

Endey Lonh

Professor Reilly

FYW 100P-04

19 April 2016

The Model Minority Myth

As with all racial and ethnic minority groups, Asian Americans are subject to the negative effects of stereotyping which are typically offensive beliefs about the target group. While Asian Americans are depicted by a number of negative stereotypes (i.e. passive, stingy, and speaking English poorly,) the “model minority stereotype” also portrays Asian Americans in a “positive light,” (i.e. intelligent, excelling in math and science, highly academically achieving, hardworking, and well-behaved,) and I am surely not an exception to this stereotyping. Asian American stereotypes- positive and negative- continue to exist in the United States, raising concerns about the impact of these stereotypes on the Asian American population. These findings have important consequences for the broader domain of racism. We are expected to be good at math. We are expected to be doctors. We are expected to be more academically, economically, and socially successful than any other racial minority group.

Contrary to these popular beliefs, the overly positive misrepresentation of Asian Americans as the model minority is misleading and inaccurate. The model minority stereotype places increasing pressure on Asian American students to obtain high academic achievement, thereby leading to depression and shame. This distorted comparison can lead to adverse effects in the lives of Asian Americans. The myth of Asians as a model minority would seem flattering to some, but it has a negative and debilitating effect on the general population of Asian Americans. Several mental health concerns and psychological affliction, such as threats to

cultural identity, powerlessness, and feelings of nonconformity, loneliness, and hostility remain unaddressed and hidden. Both social and psychological forces to conform to the model minority stereotype place an excessive amount of pressure on Asian Americans.

From kindergarten to third grade, I attended two public schools in Providence, Rhode Island that were both very diverse. With approximately twenty students in each class, the majority of the students were actually minorities. In this environment, I felt very comfortable and was able to enjoy school and learning without the competition of fellow students. I have had people praising me for my academic excellence my whole life. Since I was a child, I was often commended for my grades and standards and, of course, had my peers asking me to help them with math. Although none of them have ever said so directly, my teachers have often given me the impression that I am the model student that the rest of the class should strive to be. Ogbu goes on to explain cross-cultural evidence of variability in minority school performance, and reports that, “Asian-American students do better than blacks, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans in reading, verbal ability, and math tests” (315).

However, “Behind the Model-Minority Stereotype: Voices of High- and Low-Achieving Asian American Students” includes a study that was conducted at what the author calls “Academic High School” in Pennsylvania. Stacy Lee of the University of Wisconsin conducted her fieldwork at the school whose, “racial makeup of the student population was: white (45%); African American (35%); Asian American (18%); and Latino (2%).” (414). Lee emphasizes that, “a thorough examination of the rankings illustrates that not all Asian American students are successful” (414). I was at the top of my class in third grade, and I was even given the chance to take an accelerated test to skip ahead to fifth grade. At the time, the opportunity did not present itself as a big deal to me, and not knowing the prodigious benefits of the weighing outcome, I did

not take it as seriously as I should have, and I failed. Albeit, I continued on to the next grade while still advanced than most of my classmates.

When I first moved to Cranston in fourth grade, I was placed in an ESL classroom, and I was stumped. My grades were superb, and I did not understand why valuable learning time was being taken away from me just so I could relearn things that I already knew. Did they just assume that because I am a minority, I could not speak or understand English well, or was this something that they would do with every new student? I was placed in a classroom with fifteen fellow minorities, many of who were Hispanic. I suppose the classroom's purpose could also have been to provide a safe, comfortable space for new students, because many of my peers already spoke English competently. I remained in that classroom for the first two weeks of school before I was put into a "regular" classroom. In the article, "Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation", Professor John U. Ogbu of the University of California, Berkeley emphasizes that, "minority and poor children were neither culturally deprived nor deprived of stimulating learning environments, and that they came from cultures that were different but as viable as the white middle-class culture" (313). However, Ogbu also mentions that, "Asian-Americans are not the only language and cultural minorities doing well in school... Hispanic groups in the United States reveal some variability, too" (315). Conventional wisdom has it that Asian Americans are the "model minority," but Ogbu's argument and evidence from past studies proves that Asians are not the only keen ones.

Many Asian students stated that their parents decided to move to the United States because of the educational opportunities for their children, and this is also the case for my parents. Growing up, my parents were wise, stern, and caring, and kept me out of trouble; they raised me with strong values to study hard, do my work, and use my time efficiently and to make

a better life for myself. I understand the sacrifices that they have made for my brothers and me; therefore, I try my best, and even if I am struggling with something, I persevere. Lee also quotes a student, Mei Mei, who says, "...and sometimes you tend to be what they expect you to be, and you just lose your identity-just lose being yourself. When you get bad grades, people look at you really strangely because you are sort of distorting the way they see an Asian. It makes you feel really awkward if you don't fit the stereotype" (419). From the point of view of a "low achiever," I relate to Ming Chang, an interviewee of Lee's. Chang's values and thoughts on the model minority stereotype are similar to mine. When it comes to personal problems, I am able to talk to my friends about it without the fear of judgment, but when it comes to academics, I would rather keep it to myself. The model minority stereotype places a pressure on me to be academically successful.

