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ABSTRACT

Most research on adolescents has been conducted with white, middle-class adolescents, which has created a lack of differentiation among the majority and minority cultures in the United States. To correct this, adolescents from two cultural groups at two points in time were studied so as to see how their trajectories differ in terms of academic achievement, activity choices, time use, and self-perception. A sample of 55 second-generation Chinese-American and 58 Euro-American students from well-educated suburban families participated in two data collections 5 years apart. Results indicate that the Chinese-American students achieved higher grades, had higher aspirations, participated more in arts and academic extra-curricular activities, and spent more time doing homework than their Euro-American counterparts. Euro-American students participated in band and sports to a greater degree, got more sleep, spent more time with friends, dated more, and were more likely to be employed than Chinese-American students. It was found that activity participation was related to the adolescents' self-perceptions. Chinese-Americans' self-ratings of competence and acceptance tended to be lower, which may reflect self-effacement on the part of Chinese people. (RJM)

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Achievement, Activity Choice, and Self-Perception from Early to Late Adolescence

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Abstract

A sample of 55 second-generation Chinese-American and 58 Euro-American students (mean age = 17 yrs.) (Time 1 mean age =12 years) from well-educated suburban families have participated in two data collections five years apart. Chinese-American students achieved higher grades, had higher aspirations, participated more in arts and academic extra-curricular activities, and spent more time doing homework than their Euro-American counterparts. Euro-American students participated in band and sports to a greater degree, got more sleep, spent more time with friends, dated more, and were more likely to be employed than Chinese-American students. Activity participation was related to the adolescents' self-perceptions.

Achievement, Activity Choice, and Self-Perception from Early to Late Adolescence

The majority of research on adolescence has been conducted with white, middle-class adolescents. Accounts of the adolescent experience often ignore the differences that exist between the majority and minority cultures in the United States. Our general purpose in this study is to investigate adolescents from two cultural groups at two points in time— early adolescence and late adolescence—to see how their trajectories differ in terms of academic achievement, activity choices, time use, and self-perception.

Existing studies of Asian-American children and adolescents have focused on academic success (e.g. Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992; Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Schneider, Hieshima, Lee, & Plank, 1994; Stevenson et al., 1990), on parenting style, and/or on psychosocial adjustment (e.g., Chi), Feldman, & Rosenthal, 1992; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). A few studies (e.g. Schneider, et al., 1994) have looked at the time use and activity choice of Asian-American students. Cultural beliefs influence the activities parents provide for their children and adolescents (Eccles, 1993). Schneider et al. (1994) found that Chinese-American junior high school students were less likely to participate in sports and to do family chores and more likely to participate in education-related activities, music, and language schools than were Euro-Americans.

Cross-national comparisons of American adolescents with Asian adolescents have examined similar topics. Fuglini and Stevenson (1995) found that Chinese high school students spent more time engaged in academic endeavors, while American students spent more time working and socializing with friends. Differences in the use of time were related positively to mathematics achievement.

In addition to the link between time use and achievement, it seems probable that time use and activity choice are related to adolescent self-perceptions. It seems likely that the more experience an adolescent has in a particular domain, the more competent or accepted s/he will feel in that domain. Cultural group differences in adolescent time use within the United States are important to examine because both groups of adolescents attend the same schools and live in the

same communities. Approval from peers in the public forum (i.e., classmates) is far more important to adolescent self-esteem than is support from close friends and parents (Harter, 1993). Adolescents' feelings of competence and social acceptance may be influenced greatly by their experience with particular activities. For example, sports involvement is highly valued in the United States. If cultural beliefs cause parents to discourage involvement in team sports, adolescents' self-perceptions of athletic competence are likely to be lower than those of adolescents whose parents encourage participation in team sports. Parents who do not allow their adolescent to date may have adolescents with lower self-perceptions of romantic appeal.

