

The Model Minority: Mantra, Myth, and... Mistake?

An exploration of Asian poverty in America

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, the Asian population in America has been eagerly penned the “model minority,” espousing the ideal of what each minority in America should aspire to be. This translates roughly to high educational achievement and attainment, higher socioeconomic status, stable and traditional family structure, low rates of crime, and a life dedicated to hard work. More bluntly put, the “model minority” stereotype glorifies the work of a minority group to grow nearer towards “Whiteness” and White values, sometimes referred to as “passing as/acting” White. What seems as a harmless, and even complimentary stereotype at first, however, can have a darker impact leering in the background, enforcing the pressure of exceedingly high expectations on those whom this moniker applies. In this paper, we will examine the history of the Asian population in America in determining both what led to this determination as a model minority and what exactly it constitutes. We will investigate its impacts on the Asian population of America, with a particular focus on when the model minority standard is not met through poverty.

Introduction

Growing up in a rural, southern town in North Carolina, from the moment I entered school I knew that I was different. Not that I felt inherently different from the rest of the kids in my class, rather that they made *me* feel different. Clayton is a majority-white town in North Carolina, and my Asian-ness stuck out like a sore thumb. However, it was not just that I *looked* different from the rest of my peers, it was what that physical difference meant to them. My dark hair, smaller eyes, and yellow undertone meant that I was supposed to be the one to get the 100% on the science quiz, to master the violin through years of practice, and spend my life with my nose to the grindstone, constantly working. While at first I found this presumption rather flattering, it later took on a twisted take: instead of my accomplishments being my own, they became matter-of-fact truths expected because of my race. When my teacher praised me for getting the highest score of the whole class on the math section of our annual standardized tests, my friend and classmate sitting beside me whispered “I mean, duh. You’re Asian. You don’t even have to try,” which was simply not true. Any accomplishment I had to be proud of was stripped away from me by my own identity. According to the world around me, everything I had achieved was because of blood running through my veins, rather than the hard work to which I dedicated myself.

However, there was one area where I did not fit into this model minority myth, and it was pretty obvious: I was not rich. Growing up low-income, aside from simply being difficult in and of itself, became an increasingly sore spot as I grew up, a badge of shame. Everything about me, or at least, everything they had told me about myself,

pointed to a life of economic prosperity. Asian families are the ones who pay for violin lessons, who have nice and respectable cars, and an equally nice and respectable house in the wealthier neighborhood. There was only one other Asian family in my town that I knew of, and they lived in Glen Laurel, the suburb for upper middle class families. My family and I, on the other hand, rented a house in a neighborhood where the welcome sign had paint peeling, letters missing, and graffiti tags. Growing up, I was never proud of where I lived; I was embarrassed. Not just because it was shameful to live in a rented house on the wrong side of the tracks, but rather because it was mortifying to live in a rented house on the wrong side of the tracks in spite of being Asian. It always seemed like more of an embarrassment because all the signs pointed to me living a completely different life that normally is seen as automatic with my race, and yet this simply was not true. Living with this perceived constant reminder of a failure to live to the standard expected of me then became the inspiration for this paper. Were there others out there like me, wrestling with the contradiction of being a poor Asian in America? How do they feel, and is the emotional impact of being in poverty greater because of who they are told to be? These are the questions I have set out to answer.

Literature Review + Methodology

To start this academic adventure, I had to start reading. The pieces I had already read about Asian poverty in America exclusively came from news articles. In 2017, Kimberly Yam wrote an article for The Huffington Post titled, “Asian-Americans Have

Highest Poverty Rate in NYC, But Stereotypes Make Issue Invisible,” pretty much summing up exactly what is going on with the Asian-American population in a nutshell. From NPR to NBC to The Washington Post, journalists had begun to take notice of the contradiction between what everyone is told about Asians in America and what the statistics actually reflected. To do this subject justice then, I had to delve deeper than just topical journalistic features. To start, I went back to these original pieces to find what their sources were in order to more deeply root myself into the issue. However, I was disappointed to discover that although journalists had begun to draw the dichotomous line between the model minority and reality, that there were studies on Asian poverty in America, and that there were also sources delving into the model minority myth, or myth, as I will now refer to it, there seemed to be nothing connecting these issues. These missing links in-between, then, were what I had to search for and hopefully find. Upon further thought, a final moving piece popped up into the periphery, that of attitudes toward mental health in the Asian community. My theory was that, for Asians in America, the mental impact of poverty would be enhanced not only by the model minority myth, but also by the negative attitudes of Asians towards mental health.

