

The Harms of the White Model-Minority Myth

Sociologist William Petersen coined the term “model-minority” in his piece “Success Story: Japanese American Style.” At the surface-level, many viewed the article’s intent as recognizing and uplifting Japanese Americans, however, the deeply embedded racial undertones proved to cause far more harm towards racial minorities in the U.S. than empowerment. The model-minority myth is recognized as Asian Americans being successful academically, socially, and professionally given the confines America enforces upon racial minorities. The term “model-minority” cannot be vacuously interpreted as such, however. When taking historical, social, and economic contexts both at the time the term was created and contemporarily, we can see how whiteness in America has continued to label Asian Americans as a monolith, target the Black community, and maintain their power structure by any means necessary.

The model-minority myth first rose to popularity in the 1960s, a time of political uproar. The U.S. was undergoing a Civil Rights movement, Anti-War demonstrations, and the implementation of “the Great Society” social programs. The privileged eye deemed the myriad of social programs and movements as a way of social minorities complaining about the government and their country, regardless of having full awareness of the systems of oppression being targeted through these demonstrations. In short, the state simply did not want to put up with their people’s cries for help, and sought to rectify their image through creating a false narrative based entirely on logical fallacies. By claiming that Asian Americans were successful in America without the help of the government, those who received welfare benefits from the government were forced into the title of “lazy” and thought of as “leeching off of hard-working Americans.” The sentiment “pick yourself up by the bootstraps” expanded rapidly and created a hyper-individualistic workplace and paradigm shift when it came to discussing government programs and welfare. The paradox of individualizing status while simultaneously labeling Asian American communities as a monolith was fully representative of white America’s exploitation of minorities for personal gain, regardless of how nonsensical their claims were. The model-minority myth explicitly prescribed Asian Americans as wealthy and successful, however this reduced access to government services gravely impacted them, as well. Following the popularization of the myth, Asian Americans received proportionately less aid based on income status. Many Asian Americans' income level fell below the poverty line, yet the stereotype of self-made success hindered them from having channels of support. These lower-income Asian American communities are often left to fend for themselves.

Economic policies are not the only hindrances brought upon Asian Americans by the model-minority myth. The current education system very apparently lacks support for lower-performing students, especially those in lower-level classes than their peers. What often flies under the radar, however, is the neglect of lower-performing students in relation to race, specifically Asian American students. In high competitive school settings, teachers may pay extra attention to students who do well academically while ignoring the needs of students who are not doing well, and because of implicit biases. Becoming indoctrinated with the model-minority myth isn’t uncommon, and teachers often fall victim to it, which puts their Asian

American in difficult and, in some cases, neglectful situations. Studies that tout certain Asian American students as overperformers also acknowledge that many students within these groups including many South Asian, East Asian, and South East Asian students are just as likely to under-perform when compared to their counterparts. Unfortunately educators often hold their Asian American students to unrealistic standards of independence, which they often reveal through the guise of expecting better from their Asian American students who tend to struggle more with their content. The myth also negatively affects higher performing students. Asian American students who perform very well in their academic studies are often invalidated on the basis of their race. People who are indoctrinated with the model minority myth will attribute their high test scores, good grades, and college admissions to being a naturally gifted Asian; if a white student were to achieve all of those same things, their ability would be attributed to a work ethic, dedication, and being a well rounded student. Asian Americans can also be indoctrinated by the model-minority myth and cause further harm through it. The Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard case is an example of a white man being the face of a movement meant to create divisiveness between Asian Americans and Black and Hispanic Americans. The group of anonymous Asian Americans and Edward Blum's purpose is to create race blindness when it comes to institutional acceptances. Their case was vehemently targeted at Black and Hispanic students that got accepted into the university with the same credentials as the Asian American students who got rejected. The Black and Hispanic students that got admitted into Harvard were well qualified. Edward Blum's case that the Asian American students should not have been rejected, but the students from the other racial and ethnic minorities should have, is blatant racism. Promoting color-blindness does nothing but allow white America to continue to maintain its hierarchy while creating tools for division amongst its social minorities.

Through this constant marginalization of Asian Americans, they often face intense intrapersonal struggles. One of significant weight is that of mental health amongst Asian American communities, and one of the most mentioned triggers is the pressure to live up to the "model minority" stereotype and successful assimilating as what the average American expects of an Asian American. Oftentimes, conforming to these white standards inhibits Asian Americans from being able to develop and express individuality outside of the stereotypes already placed on them, often resulting in severe depressions and anxieties. Given interpersonal stigmas surrounding mental health within the Asian American community, which was exacerbated through the idea of a minority that doesn't rock the boat, Asian Americans lack resources and services, reinforcing mental health as a sacrifice. This may be due to language barriers, the enforcement of stoicism, or even the manifestations of the model minority myth. It is very clearly a cyclical issue of the model minority myth causing mental health issues, while the mental health issues don't align with the model minority, in turn worsening mental health.

The model-minority myth also infantilizes Asian Americans. During the 1960s and 1970s when the term was gaining popularity, Asian American activists were fighting for the development of ethnic studies programs in Universities, running Anti-War demonstrations, and reparations for Japanese American internment camps. By creating the sentiment that Asian

Americans were harmless, didn't rock the boat, and generally submissive to whiteness, was an attempt to erase the incredible work done by activists such as Richard Aoki, a founder of the Black Panther Party. Asian Americans were participating in anti-imperialist movements, yet were somehow reduced to quiet participants of society. It is this very narrative that white America used to try and negate work being done by Black Liberation activists. Asian Americans, which were full of revolutionary thinkers, were now used as a method of comparison to Black revolutionary thinkers. Often white constituents of the state also fell victim to these false comparisons and believed that if Japanese Americans were able to "overcome" internment, other minorities should also be able to, entirely ignorant to the oppression of Black Americans embedded in policy, institutions, and economics since the creation of "whiteness." This very notion is still used as an argument of anti-Blackness today. In 2017, Andrew Sullivan implies the America is a post-racial society where Asian Americans hold success because of their nuclear family structure, and an emphasis on hard work. This implies that other minorities do not work just as hard and is used to weaponize Asian Americans against Black Americans. The idea that the nuclear family structure is consistently more stable than other family structures is false, and evidence proves the complete opposite in certain situations. Black Americans face an incredible inequity that has shifted in characterization, but has held the same roots in American anti-Blackness.

Whiteness continues to create narratives into communities of minorities with the sole purposes of overstepping, oversimplifying, and shifting white accountability. The model minority myth has created extensive issues for Asian Americans, portraying them as a monolith and hindering them in economic, academic, and intrapersonal development. It has also exacerbated divisions among non-White people, by using Black people as a target through weaponizing Asian Americans. White America has never been void of racial divide, and by creating further divides and pinning them among minorities, they are able to reduce dissonance among themselves and other minorities. White people often approach race as an emotional issue, as one should, however in their case, that emotion always centers themselves. By looking at the racial divide within and outside the Asian American community, it is very clear that the model-minority myth does not reflect the intricacies of Asian American communities, and cannot continue to be the story of Asian Americans.