The primary purposes of this study are (1) to describe the ethnic group differences in activity choice and time use; and (2) to relate experience in specific domains to measures of self-perception. The existing cross-national and cross-cultural research leads us to predict that Chinese-American adolescents will have higher grade point averages, will spend more time studying, will show greater involvement in music and language schools, and will spend less time practicing sports, working, and socializing with friends than will Euro-Americans. It is further predicted that experience in these particular domains will be correlated with domain-specific self-perceptions.

Method

Sample. A sample of 60 second-generation Chinese-American and 60 Euro-American fifth and sixth graders (Mean age = 12 years) was recruited in 1990-1991 from well-educated intact middle-class families in the suburban area of a large midwestern city. There were 30 boys and 30 girls in each group. They were contacted again in 1995-96 when they had completed tenth or eleventh grades (Mean age = 17 yrs.) to participate at Time 2. Ninety-four percent (55 Chinese-Americans, 58 Euro-Americans) of the original sample participated. Two could not be located, one had been killed, and three decided not to participate. (See Table 1 for sample characteristics.)

Procedure. Students and their mothers and fathers completed questionnaires and interviews at both Times 1 and 2. As part of a larger study, students completed standardized cognitive and personality (CPQ) measures at Time 1, and personality (HSPQ), stress, depression, and self-perception measures at Time 2. Achievement test data and grades were also collected at both times.

Results

Analysis of Variance and Chi-Square Results

Academic achievement. At Time 1 (1990-91) Chinese-American children ($M = 4.17$) outperformed Euro-American children ($M = 3.90$) in math grades, $F = 5.37$, $p < .05$, but there were no significant differences in overall grade point average. (See Figure 1.)

At Time 2 Chinese-American adolescents had earned higher overall grade point averages. A series of 2 (gender) x 2 (ethnic group) ANOVAs showed Chinese-American students had higher cumulative grade point averages at the end of ninth grade ($M = 3.95$) and tenth grade ($M = 3.97$) than the Euro-American students (Ms = 3.49, 3.55), Fs (1, 112) = 19.78, 15.55, ps < .0001. (An A = 4 points with .5 point added for honors classes.) A gender effect showed that girls received higher grades than boys. There was a larger gap for grades in mathematics courses: the Chinese-American mean was 4.03, while the Euro-American mean was 3.40, F (1, 112) = 21.35, $p <$ .0001. Chinese-American students were also more than three times as likely to be named National Merit Scholarship finalists.

Academic aspirations. Chinese-American students were striving for admission to more selective colleges and universities ($M = 4.41$) than Euro-American students ($M = 3.29$), using the selectivity index from Barron's 1996 College Guide. Chinese-American students ($M = 5.70$) also had higher aspirations for degrees (5 = Master's, 6 = Ph.D.) than did Euro-American students ($M = 5.32$), F (1, 108) = 13.77, $p < .0001$. The most popular career first choices for Chinese-American students were medicine (18) and engineering (12), and for Euro-Americans were medicine (12), education (10), business (8).

Activity choices. Chinese-American and Euro-American students participated in different activities while in junior high and high school. A series of 2 x 2 MANOVAS showed there were pronounced ethnic group differences in the number of years they had participated in the arts, F (6, 104) = 6.68, $p < .0001$; sports, F (11,98) = 5.95, $p < .0001$ academic competitions, F (2, 108) = 24.03, $p < .0001$; and religious groups, F (2, 108) = 9.49, $p < .0001$. Chinese-American students had participated more in orchestra, art competitions, tennis/badminton, math/science team, and

academic bowl. Euro-American teens had participated more in band, track, softball/baseball, football, soccer/hockey, and religious activities (choirs, church services, youth groups). Euro-American adolescents (27) were more likely than Chinese-American adolescents (11) to hold a job during the school year.

Summer activities. In interview questions, subjects were asked how they spent their summers between grades 8 and 11. Chinese-American adolescents were more likely to attend summer school all three summers (see Table 2). Euro-American students were more likely to travel in the United States and to attend sports camps between grades 8 and 9; and to be employed the last two summers.

