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Model Minority

The “American Dream” – an intangible concept created by white Americans to delineate the power distance between white people and people of color. The United States of America has served as the epitome for hope and revival of a new life for immigrants. Particularly, Asian American immigrants seek heavily the “American Dream” upon migrating to the states. Combined with great determination, motivation, and unwavering work ethic, some rise above the others in achieving the mythical “American Dream.” As a result, the success of a small portion of Asian Americans has been celebrated and caused a trickle-down effect to the reputation of Asians and Asian Americans. Now, Asians are stereotyped to be overachievers, brainiacs, and well-off in comparison to the other minority groups – the “model minority.”

William Peterson, a sociologist, first coined the term “model minority” in 1966. Peterson originally coined the term in regards to Japanese Americans and their abilities to gain success and capital in America as a minority group (Lawyers Committee). While not only perpetuating stereotypes, the idea of “model minority” depicts societal systemic racism.

Asian Americans have showed exemplary progress in getting a good education, working at a good job, and earning a good living. With nothing but positive attributes,

Asian Americans have been given the image of being the “model minority” in which shows a “bright, shining example of hard work and patience whose example other minority groups should follow” (Asian-Nation). According to statistics from the Census, Asian Americans have done very well socially and economically. Yes, statistics show that Asian Americans are scoring higher than other minority groups in terms of socioeconomic achievements. Asian Americans is the highest racial group to earn a college degree with a percentage of 42.9% (refer to Table 1 for other statistics) in comparison to Blacks and Latino/Hispanics racial groups with approximately 1.5% each (Asian-Nation). Asian Americans also have the highest median family income amongst all racial groups collected by the Census. What is problematic with the statistics used to portray the “socioeconomic success” of Asian Americans is that many Asians and Pacific Islanders are grouped together and labeled as one homogenous group (Lawyers Committee). According to a study, 62% of the “Asian Americans” forced to identify as “Asian” through the Census, are more likely to identify with their country of birth rather than simply as “Asian Americans.”

TABLE 1

Socioeconomic Characteristics by Racial Groups

Numbers are in percentages, except for income
Click on a column heading to sort up or down

	Less Than High School	College Degree	Advanced Degree	High Skill Occupation	Married, Spouse Present	Homeowner	Median Personal Income	Median Family Income	Living in Poverty	Public Assistance
Asian Americans	19.5	42.9	6.5	34.6	74.9	68.2	\$20,200	\$59,000	11.5	2.2
Whites	15.3	25.3	3.0	21.4	64.5	78.2	\$23,640	\$48,500	9.4	1.3
Blacks	29.1	13.6	1.2	12.3	38.0	54.4	\$16,300	\$33,300	24.9	4.5
Native American Indians	27.4	10.8	0.9	11.9	50.2	64.2	\$14,500	\$32,240	25.1	6.1
Latinos/Hispanics	48.5	9.9	1.6	9.6	56.3	52.4	\$14,400	\$36,000	21.4	3.5

Data recorded for Asian Americans consists of multiple identifies and ethnicities among different Asian and Pacific Islander descents. While one ethnicity may do better than another ethnicity within the Asian American group, it is not reflective of the different ethnicities, which puts other groups at a disadvantage because of the so-called positive attributes perpetuated by the “model minority.” Southeast Asians do not represent the achievements of other Asian groups such as Chinese and Indian Americans. By grouping different ethnicities with Asia, the data is skewed to favor the larger population (Chinese and Indians) who score, statistically, higher when it comes to socioeconomic achievements (Census). To further prove the systemic racism that comes with the “model minority” idea, the stereotypes of Asians deterred Asian American Pacific Islander serving institutions to receive federal recognition. What this means is that organization who promote the identities of Pacific Islanders (but are unable to do so because “Asian” is the only option to choose) weren’t granted or eligible for federal funding until 2007 because of the “positive” attributes from the “model minority” in that Asian Americans were well off, disadvantaging other ethnic groups within the Asian community (Nakasec).

Asian Americans are believed to be “immune to the challenges faced by other people of color” (Washington Post). Often, Asian Americans are disregarded when it comes to issues that deal with racism, social justice, and equality because of the stereotypes (seen as “positive”) that have been imposed by all Asian Americans. However, Asian Americans are establishing movements to reclaim its place in social justice conversations such as the #ModelMinorityMutiny movement. Part of what the

Model Minority demands is equality amongst all racial groups. This movement was created to inspire Asian Americans to “stand up, speak out, and take action against the anti-Black logic of model minority politics” (Racefiles). The goal of this movement is to help lead to “concrete political commitments and strategies, to transform U.S. political, economic, and cultural systems to value humanity over capital accumulation and war” (Racefiles). The Model Minority Mutiny is the start of a new movement to not only engage Asian Americans with social justice conversations and movements, but it is also a way to break Asian American stereotypes and shine light to Asian Americans who do not fill the “model minority” stereotype that the American society has imposed upon them.

