

**BEYOND THE SHADOW OF WHITE PRIVILEGE? THE SOCIOECONOMIC
ATTAINMENTS OF SECOND-GENERATION SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS***

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ABSTRACT

There have been numerous studies of second-generation minorities in recent years but South Asian Americans have unfortunately been completely ignored in this growing literature. In order to begin to fill this research gap, we provide the first multivariate statistical analysis that focuses specifically on the socioeconomic attainments of second-generation South Asian Americans. Our results indicate that this group has educational attainments that significantly exceed those of non-Hispanic whites. The wages of South Asian Americans are also on par with those of non-Hispanic whites who have similar educational and other basic demographic characteristics. If anything, 1.5-generation South Asian Americans may be slightly advantaged in terms of wages relative to non-Hispanic whites. These conclusions apply equally to both male and female South Asian Americans. Some theorists of race relations have emphasized the socioeconomic advantages of non-Hispanic whites relative to minorities with darker skin tones, but these theories do not appear to be directly applicable to second-generation South Asian Americans.

INTRODUCTION

The socioeconomic attainments of South Asian Americans have not been extensively studied prior research. This research gap is academically unfortunate for at least two reasons. Firstly, discussions of Asian Americans often make assumptions that derive from the literature associated with the model minority myth (Min 1995) that makes claims about the socioeconomic attainments of Asian Americans as an overall category (Takaki 1998). Whether or not these assumptions fit the case of second-generation South Asian Americans needs to be more explicitly considered. For example, the over-education thesis promoted by Hirschman and Wong (1984) and others (Min 1995; Hurh and Kim 1989; Takaki 1998) argues that Asian Americans receive lower socioeconomic returns to their schooling, but these studies do not consider second-generation South Asian Americans. Kibria (2006) provides some important descriptive statistics for South Asian Americans but her analysis is not adequately multivariate to assess the hypothesis that South Asian Americans face a systematic racial/ethnic disadvantage net of their investments in schooling, educational credentials and other variables associated with human capital investments (Hurh and Kim 1989).

Secondly, the socioeconomic attainments of South Asian Americans have a broader theoretical significance in terms of the debate on white privilege. According to this view, racial/ethnic groups with darker skin tones should be disadvantaged in American society and especially in the American labor market (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Feagin 2001; Frankenberg 1993; Omi and Winant 1994). As discussed by Saenz and Morales (2005, p. 173), the “whiteness” literature emphasizes the extent to which whites gain socioeconomic privileges because of structural arrangements that provide them greater opportunities in terms of college admissions, job interviews, and improved labor market rewards. By contrast, darker-skinned minorities are

incorporated into subordinate positions in the racialized stratification system due to their “collective blackness.” Whites will be always at the top of the social structure, and “a hierarchical racial order continues to shape all aspects of American life” (Bonilla-Silva and Glover 2004, p. 28).

According to Bonilla-Silva (1997), prejudice against persons with darker skin tones has been so thoroughly ingrained into American culture for so long that these negative attitudes cannot be easily dismantled. Bonilla-Silva (1997, p. 475) argues that American institutions have evolved with centuries of racist relations so that racism must still be a significant feature of American labor markets because “racialization develops a life of its own.” Nonetheless, because whites will probably become a numerical minority in the U.S. by 2070, whites need to preserve and consolidate their racial power by carefully continuing to denigrate darker-skinned persons and to maintain the socioeconomic privileges of light-skinned persons (Bonilla-Silva 2003a, 2003b).

Our objective here is not, however, to summarize the literature on white privilege, but to investigate the socioeconomic attainments of second-generation South Asian Americans in light of general implications of that literature. In doing so, we assume that South Asian Americans have, *at least on average*, darker skin tones than Americans of European ancestry (i.e., non-Hispanic whites). For this reason, the white privilege literature suggests the hypothesis that South Asian Americans should face a net racial/ethnic disadvantage in their socioeconomic attainments. Given that they tend to have darker skin tones, South Asian Americans are predicted to face fewer opportunities in the labor market and are consequently hypothesized to have lower wages relative to non-Hispanic whites (i.e., persons with lighter skin tones) after

controlling for relevant educational attainment and other demographic factors relating to labor market outcomes.