Time use. Students were asked to describe in detail a typical school day, a typical Saturday, and a typical Sunday in the spring from the time they got up in the morning to the time they went to bed at night.. A 2 x 2 MANOVA also found ethnic group differences in time use, $F(12, 91) = 4.75$, $p < .0001$. (See Table 3.) Chinese-American adolescents were awake longer hours and spent more time on school homework, extracurricular academic pursuits, and homework for weekend Chinese classes. Euro-American adolescents spent more time in sports practice and competitions. Regarding gender differences, girls spent more time in class, more time doing homework, and more time doing volunteer service work. Boys spent more time watching t vision.

Free time activities. Responses to the interview question, "What do you like to do in your free time?" differed somewhat between groups. Chinese-American adolescents (35) were more likely than Euro-American adolescents (19) to name more sedentary activities (i.e., watching TV, surfing the Internet, and listening to music), $X^2(1) = 11.75$, $p < .001$. Euro-American adolescents (47) were more likely than Chinese-American adolescents (34) to name unstructured activities with friends (i.e., going out or talking on the phone with friends), $X^2(1) = 4.74$, $p < .05$.

Peer interactions. A series of 2 x 2 ANOVAs showed that Chinese-American adolescents reported going out with friends much less than did their Euro-American counterparts. Euro-American teens went out with same-sex peers ($M = 7.98$ times/month), with mixed groups ($M = 6.32$), with several other couples ($M = 2.56$), and on single dates ($M = 3.51$) much more than did

Chinese-American teens (Ms = 4.37, 3.31, .76, .67, respectively), Fs (1, 107) = 9.19 to 14.43, ps < .001.

Self-Perception. Euro-American adolescents reported more positive self-perceptions than Chinese-Americans in the Job Competence and Romantic Appeal domains of the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents. (See Figure 2). Gender differences emerged in two of the domains. Girls perceived themselves to be lower in athletic competence and physical appearance than did boys. Examination of a gender by ethnic group interaction showed that Chinese-American boys rated themselves significantly lower in romantic appeal than did Chinese-American girls, Euro-American girls, and Euro-American boys. (See Figure 3).

Correlational Results

Time 1 grade point average was associated strongly with grades and scholastic competence at Time 2 for both ethnic groups. (See Table 4). Time 2 grades were associated with scholastic competence more strongly for Euro-American adolescents, while Time 1 grades were associated more strongly with scholastic competence for Chinese-Americans. Art and music participation was positively related to grades at both Times 1 and 2 for Chinese-American students.

The number of years the adolescent had spent in organized sports was associated positively with the self-perception of athletic competence in both groups. (See Table 5). Dating frequency was positively related to self-perceptions of social acceptance, job competence, romantic appeal, and global self-worth for Chinese-Americans. For Euro-Americans dating frequency was positively related to self-perceptions of athletic competence and romantic appeal and negatively related to scholastic competence. Chinese-American adolescents who dated more frequently had higher self-perceptions of social acceptance, job competence, romantic appeal, and global self-worth. Euro-American teens who dated more frequently had higher self-perceptions of athletic competence and romantic appeal and lower perceptions of their scholastic competence. For Chinese-Americans having a summer job was weakly related to perceptions of social acceptance and job competence.

Conclusions

The adolescent lives of Chinese-American and Euro-American adolescents appear to be somewhat different. Chinese-American adolescents demonstrated higher academic achievement and higher aspirations for future education. They participated more in the arts and academic competitions and less in sports than their Euro-American counterparts. They went out less with friends, dated much less, and were less likely to be employed than Euro-American teens.

Adolescents' time use and activity participation were related to their self-perceptions in specific domains. Chinese-American adolescents as a group had significantly less job and dating experience than Euro-American adolescents. Chinese-American parents tended to believe that working at a job and dating would distract them from concentration on academics. There is some basis for those beliefs in the Euro-American data. Euro-American adolescents who were employed more and dated more had lower self-perceptions of scholastic competence. Chinese-American students also had significantly lower self-perceptions of job competence and Chinese-American boys had lower perceptions of romantic appeal.

