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# The model minority and the inferior minority myths: Inside stereotypes and their implications for student involvement

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*In-depth interviews with an Asian American and a black student reveal the negative influence of racial stereotypes on their learning experiences. Samuel Museus shares their stories and offers recommendations for postsecondary educators.*

By Samuel D. Museus

# THE MODEL MINORITY AND THE INFERIOR MINORITY MYTHS

## Understanding Stereotypes and Their Implications for Student Learning

**I**N 2003, members of a Republican student organization at a large, predominantly white rural campus held a party at which several students were dressed in racially controversial costumes. After the party, pictures of the students in their costumes, complete with derogatory captions, were posted on the personal Web site of the president of the organization. One picture displayed a white student wearing black face paint with the caption “Apparently [he] was released long enough to come to our party. We thank the local police department.” Another photograph portrayed a student dressed as a Ku Klux Klan member and was linked to this caption: “He took a break from cross-burning to drink a cold one.” These pictures sparked uproar and racial tension on campus, and university officials urged the president of the Campus Republicans to resign his post.

In 2006, in an article called “Racist Parties on the Rise,” *The Hilltop*, the student newspaper at Howard University, reported that similar racially themed parties have been held on numerous college campuses across the country. Racial party themes have encouraged col-

lege students to dress as white supremacists, white military soldiers and Vietnamese prostitutes, and pregnant Latinas or Latino gardeners. These parties serve multiple functions on college campuses. First, racially themed parties represent cohesion among members of a campus subculture—usually that of predominantly white student organizations. Students at the racially themed party described in the preceding paragraph, for example, were likely expressing the views and values that initially brought that group together. Second, such incidents can be perceived as acts of racial discrimination that are associated with the harmful effects of making students of color feel unwanted, marginalized, or unsafe on their campus. Indeed, it is possible or even probable that many black students who heard about the party in the opening vignette questioned whether they were safe at an institution where the reality of racism was so potent.

Another reason that racially themed parties are so contentious is that they manifest and reinforce deeply entrenched, culturally derived and perpetuated stereotypes about racial minority groups that can have devastating

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implications for the experiences of minority college students. Despite the potential power that such stereotypes hold to shape individual and group experiences, however, not all educators are conscious of the ways in which those culturally derived assumptions influence the learning of students who belong to the populations that are targeted by such stereotypes. In order for educators to fully understand minority students, we must consider the ways in which cultural factors such as racial stereotypes shape their college experiences. The experiences of two racial minority undergraduates, described later in this article, help highlight the implications of stereotypes and surface key concerns that educators need to address as they work to cultivate inclusive learning environments.

## THE REALITY OF RACIAL STEREOTYPES

IN HIS SEMINAL WORK *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport documented the origins, dynamics, and consequences of racial and ethnic prejudice in the mid-twentieth century. After reviewing several prior definitions of prejudice, he defined ethnic prejudice as “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization” (p. 9). Allport further asserted that stereotypes, while they are not synonymous with prejudices, are key components in the creation and perpetuation of prejudice. Specifically, he explained that we develop categories—clusters of associated ideas and memories that help us understand the world around us and guide our daily perceptions and behavior—and that a stereotype can be defined as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category . . . to justify our conduct in relation to that category” (p. 191).

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Employing Allport's general conceptualization of stereotypes, we might define racial stereotypes as exaggerated beliefs about a particular racial group that are used to justify one's conduct in relation to members of that group. This definition, however, assumes that the individual who adheres to a particular stereotype will admit that a stereotype influenced his or her conduct. It ignores how stereotypes are experienced by or influence members of the targeted group. The importance of these considerations is supported by Claude Steele's research, which indicates that stereotypes can influence the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of members of the targeted group as well as individuals who do not necessarily believe those stereotypes and those who invoke them as a justification for their conduct. Racial stereotypes, therefore, are not confined to exaggerated beliefs that are used to justify conduct toward a group but rather can be viewed as exaggerated beliefs or overgeneralizations about a particular racial group that can help shape the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of members of the generalizing and the targeted groups.

Stereotypes of racial minority groups include overgeneralizations of a broad range of personal traits that encompass students' physical, psychological, social, and academic characteristics. Stereotypes on college campuses exist at the intersection of racial background and academic ability. Racial academic stereotypes are particularly important in the learning experiences of racial minority college students. Two of the most common racial academic stereotypes are the myths of the *model minority* and the *inferior minority*. Bob Suzuki has written about the existence of the model minority stereotype—the assumption that Asian Americans universally achieve unparalleled academic success. In contrast, scholars such as Sharon Fries-Britt and Bridget Turner have studied the impact of racial academic stereotypes on the experiences of African American students and illuminated how black students are stereotyped as academically inferior and as having questionable academic qualifications. Authors have emphasized the notion that such assumptions can contribute to minority students' feeling pressure to confirm or refute those stereotypes.

