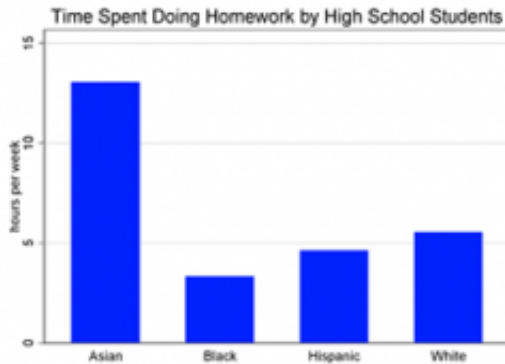


Is there a 'Tiger Mother' effect?

May 5 2011



Weekly hours spent on studying and homework by full-time high school students, averaged over the entire year. Figure courtesy Valerie Ramey, UCSD.

It's officially the "Year of the Rabbit" on the Chinese calendar. But 2011 might be better known as the "Year of the Tiger Mother."

In early January, Yale law professor Amy Chua published a critique of coddling Western-style parenting in *The Wall Street Journal*, "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior." The essay, summarizing her book "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" — in which she details, among other things, how she raised her daughters in the "traditional Chinese" way, with strict discipline and an emphasis on academic success and music lessons above all else, prohibiting TV, computer games, play dates and sleepovers — set off a media maelstrom. She was hailed. She was reviled. Lots of parents wrung their hands. Controversy over Chua's extreme parenting even reached as far as the Davos summit, where

former Harvard president Larry Summers commented on the debate. Columnist David Brooks of The New York Times called her a “wimp.”

The hullabaloo prompted Valerie Ramey, a professor of economics at the University of California, San Diego, to ask: What did the data have to say?

Chua’s book, said Ramey, struck a nerve in part because of the stereotype of Asian academic success. And statistics back up that stereotype. The most recent academic test scores from the Program for International Student Assessment show that four of the world’s five top-scoring countries are Asian countries. (Finland is the non-Asian exception). In California, Asians represent 12 percent of [high school](#) graduates, but one-third of admissions to the University of California and almost half of all undergraduate admissions to UC San Diego.

And why does this matter? Doing better in school, Ramey said, still leads to better financial outcomes over the long haul: High school performance is an important determinant in admission to college, and going to college significantly raises one’s income. The income gap between college and high school graduates, Ramey added, has been widening since the 1980s, and the latest U.S. Census figures show that Asians as a group are much more likely to have college degrees and also have much higher household incomes.

To begin to answer the question of whether Asian parents and children were behaving differently, Ramey analyzed the [American Time Use Survey](#). A project of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the survey measures the time use of thousands of individuals from 2003 to 2009 based on time diaries. It includes data on individuals ages 15 and older, so Ramey concentrated her analysis on the time use of high school students, college students and parents.

Table 1: Average Hours per Week Spent by High-School Students

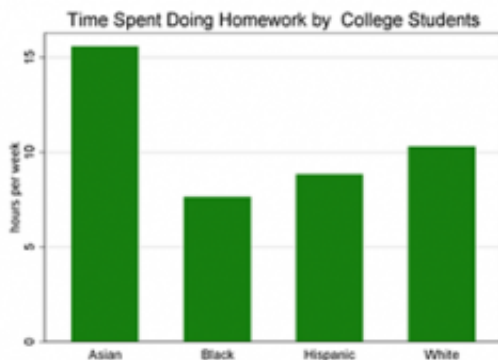
| Activity | Asian | White | Black | Hispanic |
|--|-------|-------|-------|----------|
| Studying | 13.0* | 5.6 | 3.4* | 4.6* |
| Music practice and performance | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.1 | 1.0* |
| TV watching | 13.6 | 13.7 | 17.6* | 15.6* |
| Computer (games and other leisure use) | 8.5* | 5.6 | 5.0 | 4.7 |
| Sports | 3.4* | 5.1 | 6.0 | 4.8 |
| Socializing | 5.2* | 7.7 | 7.5 | 8.1 |
| Household chores | 4.6 | 5.9 | 4.4* | 5.6 |
| Work | 2.4* | 5.8 | 4.1* | 3.1* |

*Indicates that the average is statistically different from that of whites at the 5 percent level.

Courtesy Valerie Ramey

Asian high-school students spend significantly more time studying and doing homework, Ramey found, than any other ethnic or racial group. Averaged over the entire year (including summer vacations), the average, non-Hispanic white student spends 5.5 hours per week studying and doing homework, while Hispanic and non-Hispanic black students spend even less. In contrast, the average Asian student spends a whopping 13 hours per week. Parents' educational levels do not explain the differences, Ramey said, as these become even greater if the sample is limited to children who have at least one parent with a college degree.

The average Asian high-school student does not fit every aspect of Chua's prescription for her daughters, Ramey discovered. In particular, the average Asian student spends no more time practicing and performing music, about the same amount of time watching TV, and more time playing on the computer. But Asians do spend less time on sports and socializing than any of the other ethnic groups. The biggest difference, though, is in time spent working at a job: White students spend 5.8 hours per week on average, and Asian students spend only 2.4 hours.



Study time by full-time college students. Figure courtesy Valerie Ramey

Ramey next wondered: Do Asian students “coast” once they escape the grips of their Tiger Moms? The gap is not so extreme among fulltime college students, Ramey said, but it is still the case that Asian students spend more time studying: 15-plus hours per week in comparison with white students who spend a little over 10 hours per week, and with black and Hispanic students who spend less time.

So what about the parents? Ramey, together with her husband, Garey Ramey, had earlier documented — in a study the coauthors dubbed the “Rug Rat Race” and which was published by the Brookings Institution last year — that college-educated parents, mothers especially, had since the 1990s dramatically increased the time they spent caring for their children and managing their activities (in hopes of getting them into elite universities). Now Valerie Ramey asked: Could it be that Asian mothers spend even more time grooming their progeny?

The numbers show that Asian mothers do spend more time in educational activities, such as reading to their children or helping with homework, Ramey said, but only by a half-hour per week more than white mothers. There is no difference in time spent on all child care

activities between white and Asian mothers, though both groups devote more time than black and Hispanic mothers. These averages control for differences across groups in the number and age of children, education of the mother and marital status.

Table 2:

Average Hours per Week Spent by Mothers

| | Asian White Black Hispanic | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|------|-------|-------|
| Educational activities with children | 1.9* | 1.5 | 1.3* | 1.3* |
| All child care | 14.1 | 14.4 | 11.0* | 11.3* |

*Indicates that the average is statistically different from that of whites at the 5 percent level. These averages control for family composition, age and education of mother and marital status.

Courtesy Valerie Ramey

So, Ramey said, these Tiger Mothers seem to be able to make their children spend a lot more time on their studies without having to spend too much more of their own time: “That’s a lot of bang for the parenting buck. And perhaps this is what Chua’s ‘Chinese discipline’ is all about.”

“More seriously, though,” Ramey, said, “it is clear from the data that Asian teenagers and college [students](#) spend more time studying than their counterparts in any other ethnic group. This is consistent with the claims made by Chua. But whether it’s the case that Asian-style parenting is the cause of the difference remains for further research to ferret out.

“At this point, my work is ‘just the facts, ma’am,’” Ramey said.

She plans to extend her research on the subject in the coming months.

Meanwhile, Ramey, who is white, takes a certain pride in having herself once been lambasted as being “Asian” (by a friend of her then-seventh-grade daughter). Today, Ramey’s son is about to graduate from Stanford with an engineering major. Her daughter is now a junior at a prestigious high school, studying for her Advance Placement exams and preparing to apply to colleges.

Provided by University of California

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