High achieving students and their experience of the pursuit of academic excellence

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Abstract

High achieving students are students who perform much better academically than their peers. While there are benefits to being a high achieving student such as receiving more support from teachers, they also encounter unique challenges such as increased frequency of bullying. Much of the research on this group of students is based on quantitative studies conducted on participants of Caucasian descent. It is suggested that obtaining a better understanding of these high achieving students could be achieved by making sense of their experiences through a qualitative approach. An individual's experiences and perceptions can be influenced by cultural factors and conducting research with an Asian population would help better understand how factors which are more strongly emphasized in Asian culture such as filial piety and obedience to parents contribute to the experiences of Asian high achieving students.

High achieving students and their experience of the pursuit of academic excellence

Terms such as "gifted" and "high achieving" are used interchangeably in literature to refer to those children who do very well academically at school compared to their peers. It has been commented that the definitions of these terms overlap with one another (Robinson, 1997; Ruban & Reis, 2006). However, some studies have suggested that these terms are not identical and that there are differences among students classified as gifted and high achieving (Dougherty, 2007; Kotinek, Neuber, & Sindt, 2010).

Definition of high achieving students

The definition of giftedness was considered following a report by Marland (1972), the United States Commissioner of Education, who defined giftedness as individuals "who by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance" in six areas consisting of general intelligence, academic performance, creativity, leadership ability, visual and performing arts as well as psychomotor ability. Using this definition, students who possess high academic abilities would be classified as gifted and many researchers have done so in their studies (e.g., Manning, 2006; Plucker & Stocking, 2001; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1993). The term high achieving is used by researchers to refer to students who stand out in terms of their academic abilities (e.g., Kotinek et al., 2010; Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, 1984). The overlap in definition can be seen as students who are gifted may also be high achieving as having excellent academic performance is part of the criteria of being gifted. These two terms are not synonymous but a student can be described by one or both of these terms, a view that is shared by Kotinek et al (2010).

In the present review, "high achieving students" would be used to refer to students who perform very well in their studies based on research by Kotinek et al. (2010) and Winston et al (1984). Studies on gifted students were included in the literature search for this review only if the participants utilized in these studies were selected solely on their excellent academic performance. Studies which utilized students who also met the criteria for other areas of excellence like sports or the arts were excluded as these students would better fit the criteria of "gifted" instead of "high achieving".

Quantitative studies on high achieving students

Benefits of being a high achieving student

Regardless of these definition issues, research has shown that being a high achieving student is associated with certain positive features such as possessing higher self esteem, receiving greater teacher support and more active seeking of help for problem solving compared to lower achieving students.

Self esteem

Research suggests that higher self esteem was found to be associated with high achievement (Bachman & O'Malley, 1977; O'Malley & Bachman, 1979; Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978). A study by Alves-Martins et al. (2002) corroborated this relationship for participants who were 13 years old but found no differences in self esteem levels between high and low

achieving students who were 14 and 15 years old. It was suggested by the authors that the difference in self esteem levels between the two groups of students who were 13 years old reflect the importance of academic performance in the self esteem of these younger students. Using Harter's framework of the protection of self esteem (Harter, 1993, 1998), the authors explained that older students who are lower achieving were able to protect their self esteem by changing their domain specific self evaluation by reducing their investments in areas which have a negative impact on their self esteem, for example, academic work, and increase their investments in areas which are more beneficial, for example, sporting achievements.

Fenner (2010) interviewed 30 male middle school students and reported similar findings of high achieving students indicating higher levels of self esteem compared to low achieving students. It was stated that social support and experiencing success were important factors that contributed to their higher self esteem. One limitation of this study was that it was based on a small sample of students and the results might not be representative of the majority of high achieving students. The findings of these studies suggest that the higher self esteem experienced by these high achieving students might be attributed to having a positive environment and the repeated experience of success.