Steele has also provided evidence that such stereotypes can cause minority students to feel anxiety in particular environments or situations that may influence their academic performance. Yet knowledge of the ways in which stereotypes influence racial minority students' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and outcomes is limited. Researchers and practitioners in higher education must understand the consequences of such culturally perpetuated assumptions.

Because awareness of students' experiences are particularly important in helping educators understand how racial stereotypes influence the college experience, I conducted individual face-to-face interviews with racial or ethnic minority students at a predominantly white rural public research university. The interviews focused on understanding the role that culture plays in minority students' adjustment, engagement, and sense of belonging at the university. Among the cultural factors that those students identified as having a salient impact on their experiences were racial stereotypes. The following two sections provide a description of the role that stereotypes played in the experiences of one Asian American and one African American student on this predominantly white campus. Christy and Sarah are two students who attend the institution, referred to here as Mid-Atlantic University.

### THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

CHRISTY is a second-year Korean American student who moved into the predominantly white cultures of Mid-Atlantic University from racially diverse pre-college communities. When asked about stereotypes, Christy underscored the prevalence of the model minority myth. She explained how, because of that stereotype, she believed that her instructors and classmates held excessively high expectations for her academic performance. She also expressed concern over the possibility of not being able to meet those expectations: "In the classroom, I'm sometimes scared to speak up because all eyes will be on me . . . and I am the only Asian in class. There's more scrutiny. There's more 'what

is she going to say? Oh, it's the Asian girl speaking.' It's like I have to sound highly intellectual or something." This quote highlights Christy's belief that the model minority myth exists in the classroom environment and illustrates the high levels of pressure she feels to conform to that stereotype in class.

Just as important as consciousness of a stereotype is internalization of it. Christy spoke of the pressure that she felt to conform to the model minority myth to which she felt her white instructors and classmates adhered. At the same time, she also noted how similar pressures emanated from members of the Korean subcultures on campus. Christy explained how her Korean American peers had internalized the model minority stereotype, which resulted in added pressure from the groups with which she most closely identified and associated; she stated, "I feel more pressure from my Korean friends than the faculty." Educators should understand the ways in which Asian American students like Christy internalize the model minority stereotype and how such internalization influences their experiences and behaviors. Even the particular groups targeted by such stereotypes may be perpetuating harmful assumptions of the stereotypes.

Christy helps shed light on the nature and complexity of the impact that racial academic stereotypes have on the experiences of Asian American college students by explaining how the model minority myth played a role in diminishing her desire to engage in the learning process: "It's really sort of frustrating, because I am more of an outgoing person, but I find myself just shutting down in classrooms. I mean, I guess, I never realized this before, but it does play a part that I am Asian and I am the minority. I don't really speak up or participate in class much." The influence of the model minority stereotype on Christy's desire to engage transcended the confines of the classroom. She noted how the myth and its implied expectations of academic superiority hindered her willingness and desire to seek help from her professors: "I've only gone to talk to teachers when I was struggling in class to the point where I was like, 'Should I drop this class or not?' So, I had to go. I *had* to go and to talk to them about my grades or whatever. But other

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times, when I needed to go talk to them, I didn't. . . . I just feel like, if I go in, they're just going to think 'You're not an Asian. You're stupid.'" With these comments, Christy underscores how the model minority myth can repel a student from interaction with peers and faculty both inside and outside of the classroom.

In their two volumes of *How College Affects Students*, which review three decades of empirical research, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini have highlighted the importance of college students' interacting with social agents on campus. Given what is known about the importance of peer and faculty interaction, the fact that the model minority stereotype can constitute an impediment to minority students' engagement is anything but trivial. These concerns are not just pertinent to the experiences of Asian American college students; they are also highly relevant to the lives of their African American counterparts.

### THE INFERIOR MINORITY MYTH

**P**ERHAPS EQUALLY PREVALENT as the stereotype that Asian American students are academically superior is the stereotype that African American students are academically inferior. Amanda Lewis, Mark Chesler, and Tyrone Forman have shown how, due in part to the creation of affirmative action programs and practices over four decades ago, some espouse the belief that historically underrepresented racial minority students at prestigious American colleges and universities must have been admitted to fulfill a racial quota. Indeed, opponents of affirmative action have argued that such a stigma can negatively affect the experiences of black and Latino or Latina students. The problem, however, is not that American colleges and universities admit unqualified students but that elements of American culture have perpetuated such overgeneralizations about those students' academic ability.