The Chinese-American self-ratings of competence and acceptance tend to be generally lower than Euro-American self-ratings. This may reflect self-effacement on the part of Chinese people, which has been noted in other studies (e.g., Stigler, Smith, & Mao, 1985). This descriptive data is an important contribution to our understanding of ethnic group differences in achievement, activity choice, and self-perception in adolescents of two cultures in the United States.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Chinese-American and Euro-American Adolescents at Time 2

Characteristic	Chinese-American Mean	Euro-American Mean
Age of adolescent (yrs.)	16.80	17.00
No. of children in family	2.18	2.60*
Family size in home	4.22	4.57
Years in U. S.	23.00	all native
Mother's educational attainment (yrs.)	16.81	16.88
Father's educational attainment	19.65	18.64*
Families with income greater than $60,000/yr.	93%	91%
Hollingshead social position scores†	18.40	17.52

Notes. *Group differences at ($p < .05$). †Reverse-coded.

Table 2

Ethnicity Differences in Summer Activities Over Time

Activity		Chinese-Amer Teens	Euro-Amer Teens	χ^2	p
Attend summer school	1st summer	15	2	12.92	.0003
	2nd summer	25	15	5.54	.02
	3rd summer	25	4	23.00	.0001
Travel in United States	1st summer	15	39	17.69	.0001
	2nd summer	22	32	2.35	NS
	3rd summer	17	29	3.69	.055
Attend sports camps	1st summer	6	19	7.59	.006
	2nd summer	8	14	1.54	NS
	3rd summer	9	13	.51	NS
Work at a job	1st summer	5	11	2.14	NS
	2nd summer	11	23	4.94	.026
	3rd summer	12	38	20.81	.0001

Notes. 1st summer signifies between eighth and ninth grades. 2nd summer signifies between ninth and tenth grades. 3rd summer represents between tenth and eleventh grades.

Table 3

Ethnic Group and Gender Differences in Time Use

Activity	Chinese-Amer Girls	Chinese-Amer Boys	Euro-Amer Girls	Euro-Amer Boys	Gender F	Ethnicity F
Awake (hrs./day)	16.95	17.25	16.80	16.19		4.02*
Class (hrs./day)	7.79	7.42	7.88	7.29	17.44***	
Weekday homework (hrs./day)	3.16	2.46	2.38	1.74	8.32**	10.29**
Weekend homework (hrs./wk.)	3.68	2.37	2.44	2.02	7.95**	6.66**
Instrument practice (hrs./wk)	1.94	1.81	.56	1.05		1.81
TV viewing (hrs./wk.)	4.55	7.03	3.69	7.52	8.33**	.07
Sports practice/meets (hrs./wk.)	2.58	1.35	4.27	3.69		5.15*
Extracurricular arts (hrs./wk.)	4.30	2.61	3.45	2.17		.39
Extracurricular academics (hrs./wk)	1.79	1.14	.00	.19		17.11***
Religion classes/groups (hrs./ wk)	.46	.96	.87	1.28		1.90
Chinese school homework (hrs./wk)	.65	1.23	0.00	0.00		15.67***
Volunteer service work (hrs./wk.)	1.02	.00	.30	.10	6.88**	1.70

Notes. Ns = 113.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 5

Correlations Between Activity Participation and Domains of Self-Perception

	Years of Sports Participation		Years of Summer Employment		Dating Frequency	
Scholastic Competence	.23*	**.11**	.13	**-.23***	.06	**-.25***
Social Acceptance	.07	**.12**	.25*	**-.05**	.32*	**.24**
Athletic Competence	.40**	**.53*** **	.08	**.18**	.22	**.30***
Physical Appearance	.04	**.03**	.14	**.21**	.27	**.14**
Job Competence	.23*	**.16**	.28*	**.14**	.41**	**.11**
Romantic Appeal	.07	**.12**	.18	**.15**	.64***	**.47*** **
Global Self-Esteem	.14	**-.08**	.11	**-.01**	.40**	**.09**

Notes. Correlations for Chinese-American adolescents are in regular type. Correlations for Euro-American adolescents are in bold type.