Just as Black Lives Matter is a call to center all Black lives, Model Minority Mutiny is a call not only to those of us with class, skin-color, or gender privilege to examine our complicity in the system. It is an opening to acknowledge the marginalization of those Asian Americans who are most vulnerable to state violence – refugees of war; those targeted by state surveillance and profiling; those trapped in low-wage jobs and the informal economy; those who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated; those who are undocumented; those who are trans, disabled, queer, cis-women, dark-skinned, Sikh, or Muslim. It is an invitation for Asian Americans to unite across difference for the long-term work to dismantle the apparatuses of state violence (Racialfiles).

The “model minority” idea comes with disadvantages to the lesser successful communities within the Asian American ethnic groups. For every Chinese American who has a college degree, the same number (or greater) of Southeast Asians are having difficulties in acclimating and adaption their lives in the United States. According to Asian Nation, the percentage of Vietnamese Americans who receive a college degree is only 20% compared to the rate of other Asian American ethnic groups (over twice the rate). Moreover, the rates for Laotians, Cambodians, and Hmong are much lower, with a rate of 10% (PBS). In California, about 40% of Vietnamese refugees are on public assistance (Asian-Nation). As for Minnesota and Wisconsin, Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians all equally get public assistance. Moreover, many immigrants from Asia come to the United States with high levels of education; however, because of various circumstances (such as language barrier), many do not attain a job related to their field of study. Instead, they end up working as janitors, waiters, or buys boys. The lesser scenario is that they would go into business for themselves in order to make a living. In terms of income disparity, the “higher” median income by Asian American families is not attributed to the “model minority” and the success or the ability to be “well off” in America. Instead, this is because the typical Asian American family “tends to have more members who are working” than families of other races (Asian-Nation). Additionally, Asian Americans are more likely to live in metropolitan areas (such as New York City) where cost of living is much higher and in turn have to spend more to make a living. With these circumstances, the statistics regarding median family income of Asian Americans actually trails that of Whites. Other attributes that is associated for the model

minority are: smart, wealthy, hard-working, self-reliant, living the “American Dream,” docile and submissive, obedient and uncomplaining, and spiritually enlightened and never in need of assistance (CMCH).

According to Asian author Kim Wong Keltner (*Tiger Babies Strike Back: How I Was Raised by a Tiger Mom but Could Not Be Turned to the Dark Side*), the expectation of success in itself is a problem (in terms of the attributed success to the model minority idea). Keltner goes on and states that “Princeton University has already produced a study that shows in college admissions, Asians need higher SAT scores” (NYTimes). Because of the high expectations put into students of Asian descent, many fall into depression and some, suicide. The pressure that comes along with stereotyping and expectations put on by family and society has strong negative impacts to the well being of those with Asian descent. The risk factors (in terms of suicide) surrounding children of immigrant parents are higher in comparison to other races (Pacific Standard). According to a study done in 2010, in comparison to their white counterparts, the number of Asian American students suffering from depression was significantly higher (Pacific Standard). The study also assessed the risk factors for suicide and depression among Asian American youth and found that “Asian American youth listed concerns over school performance, being subject to bullying, low parental support, and difficulty orientating to American culture as largely responsible for the pervasiveness of suicide and depression within the community” (Pacific Standard). Because this is a growing concern among the well being of students with Asian descent, many universities such as Cornell, MIT, and Stanford are implementing counseling programs

that reaches out the most at-risk students (Pacific Youth). Cornell is a great example of a university that is inclusive and thinking about the differences amongst its student population and making sure fairness and equity exists for its students. In turn, Cornell specifically developed a special health-oriented Asian and Asian American Campus Climate Task Force to analyze and understand why the suicide rate among the Asian community is higher. As a result to their study, a program called “Let’s Talk” was developed in which students are able to receive informal consultation with trained counselors in different areas throughout the university (Cornell).

Consequently, understanding the implications and repercussion that go along with the “model minority” idea is the first step in creating equality and equity by ensuring a safer community and better well-being for people of Asian descent. Stereotypes are dangerous and they are not to be taken lightly. Stereotypes do nothing but harm not only in a large scale, but also on an individual basis. Whether the “model minority” idea seem like a positive attribute to an oppressed race, it is indicative of systemic racism and do more harm than good.

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