With this in mind, I began my research again. Instantly, it became obvious that with the wide breadth that the racial identity Asian spans, it would not be possible to actually cover *all* Asians in my analysis. As was repeated over and over again in the various studies I read, the Asian population is “extremely diverse and heterogeneous” (Sue, Stanley, et al. 47). There are massive variations in the Asian community in

America. The difference between an immigrant from China versus a third-generation Chinese is incredible, let alone the difference between an immigrant from Laos and a second-generation Japanese. The contrasts between Central versus South versus South East versus East Asia are infinite. The distinctions between those who move to the United States as refugees versus those who have moved for other purposes are too immense to be glossed both over and together. And yet historically, they have been. Quite a lot of research out there has treated Asian Americans as one conglomerate, homogeneous group, when in fact, Asian Americans are said to “represent a variety of cultural heritages and immigration experiences” (Goyette 23). In short, to cover the true entirety of the Asian population in America (1) my paper would either be egregiously lengthy and likely logically flawed, or (2) I would have to have a lot more resources at my disposal than a current university senior has.

In light of the complexity of the Asian population in America, combined with the research available to draw from, I decided to centralize my efforts primarily on second generation and beyond East Asians in America. To be perfectly clear, this decision was not because the importance of poverty among other Asian groups is any less, but rather about the availability of information at this point and time. In addition, aside from refugees, the majority of Asians who immigrate to America can be described as “high-skilled immigrants... whose education and income often surpass that of native-born whites,” who therefore would not pertain to impoverished population I wish to discuss (Jiménez 850). Finally, second generation and beyond East Asians in America will have grown up with the model minority myth throughout their entire lives, as

opposed to it being lately thrust upon them post-immigration, enabling a more-visible impact, if there was one.

Now more focused, the majority of scholastic articles I encountered were within the sociological realm of academia, with a few related health and economic pieces interspersed. In regard to the sociological works, the most helpful and pertinent ones on the model minority myth and/or Asian poverty in America were based on using in-depth interviews, analysis of data from various related studies, and giving historical context to the modern day Asian in America, most helpful among those being those of Jiménez and Horowitz's "When White is Just Alright"; Sue, Stanley, et al.'s "Psychopathology Among Asian Americans: A Model Minority?"; Wong and Halgin's "The 'Model Minority': Bane or Blessing for Asian Americans?"; Stacey J. Lee's "Behind the Model-Minority Stereotype: Voices of High- and Low-Achieving Asian American Students"; and Goyette and Xie's "Educational Expectations of Asian American Youths: Determinants and Ethnic Differences"; along with Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu's *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*, and Claude M. Steele's "A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance". The majority of my research on Asian-American mental health came from Lee and Zane's *Handbook of Asian American Psychology*, with additional incredibly complementary pieces such as Sue, Stanley, et al.'s "Asian American Mental Health: A Call to Action"; Atkinson and Gim's "Asian-American Cultural Identity and Attitudes toward Mental Health Services"; and Hall and Yee's "U.S. Mental Health Policy: Addressing the Neglect of Asian Americans" to modernize the data and analysis presented in the *Handbook*.

Finally, to provide historical context to Asians in America and how they are seen in the public eye, I read from Tchen and Yeats' *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, Victor Bascara's *Model-Minority Imperialism*, Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America*, Nancy Wang Yuen's *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, among other pieces covering the vast cultural attitudes towards Asians in America. Together, this vast multitude of information has culminated to be the paper you are about to read.

Analysis

Asians in America: Where did it all start?

While Asians have existed in America since as early as the 16th century, they did not start coming in major waves deemed concerning by the American public until the late 19th century. As early as 1875, governmental action was taken against Asian immigrants with the Page Act, barring "undesirable" Asians, such as forced laborers and women who might become prostitutes, from entering the country (Tchen 237). At the level of the citizen, cries from Americans for the national exclusion of Chinese from America, with political cartoons and books about the "vicious conspiracy" of the Chinese against the United States being widely circulated at this time (Tchen 231). The main fear here was generally what it always is when new waves of immigrants come to a country: that they would bring crime, lackluster morals, and anti-nationalist ideals into the country, all while taking jobs from deserving and hard-working Americans. As a result, in 1882, the self-explanatory Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, followed by the 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and Japan to prohibit Japanese from

entering the U.S. (Lee 132). By the 1920s, animosity towards Asians in America had only heightened, now reaching as far as Hollywood, with characters like Yen How and “Fu Manchu secretly plott[ing] the destruction of the entire white race in books, comics, radio dramas, films, and TV shows” (E. Lee 133). This paranoia in relation to the Asian population became known as “yellow peril,” and led to the passing of other exclusionary legal acts such as the 1917 Immigration Act, which established the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” expanding the immigration ban to all Asians attempting to come to America, the Quota Act of 1921 and the 1924 Immigration Act, limiting all immigration to the U.S. in general (E. Lee 136).

