

The Ace Student: A Study on the Effects of the Model Minority Stereotype

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Abstract

With the rise of Asian populations in the United States came the development of various social challenges that not only limited opportunity and discriminated against early Asian immigrants, but also led to the eventual formation of the model minority stereotype. Although perceptions surrounding the model minority stereotype have evolved over the years, it continues to impact millions of lives across the nation by increasing the risk of developing anxiety disorders or depression (among other effects) in Asian American students, which necessitated its investigation. Thus, this paper seeks to examine the origins of this stereotype as well as its impact on Asian Americans and by extension, other ethnic/culture groups in the United States, and combines these findings with the psychology of motivation and human behavior in order to explain the possible link between these two areas. It finally arrives at the conclusion that wide-spread education and awareness of the model minority stereotype's lesser-known impacts may be a step in the right direction, although further action must be taken to effectively mitigate this stereotype's harmful effects moving into the future.

Introduction

Over the past century, the population of the United States has evolved and is now home to over 20 million Asian Americans making up 7% of the total population, a group that is also projected to reach 46 million in 2060 (Budiman and Ruiz, 2022). Reasons behind this wide-spread immigration varied, as many voluntarily came to the United States in pursuit of higher education, better opportunity, or employment while others escaped political turmoil back home including wars, persecution, and genocide. Overtime, success stories of Asians assimilating into American culture published by the *New York Times* and *U.S. News and World Report* sparked wide-spread attention. Asian Americans came to be regarded as what William Petersen coined in 1966 as the "model minority." Today, this term generally sets apart Asian Americans as wealthy; naturally good at math, science, and technology; hardworking or self-reliant; docile and submissive or obedient and uncomplaining; and never in need of assistance ("Model Minority Stereotype for Asian Americans"). While at first glance the model minority stereotype may suggest promising feelings toward Asian Americans, it has had its share of consequences including deepening the divide between Asian Americans and other minority groups, leaving a variety of negative psychological impacts ("The Model Minority Concept"), eliminating individuality among different groups of Asians, and overlooking the decades of racism and hate crimes endured by early Asian immigrants (Blackburn, 2019). For these reasons, this paper will specifically seek to argue that the model minority stereotype has significantly harmed Asian Americans through a historical, psychological, and sociological standpoint with a main focus on the negative impact the label has left on the academic pursuits and motivations of Asian American students.

Origins of the Model Minority Stereotype

In order to understand how the term came to its current harmful use, it is necessary to first examine the formation of the label as well as its historical significance. Robert G. Lee, a professor at Brown University and author of numerous Asian American Studies texts, discussed in his work “The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth,” how political turmoil, specifically the crisis of racial policy in the 1960s, fueled the beginnings of the model minority stereotype. As many African Americans fought for economic equity and formal political rights, others began to notice the lack of action from Asian Americans compared to other minority groups (Lee, 2010). One *U.S. News*¹ article even wrote, “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent on uplifting Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own with no help from anyone else” (qtd. in Lee, 2010). Further, the author of the article “described America’s Chinatowns as ‘havens for law and order’” and referenced the “low rates of delinquency among Chinese American youth” (qtd. in Lee, 2010). On a similar note, Asian Americans were also more reserved when it came to utilizing welfare programs. While 15% of Chinese families in New York City had incomes below the poverty line, only 3.4% enrolled to receive public assistance (Lee, 2010). This only contributed to the growing idea regarding the self-reliant nature of Asian Americans. Similarly, in William Peterson’s “Success Story: Japanese-American Style” published in *The New York Times*, he explored the resiliency of Japanese Americans following the hardships faced during the second world war in which Japanese Americans were subject to various forms of mistreatment on the basis of race. He noted how Japanese Americans, although they had the odds stacked against them, pursued education as a means of breaking free from their pasts in order to work toward a better future. This sense of “resiliency” seen in Asian Americans was also supported by a study regarding the resilience among survivors of the 2010 Haiti earthquake that stated, “being resilient does not mean individuals are unaffected by difficulties, but that they have the ability to draw maximally on personal beliefs, behaviors, skills, and attitudes to recover from trauma rather than [succumb to it]” (Rahill, et al., 2016).