In drawing out this hypothesis, we hasten to add and fully recognize, of course, that skin tones vary considerably within the South Asian and South Asian American communities. This fact is reflected in the early history of South Asian Americans during which debates considered whether South Asians should be classified as whites (Takaki 1998 pp. 294-301; Kitano and Daniles 2001, p. 107) due to the fair complexions of at least some persons from South Asia. Most of the early South Asian immigrants were from northern India (i.e., Punjab) and they are sometimes described as having lighter skin tones (Takaki 1998). Although the Thind case decision handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1923 ruled against the legal treatment of South Asians as being as privileged as whites, the fact that many states had earlier ruled in favor of categorizing South Asians as whites (Jensen 1988) is suggestive of lighter skin tones among at least some of the South Asian immigrants especially at that time.

In our study, we do not have data on the skin tones of the respondent nor are we aware of any socioeconomic data for the U.S. that includes such information. We therefore cannot directly test the white privilege hypothesis using data on skin color. We can, however, indirectly investigate the hypothesis by making the assumption that South Asian Americans have darker skin tones than non-Hispanic whites albeit only in terms of an average (i.e., not in all individual cases). Nonetheless, because our statistical analyses model average tendencies in the data (i.e., using regression), this on-average reasoning is appropriate given our research methods.

We limit the analysis to the second generation. Kibria's (2006) descriptive statistics indicate some significant socioeconomic differences between foreign-born and native-born South Asian Americans. Furthermore, previous research on Asian Americans often finds that native-

born Asian Americans differ from their foreign-born immigrant counterparts in terms of labor market processes (Zeng and Xie 2004; Sakamoto and Xie 2005). In keeping with previous research, however, we follow the custom of including in our analysis persons who are foreign born but who came to the U.S. at a young age and are therefore schooled and socialized primarily in the U.S. (Portes and Rumbaut 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993). In order to be specific, we refer to them as being the 1.5 generation, but following the usual practice in this field, we use the term second generation to include both the 1.5 generation as well as the native-born offspring of foreign-born immigrants (Farley and Alba 2002).

From a theoretical point of view, our research interest is in estimating the net racial/ethnic disadvantage for South Asian Americans rather than assessing the various disadvantages of being an immigrant. Immigrants are less familiar with American labor market practices and institutions that may be further obfuscated by cultural differences and reduced social networks (e.g., Duleep and Regets 1997; Levine 1993; Min 1995; Tang 1999). The quality of training obtained in foreign universities is often of lower quality than that obtained in U.S. universities (Bratsberg and Ragan 2002). In addition, as noted by Sanders and Nee (1996, p. 232), “U.S. employers are ill-prepared to evaluate foreign-earned human capital” which exacerbates skill transfer problems among immigrants.¹ Although South Asian immigrants are much more likely than most other Asian immigrants to speak English well, a significant proportion of South Asian immigrants nonetheless do not (Barringer et al 1993, pp. 184-187; Reeves and Bennett 2004, p. 11) and may therefore encounter some language problems when entering the U.S. labor market. Finally, immigrants of all racial/ethnic backgrounds may be

¹In the case of Mexican Americans, it has already been known for some time that the returns to schooling tend to be substantially higher when the schooling is obtained in the U.S. (Reimers 1985).

disadvantaged in the labor market due to limitations associated with visa and non-citizenship restrictions.

By contrast, these sorts of labor market issues are virtually absent or are at least trivial for most of the second generation. The second generation is socialized and schooled primarily in the U.S. and is therefore more likely to be comparable to non-Hispanic whites in terms of unmeasured aspects of labor market qualifications. For this reason, focusing on the second generation yields estimates of net wage differentials that may be more confidently interpreted as representing a racial/ethnic disadvantage per se rather than deriving from some aspect of immigration that is not adequately controlled for in the statistical model. That is, the estimated wage disadvantages would be more arguably associated with the persistence of racial/ethnic discrimination that is our main theoretical concern.