Perhaps most famously in the history of Asians in America were the Japanese internment camps of the 1940s. In direct response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese during World War II, the United States government issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the ten War Relocation Authority camps throughout the U.S. in which the Japanese in America were to be incarcerated (E. Lee 229). At the time, the Japanese population in America comprised less than 1% of the total U.S. population, numbering only 120,000, of which 80,000 were American citizens. It would not be until 1946 that all camps were entirely shut down (E. Lee 228).

Defining the model minority myth

Since then, the view towards Asians in America has changed drastically. Given time for healing and forgiveness, by the 1960s Asians were no longer demonized in the way that they once had been. In 1965, the United States issued the Hart-Cellar Act,

officially lifting the quotas put in place by the 1924 Immigration Act and showcasing the increase in acceptance of Asians in the hearts and minds of Americans (Hsu 236). It was around this same time that the phrase, “model minority” first began to float about. From then on, Asians in America were pegged with this ‘flattering’ stereotype about themselves, of being the model for which all minorities should aspire and strive to be. But what, exactly, does it mean to be a model minority? Well, it can be said that Asians “have become ‘model minorities’ perceived as exemplary immigrants with educational credentials, entrepreneurial ambitions, strong work ethics, valuable job skills, and exemplary family values” (Hsu 236). In many ways, it could be said that the model minority myth simply describes someone who has been able to embody the American Dream. In fact, Asian Americans, through the model minority myth, serve as proof to the nation that the American Dream is still alive and well, that one really can succeed in life if they just work hard enough.

However, the model minority myth is so much more than just the embodiment of the American Dream. First and foremost, it is a stereotype. As Peter Singer put simply in his 2007 analysis of the emerging discussion of intelligence as related to race, “racist stereotyping harms the prospects of many non-whites... [and] no matter what the facts on race and intelligence turn out to be, they will not justify racial hatred, nor disrespect for people of a different race” (Singer). Using someone’s race as an assumption point about who they are as a person is not only “dangerous” as Singer calls it, but de-humanizing, by stripping away their individuality in place of a (flawed) group

identity. Furthermore, as any stereotype tends to do, the concept of the model minority breeds contempt, as can be seen in the pushback against the Asian-American community in higher education (A. Wong, Jaschik, Gersen). Finally, the creation of a positive stereotype has a darker, converse side in which it implies that if one minority group is good and the ideal model to follow, that another/other minority groups are bad. In other words, in saying that Asian-Americans are always hard-working and high-achieving, this implies inherently that other minority groups are just the opposite: lazy and low-achieving. In this way, the model minority myth denigrates and strips individuality from more than just one minority group, doing a duplicitous sort of double-damage.

Nevertheless, many argue that the model minority myth is a good thing. Most stereotypes, when one tries to come up with them, are blatantly negative, such as women not being able to drive or the French being rude. The model minority myth turns this concept on its head: why would someone not want to be automatically assumed to be intelligent, hard-working, and the embodiment of American ideals, particularly when there are many other, much worse stereotypes that could be applied in its place.

So Whose Fault is It?

With this in mind then, it begs the question as to whether or not this stereotype originated from a self-imposition or external-imposition. In other words, did the model minority myth come from others creating this label and attaching it to Asians, or is it one that came about on its own from Asians themselves? Trick question. Regardless of

how the model minority myth originated, it now in its current form is perpetuated by both non-Asians and Asians themselves. Most of the research in regard to this area has been done in the realm of academics, with in-depth interviews with Asian-American students. As Asians have replaced Whites in some places as those who “set the norms of academic achievement,” schools have become popular sources of information for scholars when researching the model minority myth.

When interviewing those who interacted with Asian students in the classroom -- teachers, classmates, etc. -- the consensus was that yes, Asians do generally fulfill the model minority myth. As one student from Jiménez and Horowitz’s study put it, “if you’re really studious and you’re white, you’re called ‘Asian at heart,’” confirming the superiority of Asians in an academic setting (Jiménez 859). Later in that same study was a sentiment echoed by the many others studies I read: that “teachers themselves contribute to the ethnoracial encoding of academic success by making assumptions about students’ intellectual abilities based on ethnoracial background” (Jiménez 860). In short, in the academic world, Asians experience the expectation to fulfill the model minority myth from both their peers and their mentors.

