The Model Minority Myth: What 50 Years of Research Does and Does Not Tell Us

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The Model Minority Myth: What 50 Years of Research Does and Does Not Tell Us

by Dr. Nicholas D. Hartlep

It is little wonder why Asian-Americans are perceived by the wider higher education community to be paragons of scholarly success, despite their treatment by the U.S. government, historically, as political pariahs (as seen in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the lawful internment of innocent Japanese-Americans during the early 1940s).

The Asian-American student population supposedly scores off-the-charts on high-stakes college admission tests, such as the SAT. Public perception of Asian-American success is evidenced in the phrase “the Asian invasion” — the notion that Asian-Americans are overrepresented on college campuses. Still, Robert Teranishi, associate professor of higher education at New York University and author of the book *Asians in the Ivory Tower: Dilemmas of Racial Inequality in American Higher Education*, says, “Despite the perception that Asian-American Pacific Islander students are heavily concentrated in selective universities, the largest concentration of AAPI college enrollment is in community colleges.”

While some in the ivory tower (such as Arthur Sakamoto) endorse the claim that Asian-Americans are successful in higher education, Teranishi’s research under the auspices of the National Commission on Asian-American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) indicates that this “problem-free” façade is empirically inaccurate. Others who have objectively considered the data, such as Frank Wu, agree. Moreover, Asian-Americans are also believed to have superior mental health despite evidence to the contrary.

The model minority characterization of Asians began largely as a result of William Petersen’s 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article “Success, Japanese-American Style.” Despite the persistence of this myth nearly fifty years later, it is still not understood well by the higher education community, leaving a false narrative of the Asian-American experience intact.

What does research tell us?

Poring over five decades of research on the model minority stereotype (MMS) while myself conducting research for two forthcoming books, *The Model Minority Stereotype: Demystifying Success* (2013, Information Age Publishing) and *The Model Minority Stereotype Reader: Critical and Challenging Readings For the 21st Century* (Cognella Publishing, 2013), I have found that research conducted on the MMS is compelling and conclusive.

First, research reveals that Asian-Americans were intentionally selected to be model minorities. African-Americans could have been constructed to be model minorities, but it was not their fate. Petersen’s 1966 story came about, not because the Asian population was superior to other minorities, but because the U.S. government needed a way to shift negative international attention away from itself. Alison Reiko Loader, a Ph.D. candidate in communication studies at Concordia University in Montreal, wrote an illuminating article on this issue, “We’re Asian, More Expected of Us: Representation, The Model Minority & Whiteness on King of the Hill.” She comments that “the model minority stereotype is not as flattering as it may first appear. The
expectation of overachievement diminishes individual accomplishment and diversity amongst people of Asian
descent by making them all seem the same. By portraying Asians as successful, it also effectively silences
them and conceals racism against them.”

According to Loader and others, the MMS shielded the status quo, insulating politicians from accusations that
African-Americans were unsuccessful due to racism and discrimination in the United States. Since Asians had
“made it,” they were presented as verification that America was a land of opportunity. Northwestern Professor
Shalini Shankar posits that schools seem to perpetuate the model minority due to the fact that the stereotype
is so functional. “The model minority has gained currency because it allows schools to focus on their more
successful Asian-American students as role models for other students. In these contexts, I see the model
minority as a functional stereotype, not a myth.” Petersen’s MMS construct helped fortify the meritocratic and
American Dream narratives being espoused during the peak of the African-American Civil Rights Movement.

It also certainly helped that Petersen’s story came on the heels of the release of The Negro Family: The Case
For National Action (the 1965 Moynihan Report), written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick
Moynihan. Moynihan’s report blamed African-American ghetto culture for the difficulty the population
experienced. Petersen’s decision to write an Asian-American success narrative was as purposeful as it was
politically intentional.

Furthermore, research on the MMS reveals that Asian-Americans do, in fact, experience racism and mental
health challenges. According to Eliza Noh, “Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for Asian-American
women age 15-24.” Other mental health experts cite the “model minority” stereotype and its attendant high
expectations as a likely cause or contributor to suicide. Paradoxically, since Asian-Americans are perceived as
having few, if any, mental health problems — an argument often advanced due to this population’s low
utilization rates — Asian-American mental health needs go largely unmet. “In reality, the underutilization may be
a reflection of barriers to accessing care, including the absence or awareness of culturally and linguistically
appropriate services,” says Dr. Shalini Tendulkar, a researcher at the Institute for Community Health at the
Cambridge Health Alliance and an instructor in medicine at the Harvard Medical School. “Additionally, it is
imperative that we recognize that even within the Asian-American race, mental health disparities exist.
Unfortunately, these disparities are often obscured when we examine aggregated data.”

What does research not tell us?

Research does not tell us whether MMS critics are themselves elitist, although the charge has been made by
Sakamoto, Takei and Woo, who in their article, “The Myth of the Model Minority Myth,” contend that the over-
education argument — the notion that Asian-Americans’ returns on education are unequal compared to non-
Hispanic Whites — is highly elitist since it argues for increased income inequality: the need for highly educated
Asian-American workers to earn even higher salaries in order to put them on par with comparable White
workers.

Sakamoto notes, “Much of the existing research on the MMS examines Asian-Americans’ oppression and lack
of parity with Whites.” And although much of MMS scholarship showcases how the stereotype divides and
conquers people of color, according to Sakamoto, it does not provide actionable solutions. The former is a
strength of the scholarship, but the latter is a liability. Actionable solutions are important to the diverse higher
education community.

For instance, those who want to understand the MMS more fully might find themselves caught between two
kinds of model minority resources: erudite articles with technical discussions of the myth, or books and
websites on the myth with concrete data. Texts of the first type focus on the MMS but are often so technical
they are inaccessible go the lay reader; they also lack practical applications to the college classroom. Texts of
the second type, while generally more accessibly written, often leave readers without a clear sense of higher
education implications. Consequently, the future trajectory of model minority research in higher education
remains to be seen. Research does not tell us where the sociology of the stereotype will lead.

According to Teranishi, “Higher education should reconsider the model minority myth and develop strategies to demythologize the stereotype.” Wu also reminds us that the MMS “is a means of putting down African-Americans and Hispanics.” Asian-American collegians are not “problem-free.” They should be considered “people of color,” and they should be able to access affirmative action. According to Noh, “They also should be provided the mental health care services that they need.”

Research over the last 50 years informs us that Asian-Americans were intentionally picked to be model minorities and that Asian-Americans experience racism and mental health difficulties. The MMS is not a burden exclusively for Asian-Americans. In the previous installment of this series, we considered how the MMS negatively impacts other minority groups. The final installment will explore policy suggestions to combat the stereotype.

Dr. Hartlep is an assistant professor of educational foundations and author of the forthcoming books, The Model Minority Stereotype: Demystifying Success (2013, Information Age Publishing) and The Model Minority Stereotype Reader: Critical and Challenging Readings For the 21st Century (Cognella Publishing, 2013). He can be followed on Twitter @nhartlep.

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