Teachers' support

Being a high achieving student was also linked to more positive relationships with and emotional support from teachers (e.g., Babad, 1998; Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1989; Baker, 1999). For example, students, who were asked to rate the behaviours high and low achieving students received from teachers, reported that high achieving students received more positive feedback and instruction from teachers, as well as more opportunities for further development from teachers (Brattesani & Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein & Middlestadt, 1979). However it needs to be recognized that these ratings of teachers' differential behaviours were based on students' perceptions and utilized questionnaires and/or interviews, and are therefore subjective. Other limitations of these studies include the difficulty in quantifying certain behaviours such as anxiety, and researchers' choice of questions to elicit the targeted responses, which can be beyond the developmental abilities of some students, especially if they are younger (Babad, 1993). The reliance on students' perceptions exclusively in these studies without taking into account information from other sources such as teachers' reports or classroom observations provides a very narrow understanding of the phenomenon of high achieving students receiving more positive support from teachers.

Some studies have sought to address these limitations by incorporating information from a wide variety of sources. Cooper and Good (1983) included teachers' and students' perceptions in addition to classroom observations, while Babad (1990) included both teachers' and students' perceptions. Both studies reported similar results, with high achieving students indicating that they received more praise and emotional support from teachers than their lower achieving counterparts. The teachers in both studies however, reported that they gave more praise and emotional support to the low achieving students. These studies highlighted the importance of including information from various sources to allow a more holistic understanding of the experiences of high achieving students as these sources can provide additional information from different perspectives.

Active seeking of help

Students who were high achieving are more likely to seek help compared to their lower achieving peers (Pollard, 1989; Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). Ryan and Pintrich (1997) conducted a study on a group of 13 and 14 year old students to investigate their help seeking strategies in math class through the use of questionnaires. They found that students who perform well in their math were the most likely to ask for help in their learning. Similar to the limitations discussed in the previous section, this study relied on self reports by the students which can be subjected to biases, such as self serving bias, and are also subjective by nature of their design. Similar findings of more active seeking of help by high achieving students were also reported by Newman and Goldin (1990), who asked 65 primary school children to fill in a questionnaire about their help seeking behaviours. However, this study was conducted on primary school students and the results might not be easily generalized to students in higher educational institutions.

The findings of these studies suggest that compared with lower achieving peers, high achieving students are less likely to think that others would associate their difficulties in learning with inability and therefore, are more likely to seek help (Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001). High achieving students are more likely to seek help because they appear to be less affected by how they are perceived by others.

Challenges of being a high achieving student

Whilst there are positive points associated with being a high achieving student they also face unique challenges such as increased levels of stress, and bullying from their peers, as well as exhibiting more maladaptive perfectionistic behaviours compared to their peers.

Levels of stress

The definition of stress varies according to the model utilized, but in all these models, stress is conceptualized as something that is negative and undesirable (McNamara, 2000). The medical model of stress as first conceptualized by Selye (1956), defines stress as a negative reaction by an organism to an environmental stimulus and can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the intensity of the stress (i.e. high or low) and the time period (i.e. acute or chronic) in which the stress is experienced. While Selye's medical model suggests that stress is caused by internal factors, environmental models such as that by Broadbent (1971) and Cohen (1978), posits that stress is caused entirely by external factors, such as aversive environmental conditions. However, the major limitation to these two models is that they do not explain sufficiently how organisms or people respond differently to the same amount of stress (Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008). For example, given a specific amount of stress, one person might experience a high level of distress while another person might not experience any distress.

Psychological models such as that by Bandura (1997), Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and Leventhal et al. (1980), emphasized the importance of an individual's perception in the definition of stress. Stress is defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" and this definition is the most widely accepted definition in literature (Grant et al., 2003; Hess & Copeland, 2006) as their model of stress, based on this definition, has received empirical support (e.g., Goh, Sawang, & Oei, 2010; Watson, Goh, & Sawang, 2011) and can be applied in many situations where stress is experienced such as in health and occupational settings (Folkman, 2009).

High achieving students reported experiencing higher stress levels than their peers in a number of studies (Crystal et al., 1994; Myers & Pace, 1986; Supe, 1998). For example, high school students were asked to indicate their levels of stress in a questionnaire in a study conducted by Crystal et al.(1994). The authors found that high achieving students in the United States reported significantly higher levels of stress compared to their lower achieving peers. Their desire to do well in their academic studies, coupled with peer pressure to

socialize with their friends so as to accepted by them, contributed to an increase in stress levels. These studies utilized self report questionnaires and as stress is subjective and its experience unique to each individual, the use of self reports would therefore be appropriate (Everson-Rose & Clark, 2010).