However, this external expectation does not just exist within the academic lives of Asian-Americans. Both in their professional and personal lives, assumptions are made about how Asian-Americans live their lives. Due to their high educational attainment -- assumed due to the model minority myth -- they only go into higher-paying jobs, such as careers in health, law, or business, and therefore make higher wages. They have a

relatively high socioeconomic standing, and are perfectly honorable law-abiding citizens. In essence, it is being a minority, without all of the automatic negative connotations associated with being a minority.

On an internal level, it should be no surprise that Asian-Americans take the model minority myth to heart. Second-generation and beyond students grow up their entire lives hearing from all those around them that they are intelligent, will work hard, will get good grades, and are destined for success because they are Asian, and that is what Asians do. They know that they are expected to graduate high school, go to college, get a good job, and live a successful life with their family. Beyond this, however, this is what they expect of and hope for themselves (Jiménez 861, F. Wong 45). Along with everyone else around them telling them what they should be and who they are, they reaffirm the stereotype for themselves.

One can see this exact theory applied in a different manner in Steele's research done on how stereotype threat affects the performances and outcomes of the students to whom it applies. In essence, what Steele and his colleague Aronson discovered was that when presented with a negative stereotype about themselves, students were more likely to feel anxious about their academic performance and therefore do worse on their examinations than their peers. Although the model minority myth is a negative stereotype, the same concept can be applied to Asian-Americans: when presented with stereotype that both determines and expects certain outcomes, the intense pressures to achieve this expectation only serve to hinder actual performance.

At the core of this expectation, unsurprisingly, one will find their parents.

Throughout the literature, one common thread was that Asian parents would typically have much higher expectations than those of U.S. parents (Goyette 24, Jiménez 863, F. Wong 43). One main explanation of the difference in expectations of American vs. Asian parents is that the way in which each set of parents respectively view education and what it can do for an individual varies. In America, education can be a tool for social mobility if one is smart. If one is inherently intelligent, then they can use the tool of education to their advantage. For Asians, the common belief is that “educational goals are achievable through effort and are not solely determined by ability” (Goyette 25). This unique perspective is what then transforms what can be expected of a person when they receive an education. For Asian parents, they believe that the effort and work put in is more important than the raw intelligence their child has, so they correspondingly push them harder than any other demographic of parents. For (White) American parents, they believe that first their child must be inherently intelligent before they can take advantage of the education system, resulting in more relaxed expectations of the child.

Finally, it is postulated that Asian-American parents, as a result of how they view intelligence versus hard work, view education as the most “effective channel of upward mobility for their children” and therefore place great value on their child’s educational attainment (Goyette 25). This is reflected in the data Goyette and Xie’s 1999 research on educational expectations for different racial groups. The average expected years of

schooling for whites fell at 15.6 years, while expectations for Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans were at 16.7 years, 16.9 years, and 17.5 years respectively (Goyette 27). Moreover, more East Asian-Americans interviewed expected to graduate from college as opposed to whites, at an average rate of 81.4% in comparison to the 58.3% of whites (Goyette 28). In particular, one would expect these expectations to be particularly pervasive among Asian-Americans who are of lower socio-economic status, as education is seen as their one way to rise above their situation. For Asian-Americans of a more privileged socio-economic status, the pressure is slightly lessened, as the immediate consequences are mitigated by their current status. However, it is still quite clear that East Asian-Americans' expectations for themselves are quite high across the board.

... But is it true?

So it is all good and well to realize that the model minority myth is perpetuated by both non-Asian-Americans and Asian-Americans alike, is there any evidence supporting the perpetuation of this stereotype? According to popular culture, the answer is a most resounding 'yes'. According to historical data, the answer is still mostly 'yes'. As shared in the conclusion of Hsu's *The Good Immigrants*:

“A Pew Report titled “The Rise of Asian Americans” (2012) trumpeted this shift in immigration rates even as it proclaimed that “Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest growing racial group in the United States. They are more satisfied than the general public with their lives, finances,

and the direction of the country, and they place more value than other Americans do on marriage, parenthood, hard work and career success” (Hsu 237).