Sarah, at the time of the interviews, was a fourth-year African American student at Mid-Atlantic University. Sarah also spoke of the impact of stereotypes on her experiences at the university. Unlike Christy, Sarah associated

stereotypes about her race with feelings of being devalued by the dominant culture at Mid-Atlantic. Similar to her Korean American counterpart, Sarah highlighted added pressure that she experienced as a result of racial stereotypes, asserting that she felt pressure to disconfirm the inferiority minority myth: "They could care less about you. As soon as you walk in, you think, 'Okay, I know they already think that I'm not as smart as them and I'm not as quick as them.' Sometimes you feel like, 'Why bother and try to prove them wrong?' And at other times, you feel as if you *have to* prove them wrong."

Sarah described how she had internalized the inferior minority stereotype. For her, the internalization was related to automatic and immediate tension that she felt when entering a classroom. She explained how, the moment she enters a classroom, she feels that her white peers believe she is academically inferior: "I think a lot of it is in your head when you go into class. When you first walk in, you're thinking that all these white faces automatically think you're inferior to them. Regardless if they think that or not, that's what *you* think when you first walk in."

Sarah also underscored the internal conflict she felt as she struggled with her beliefs about preconceived notions that others held. Despite the fact that she realized all white people did not believe she was academically inferior, Sarah could not convince herself that her white peers in the classroom did not carry that attitude: "It takes time and a lot of battling with yourself. You think, 'No. . . . They're not thinking that.' Then you're thinking, 'Yeah, they are. Why is she over there looking at me?' You know?"

Such internal conflict has important implications for minority students' experiences and learning outcomes because it distracts them from and hinders their engagement in the learning process. The racial academic stereotypes prompted Sarah, like Christy, to limit her engagement in the classroom: "In my classes, I'm the only black kid and the only minority in general, so I would just do the bare minimum as far as class activities is concerned. You only have to speak one time a day, so I'd raise my hand once. I didn't feel that if I had something to say

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I should say it, because I didn't feel comfortable with my teacher, with everyone around me."

Christy and Sarah offer valuable insights into how stereotypes that exist or are perceived to exist on predominantly white campuses can detrimentally influence the behavior and experience of students of color. At least two common threads emerged between their stories. First, racial academic stereotypes played a role in their undergraduate experience. Second, those stereotypes were associated with a lack of desire or willingness to engage in and out of the classroom. Thus, by impeding engagement, racial academic stereotypes created a barrier to learning for these students.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND OUTCOMES

**W**HILE IT MAY BE INTUITIVE that stereotypes can contribute to unwelcoming campus environments, *how* those stereotypes negatively influence the behavior and outcomes of students is not as well understood. Almost a decade has passed since Steele brought into the spotlight the relationship between stereotypes and academic performance. He opened his compelling article "A Threat in the Air" with the following words: "From an observer's standpoint, the situations of a boy and a girl in a math classroom are essentially the same. The teacher is the same; the textbooks are the same; and in better classrooms, these students are treated the same. Is it possible, then, that they could still experience the classroom differently, so differently in fact as to significantly affect their performance and achievement there?" (p. 613). To answer this question, Steele tested the effects of stereotypes on the classroom performance of students belonging to groups targeted by racial academic stereotypes. He concluded that the existence of negative assumptions about a group's academic ability can diminish academic performance among members of that group. He called the hazard posed by those assumptions *stereotype threat*: "Stereotype threat, it is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists. Where bad stereotypes about these

groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening" (p. 614).

While Steele's research was critical in identifying and confirming the impact that stereotypes can have on academic performance, the *extent* of the influence that those preconceived myths have on student involvement and learning was not explored. Christy and Sarah provide evidence that stereotypes warrant further discussion because they can have a strong influence on aspects of the college experience, including student engagement.

As noted earlier, Pascarella and Terenzini concluded from their meta-analysis of research that involvement and interaction with key agents on campus is an important determinant of student outcomes. Alexander Astin has also asserted that the quality and quantity of students' campus involvement are key factors in cultivating positive outcomes. Meaningful and sustained interactions in the classroom and in campus activities, evidence from all three authors suggests, is a critical factor in promoting the success of college students. To the extent that racial stereotypes impede that kind of engagement among students in targeted populations, those myths may adversely affect those students' learning.