DATA AND METHODS

We use the 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) from the 2000 U.S. Census. These data are well known and widely used in the social science community due to their high quality. They are representative of the entire nation and contain a variety of measures of demographic characteristics. The PUMS is also one of the very few recent data sets that identifies specific Asian ethnic groups. In the following, we define the South Asian American category as including persons who identified themselves as Asian Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan. However, 94% of our sample of South Asian Americans is Asian Indian due to the much larger demographic size of that South Asian group.²

² Unfortunately, the sample sizes for Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan Americans were too small to treat them as separate categories in our regression analysis. In the past, we have tried to obtain access to the full 2000 Census data at the U.S. Census Bureau---that would have provided

Our study of socioeconomic attainments is limited to persons aged 25 to 64 who were not enrolled in school and who had worked at least 1040 hours during the year. The latter stipulation deletes from the sample persons who did not have a definite attachment to the workforce because they were not in the labor market at all or because they worked only sporadically during the year (i.e., less than a standard part-time schedule). Our regression models use the logarithmic transformation of the hourly wage as the dependent variable. This methodology is standard practice in the statistical analysis of wages (Sakamoto and Furuichi 1997).

As noted above we limit the analysis to the second generation. Although our data do not specifically include a variable to identify generational status, we refer to native-born South Asian Americans who are over 25 years of age as being second generation because the majority of the South Asian population are post-1965 immigrants (Min 2006; Reeves and Bennett 2004).³ We also include the 1.5 generation which we define as South Asian Americans who were born in South Asia but who came to the U.S. at age 14 or younger. Our statistical analysis is broken down by gender because our main substantive concern is with racial/ethnic differentials.

The independent variables for the log-wage regression include years of age, a quadratic term for years of age, a dichotomous variable to indicate 1.5-generation South Asians, a dichotomous variable to indicate native-born South Asians, a dichotomous variable to indicate disability status, a dichotomous variable to indicate having had some military experience, a set of dichotomous variables to indicate the highest level of schooling completed, a dichotomous

a substantially larger sample size---but our requests for the funding of this project were repeatedly denied by the National Institute of Health. We do not consider other South Asian groups (e.g., Nepalese, Burmese) because they are difficult to identify with the 2000 PUMS and because they are unlikely to be present in sample data due to their extremely small population sizes in the U.S.

³ We also exclude persons who report multi-racial ancestry although they are very small in number in the case of adult South Asian Americans.

variable to indicate being self-employed, a dichotomous variable to indicate living in a metropolitan area, and a set of dichotomous variables to indicate region of residence in terms of the major U.S. Census Bureau divisions. Interaction terms between age and having a college degree and between age and having some graduate education are also included because they proved to be statistically significant in the analysis.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for men are shown in Table 1. Although the sample size for non-Hispanic whites is close to 2 million, 1.5-generation South Asian American men number 1,193 while native-born South Asian American men number 654 in our sample. While not extremely large, these sample sizes for South Asian American men are adequate for basic statistical (including multivariate) analysis. Reflecting the recent immigration patterns of most South Asians, the sample size for the 1.5 generation is significantly larger (i.e., nearly double) that for the native-born group.

Table 1 shows that both groups of South Asian American men are considerably younger, on average, than white men. The latter group has a mean age of 43 years while the mean age for 1.5-generation South Asian men is only 32 years and the mean age for native-born South Asian men is 33 years. That is, South Asian American men are, on average, at least 10 years younger than white men. Their younger average age is again a reflection of the recent immigration patterns of most South Asians. Age is usually a significant factor affecting wages especially in the case of men.

Other notable racial/ethnic differences in Table 1 are the obviously higher educational attainments of South Asian men. Despite their younger age, native-born South Asian men are more than three times more likely than whites to have some graduate education (37% versus 11%, respectively) while 31% of 1.5-generation South Asian men have some graduate education. Correspondingly, the mean years of schooling completed is 13.80 for whites, 15.92 for the 1.5 generation, and 16.12 for the native born. These differences are large given that the standard deviation in schooling is only about 3 years. In sum, South Asian American men have achieved notably higher educational attainment relative to white men.