However, this information is skewed. As mentioned earlier, the majority of those who are able to immigrate into the U.S. are those who already have achieved high levels of education and career success, and this is why they are able to relocate, so there is a certain degree of selection bias when touting this information. The immigrant Asian population in the United States, with the exemption of refugees, tends to consistently prove the model minority myth wrong. Having said that, this paper is focused on second-generation and beyond East Asians, so it would be of service to discuss their particular status within the United States instead.

As put in the words of Sakamoto et al., “the higher educational achievement of Asian Americans in the U.S. school system is not a myth but a generally observed empirical regularity, at least on average for this group as a whole” (Sakamoto et al. 260). Asian Americans achieve higher standardized test scores, have higher grades and take more advanced courses, are less likely to repeat grades, and more likely to finish high school and receive a bachelor’s degree or higher (Goyette 27). So perhaps on the whole, second-generation and beyond Asian Americans do seem to fit the model minority myth.

However, if one looks at the data, one can begin to find inconsistencies that provides support to the truth that the model minority myth is a false narrative. While the majority of Asian-Americans in poverty are not from East Asia -- Hmong,

Bangladeshi, and Cambodian Asian-Americans topping the list -- average poverty rates among Chinese, Koreans, and Mongolians are in fact higher than the national average of 12.7%, breaking the mold of the model minority with 13.6%, 15.2%, and 26.1%, respectively in accordance with the most recent U.S. Census (Sakamoto et al. 258, U.S. Census Bureau 11).

Furthermore, through the in-depth interviews conducted by Stacey J. Lee in her “Behind the Model-Minority Stereotype” article, she identifies four different categories of Asian-identifying students that defy the model minority myth in the high school where she collected data and did her research: Koreans, Asians, Asian new wavers, and Asian Americans (S. Lee 416). Within these four categories, all contained some of the population targeted in this paper, but of particular relevance are those Lee identified as low-achieving Asians, as well as those she deemed Asian Americans. The latter, among the low-achieving Asians, Lee found Asian students who were intelligent, but lacked the desire to work particularly hard in school (S. Lee 421). It was not that these students lacked the potential to fulfill the model minority myth then, but rather that they chose not to, as self-application to education was not their main priority.

With the Asian American population, Lee found that generally, these students were hard-working and typically did well in school. Their motivations for working hard “was the belief that education would give them the tools to fight racism,” hoping to become lawyers, journalists, filmmakers, and other influencers in and of the future (S. Lee 426). However, among these exemplary students were a number of “average”

students who were made to feel low-achieving because of the high expectations set for them. For example, one student, Xuan Nguyen, felt that she was “made to feel like a low achiever simply because she [did] not fit the stereotype of the Asian math genius” (S. Lee 426). Lee made it clear that she was not alone in feeling this way. Many other Asian-identifying students who were simply ‘average’ often felt as though they were below average because of how others constructed expectations based on their race (S. Lee 427). Once again, the model minority myth was proven to not be the entirely true story.

In fact, throughout all the literature I read, both the more scholarly journalistic articles and the more flashy news articles, the general sentiment was that the model minority myth was blatantly not true for a large number of people in the country. Asian-Americans can be poor, they can be average, and they most definitely can have the wide array of qualities and characteristics so readily available to Whites. While the stereotype does quite obviously have some grounds on which to stand, as many researches have begun to discover, it is, in all honesty, more of a myth than anything else.

So, how are we feeling?

Now it begs the question: how does the model minority myth actually tangibly affect those to whom it is applied? Obviously, the first step is to ask the applicable demographic how they feel about this myth perpetuated all around them.

Unsurprisingly, nearly all Asian-Americans interviewed in the various studies had

negative feelings towards the myth. Even though the myth can often bring Asian-Americans to be “considered ‘honorary whites,’” the title is not one that many wish to bear (Okamoto 817). This title brings Asian-Americans closer in line with Whites socioeconomically, leading them to be a “sociological minority that is often not officially classified as a minority... [and] popularly regarded as the non-minority minority” (Sakamoto et al. 256). As a result, the very real plights of Asian-Americans are often cast to the side or ignored entirely, as most assume from the model minority myth that equality is relatively standard between Whites and Asian Americans, when often it is not. One large point of proof touted to emphasize that Whites are seen as Asian-Americans is the high rate of intermarriage between the two races (Qian 73).¹ However, this proclamation that Asian-Americans are essentially equal to Whites is false. Asian-Americans must “make a higher investment in human capital to obtain the same socioeconomic rewards as whites” (Sakamoto et al. 263).