While other stereotypes exist and are deserving of attention, in this article, I focus exclusively on the model minority and inferior minority myths because of their implications for minority student engagement and, as a consequence, student learning. Although the association of the model minority stereotype with negative consequences may seem less clear than that of the inferior minority, Kenyon Chan and Shirley Hune have explained that the model minority myth has been associated with extraordinary pressures for Asian American college students to excel academically. The frequent absence of Asian Americans from discussions about race in higher education is, in part, a function of the persisting systemic disregard of concerns relevant to Asian American college students, which itself is derived from the assumption that all Asian Americans achieve success in education. Christy's experiences suggest that these assumptions may not be correct.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR ENHANCING THE MINORITY UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE THROUGH CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND STEREOTYPE REDUCTION

**W**HAT do the experiences of Christy and Sarah—and students like them—mean for the work of postsecondary educators? What actions can be taken to diminish the negative consequences of racial stereotypes and improve the experiences of racial minority students? Programmatic interventions are one method for effecting change, but they may not be sufficient. A holistic cultural perspective, described in this section, is also necessary.

Charles Stangor and the contributors to his book *Stereotypes and Prejudice* have offered insight into the various approaches that educators can take to help create environments in which racial stereotypes and their effects are diminished. Those techniques of stereotype reduction include educating people about their assumptions, exposing people to heterogeneous groups consisting of members of minority and majority populations, and promoting formation of cooperative multiracial groups that work toward common goals. In this same vein, educators can sponsor workshops focused on educating diverse groups of students about the impact that such stereotypes have on minority students. Such programs are best seen as an augmentation of rather than a replacement for larger cultural changes.

At least two issues warrant fostering campuswide environments that are conducive to stereotype reduction and minority student engagement. First, isolated efforts to educate college students about racial stereotypes or to promote cooperative intergroup contact run the risk of becoming fleeting experiences in the context of students' entire undergraduate life and therefore may have minimal impact. Students who participate in an isolated, one-time event or activity designed to demystify an internalized racial stereotype may continue to be exposed to a culture filled with artifacts, assumptions, and beliefs that reinforce the stereotype. Second, while stereotypes can be thought of as individual beliefs, they can also be considered deep-rooted features of our societal and institutional cultures. The deep-seated nature of these stereotypes may also diminish the positive effect of a one-time event or activity.

Educators who wish to effect positive change, break down stereotypes, and diminish racially constructed barriers to success for minority students should examine how to couple one-time educational experiences with the creation of a cultural norm that rejects negative stereotypes. Manifestations of this norm on campus can include regular exposure of students to art, advertisements, performances, and other cultural artifacts intended to expose misconceptions and reduce racial stereotypes.

More than a decade ago, at Christy and Sarah's university, black students and their peers protested for almost a week to prompt the university's administration to adopt an extensive strategic plan to diversify the institution. Since that time, the university has increased emphasis on diversity in recruitment, held numerous forums on how to improve the campus climate for minority students, and adopted other initiatives aimed at improving race relations on campus. Christy, for example, explained how a forum designed to facilitate discussions about race on campus gave her a venue for expressing her identity and for spreading awareness about issues such as racial stereotypes and how they affect the experiences of Asian students on campus: "I really enjoyed the discussions about race, because I was the only Asian in that group. They brought up different issues. . . . We talked about stereotypes, and the other students were like, 'Oh I never realized you guys thought that way or you guys were that way.'"

While Christy spoke positively about this experience, she had difficulty identifying ways in which the university had made long-lasting institutional changes to address the issues that she and her minority peers face. While isolated experiences such as her participation in the race-focused discussions can make a difference, their impact can be short-lived. In discussions with Christy and Sarah, they suggested that institutional diversification initiatives lacked depth and long-term impact. Christy illustrated this belief when asked how she felt the university could address the racial barriers faced by Asian American students on her campus. Her response highlighted her perception that diversity efforts were largely brief and superficial: "Do you want to know what I really think? I think that if I suggested any change initiative, it would probably last for like a month or two, . . . and then I don't think anything would happen. It would just be something that you do just because you feel like you're doing something good, but I think

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eventually everyone would return to what they're comfortable with."

Because racial stereotypes on campus are deeply embedded in ways of thinking and in the environments in which we function on a daily basis, they are difficult to change. One-shot forums on the campus climate for minorities or increasing recruitment of racial minority students might have little impact on dominant cultural attitudes and beliefs. The desirable course of action is to cultivate institutional cultures in which the salience of racial stereotypes and prejudice are minimized and students of color are viewed as and believe themselves to be unique individuals and valued members of the broader campus community.

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