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MODEL MINORITY MYTH

The model minority myth refers to a set of stereotypes that are composed of several positive qualities purportedly unique to all Asian Americans. Asian Americans

represent a very diverse population in the United States, with approximately 29 distinct ethnic groups differing in languages, religions, and customs. However, the model minority myth tends to generalize more toward East and Southeast relative to all Asian American groups. The model minority myth generally characterizes this group as intelligent, academically conscientious, educationally achieving, skilled in math and science, respectful, obedient, well-behaved, well-assimilated, self-disciplined, serious, hardworking, affluent, and professionally successful, particularly in business, science, and technology.

History of Asian American Stereotypes

Although the current and most common stereotype of Asian Americans that exists in the United States is the model minority myth, stereotypes about this population have evolved through numerous changes since the first wave of Asian immigrants in the mid-1800s. These stereotyped images have included the “pollutant,” the “coolie” (i.e., an unskilled Asian laborer), the “deviant,” the “yellow peril,” the “gook” (i.e., used to describe North Vietnamese soldiers during the Vietnam War), as well as the model minority.

Political and economic issues have largely influenced the evolution of Asian American stereotypes. Asian immigrants were often portrayed in the media as the pollutant, coolie, and deviant during the 1800s and 1900s. These Asian stereotypes originally evolved from White Americans’ feelings of threat and invasion by Chinese immigrants during the unstable and depressed economy between the 1870s and 1890s. Because of their willingness to work for lower wages, Chinese immigrants were used as scapegoats, often facing attacks for sending money made in the United States back to their families in China and becoming work competitors with small American farmers and workers. Eventually, the *yellow peril* terminology was coined by journalists to warn White Americans that the Chinese and Japanese were going to take over the United States and destroy their civilization; thus, the press depicted Asians as irrational, dark, and inassimilable.

The yellow peril stereotype was extended to other Asian groups as the wars with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam evolved. At the same time, the restrictions on the immigration of Asian women and the bans on miscegenation contributed to the image of “asexual” Asian men. Therefore, Asian men were often depicted as either hypermasculine and dangerous or as impotent

and sexually undesirable in popular fiction and movies. During the wars, the use of comfort women by the Japanese military in Asia contributed to the stereotypes of Asian women as exotic and promiscuous. The U.S. media also sexualized Asian women and depicted them as submissive, quiet, mysterious, or untrustworthy. Asian women also were portrayed to fall in love with White men rather than Asian men.

During the civil rights movement and Black Power movement in the 1960s, and possibly in reaction to these movements, the model minority stereotype first appeared in popular media in *U.S. News and World Report* in 1966; this was followed by similar articles in *Newsweek* in 1984 and *Time* magazine in 1987. Asian Americans were described as a racial minority group that had overcome hardship and discrimination through hard work and determination and were, therefore, set as an example for other ethnic minority groups to follow. Many have argued that the characterization of Asian Americans as a model minority was developed as a political propaganda against other racial minority groups by creating a racial triangulation between White Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans, such that Asian Americans are triangulated as alien to White Americans but superior to African Americans. More specifically, it was used to place the blame of racism and social inequality in the United States onto the minorities themselves, suggesting that African Americans and Latinos/as did not have the intelligence or discipline for success that Asian Americans possessed and that other minority groups should try to be as well-behaved and obedient as Asian Americans. This marked the beginning of the model minority myth that would come to dominate the image of Asian Americans in the United States.

The Model Minority Myth Today

An abundance of evidence suggests that the model minority myth is still alive and well today. For example, current media primarily depict Asian Americans as successful, affluent, intelligent, wise, technologically skilled, industrious, altruistic, and highly driven to achieve academic excellence and professional accomplishments. Research has demonstrated that White American students hold the model minority myth about Asian Americans, such as perceiving Asian Americans as being more successful in technical careers than social careers and characterizing Asian Americans as hardworking, intelligent, self-controlled, cautious,

obedient, and being loyal and committed to family. Also, studies have shown that the model minority myth has been accepted by other ethnic and racial groups and internalized by Asian Americans.

Although the model minority myth often emphasizes positive stereotyped traits, it is important to note that some negative stereotypes have continued to exist about Asian Americans. For example, stereotypes that describe Asian Americans as quiet, shy, and overly compliant remain commonplace. Women of Asian descent continue to be depicted as exotic and subservient, whereas Asian men are often portrayed as asexual, submissive, and nerdy.