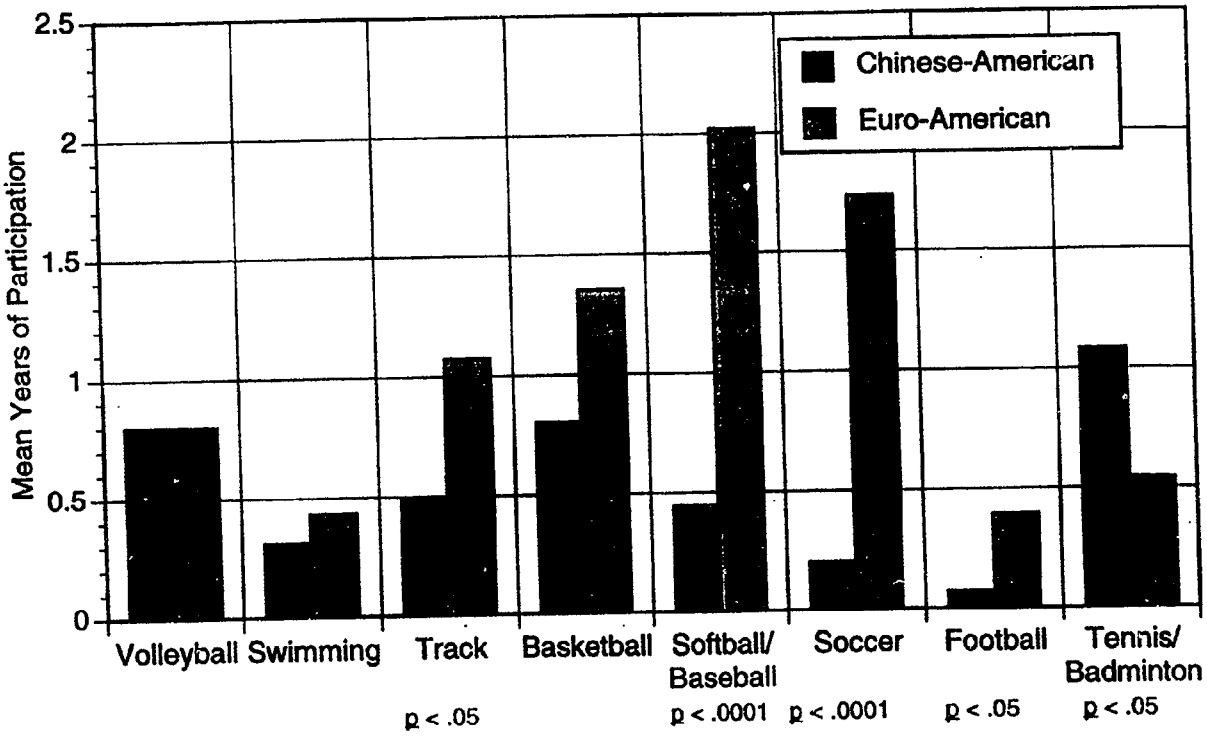
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 6.

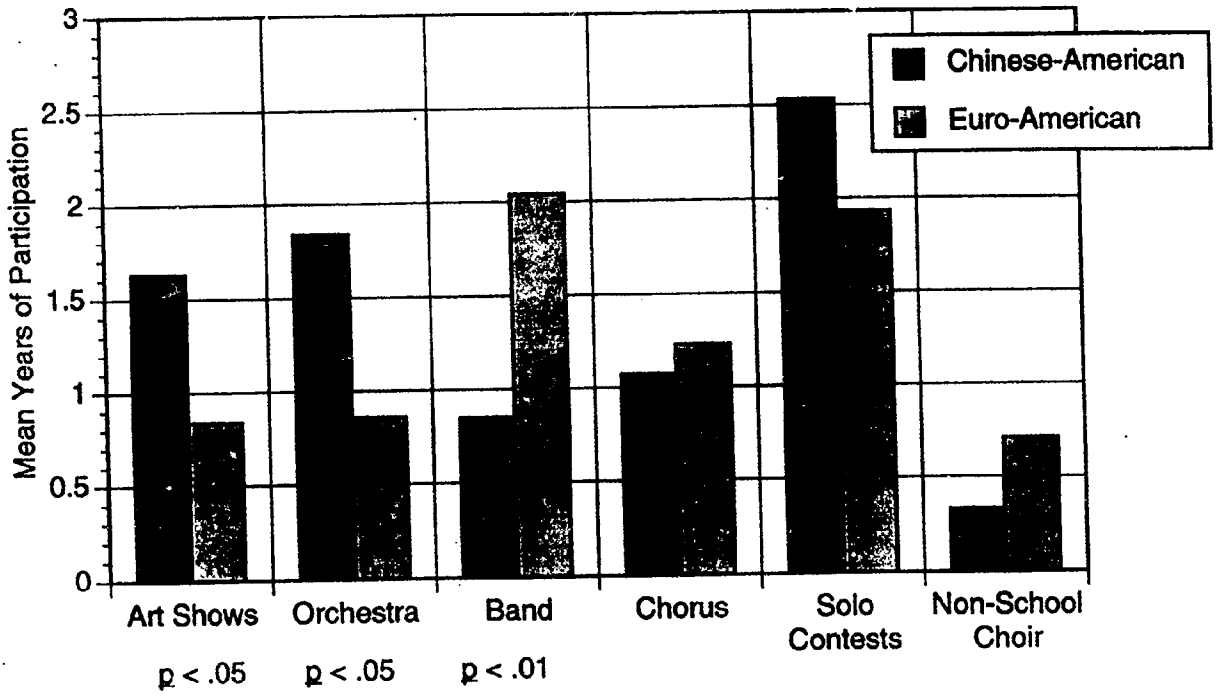
Correlations Between Self-Perception and Dating Frequency, Homework Time, and School Grades

	Dating Frequency		Homework Time		Overall GPA		Math GPA	
Scholastic Competence	.06	-.25	-.31	.10	.23	.61**	.22	.51**
Social Acceptance	.32*	.24	.02	.27	.18	-.26*	.23	-.14
Athletic Competence	.22	.30*	-.23	-.06	-.08	-.15	.01	.01
Physical Appearance	.27	.14	-.13	-.06	.13	-.36**	.16	-.11
Job Competence	.41**	.11	-.07	-.06	.28*	.20	.38**	.15
Romantic Appeal	.64***	.47**	.10	.09	.12	-.29*	.16	-.18
Behavioral Conduct	.05	-.07	-.02	.44**	.27	.29*	.32*	.15
Close Friendship	.22	.16	-.14	.21	-.27	.00	-.19	-.12
Global Self-Esteem	.40**	.09	-.14	.12	.21	-.15	.19	-.08
Depression	-.24	-.05	.02	-.19	-.18	.19	-.31*	.14
Stress	-.10	-.11	.08	-.03	-.22	-.10	-.26	-.10

Cultural Differences in Sports Participation from Grades 6-10



Cultural Differences in Arts Participation from Grades 6-10



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Cultural Differences in Academic Activities Participation from Grades 6-10

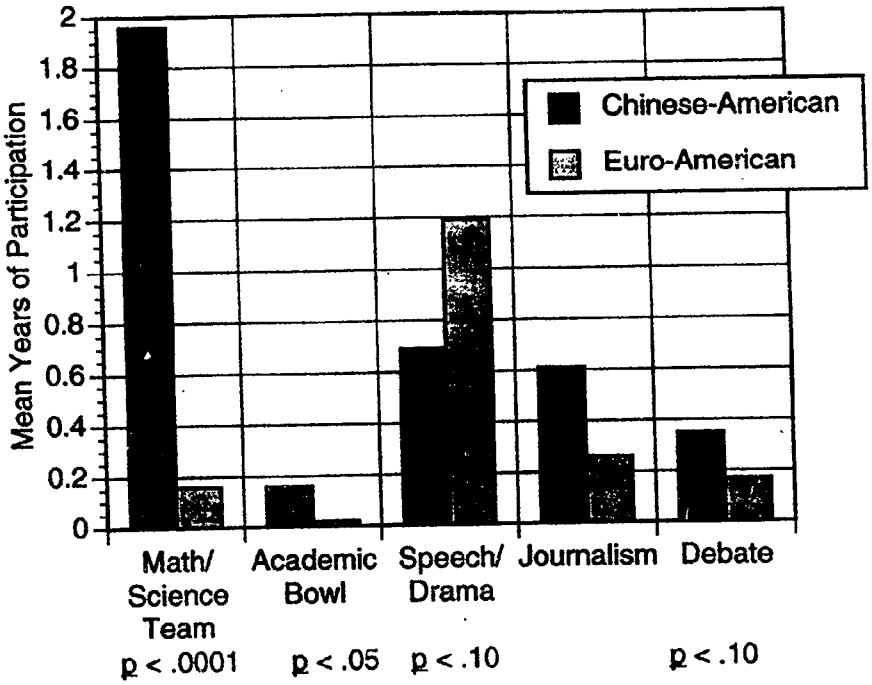
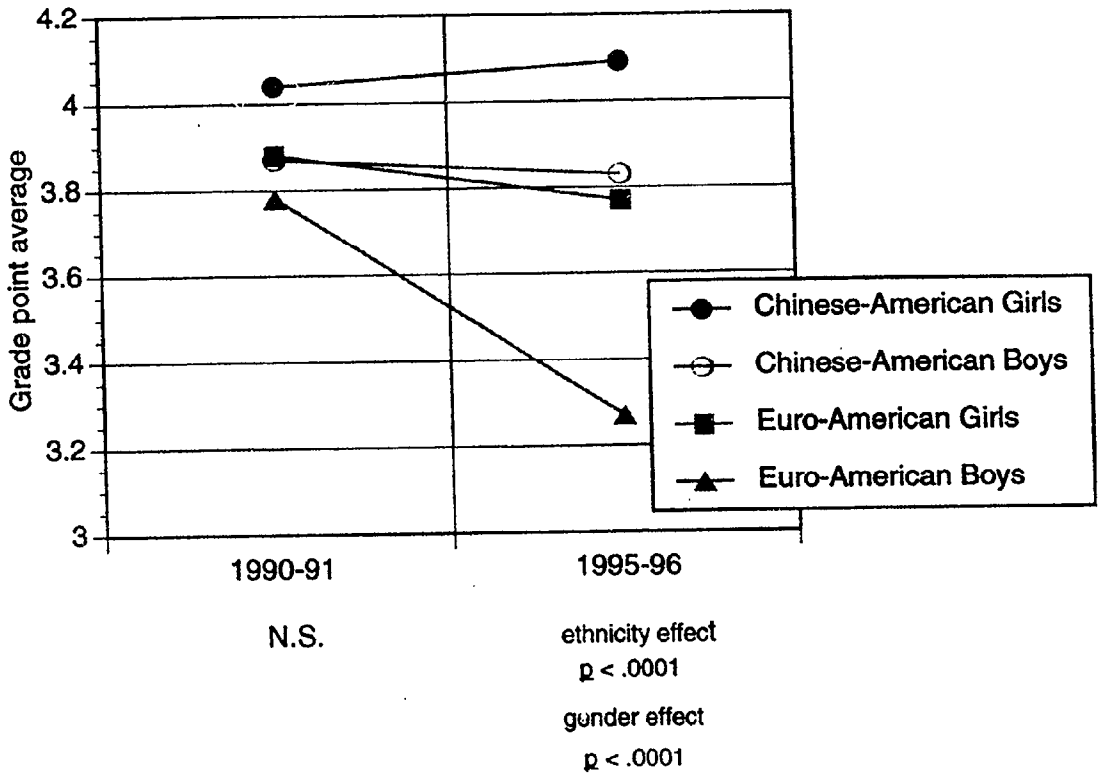
Figure 1. Mean Grade Point Averages Over Time