However, there are some limitations in using these measures such as misinterpretation of questions and the reluctance of participants to respond accurately (Fowler & Mangione, 1990). Other studies use physiological measures such as heart rates and blood pressures in the study of stress which have the advantages of being more easily quantified and highly reliable. However, they can be expensive and require specialized training to operate (Brannon & Feist, 2010). One study compared the stress experienced by high achieving and low achieving students through the measurement of their blood pressure levels (Hughes, 2005). The researchers measured the blood pressure level of both high achieving and low achieving students two weeks before a major examination. It was reported that the blood pressure levels of high achieving students were higher than that of their peers, suggesting that the high achieving students experienced higher levels of stress compared to their peers. However, there are concerns about the generalisability of these results due to the small sample size (n=13).

High achieving students experience higher levels of stress compared to their peers and obtaining additional information from various sources through different methods such as blood pressure measurements and questionnaires can lead to a better understanding of the stress experienced by these students.

Perfectionistic behaviours

 Research has identified a relationship between high achieving students and perfectionism. Perfectionism is conceptualized as having "lofty" unattainable goals coupled with perpetual self-criticism (Flett & Hewitt, 2002) and is commonly viewed as maladaptive and negative because of the wide range of problems, such as anxiety and suicide, associated with it (Parker, 2000; Schuler, 2000). However, not all researchers agree with a maladaptive view of perfectionism and pointed out that when perfectionism is reframed as striving for excellence, such a trait can be adaptive and this form of adaptive perfectionism is not associated with distress (Hill et al., 2004; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Other researchers such as Frost and colleagues (1990), and Hewitt and Flett (1991) have adopted a more multidimensional view of perfectionism and argued that perfectionism can be both adaptive and maladaptive

depending on its form and context. Individuals who display adaptive perfectionism were conceptualized as setting high standards but with less preoccupation over not meeting these standards (Flett & Hewitt, 2006) while those who are perfectionistic in a more maladaptive way are overly concerned about making mistakes and constantly frustrated by their failures (Saboochi & Lundh, 2003).

Recent research has suggested that only maladaptive perfectionism is associated with negative consequences (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001; LoCicero & Ashby, 2000). For example, Bieling et al. (2004) used a sample of undergraduates to compare three models of perfectionism with the two measures of perfectionism, the Frost Mulidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) (Frost et al., 1990) and the Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HMPS) (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), using confirmatory factor analysis. They reported that their data best fit a two factor model of perfectionism. Using regression, they also found that only maladaptive factors and not adaptive factors were associated with depression, anxiety and stress. These studies provide some evidence for the model of perfectionism as comprising of adaptive and maladaptive factors and challenge the original conceptualization of perfectionism as solely maladaptive.

Research has investigated the association between perfectionism and high achieving students (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Rice, Brooke, Leever, & Porter, 2006). Parker and Adkins (1995) found that high achieving students presented with higher levels of perfectionism compared to the average student but it was not known if the perfectionism reported was adaptive or maladaptive. While more recent studies such as that by Shaunessy et al. (2011), and Canter (2008) have reported that high achieving students experience more adaptive than maladaptive perfectionism compared to the average student, these studies did not take stress into consideration. It was hypothesized by Flett and Hewitt (2002) that certain behaviours representative of adaptive perfectionism can become maladaptive under stressful conditions and this hypothesis has received some support (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Mosher, 1995; Hewitt & Flett, 1993; Rice et al., 2006). For example, having high personal standards can motivate one to achieve when there is little stress but these same standards during periods of high stress such as examinations can become dysfunctional.

Rice et al. (2006) measured the level of stress experienced and perfectionistic behaviours exhibited by a group of high achieving undergraduates at two points in time, one at the beginning of the semester where stress was perceived to be low and at the end of the semester

before the examinations when stress was perceived to be high. They reported that the students indicated more maladaptive perfectionistic behaviours at the end of the semester compared to the beginning of the semester. As the type of perfectionism can be influenced by stress, it is important to include measurements of stress in future studies on perfectionism so that more accurate understandings of the type of perfectionism experienced by high achieving students can be obtained.

