between immigrant Southeast Asian and white Canadians is non-significant. While immigrant West Asians have a similar educational attainment level as immigrant whites, non-immigrant West Asians have a higher educational attainment level than non-immigrant whites.

Finally, our results indirectly dispute the model minority hypothesis from another angle: Within group variation. Even though some Asian ethnic groupings are better educated than

whites, the educational disparities within these groups may be wider than those among whites. For example, at the lower end of the educational attainment spectrum, Chinese and other Southeast Asians are similar to whites. Though not significantly disadvantaged on these grounds, the similarity with whites in terms of individuals with a high school diploma only and non-high school graduates presents a troubling picture. About 11 percent of Chinese Canadians, 8 percent of Southeast Asian Canadians, and 15 percent of white Canadians have high school diplomas only. And about 18 percent of individuals within each of these groupings have education attainment levels below a high school diploma. These results strongly suggest that educational attainment advantage of some Asian groupings obtains largely because they have a comparatively high proportion of individuals with post-secondary education. The educational advantage of these groupings may be bimodal, not universal, and thus monopolized by specific segments of these Asian populations.

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