In a 2001 study by The Committee of 100, a Chinese-American organization, it was found that although the respondents generally thought that Chinese-Americans place a greater emphasis on education, have strong family ties, trust them as honest businessmen, are as patriotic as other Americans, and have contributed to the cultural life of America (with percentages ranging as high as 91%), only 32% of those same respondents expressed positive attitudes toward Chinese-Americans (F. Wong 39). In

¹ This is, of course, ignoring the fact that the majority of these interracial marriages are only between White men and Asian/Asian-American women, resulting from the racist stripping of masculinity from Asian males in the early 20th century and the ultra-fetishization of Asian females from the mid 20th century to today (R. Kuo).

the study conducted by Stacey J. Lee, the understanding among the students that they were not equal to Whites was so prevalent that they “seemed to accept that discrimination would limit their potential. They did not challenge discrimination but instead altered their expectations to fit what they perceived to be their opportunities” (S. Lee 418). The model minority myth has done its work to lull White Americans into thinking that racial equality for Asian-Americans has arrived, when it clearly has not. This is perhaps the greatest reason for which Asian-Americans dislike the myth being spread: it denies their struggles and existence as individuals, and reaffirms the falsehood of the homogeneity among the Asian-American community.

In a study by Sakamoto that asked 162 undergraduate students to rank their feelings on being referred to as a model minority, only 26.3% of those students expressed positive feelings (F. Wong 40). It is not hard to imagine why. In her study, Stacey J. Lee found that Asian students felt compelled to live up to the model minority standards, motivated by “a sense of guilt and responsibility to their families (S. Lee 427). These same students, regardless of being high- or low-achieving, “experienced anxiety as a result of their efforts to live up to the standards of the model-minority stereotypes. Students unable to do well academically felt depressed and embarrassed” (S. Lee 427). They feel that it both “marginalizes them from mainstream society and also interferes with their wish to be perceived as individuals” (F. Wong 40). One student interviewed summed up their sentiments towards the model minority myth quite well when they said:

“Because regardless of its positive connotations, it is STILL a STEREOTYPE. This means that there are certain expectations of Asians based simply on their appearance. I think this is b*llsh*t, and I try with all my ability to avoid being labeled” (Oyserman 445).

In a study by Cheryan and Bodenhausen that examined the effects of a positive stereotype (i.e., the model minority myth) on academic performance using a quantitative skills test, they found that the participants who were “primed to their ethnicity felt pressured to live up to the expectations of performing well, which reduced their ability to concentrate, and, as a result, negatively affected their performance on the test” (F. Wong 45). In other words, they found that the less-common positive stereotypes, just like the more-common negative stereotypes could also be detrimental to an individual’s performance.

As one could reasonably expect, Asian-Americans do not take too kindly to the model minority myth being thrown upon them. In many cases it is hiding a great portion of the truth if not entirely false, it creates an unnecessary pressure and stress on Asian-Americans through its high expectations, and it de-legitimizes, if not all-but-erases the experiences and struggles of Asian-Americans living in the United States. As has been evidenced by a multitude of studies, these slights towards Asian-Americans caused by the model minority myth increase stress and mental health issues for the individual affected, regardless of whether or not they do or do not fit within the myth.

How Mental Health Factors into the Model Minority Myth

The adverse mental health effects of perceiving a high standard from external sources are considerably worse for those already considered “vulnerable,” those who have experienced some bout of poor mental health within the previous year. That being said, it then becomes important to assess the state of mental health in the Asian-American community. In general, information on whether or not Asian-Americans are more or less vulnerable than other races is spotty at best. For one, more research on Asian-Americans in general is required, as a minority of research has been dedicated to this subject, and the population of study is so small. Additionally, of the studies that do try to assess whether mental health is poorer among Asian-Americans relative to other races have resulted in many different outcomes. For some, Asian-Americans as a whole do have poorer mental health than other racial groups, but for others, the results are inconclusive. In one study conducted, “Asian American students reported higher levels of depression and social anxiety” (Sue et al. 45). In another, the Chinese American Psychiatric Epidemiological Study, it was found that “Chinese Americans in the CAPES project did not have higher rates of mental disorders than Whites” (Sue et al. 46). It goes without saying that greater research must be conducted to determine the truth with more clarity in regard to Asian-American mental health. Furthermore, these studies have all, for the most part, tried to treat Asian-Americans as a homogeneous group, which as we have already discussed, they are most definitely not. Unfortunately, the question of the current state of mental health for Asian-Americans has remained unresolved to this day.