Table 1 also shows that South Asian men are much less likely than white men to have military experience or to live in a non-metropolitan area. Relative to white men, South Asian men are more likely to reside in the West or Northeast and are less likely to reside in the South or Midwest. Despite their younger age, South Asian men also have a higher mean wage than white men probably due in part to the educational differences between the two groups.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for women. The racial/ethnic differences for women are similar to those for men. Relative to white women, South Asian American women are much younger, more highly educated, more likely to live in a metropolitan area, and are more likely to reside in the West or Northeast. South Asian American women also have a higher wage than white women. In our sample of South Asian American women, the 1.5 generation is more numerous than the native born as shown in Table 2.

Regression Results

Table 3 shows the results for the regressions with years of schooling as the dependent variable. The short model specification includes only dichotomous variables to indicate the two South Asian groups and the coefficients for this model are equivalent (within rounding error) to

the bivariate differences indicated by the descriptive statistics in Tables 1 and 2. For example, the coefficient for native-born South Asian men is 2.32 which is equal to the difference in mean years of completed between that group and white men as is evident from Table 1.

The independent variables for the regression models in Table 3 include years of age, a quadratic term for years of age, disability status, and military experience. After controlling for these variables, the net racial/ethnic differentials in years of schooling increase slightly for men. After taking into account the influences of age, disability status, and military experience on years of schooling, the differential between white and native-born South Asian men increases to 2.52 years while the differential between white and 1.5-generation South Asian men increases to 2.36 years.

The results in Table 3 similarly show that South Asian American women are advantaged in terms of obtaining more years of schooling relative to white women. After controlling for age, disability status, and military experience, however, the net advantage of native-born South Asian women is slightly reduced from 2.50 (in the bivariate model) to 2.41. The net advantage of 1.5-generation South Asian women is also slightly reduced in the multivariate model as shown in Table 3.

Table 4 shows the regression results for the models with log-wage as the dependent variable. Because the dependent variable is expressed in terms of logs, the coefficients refer to percentage effects (Sakamoto and Furuichi 1997). The estimated net effects of age, age-squared, disability status, military experience, educational attainment, metropolitan residence, and region are all generally consistent with prior research (e.g., Sakamoto and Furuichi 1997). After controlling for these variables, Table 4 shows that the coefficient for native-born South Asian men is small and not statistically significant at any conventional level. This finding indicates

that this group has hourly wages that are on average the same as non-Hispanic white men with similar values on the aforementioned control variables. In the case of 1.5-generation South Asian men, the coefficient is about .06 and is statistically significant at the .01 level. This result suggests that, net of the control variables, 1.5-generation South Asian men have wages that are about 6% higher than comparable non-Hispanic white men.

These conclusions regarding racial/ethnic differentials are generally similar for women as shown in Table 4. Net of the control variables, the wages of native-born South Asian women are on average the same as non-Hispanic white women because the estimated coefficient for native-born South Asian women is small and not statistically significant at any conventional level. For 1.5-generation South Asian women, the coefficient is about .10 and is statistically significant at the .001 level. This finding suggests that, net of the control variables, 1.5-generation South Asian women have wages that are about 10% higher than comparable non-Hispanic white women.

CONCLUSIONS

In their review of the statistical literature on the role of race/ethnicity in the labor market, two eminent labor economists conclude that there is a “major need” of more studies of Asian Americans socioeconomic outcomes (Altonji and Blank 1999, p. 3250). In this analysis, we have attempted to begin to fill this research gap. We have investigated second-generation South Asian Americans because, to our knowledge, no previous study has focused specifically on this group.

Our results indicate that second-generation South Asian Americans have much higher levels of educational attainment than whites. Given the increasing importance of education in

determining labor market success (Farley 1996; Autor and Katz 1999; Sakamoto and Kim 2003), this advantage of second-generation South Asian Americans is significant for racial/ethnic relations because it suggests that this group will continue to do at least as well as whites in the future. Some research suggests increasing social class immobility associated with the rising costs of obtaining a college education (Kane 2004). Given that parents who are successful in terms of achieving high educational attainment tend to foster this characteristic in their children (Mare 1981; Mare and Winship 1988; Sun 1998), the higher schooling and wages of second-generation South Asian Americans suggest that they have successfully established themselves in American society in contrast to fears of rapid downward mobility that are sometimes raised in regard to other recent immigrant groups (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1995).

