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# Lost Among Caucasians: The Lethal Fallacy of the Model Minority Stereotype

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# LOST AMONG CAUCASIANS:

## *The Lethal Fallacy of the Model Minority Stereotype*

By Nicholas D. Hartlep, PhD

*Do you believe that Asians/Asian Americans are largely successful? Do you assume they all win spelling bees, attend Harvard, and become brilliant scientists? Then you, like many other North Americans, subscribe to the “model minority” stereotype—the faulty belief that, by and large, Asians/Asian Americans are occupationally, financially, and academically successful.*

**T**he stereotype is prevalent in higher education, embodied in slogans that describe Asians/Asian Americans as taking over prestigious universities. Some have dubbed the University of British Columbia the “University of a Billion Chinese,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology as “Made in Taiwan,” University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) as “University of Caucasians Lost among Asians.” These acronymic puns reveal a pervasive misperception. Despite widely held claims that Asians are overtaking topflight 4-year colleges, the truth is most attend 2-year colleges.

### **Killing Them Silently: The Model Minority on Campus**

This supposed “positive” stereotype is in fact “negative.” Studies actually indicate that the model minority stereotype correlates with increased numbers of suicides among Asian students who do not achieve the academic success expected of them.

The model minority stereotype is killing Asian/Asian American students silently. On April 10, 2000, Elizabeth Shin, a Korean student at MIT, committed suicide by self-immolation; in May 2007, Mengyao “May” Zhou, a Stanford University

graduate student, committed suicide by taking more than six times the safe dosage of Unisom; and on April 21, 2012, Wendy H. Chang, a senior at Harvard, was found dead in her dorm room, having apparently hanged herself.

While the loss of life is clearly the most extreme damage done by a general acceptance of the model minority stereotype, there are many other serious implications. For example, despite data that indicate otherwise, there remains a widespread belief that Asians/Asian Americans in North America are all financially prosperous and occupationally successful.

### **The Model Minority Stereotype at Work**

According to *2012 API Representation on Fortune 500 Boards*, a report published by Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP), 129 Asians and Pacific Islanders (APIs) held 144 board seats at 114 Fortune 500 companies—in 2010, there were 96 API directors and 115 board seats at 98 companies. Asian Americans continue to be woefully underrepresented in leadership roles despite the group’s incredible growth rate. Why are Asians/Asian Americans underrepresented in leadership positions within Fortune 500 boards and companies? Could it be that the model minority suggests that they are more technologically and scientifically

savvy, and that they lack the interpersonal skills necessary to lead?

This reminds me of something a colleague once told me: People don't see and interpret the world as it truly is; rather, they see and interpret it as they are. The media reinforces our tendency to think of Asians/Asian Americans as a model minority, by often portraying them as scientists, mathematicians, or medical doctors. Because we are inundated with these stereotypes, we can't rely on our perceptions, but instead, must apply critical analysis.

Our unthinking acceptance of stereotypes causes us to lump individuals we identify as belonging to a particular group together as if no meaningful differences exist between them. If it is wrong to stereotype African Americans as athletes or drug dealers (which, of course, it is), isn't it just as wrong to stereotype Asians/Asian Americans as overachievers who do exceptionally well in college and the workforce?

### Origins of the Model Minority Stereotype in the United States

The stereotype of the North American Asian/Asian American model minority arose during the 1960s when an academic by the name of William Petersen authored a story published by the *New York Times Magazine*, titled "Success Story: Japanese American Style." The piece highlighted and overemphasized Japanese success, comparing it to the lack of success African Americans were having in the United States. The timing of Petersen's publication is notable, coming months after the release of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. The "Moynihan Report," as it is now come to be known, accused African Americans of having a culture that caused the undesirable outcomes they were having. Together, the takeaway message of Moynihan's demonization of blacks and Petersen's praise of the Japanese in America produced the modern-day model minority stereotype.

### The Asian Model Minority Stereotype at Work

All stereotypes are harmful to employers precisely because they constrict employees' sense of individuality and stifle creativity. Interestingly, the more people believe in stereotypes, the more accurate the stereotypes seem to be. Human nature causes us to remember situations that confirm a stereotype, and forget the many times the stereotype was disconfirmed.

Research conducted by Harvard University's Project Implicit illustrates how stereotypes are linked to our implicit biases. Implicit biases are prejudices and ways of thinking that are subconsciously present. Implicit biases have occupational implications for Asians/Asian Americans. If, because of implicit bias, an employer assumes that Asians/Asian Americans lack qualities needed to succeed as leaders, they will track Asian/Asian American employees into technical positions instead. In the business world, this is referred to as the "bamboo ceiling"—in the medical profession, the "sticky floor."

### Working Past Stereotypes

Stereotypes are always more hurtful than helpful. University administrators and professors, as well as those in the corporate world, are best served when they understand that the Asian/Asian American model minority stereotype is limiting and inaccurate. **PDJ**



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Read the expanded online version of this article, which includes Dr. Hartlep's five suggestions for supporting diversity and equity initiatives:  
<http://pdjrn.com/1spRwzm>