In middle school, I was placed into the high honors classes, but the self-assurance stopped when I realized that many of my peers were smarter than me. I continued to get straight A's on my report cards, but I began to notice that I no longer enjoyed school. I began procrastinating and staying up all night doing homework and writing papers instead of sleeping. After the school day ended, I would remain in my math class tutoring fellow classmates. My peers would end up scoring higher than me when it came to taking the unit test, and I started to lose it. Why are my grades plummeting even though I am trying so hard? At this point, I cared more about my grades than my mental health. The increasing pressure to obtain high grades and academic achievement led me to feeling shameful about myself. At the end of eighth grade, I received my very first failing grade, an F- in Algebra 1, and I felt nothing. I viewed myself as a model minority to my peers, and I felt a pressure to be one of the more successful students from

my class, but after failing math, something that I am supposed to excel in- I started to give up. I stopped talking to people because I felt ashamed.

While putting together my schedule for freshman year of high school, my guidance counselor overlooked the rest of my grades and pointed out that I had failed Algebra 1. I performed well in the rest of my classes, but instead of seeing my potential to continue to succeed, she went on to recommend that I drop down to all CP classes instead, with the exception of science and art. At that moment, my self-esteem was shattered, and I lost all confidence in myself. It seemed as though my grades had become a reflection of who I am, and if I fail a math class, I will fail at life. While trying to conform to this stereotype throughout my high school career, I have lost myself. I am afraid and embarrassed to go to anyone for help when I am struggling with academics because I feel like it is something that I am supposed to be good at, and there is no need to seek help.

After being in the same environment for all of my life, I figured that once I got to college things would get better. I would not have any distractions so I would be able to focus on myself and my grades, and maybe I would be able to get back to being the good scholar that I once was, but I was wrong. When I entered my First Year Writing class and looked around, I felt ashamed because I was the only Asian American, and it only got worse as the semester went on. I was going through a very unhealthy mental state, but I could not get myself to reach out to my professors for help. Everyone around me seemed to be doing fine, and I felt so alone and irrelevant. After all, I am supposed to be mentally and emotionally stable.

The essence of Hyung Chol Yoo, Pansy Yip, and Matthew J. Miller's argument in "Validation of the Internalization of the Model Minority Myth Measure and Its Link to Academic Performance and Psychological Adjustment Among Asian American Adolescents" is

that, “contrary to these popular beliefs, the overly positive caricature of Asian Americans as the model minority misrepresents sociocultural reality of many Asian Americans. Moreover, this distorted comparison can lead to adverse psychological effects in the lives of Asian Americans” (273). Yoo, Yip, and Miller also state that, “the extent to which Asian Americans themselves internalized the model minority myth and its potential harm to their mental health” (238). A significant amount of my anxiety and depression is caused from the stress and pressure that I feel from school. If it were up to me, I wish that I could be a scholar, and sometimes I wish that I had what it takes to become a doctor, but I have accepted the fact that I am not cut out for certain things, and I have come to accept myself and the fact that my talents just happen to be in the visual arts rather than math and science.

The model minority stereotype has affected my life in negative ways, but it has also allowed me to find who I am. Without being forced to take certain classes in college, I have been able to explore other fields that have interested me, such as political science, and I have been able to dodge the dreaded math classes, for now. These external and internalized stereotypes had a profound, negative impact on the expansion of my identity, competence, self-concept, and development. This self-stereotyping resulted in a constant pressure to conform to the model minority stereotype, but overtime, I have realized that I do not have to be what people want me to be because I am my own person. I am not a stereotype.

Works Cited

- Lee, Stacy J. "*Behind the Model-Minority Stereotype: Voices of High- and Low-Achieving Asian American Students.*" *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 25.4 (1994): 413-429. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 15 April 2016.
- Ogbu, John U. "*Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation.*" *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 18.4 (1987): 312-334. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 19 April 2016.
- Yoo, Hyung C., Miller, Matthew J, Yip, Pansy. "*Validation of the internalization of the model Minority Myth Measure (IM-4) and its link to academic performance and psychological adjustment among Asian American adolescents.*" *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 12.2 (2015): 237-246. Web. 10 April 2016.