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by Dr. Nicholas D. Hartlep

According to literature on the model minority stereotype (MMS) in higher education, the MMS is a sociopolitical foil: it conveniently obscures important differences among minority groups—namely, pre-existing economic and educational disparities between non-Hispanic Whites and Asian, Latino, and African Americans. This column shares three reasons why the MMS is detrimental to people of color collectively and destructive to higher education generally: the myth perpetuates wedge politicking, promotes meritocratic logic in higher education, and ignores historical facts.

1. Perpetuates Wedge Politicking

Mainstream American society identifies Asian Americans as model minorities, especially when compared to African Americans and Latino Americans. The academic success and scholastic achievement of Asian Americans are touted in higher education since this perception seems to confirm the notion that such success can be accomplished without assistance; in other words, it reinforces the idea of self-reliance in a meritocratic system with a level playing field.

Meanwhile, African Americans and Latinos are frequently demonized as affirmative action recipients who depend largely upon handouts and aid. Frank Wu, author of Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White, has written about the impact the MMS has on affirmative action discussions in higher education. Wu laments not only the stripping away of affirmative action protection from Asian Americans who may need it, but also warns that the stereotype “generates anger and resentment, especially in an economic downturn, because the assumption is Asian Americans are doing well while others suffer.”

By its very nature, the MMS serves as a politically divisive tool. Rhetorically speaking, the model minority characterization is part of a wedge politicking strategy that higher education officials and politicians fall back upon during times of educational unrest: it is their failsafe. Policies and procedures can be declared objective and meritocratic if Asian Americans can achieve success. So goes the trope.

Devastatingly, the imagery of Asian American success stories produces specific minority positions within the racial structure in American society and higher education; Asian Americans are one level lower than Whites and one level higher than other minorities. Jean Kim has called this “racial triangulation.” Triangulation is one reason that some scholars have written that Asians in the United States have become “honorable” Whites. Since Asian Americans are not fully accepted, they are said to bump up against “glass ceilings” that prevent them from moving up the ranks in higher education.

Inevitably, then, the MMS is part and parcel of the intentional dividing of Asian Americans from other subordinated communities of color. In short, the MMS is a divide-and-conquer tactic deployed by the educational and social mainstream thereby reducing the chance that Asian Americans will form coalitions and voting blocs capable of reforming existing unequal societal power structures, especially within higher education. Higher education has bought into the ploy since the success of this population promotes meritocratic logic within academe. Wu counters that the MMS “isn’t true of many millions of Asians in America.”
2. Promotes Meritocratic Logic

One insidious consequence of the MMS is the misguided assumption that Asian Americans have achieved relative success by dint of their own effort. Not only is this historically false, it also supports wedge politicking. Wu says that the MMS can “create crazy pressure on young Asian Americans to be overachieving rocket scientists.”

Joyce Tang, a professor of sociology at Queens College of the City University of New York and author of “The Model Minority Thesis Revisited: (Counter)evidence From the Science and Engineering Fields,” observes that, “although Asian Americans are well-represented in high-paying professions, they lag significantly behind their Caucasian peers in getting ahead in major scientific and engineering fields and organizations.” Tang notes that “a mixture of political, market, and cultural forces has affected the career prospects of Blacks and Asian Americans in different ways. For example, when making decisions on who should be promoted to management, the passive interpersonal style prominent in Asian culture may put Asian Americans in a less favorable light in comparison to the more assertive style in African American culture. Asian cultural traits—such as hesitancy to speak up in public settings, deference to authority, and reserve—may be qualities that companies in the United States look for in workers.”

Although college admissions are alleged to be fair and strictly meritocratic, research has disproved this. The message of the MMS is that African and Latin@ Americans need to work harder and complain less, like their Asian American counterparts. Only then will their achievement be more similar to the stereotypical Asian “whiz” kid. Meritocratic logic is highly problematic, especially when it comes to higher education, because unsuccessful collegians are blamed for their failures, not taking into consideration socio-historical realities that complicate everyday reasoning. Meritocratic logic, simply put, ignores historical facts.

3. Ignores Historical Facts

Asians in America were used to build much of the United States’ wealth. Chinese “coolie” labor built the American railroads, yet received little recognition from the White mainstream, as evidenced by their not being present in the famous “Golden Spike” photograph taken when the transcontinental railroad was finally completed.

During World War II, Japanese Americans were forcibly relocated to what can only be called “concentration camps,” their only crime being their Japanese ancestry. Despite being American citizens, their civil liberties were actively violated in an embarrassing miscarriage of justice.

Even in the 1960s, when the MMS was first propagated, pejorative terms like “coolie,” “yellow peril,” “savage,” “chink,” and “heathen” were still being bandied about regularly within mainstream society. More pariahs than paragons, Asian Americans only became America’s model minority because they served a political purpose (see Part I of this series).

Conclusion

The MMS deserves to be demythologized. A key reason it remains misunderstood is that it is part of the American puzzle of exceptionalism. American folktales are often narratives of rugged individualism celebrating Horatio-Alger-like characters who have overcome personal hardships to achieve success. The protestant work ethic or the belief that success is a direct function of individual effort stymies those who critique the stereotype. Indeed, some Asian Americans themselves promote the stereotype—an issue that will be addressed in Part III of this series.

Because the stereotype is seemingly positive, many innocent onlookers buy into the MMS. These individuals unknowingly contribute to the demonization of other communities of color. Those in higher education who are
devoted to social justice need to understand that wedge politicking, meritocratic logic, and historical amnesia work together. In concert they produce reinforcement and promotion, which, once set in motion, are difficult to counter-argue. The higher education community should work against the MMS since it is divisive and negatively affects all students of color.

Part III, the next and last part of this series, provides policy suggestions for destabilizing this relatively stable stereotype of successful Asian Americans. The higher education community should work against the MMS since it is divisive and negatively affects all students of color.

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