In a similar vein, there is a lack of clarity as to whether or not Asian-Americans underutilize mental health services. Historically, it has been considered to be true, but these past studies committed the same sin as those before it: they have attempted to group together and homogenize an exceedingly heterogeneous group. Despite it not making any sense to group together the data from Asian refugees with the data of second- or third-generation Asian-Americans, a lack of resources and a small population size limited these studies to do just that. However, in a particularly helpful study by Donald R. Atkinson and Ruth H. Gim, the distinction was made that utilization of mental health services by Asian-Americans was directly related to their respective levels of acculturation. The more acculturated² an individual was, the more likely they were to both recognize their need for mental health services and actually seek out the proper aid for their symptoms (Atkinson 211).

Nevertheless, this still does not provide conclusive evidence on where Asian-Americans fall on the mental health spectrum. Traditionally, Asian-Americans are seen to under-utilize mental health services, but they are also perceived, on average, to have lower rates of mental disorders than any other racial group. Falling into the pit of the model minority myth, Asian-Americans are seen as a well-adjusted group that, due to their general success in life on all planes, have no reason nor need to have any mental health issues (Sue et al. 39). However, Sue, et al. note that at present it is “not possible

² Acculturated here meaning more assimilated to traditional American culture. This was measured by a consideration of whether or not they were an immigrant themselves, of how long an individual had been living in the United States, and how closely they personally identified with American culture.

to determine the specific rates of psychopathology... evidence does suggest that their rates of mental disorders are not extraordinarily low,” as they are often portrayed to be (Sue et al. 39).

Perhaps even more crucial to note, however, is the internal attitudes of Asian-Americans towards poor mental health. Although the under-utilization of mental health services by Asian-Americans is often attributed to the fact that they are a well-adjusted group that does not need these services, the truth is that most Asian-Americans are averse to (1) admitting that they have any mental health issues, (2) that mental health issues are completely normal and should be treated as such, and (3) that using mental health services to take care of oneself is beneficial and necessary. In particular, these ideas are especially difficult to embrace if they are someone who “strongly identif[ies] with their ethnic culture” (Atkinson 209). What was most interesting, however, was the fact that Chinese-, Korean-, and Japanese-Americans did not have any difference in their attitudes towards professional psychological help, providing evidence that suggests that aversion towards mental health services is a cultural aspect that is stronger among the East Asian community than in others (Atkinson 211).

While the explanations as to *why* Asian-Americans are so dismissive of the concept of poor mental health and receiving help for said mental health are varied and unclear, it is important to at least briefly run through some of the most common theories. Perhaps most popular is the cultural argument, that culturally, there is something different about Asian-Americans that make them less likely to acknowledge

the need for help. In a similar thread, the model minority myth may also be a great contributor to the denial of mental health issues. If one is told over and over that they have no reason to be unhappy, that they are at the peak of what their options could be, that they are destined for success, it seems ridiculous that one would have any mental health issues; what would there be to feel poorly about? In this way, the model minority myth may perpetuate the poor mental health of Asian-Americans, as they may feel obligated to put on a front for others to comply with what others expect of them and with what they have been accustomed to expect from themselves.

Additionally, the model minority myth may come from the difficulty of reconciling the contradictory sides of the myth itself: on the one hand, they are expected to be hard workers, and that's how they will succeed, but at the same time, they are told they are inherently of a higher intelligence, leaving them in the middle of a complex and contradictory story. However, both of these sides still point to the same end goal, that of success, working together to create this compounded pressure and intense stress on the individual to achieve that expected success.

The One-Two Punch: The Model Minority + Mental Health

So what does this all have to do with the question originally posed at the beginning of this paper, that how poverty might affect Asian-Americans? Well, what I hypothesize is that poverty affects Asian-Americans more so than the average individual in poverty. Of course, in and of itself, living in poverty and all that comes with it, such as being unable to adequately take care of oneself and one's loved ones, a general feeling of degradation and sense of lack of accomplishment, and stress of a life of insecurity, is

incredibly difficult. However, I would like to put forth the theory that for Asian-Americans in particular, the effects of living in poverty are worse, due to the model minority myth and the mental health issues among the Asian-American population.