Bullying

Bullying has been defined as aggressive behaviours continuously inflicted on an individual perceived as less powerful, who is unable to protect himself or herself as a result of the imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). Although there are many definitions of bullying, the definition by Olweus (1993) was selected for the present study because it is widely accepted in literature and most of the other definitions are minor variants of it (Garrity, Jens, Porter, & Stoker, 2002; Ross, 2009).

It has been considered that bullying can be classified into two types, direct and indirect bullying (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Olweus, 1993). Direct bullying typically includes both physical and verbal aggressive behaviours such as hitting, kicking, teasing and name calling. Indirect bullying takes the form of relational bullying, where harm is directed through relationships such as spreading rumours and social exclusion (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Cyber bullying is a new form of bullying that has recently been considered as a result of the increasingly popularity of mobile phones and the internet. It has been defined as harm directed through the use of computers and mobile phones via email or text messaging (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009).

Although bullying can take on different forms, their negative consequences are similar. Victims of bullying experience higher levels of depression and anxiety, as well as increased risk of impairments to self esteem and difficulties in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Bullock, 2002; Daniels & Bradley, 2011). Studies have suggested that high achieving students experienced higher levels of bullying compared to their peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Li, 2007; Ma, 2001). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) interviewed a group of African American high achieving students in a public school and found that they were bullied more frequently than their peers. The students reported engaging in behaviours such as pretending not to work hard to avoid being

bullied. However, this study was based on data collected from one high school and it was uncertain if such a phenomenon was also observed in other schools.

Ma (2001) invited students aged 12 and 14 to fill in questionnaires regarding the frequency of bullying incidents. Similar to the previous study, high achieving students reported being bullied more often. However, the questionnaire asked explicitly if the participant has ever engaged in bullying activities, thus raising the possibility that the participants might display self-serving biases and under-report the frequency of bullying.

In summary, high achieving students encounter higher incidents of bullying compared to their peers and this might contribute to them experiencing higher levels of emotional difficulties such as anxiety and depression as a result.

Critique of quantitative studies on high achieving students

Most of the research on high achieving students that has been reviewed is based on quantitative studies, whose aim is to determine an objective understanding about a particular phenomenon, for example, that all high achieving students experience greater levels of stress than their peers.

Studies conducted using a quantitative approach sought to investigate the relationships between variables through the testing of hypotheses, with the eventual goal that theories become scientific law (Ashworth, 2008). To achieve this, the selected variables are removed of other existing variables that might influence the final outcome should these other variables be allowed to exert their effects on the selected variables. This procedure, while appropriate when applied to studying physical objects, has some imitations when studying human behaviour. This is because understanding human behaviour requires knowing the context in which the behaviour occurs and also the meanings and intentions that are behind the behaviour (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For example, to understand why a baby is crying, one needs to examine the context (i.e. it is cold) and the baby's intentions (i.e. to attract attention to obtain warmth). However, the context is frequently removed in quantitative studies (Halfpenny, 1996). It has also been suggested that a more holistic understanding of an individual would be better achieved by both empathizing with and making sense of his or her experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

As the context (i.e. educational institution) defines the behaviours of the high achieving students (i.e. obtaining good grades), a qualitative approach would increase our

understanding of the experiences of these students as the context where the behaviours occur are taken into consideration when utilizing such an approach. Studying the behaviour of students in this context can provide a richer understanding of this unique group of high achievers.

Qualitative studies on the experiences of high achieving students

Studies that employ a qualitative approach have reported how high achieving students perceive and react to the experiences they encountered (e.g., Ellington, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, 1999; Francis, 2009; Neumeister, 2004).