Associated with this issue is the lower self-employment rate of second-generation South Asian Americans as is evident for both men and women in Tables 1 and 2. Previous research using the 2000 U.S. Census data finds that foreign-born South Asians Americans have higher rates of self-employment than those that we report in Tables 1 and 2 for the second generation (Kibria 2006, p. 213). As reported in those tables, we find that second-generation South Asian Americans also have lower self-employment rates relative to non-Hispanic whites. These results suggest that second-generation South Asian Americans have successfully integrated into the American labor market and are not limited to employment in ethnic enclaves or particular niches of self-employment.

The traditional view in Asian American Studies has been the “over-education” thesis according to which “Asian Americans approach socioeconomic parity with whites because of their overachievement in educational attainment” (Hirschman and Wong 1984, p. 584). That is, “over-education” thesis claims that the average wages and occupational attainments of Asian

Americans do not differ very much from those of whites. However, because Asian Americans tend to have higher educational attainments than do whites, the labor market is said to be actually discriminating against Asian Americans in as much as they must make a higher investment in human capital and educational credentials in order to obtain the same overall socioeconomic rewards as do whites. As stated by Hirschman and Wong (1984, p. 602), “the apparent equality between Asians and whites is largely a function of educational overachievement by Asians. If Asians experienced the same process of stratification as whites, their educational credentials would shift their (Asians) occupational and earnings levels substantially above those of the majority population.”

We are not so sure that the above logic is necessarily correctly indicative of racial/ethnic discrimination in the case of a group that has an extremely high rate of college completion such that there may be systematic unobserved variables involved that attenuate the selectivity or average quality of their college graduates⁴ (Mare 1981). In any event, we find no evidence for the “over-education” hypothesis for second-generation South Asian Americans in the multivariate regression results shown in Table 4. The coefficients for South Asians are never negative and statistically significant after controlling for education and the other demographic variables that are typically used in labor market analyses.⁵ Indeed, in the case of the 1.5-generation, South Asian Americans actually have slightly higher wages than comparable non-Hispanic whites. This latter finding is exactly the reverse of what is predicted by the celebrated “over-education” hypothesis.

⁴ It is at least a theoretical possibility that groups with very high college graduation rates may have less selective graduates, at least on average, because persons with mediocre ability or motivation are nonetheless pushed by their social background to obtain higher education.

⁵ This conclusion remains the same even after removing self-employment, metropolitan residence, and region from the model specification.

Regarding the hypothesis of white privilege, our results do not support the broad generalization that, as a minority group with darker skin tones, second-generation South Asian Americans encounter a systematic socioeconomic disadvantage in American society. For this reason, claims about a rigid “pigmentocracy” in American society (Bonilla-Silva et al 2003, p. 121) may need to be more carefully formulated. Second-generation South Asian Americans have demonstrated by their socioeconomic attainments that they are not limited by the conventional wisdoms of contemporary race theorists.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Men

Variable	Whites		1.5-Gen. South Asians		Native-Born South Asians	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Age	42.94	10.01	32.14	5.60	33.38	8.36
Age-Squared	1944.51	876.57	1064.08	407.57	1183.89	654.64
Disability Status	0.14	0.34	0.16	0.37	0.13	0.34
Military Experience	0.23	0.42	0.04	0.20	0.06	0.24
<i>Educational Attainment</i>						
Years of Schooling	13.80	2.64	15.92	3.12	16.12	3.51
(Less Than High School)	0.09	0.29	0.05	0.21	0.06	0.24
High School	0.31	0.46	0.10	0.30	0.09	0.29
Some College	0.23	0.42	0.13	0.34	0.12	0.33
Associate Degree	0.07	0.26	0.06	0.23	0.04	0.21
College Degree	0.19	0.39	0.35	0.48	0.31	0.46
More Than College	0.11	0.31	0.31	0.46	0.37	0.48
Self-Employed	0.14	0.35	0.11	0.31	0.10	0.30
Metropolitan Area	0.66	0.47	0.96	0.19	0.95	0.22
Region						
(West)	0.18	0.38	0.27	0.44	0.32	0.47
Northeast	0.20	0.40	0.33	0.47	0.28	0.45
Midwest	0.28	0.45	0.13	0.34	0.15	0.36
South	0.33	0.47	0.26	0.44	0.25	0.43
Wage	22.32	22.03	26.23	23.23	24.83	23.00
Log-Wage	2.84	0.72	3.00	0.72	2.93	0.74
Sample Size	1,968,521		1,193		654	

Source: 2000 5% PUMS.