The relationship between Asian-Americans, their education, and the model minority myth provides a miniature scale to which poverty can be applied: their entire lives, these second-generation plus Asian-Americans are told that they are destined for success because they always work hard, are naturally smart, and understand the value of education. While this not only diminishes them from individuals to just one of a group, it also creates an intense amount of pressure on these Asian-American students to perform as well academically as they are expected to. The irony here, however, is that if one falls in line with the myth, they are representative of their whole group, yet on the other hand, if they fail, it is entirely their fault; the myth only applies when it is apparently true. This intense amount of pressure can not only lead to added stress and anxiety, but can trigger mental health issues if it becomes too much, or if these individuals believe themselves to be falling short of what is marked as their standard, which can lead into an endless downward spiral of failure and inability to perform.³

The same can be applied to those in poverty. Their entire lives, Asian-Americans are told that they will not fail, that they will live prosperous lives, and that they are the gold standard for other minorities to look up to. This creates an added pressure, as they have now been turned into the token Asian-American to which everyone looks up to and

³ Steele's stereotype threat, revisited.

scrutinizes. If the deemed level of success is not met, i.e., living in poverty, then in addition to the stresses of being impoverished, these individuals' self-esteem is critically damaged, as their flaws seemed to be all the more emphasized via the model minority myth. Again, a strong sense of irony is felt here, because if they were to succeed, it would be no big deal, as it is expected of them. However, since they are failing to meet the standard expected of them, their failure is entirely on them as an individual, and only serving to greater highlight their shortcomings in a way that heightens stress and contributes to poorer mental health.

In turn, the poor mental state in which they are experiencing is not at all helped by Asian-Americans' attitudes towards mental health, preventing these individuals from both acknowledging their current mental state and from seeking out mental health services that they could benefit from quite considerably. In the end, these two internal and external forces combine together to the detriment of the individual, making it all the more difficult to pull oneself out of poverty.

Conclusion

Clearly, a lot of change needs to be made in regard to Asian-American mental health, societal perception, and poverty. However, first and foremost, if any sort of progress is to be made in any of these fields, more dedicated research is necessary. The faults of nearly every study I pored over led back to the lack of information available about this population. Whether it was small sample size, lack of funding due to lack of interest, or something else, it is now all-too-necessary to begin vigorously working towards discovering the truth, and it would be irresponsible not to. The Asian-American population is one of the fastest-growing in the country, and research should adapt to reflect this change.

Second, mental services to Asian-Americans should be made more public and readily available, specifically aiming to target this population that desperately needs it. Additionally, educational materials on various common mental health disorders, through means of a national campaign would be incredibly beneficial to not only this population, but to the nation as a whole. The stigma associated with mental health issues is dangerous and unhealthy, and only leads to greater difficulty and prolonged suffering.

Lastly, in regard to the model minority myth, the solutions are not immediately forthcoming, nor simple when they do. The eradication of the model minority myth is a cultural change that needs to happen, and cultural changes are difficult to make through policy. To convince others to essentially “un-think” something they have grown up knowing their entire lives is more or less impossible, and it would be foolish to think so.

The particular difficulty of the situation of the model minority myth is that it is a (mostly) positive stereotype. In the case of a negative stereotype, such as the horrendous stereotype that existed that African-Americans were less intelligent, can more easily be railed against by providing example after after example of intelligent and competent African-Americans in our history⁴. In the case of this particular positive stereotype, it seems counterproductive to go out and declare that not all Asians are intelligent by providing examples of average or below-average achieving Asian-Americans. So in yet another way, the model minority myth continues to exist, as there seems no way to counteract it.

However, a strong place to start would be with an evaluation of how we view second place. Particularly in the American meritocracy we have set up, many are of the opinion that if you are not first, the best, or the greatest, you're conversely last, the worst, or unworthy. This state of mind, although initially motivating and arguably one of the greatest contributors to our history's general success, is one of the major drivers for the intense kinds of stress discussed in this paper. While the full effects of this national mentality have yet to be fully realized and studied, there has been a general understanding that this hyper-prioritization to be the best and under-appreciation of those come next has resulted in some major negative mental health outcomes dealing with perceptions of self-worth and identity. A move from the intense focus on perfection and being the best to an understanding that there are also people who come in second and third and so on would not only then be of great benefit to Asian-Americans and

⁴ Hidden Figures, anyone?

their own perceptions of their worth and where they fit in with the model minority myth, but be of great benefit to the mental health status of Americans as a whole.

Above all, it is important to know that there is hope. Through widespread awareness of the model minority myth and the damage that it can cause, perhaps, bit by bit, it can be broken down. Teachers can become more aware of how they treat their students and of what they expect of them, making sure to treat their students equally. Employers can do the same. Individuals can be mindful of the flaws of the stereotype and monitor their thoughts and actions accordingly, if necessary. This type of change is subtle, and takes time, but is absolutely necessary if any hope is to be had.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this capstone.

Monica Musgrave

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