Strong achievement ethic

Flores-Gonzalez (1999) interviewed 11 Puerto Rican high achieving students and reported that these students described themselves as strong believers in the achievement ethic. They believe that one can achieve one's dream if one works hard in school and at work. This belief was highlighted by one student, "Robert" who told the author, "[My brother] is kind of lazy too. He always wanted, since he was in school here, he always wanted to have fun and never wanted to work. That's why he is like he is now [a dropout]" . A similar comment was made by "Elizabeth" who said that, "The ones that stay in school are those who know that they have to work to have a plate of food on the table. That life is not easy if there is nobody there to help you" . This study suggested that the beliefs of this group of high achieving students influenced their behaviour of striving for good grades and that part of being a high achieving student involves having a certain belief regarding hard work.

Flores-Gonzalez (1999) utilized a participant observation method in the collection of data, where the researcher became a member of the group being researched. While this method allows the collection of data in much depth, there is a limit to the amount of objectivity the researcher is able to retain in the process as the researcher is also a participant. There is also a possibility that the data might be influenced by the close relationship between the researcher and the participant (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009). For example, the participant might be afraid to disclose certain information for fear of damaging the relationship.

High achievers were found to attribute success and failure to effort, which is within their control, and believing that the outcome is due to permanent factors such as innate abilities and perseverance. These beliefs motivate them to study hard and work towards academic

excellence (Graham & Weiner, 1996). Therefore, the motivation of high achieving students to work hard is influenced by their interpretations of causality.

Enjoyment of academic challenges

Ellington (2006) interviewed eight high achieving undergraduates and reported that they enjoyed the challenge of doing mathematics. "Anita" shared, "I like the challenge that comes with it [working mathematical problems] … I like actually having to work for it… I just liked being able to look at a problem, and then figure out how I can go about solving this problem" . "Karen" also shared similar sentiments regarding mathematics, "Math is a challenge. And I think I would personally really like a challenge" (p. 166). The comments made by these students suggested that being challenged in their academic work appeared to be a common experience among this group of high achieving students. One limitation of this study was that the results cannot be easily generalized to students of other ages.

This desire to experience challenges could be due to the students' strong belief in their self and in their abilities. Frequent experiences of success reinforce the student's belief in their abilities and as their self esteem develops, it motivates them to achieve higher academic success and to persevere longer when facing challenges (Schunk & Meece, 2006). High achieving students' experience of the enjoyment of academic challenges could be the result of their high levels of self esteem, which developed through repeated experiences of success.

Experiences of being bullied

Francis (2009) conducted classroom observations of and interviewed 71 high achieving students from nine secondary schools. These students shared their experience of being labelled as geeks and being bullied by their peers. For example, "Marie" mentioned that "People call me geek all the time cos [sic] like sometimes I wear glasses, somehow I'm a geek and like because like whenever I put my hand up and I get a question right, everyone shouts out like "geek" …". "Stella" commented that "Like me…. and like my friends Anna and Elisa and Jenny; they're all really nice people and they have really good sense of humour, and they're all really pretty and stuff, but because they do well in school they're not, like, popular. It's just something that stands in the way of people [being] popular" (Francis, 2009). This study suggested that the good academic grades of high achieving students is one of the reasons that they experienced being bullied by their peers and qualities such as humour were disregarded by these bullies.

The good academic results of high achieving students may affect other students in many ways such as emotionally, through eliciting feelings of envy, shame and hostility (Garcia, Tor, & Gonzalez, 2006; Smith, 2000). These lower achieving students could have felt a threat to their self-esteem and engage in such bullying behaviours such as calling names and social exclusion in an attempt to psychologically protect themselves (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Salmivalli, 2001). This suggest that the bullying high achieving students experience could be the result of them being perceived as a threat which causes others to engage in bullying behaviours to psychologically protect themselves from this perceived threat.

Influence of culture on the experiences of high achieving students

High achieving students encounter a wide variety of experiences which are influenced by their unique beliefs. One example would be that some students believe strongly in the achievement ethic and this motivates them to obtain good grades. These studies of high achieving students have contributed to an increase in understanding of the experiences and perceptions of high achieving students. However, most of these studies were conducted within a non-Asian context and utilized participants of Caucasian descent. An individual's experiences and perceptions can be influenced by cultural factors (Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007), and while current research has identified several factors associated with being a high achieving student, studying how culture influences these factors would provide a better understanding of how certain values which are more strongly emphasized in Asian culture such as filial piety and obedience to parents contribute to the experiences of Asian high achieving students.