Overtime, the spread and influence of the resiliency and success of Asian Americans grew until it came to be accepted by many that Asian Americans were the “model minority” and that all other minorities should aim to assimilate themselves just as successfully. The issue with this was the fact that it drove a wedge between Asian Americans and other minorities by reinforcing the idea that hard work guarantees success. This indirectly painted other minority groups—most notably African Americans—as inferior in some way or simply not hardworking for being unable to achieve the same “success” as Asian Americans (Chow, 2017). Further, the model minority stereotype has also reduced the perceived impact of the early racism faced by Asian Americans as a result of prior exclusion acts that limited Asian immigration and resulted in widespread discrimination. And, on a less historical note, the model minority label has also

¹ “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 26, 1966, p.38.

negatively contributed to the psychological development of Asian Americans, including how they experience motivation.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Eleanor H. Simpson and Peter D. Balsam, both in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University, define motivation as “behavior in pursuit of a goal” that is influenced by a variety of factors such as internal states, external environments, past history, experience, effort, or reward. Most divide these factors into two categories to produce two widely-accepted forms of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. In a review published in the *Contemporary Educational Psychology* journal by researchers at the University of Rochester, intrinsic motivation was defined as simply “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” while extrinsic motivation was defined as “doing something because it leads to a separable outcome” (Ryan and Deci, 2000). While it may be difficult to determine which of the two is more effective, Dr. Elaine C. Harpine at the University of South Carolina Aiken asserts that “true motivation must come from within—it must be intrinsic,” and a clear example that supports this comes from the experiences of South African President Nelson Mandela detailed in his book *Long Walk to Freedom*. While in prison, Mandela remained resilient and motivated himself to continue striving to achieve what he believed in because of his strong connection to pursuing social justice and equality. He wrote, “We would fight inside as we had fought outside,” illustrating the literal fight for justice behind bars as opposed to outside but also serving as an indicator that activists, when imprisoned, are faced with an obstacle that tests their resilience which may be overcome with a strong intrinsic motivation to continue to support a cause for the sake of believing in it. He was ultimately able to persevere through prison and go on to accomplish much more. Thus, it is apparent that intrinsic motivation may arguably be one of the most powerful forms of motivation an individual may possess.

Psychology of Motivation and the Model Minority

This idea becomes especially important when taking academic motivation into consideration for Asian American students. In an article published by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, intrinsic motivation was described as crucial for helping students to “become more likely to attach meaning to their work, explore new topics, and persist in the face of learning challenges.” However, the burden of being the “model minority” has caused many Asian American students to gain the motivation to excel in academics through less beneficial, external means instead. Professor Stacey J. Lee from the University of Wisconsin-Madison detailed in an article summarizing research on the effect of the “model-minority” stereotype on Asian American students that “Korean students and Asian-identified² students were motivated by a sense of guilt and responsibility to their families.” She also noted that “students

² During the study, Lee found that Asian American students had divided themselves up into two major groups, Korean and Asian, and within the Asian group there were also three subgroups that consisted of Asian American, Asian, and Asian new wave.

experienced anxiety as a result of their efforts to live up to the standards of the model-minority stereotype” and that those who were “unable to do well academically felt depressed and embarrassed.” The former observation made by S. J. Lee on motivation through guilt suggests that Asian American students often experience extrinsic motivation when it comes to their academic pursuits, with the outside stimuli being societal pressure. This is concerning in that it does not allow students to foster strong connections with their goals which—as noted by the aforementioned Harvard Graduate School of Education—may lead students to be less likely to find deeper meaning in their work or possess the resilience to continue in the face of new obstacles. As for the latter point mentioned by S. J. Lee on anxiety and depression, it is apparent that the “model-minority” stereotype has left a psychological burden on Asian American students which is only worsened by the fact that the perception of Asian Americans as a strong, self-reliant individual leads them to be more reluctant to seek out help³.

