

Chapter 18

Asians and the Myth of the Model Minority in Higher Education: A Psychocultural Reality in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

When compared with African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, Asian are often attributed more positive attributions from the dominant culture. The developed stereotype, Myth of the Model Minority (MMM), suggests Asian Americans achieve a higher degree of success than the general population. Under the internalized assumption of being psychologically trouble free, the MMM stereotype contributes to Asians being less inclined to proactively engage in help seeking behavior despite the presence of severe mental health concerns. Psychocultural examples relating to Asian Americans (e.g., Virginia Tech Shooter case) are reviewed to form a clinical and forensic psychological framework that offers a challenge as to why the MMM is problematic in higher education. The myths related to MMM and the experiences—positive or negative—of MMM are analyzed to encourage subsequent empirically-based applications for addressing MMM as well as serving as a caveat against using monocausal explanations or other thumbnail assessments of Asian American behavior in higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, racial stereotypes have been developed in a way that functions to control certain groups for personal or political reasons. For example, in advance of the rise of Germany before World War II, Nazis created anti-Semitic stereotypes that incorrectly blamed Jews for the downward plight of their country following WWI. In the United States, every major ethnoracial group has identifiable stereotypes that coincide with a history of racially motivated oppression. For example, the movement of African Americans was restricted under repressive Jim Crow laws. Historical trauma and fears stoked through these stereotypes remains a constant fixture in many institutions (e.g., higher education, law enforcement, politics, business, etc.). Asian Americans similar to other groups also experienced their share of harsh treatment (e.g., Japanese internment and confiscation of land, poor job conditions for Chinese laborers, etc.). At the same time, Asian Americans were also extolled for being “model minorities.” Asians as Model Minority (AMM) refers to a distorted perception that Asian Americans are often perceived as a prototypical racial group as evidenced by their academic and business accomplishments (Fong, 2008). While on the surface, the descriptor Model Minority appears complimentary, a closer evaluation of its function is damning in at least two ways. First, the model minority moniker is used as a clumsy guise to wipe the slate clean for past racial atrocities. In this case, the model minority label hoists up Asian Americans as a group that has theoretically succeeded in spite of any forms of past discrimination no matter how atrocious. In this case the ethnoracial cultural message seems to be one of, if Asian American’s can excel, then why can’t these other groups do so. Use of the Asian Model Minority essentially attempts to invalidate any other valid criticism for past and current ethnoracial injustices. Second, the AMM functions as an exemption from having to do anything substantial to correct the current negative educational or law enforcement circumstances that plagued several diverse communities. In fact, according to AMM, stresses that the achievements of Asia Americans is a direct byproduct of their hard work and is assumed to be greater than other racial groups (Yoo, Burrola, & Steger, 2010). Unfortunately, there are numerous empirically-based behavioral symptoms to challenge these assumptions. In fact, a concerted effort has been organized to do just that and is referred to as Asian Myth of the Model Minority (MMM). For example, suicide is the ninth leading cause of death among Asian Americans across all age groups, compared to tenth among White Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006).

Higher education functions as an ideal platform to further examine MMM. If Asians are the model minority, then why has research suggested that Asian American college students are more inclined to think about suicide and attempt in greater numbers when contrasted with Whites (Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005; Muehlenkamp, Gutierrez, Osman, & Barrios, 2005). To make matters worse, Asian Americans are also not likely to pursue mental health support or report their suicidal ideation. Above all, the MMM needs to be examined in more detail within higher education.

This chapter contains 5 sections. The first section will examine the MMM and the experiences of Asian American Students in the United States, specifically, in higher education. The second section explains the victimhood of related to MM followed by an analysis of the Virginia Tech Shooting case as an example of a negative outcome of MM. The fourth section examines the necessity of research on mental health related to MMM, the dark side of the MM, and ways to approach MM in counseling. The fifth and final section presents solutions and recommendations for future research directions.

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