Socialisation of Confucianistic values in Asian students

Asian countries, particularly East and South-East Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam are heavily influenced by Confucianism (Biggs, 1996; Luce & Sommer, 1969; Yang, Kim, & Kim, 1995), which emphasis the importance of education, hard work and filial piety, defined as devotion to one's parents (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996; Ho, 1981). There is a strong emphasis on inter-personal relationships, where individuals are socialised to see others as more important than themselves. Behaviours such as benevolence and propriety are encouraged to maintain and promote these inter-personal relationships (Yu, 2008). An "ideal" individual is, according to Confucianism, someone who seeks to achieve harmonious relationships with others and character development through the pursuit of knowledge (Tang, 1992).

Differences between Asian and Western cultures

Studies have reported differences between Asian cultures, which are influenced by Confucianism, and Western cultures (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). For example, Markus and Kitayama (1991) reported that individuals from cultures such as those influenced by Confucianism are more likely to view themselves as part of a bigger group and to pursue achievements for the good of the group. This is in contrast to individuals who grow up heavily influenced by prevalent values from Western countries such as Europe, North America and Australia, where they are more likely to perceive their goals and concepts of self as separate from others, and to achieve for personal reasons. In societies influenced by Confucianism, not only does group membership form a crucial aspect of self-identity, success is determined by the degree to which a person fulfils his or her social roles (Kim, 1994). The high value placed on emotional restraint is also exemplified by the importance of maintaining group harmony (Oyserman et al., 2002). Western cultures, instead, place more value on open expressions of emotions and seeking one's own personal goals (Diener & Diener, 1995). Members from Confucianistic cultures were reported to have a higher tendency to reason and perceive others based on situational factors and social roles, while these forms of reasoning and perceptions are directed more towards the individual from Western cultures (Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994).

The differences in behaviours exhibited by members of these two cultures have led to the use of the labels "individualism" and "collectivism" to describe these two cultures. These two labels are usually conceptualised in literature as polar opposites (Hui, 1988; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Yamaguchi, 1994), and Caucasian countries are labelled as "individualistic" because of the heavier emphasis placed on the importance of individual choice, personal freedom and self-actualisation (Inglehart, 1997; Sampson, 2001), while Asian countries influenced by Confucianism are labelled as "collectivist" as a result of their greater emphasis on group cohesion and dependency (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

However, not all researchers agree with this categorisation of cultures into two distinct groups. One critique of this conceptualisation is that it does not take into consideration individual and sub cultural differences within a culture. For example, Kashima et al. (2004) reported that Japanese participants living in urban areas indicated more individualistic behaviours than those participants living in the rural areas. Similar findings were reported by

Cha (1994), who worked with a Korean sample. Another critique is that some studies have suggested that individuals and cultures can exhibit both individualistic and collectivistic behaviours and features simultaneously. For example, a sample of Caucasian American parents in Weisner's study (2002) reported that they inculcated both dependence and independence in their children at the same time, a finding which is at odds with the perception of American culture as individualistic. Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2008) also highlighted that while there is a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships in Confucianism, its emphasis on hard work by the individual suggests that there is an individualistic aspect to Confucianism.

These studies suggested that while sensitivity is required regarding the categorization of cultures into groups, the differences between cultures ought to be acknowledged as these factors can influence the high achieving students' experience of the pursuit of academic excellence.

Qualitative studies regarding the experiences of high achieving students in Asia

The experiences of high achieving students from Asian cultures influenced by Confucianism differ from the experiences of students from Western cultures in various ways (Chhuon, Hudley, Brenner, & Macias, 2010; Le & Gardner, 2010; Qin, 2008).

Fulfilling family obligations

Chhuon et al. (2010) interviewed 10 Cambodian-American high achieving undergraduates and the most salient theme identified was the desire to fulfil family obligations. These high achieving students indicated that one of the family obligations they felt they had to fulfil was to protect the family's "face" or honour. "Rotha" shared that "I want to make my parents proud … You don't want them to look bad" (p. 39) and this desire was the main motivator for her to do well in school.

Another family obligation was to be a role model to their younger siblings and/or relatives, to encourage them to study hard. "Navy" told the interviewers that "My [younger] brother, he's a sophomore in high school, and he wants to go to college like me, you know? … My youngest sister, who's 11, I think she's going too. She looks up to me. … Because I'm the first to go away to college, and it's like they invested time and money into me or whatever, so if I don't do well, the other parents are going to see, my aunts and uncles, and they're like "Oh look what Navy did." She didn't succeed so I'm not going to let you go, you know? I'm

not going to fail"(p. 40). These comments by the students suggest that their beliefs were influenced to some extent by Confucianistic values of the importance of interpersonal relationships and filial piety, indicating that culture can influence an individual's experience of a particular event.

One limitation of the study is that the first author was a member of a cultural organization that the participants were also part of. The frequent social interactions between the researcher and participants in the 6 months prior to the gathering of data could have some influence on the data due to the relationships between the researcher and the participants.

Communications with parents

Qin (2008) conducted interviews with two groups of immigrant Asian American high achieving students, where one group reported higher than average levels of psychological distress while the other group reported average levels of psychological distress. Students who indicated higher than average levels of psychological distress reported having difficulties in communicating with their parents while students who indicated average levels of psychological distress highlighted having good communications with their parents.

The group of students who reported higher levels of distress commented that their parents insisted that they must be obedient and that they were not to challenge their parents' authority or opinions. The students felt frustrated they are not able to share their thoughts and opinions freely with their parents. For example, "Feng" shared that, "Like sometimes when my father in fact knows that he's wrong, he still has to insist that he's right… though he knows for sure that he's wrong. Usually I just won't say anything; it's no use explaining to him" .

Those students who reported average levels of psychological distress said that they frequently have open communications with their parents. They indicated that both parents and children would often take time to listen to each other's comments and discuss issues together. "Xiao" shared that, "the four of us would sit down together and discuss. We would express our own opinions" . "Lily" also reported a similar experience with her parents, "We are reasonable with one another and listen to the one who is right… I tell them that I don't think it's good to do that. I tell them why. If they listen to me then that's good, because I've made my point; if they don't listen to me, I listen to their side if we can't decide" (p.30).

The comments of these two groups of students suggest that while their parents adopted a Confucianistic approach in their communication methods, their parents' interpretation of the

approach can result in differences in the students' experiences. The parents of the distressed students might have relied on a more narrow and literal interpretation of these Confucianistic beliefs while the parents of the non-distressed students adapted the general principals of Confucianism to suit their new social environment. Cultural values and how they are translated into every day practices, therefore, has an effect on the students' experiences of being high achieving.

Although this study has provided some understanding of the experiences of immigrant high achieving students, their experience could differ from that of non-immigrant high achieving students as immigrants face challenges such as acculturation stress (Lynch, 1992) which are typically not experienced by non-immigrants. The findings of these studies would benefit from being replicated using participants from societies influenced by Confucianism.

These qualitative studies regarding the experiences of high achieving students in Asia provided some evidence regarding how values unique to Asian cultures can influence students' perceptions and interpretations of being a high achiever. Although some research has been conducted on high achieving students, only a small amount of research has explored the effects of an Asian context on the experiences of these students and therefore, it is important that further research be conducted in this area.

Conclusion

Most research regarding high achieving students is derived from quantitative studies which have identified the various areas in which these students differ from the average student. However, a more holistic understanding of these high achieving students might be better achieved through both empathizing with and making sense of their experiences, using qualitative research methodologies. There is currently only a small amount of research that examines the experiences of Asian high achieving students. The unique factors that are more emphasized in Asian cultures could contribute to a different experience of the pursuit of academic excellence compared to that experienced by high achieving students from other cultural contexts. Future research needs to be conducted to further explore the experiences of Asian high achieving students and the meanings these experiences hold for them. This can contribute to a better understanding of how environmental and cultural factors can influence students' beliefs and their behaviours of pursuing academic excellence. Understanding the meanings these experiences hold for them would also allow researchers to develop unique services such as support groups and enhanced academic programmes that can better serve the

needs of these high achieving students, thus leading to a better experience for these high achieving students in their pursuit of academic excellence.

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