Supporting these conclusions, a study conducted in 2007 by researchers at the University of Maryland⁴ determined that common sources of stress in Asian Americans include the parental pressure to succeed in academics and the pressure to live up to the model minority stereotype (qtd. in Nishi, 2012). It may also be important to note that another side effect of this stereotype may be the limitation of self-expression (“Burdened with Worry,” 2017). Asian American students feel that their worth is entirely dependent on academic success, and as an excerpt from the book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* published in *The Wall Street Journal*⁵ mentioned, “[Asian American students] can be docile and high-achieving, but [they] can’t have a voice” (qtd. in “Burdened with Worry,” 2017). Further, Asian American students generally focus on more stable career paths related to science, technology, engineering, and math due to their tendency to “avoid negative experiences associated with their racial backgrounds by working toward fields of study where academic achievements play a larger role than race” (Xie & Goyette, 2003 as cited in Lau). As a result, they may be discouraged from pursuing other fields regardless of interest.

Additional Consequences of the Model Minority Stereotype

Now, the last point made above regarding STEM fields may lead one to argue that, after all, the formation of this “model-minority” stereotype may have had some beneficial impact that

³ In a report titled “In Focus: A Summary of the Asian American Community,” researchers in the Department of Epidemiology & Biostatistics at the University of Maryland (among others) determined that Asian Americans were, in fact, less likely to seek out help as a result of cultural beliefs that define openly discussing mental health issues as taboo (2007).

⁴ This study is the same as the one noted above in the previous footnote “In Focus: A Summary of the Asian American Community.” *Young Adult Community Needs Assessment Summary Report*, Jun. 2007, www.aahiinfo.org/english/pdf/needsAssessment/AAHI_FocusG_N_YAdult.pdf

⁵ Chua, Amy. “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 8 Jan. 2011, www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704111504576059713528698754.

resulted in Asian Americans earning higher average incomes with greater representation among minorities in the workplace and beyond. However, it is important to note that Asian Americans are composed of a wide variety of ethnic groups, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Thai, and Indian just to name a few. Because of this, clear disparities in education and income exist among Asian Americans. According to a 2019 survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, Indian Americans are the highest earning group at a median household income of \$127,000 per year while Burmese Americans are the lowest at under \$60,000. Additionally, another may argue that the model minority stereotype has caused Asian Americans to face less racism and discrimination, but this is simply not true. An evident, recent example was the rise in hate crimes and violence against Asian Americans as a result of COVID-19 (Jin, 2021). According to a 2021 report by the Pew Research Center⁶, 32% of Asian Americans—the greatest out of any of the other racial groups surveyed—feared being threatened or physically attacked following the pandemic (qtd. in Jin, 2021). Furthermore, in terms of representation, a 2021 study by the Reflective Democracy Campaign⁷, a nationally recognized organization that researches and analyzes the demographics of American politics, determined that Asian Americans were the most politically underrepresented group when compared to population (qtd. in Jin, 2021).

Conclusion

While stereotypes such as the model minority are often the most difficult to dismantle, education and awareness of its history, use, and impact as well as further research on its psychological impact may lead toward a step in the right direction. Understanding that Asian Americans are not a single collective group and appreciating the complexities of each culture is also important. As for the Asian American students who find themselves struggling as victims of a heavy label, it may be helpful to recognize that Nelson Mandela, in *Long Walk to Freedom*, described how he was able to find comfort through others around him that shared his inner desire to fight for justice and understood his struggles. Through this, it is apparent that other Asian American students may learn to find extrinsic motivation outside of academics by turning to their peers and searching for reassurance and support. While intrinsic motivation seems important in order for an individual to continue to pursue a certain path even as their surroundings and circumstances change, some healthy extrinsic motivation may also be a factor in aiding Asian American students to set aside the burden of being the “model-minority” and pursue the goals they truly desire.

⁶ Ruiz, Neil G., et al. “One-Third of Asian Americans Fear Threats, Physical Attacks and Most Say Violence against Them Is Rising.” *Pew Research Center*, 21 Apr. 2021.

⁷ “AAPI Political Leadership.” *Reflective Democracy Campaign*, May 2021.

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