Impact on Asian American Populations

The prevalence of the model minority myth, as well as its acceptance in U.S. society, has raised some concerns about the influence of these racial stereotypes on Asian Americans. Specifically, demographic profiles seem to suggest that Asian Americans have greater purchasing power, obtain higher education degrees, have higher standardized test scores, earn a greater median income, own more homes, and save more earnings than other ethnic groups in the United States. Although these demographic profiles continue to fuel the model minority myth, a closer examination of these statistics demonstrates that Asian Americans receive lower incomes given their higher levels of education. Also, studies have found that Asian American college students are not as academically successful (i.e., having a lower grade point average, higher dropout rates due to medical reasons, greater risk of academic probation, and lower placement on the Dean's list) as the stereotype would suggest when compared with their White counterparts. Furthermore, Asians who are high academic achievers and seem to fit the model minority myth actually consist of a very selective sample (i.e., some but not all Asian Indians, Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, and Japanese), while many of the underprivileged and less-successful Asian groups (i.e., Cambodian, Indonesian, Malaysian, and Hmong) are often neglected. This bias is also reflected in the media portrayal of model minority Asian Americans, with East Asian Americans most visibly displayed in U.S. advertisements, South and Southeast Asian Americans less visibly displayed, and several other Asian groups almost never portrayed in the media (i.e., Afghani,

Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Malaysians, and Indonesians). Although the model minority myth may describe some Asian Americans, existing evidence suggests that this stereotype certainly does not accurately represent all Asian Americans, and within-group differences (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status) are often ignored.

In addition, recent research has demonstrated that the highly positive generalizations of the model minority myth may have negative implications. For example, Asian Americans have commonly been excluded from universities' affirmative action policies because of the misperception that, unlike other ethnic minority groups, Asian Americans will succeed academically without any additional assistance. Research has focused on the negative impact of the model minority myth and on the popular stereotype that Asian American students do not need academic or personal help and are more psychologically adjusted than other groups. The underutilization of mental health services by Asian Americans, in general, also led to the erred belief that Asian Americans do not need psychological services, which has contributed to the lack of attention to the physical and mental health of Asian Americans and a dearth of culturally sensitive services for this population. In fact, preliminary research suggests that the additional pressure to maintain and live up to the model minority image may contribute to negative psychological adjustment for Asian Americans (e.g., depression), especially given Asian parents' awareness of their minority status in the United States and fear of downward mobility, as well as the cultural value placed on education by Asian American families. In particular, Asian Americans who may not have the talent or motivation for a career in mathematics or sciences may suffer from stress and feelings of inadequacy and failure.

Future Directions

Because the model minority myth is generally used to portray select Asian American groups, future research needs to be conducted to identify the needs of less-visible Asian American groups. Results from such research can help better identify Asian American groups that may be in need of, and benefit from, affirmative action and other forms of academic and emotional support on U.S. colleges and universities campuses. More qualitative research should also be conducted to better understand the differential impact

that the model minority myth may have across various Asian American groups. Furthermore, more research is needed to explore and determine the effects that internalizing the model minority myth may have on Asian Americans' career choices, experiences of academic pressure and stress, and physical and psychological health. This type of knowledge may be particularly helpful not only for college administrators who are concerned about the success and well-being of their student body, but also for mental health professionals in better understanding the experiences of Asian American clients and identifying more culturally relevant resources. As Asian Americans tend to underutilize psychological services, university counseling centers need to develop more culturally appropriate outreach interventions for Asian American students to reduce the stigma of seeking counseling and provide culturally sensitive counseling services to better meet the needs of Asian American students. Counselors working with Asian American clients should examine their own stereotypes against, and assumptions about, Asian Americans; evaluate the impact of the model minority myth and internalizations of these stereotypes on clients' career development; and assess potential anxiety and stress related to expectations or pressures of maintaining the model minority image.

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See also Academic Achievement (v2); Asian Americans (v3); Bias (v3); Career Counseling, Asian Americans (v4); Cultural Paranoia (v3); Identity (v3); Multicultural Counseling Competence (v3); Racism (v3); School Counseling (v1); Social Discrimination (v4); Stereotype (v3)

Further Readings

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