Note: Variables with parentheses are omitted categories in regression models.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Women

Variable	Whites		1.5-Gen. South Asians		Native-Born South Asians	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	42.89	9.96	31.43	5.18	32.70	8.40
Age-Squared	1938.79	867.81	1014.47	359.60	1139.91	667.35
Disability Status	0.12	0.33	0.14	0.35	0.11	0.31
Military Experience	0.02	0.12	0.002	0.05	0.01	0.11
<i>Educational Attainment</i>						
Years of Schooling	13.87	2.40	16.00	3.05	16.38	3.45
(Less Than High School)	0.06	0.24	0.04	0.19	0.04	0.20
High School	0.30	0.46	0.09	0.29	0.08	0.26
Some College	0.24	0.43	0.13	0.33	0.10	0.30
Associate Degree	0.09	0.29	0.06	0.24	0.04	0.19
College Degree	0.19	0.39	0.38	0.49	0.36	0.48
More Than College	0.11	0.31	0.30	0.46	0.38	0.49
Self-Employed	0.08	0.26	0.05	0.21	0.05	0.22
Metropolitan Area	0.67	0.47	0.96	0.20	0.94	0.23
Region						
(West)	0.18	0.38	0.28	0.45	0.29	0.46
Northeast	0.21	0.41	0.31	0.46	0.31	0.46
Midwest	0.28	0.45	0.15	0.36	0.13	0.34
South	0.34	0.47	0.25	0.44	0.26	0.44
Wage	15.52	13.28	20.60	14.75	20.48	19.01
Log-Wage	2.53	0.65	2.83	0.64	2.79	0.68
Sample Size	1,532,128		911		519	

Source: 2000 5% PUMS.

Note: Variables with parentheses are omitted categories in regression models.

Table 3: Estimates of OLS Regression of Years of Schooling

	Men		Women	
1.5-Gen. South Asian	2.12242 ***	2.36013 ***	2.12458 ***	2.03753 ***
Native-Born South Asian	2.32305 ***	2.51972 ***	2.50086 ***	2.40976 ***
Age		0.08937 ***		0.03949 ***
Age-Squared		-0.000793 ***		-0.000603 ***
Disability Status		-1.04887 ***		-0.82616 ***
Military Experience		-0.30092 ***		0.18159 ***
Intercept	13.80004 ***	11.71657 ***	13.8749 ***	13.44772 ***
R Square	0.0006	0.0257	0.0008	0.0178

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests).

Table 4. Estimates of OLS Regression of Log-Wage

	Men		Women	
1.5-Gen. South Asian	0.15921 ***	0.05594 **	0.29138 ***	0.09907 ***
Native-Born South Asian	0.09010 **	-0.03322	0.25660 ***	0.02797
Age		0.06062 ***		0.04408 ***
Age-Squared		-0.00059 ***		-0.00044 ***
Disability Status		-0.10107 ***		-0.07274 ***
Military Experience		-0.03692 ***		-0.01134 **
Self-Employed		-0.17292 ***		-0.35074 ***
Educational Attainment				
High School		0.14833 ***		0.15843 ***
Some College		0.26855 ***		0.31443 ***
Associate Degree		0.30357 ***		0.43451 ***
College Degree		0.43674 ***		0.70053 ***
More Than College Degree		0.58019 ***		0.79890 ***
Metropolitan Area		0.19713 ***		0.20649 ***
Region				
South		-0.06424 ***		-0.07465 ***
Midwest		-0.04598 ***		-0.08160 ***
Northeast		0.00667 ***		0.01028 ***
Age*College Degree		0.00301 ***		-0.00108 ***
Age*More Than College Degree		0.00454 ***		0.00127 ***
Intercept	2.83919 ***	1.00761 ***	2.53497 ***	1.05957 ***
R-Square	0.0000	0.1896	0.0002	0.2383

*p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests).