

Demystifying Model Minority's Academic Achievement: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Studying Asian Americans' Educational Experiences

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Abstract

In an era of accountability and globalization, educational researchers are turning to Asian success stories for inspirations to better prepare their students for the challenges of the new millennium. However, the "model minority" stereotype has resulted in silenced voices among Asian American students and has created distorted conceptions among the general public. This Special Issue proposes a comprehensive framework to examine the model minority phenomenon from multiple perspectives—ecological, psychological, and methodological—and how they interplay to form an interdisciplinary understanding of this complex sociocultural system. Both theoretical and empirical evidence are investigated along these multiple lines of inquiry to construct a scholarly understanding of the model minority myth. By exploring deeper under the surface glory, such demystification provides valuable insight to global education and multicultural research.

Keywords: model minority, Asian American education, comparative education, interdisciplinary research

摘要

隨著全球化時代的來臨，許多從事比較教育研究者試圖擷取亞洲族裔的成功經驗作為教育改革的借鏡。然而“模範少數族裔”的標籤卻壓抑了亞美裔學生的聲音並扭曲了社會大眾的看法。本期專刊從多元角度深入探討此一複雜的社會現象，試圖從生態學、心理學、以及方法學的觀點重構完整的文化面貌。本期收錄的五篇論文分別根據理論研究及實證資料剖析“模範少數族裔”的成因及後果，期能經由此破解迷思的歷程為全球化教育提供全新的思考方向。

關鍵字: 模範少數族裔、亞美裔學生、比較教育、跨學科研究

"Model Minority" Myth Revisited

The "model minority" phenomenon, which describes the stellar achievement of Asian Americans since the immigration tide in the 1960s, has been

extensively documented in the popular media (see <http://www.modelminority.com> and summaries by Chang, 2003, p. 328, and Takaki, 1998, p. 474) as well as the scholarly literature (Kao, 1995; Lee, 1996; Louie, 2004; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Wong & Halgin, 2006). With evidence from both domestic assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c) and international competitions (Lemke & Gonzales, 2006), the U.S. and the world began to recognize the competitive edge of Asian and Asian American students even among industrialized countries. Increasingly, business leaders (e.g., Asia Society, the Business Roundtable, & the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006) and educational researchers (e.g., Cai, 2005; Wang & Lin, 2005) are turning to Asians and Asian Americans for inspiration for education reforms to better prepare their students for the challenges of the new millennium.

Underneath the surface glory, however, the model minority stereotype imposed on Asian American students has resulted in silenced voices and neglected needs among this racially diverse group (Lee, 1994; Lee & Kumashiro, 2005), overlooking the variation in the needs for educational resources ranging from under-achieving refugees from Southeast Asia (Walker-Moffat, 1995; Yang, 2004) to high-achieving students compelled to excel (Louie, 2004). Under the federal law of *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (2002), which aims at bringing all students to the state proficiency standards and closing the achievement gaps, these model minority students who as a group are already performing above the standards are further marginalized and forgotten. In a very real and ironic sense, the model minority image has actually worked against Asian American students because such labeling not only impedes access to educational opportunities (Wong & Halgin, 2006) but also results in anti-Asian sentiment among the majority and other minority groups (Chang, 2003). According to Wu (2002), the laudatory title of model minority is "complimentary on its face" but "disingenuous at its heart" (p. 49).

Nearly four decades after the model minority image was distilled upon Asian Americans (Petersen,

1966), it is high time that we revisit this phenomenon in an effort to arrive at a better understanding of what this image entails, why this image has persisted, and how this image can shed light on the educational experiences of non-Asian groups. According to Lew (2006), in revisiting the model minority stereotype, what is needed is "a more nuanced analysis taking into account the changing and complex relationship between cultural and structural factors, which can better explain varied school experiences among Asian American children" (p. 14).

Interdisciplinary Reconstruction of the Model Minority Phenomenon

The purpose of this Special Issue is to examine the model minority phenomenon from multiple perspectives and how they interplay to form an interdisciplinary understanding of this complex sociological system. The *ecological* perspective explores the explanatory factors that contribute to the emergence of model minority in a dynamic system with multiple players at work. The *psychological* perspective challenges the model minority stereotype by studying the mental health of Asian American students compelled to excel. The *methodological* perspective critiques the methods used to collect, analyze, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data on Asian Americans' educational experiences. The overall goal is to demystify the model minority stereotype as academic stars by probing deeper under the surface glory to search for underlying forces and hidden voices.

The objectives of this interdisciplinary approach to the study of Asian Americans' educational experiences are (a) to build a comprehensive and scholarly knowledge base of the causes and consequences of the model minority phenomenon, (b) to advance this knowledge base by refining the methodologies used to study the model minority phenomenon, and (c) to recommend directions for future research that complements and consolidates the current understanding of the model minority myth.

Like any social phenomena, the model minority myth is multifaceted in nature and can only be studied from multiple perspectives intertwined in a complex ecological network. To demystify this complex phenomenon, researchers must probe deeper under the chaotic surface to look for predictability and generalizations (Hunter, Benson, & Garth, 1997). Given the transient and illusive nature of the model minority construct (Jo, 2004), it is imperative that we critically examine the changing faces of this

stereotypic image. Several pioneering works have paved the way for scholarly inquiries of the model minority phenomenon, but their arguments are either outdated by the recent rise of the new immigration tide (Sue, 1973; Wang, 1996), based exclusively on anecdotal accounts of the participants in the system (Lee, 1996; Louie, 2004), or studied from multiple perspectives without one informing or enriching another (Gabaccia & Leach, 2003). A comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework that examines the emergence and consequences of model minority and how the causes, consequences, and methods interplay with each other is clearly needed to complement and advance the current knowledge base. Such systematic demystification helps construct a better understanding of Asian American students and may provide valuable insight to education reforms in an era of globalization and accountability (Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Papers in this Special Issue

This Special Issue brings together five summary papers that examine the model minority myth in an interdisciplinary framework. Due to space limitation, each paper only brings to light glimpses of their findings, but together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of the different forces at play.

The first paper, by Gulbahar H. Beckett, is "What Contributes to Asian Model Minority Academic Success? An Ecological Perspective." This paper situates the myth in an ecological system in an attempt to find possible causal factors that may explain the emergence and persistence of the model minority phenomenon.

The second paper, by Mei Tang, is "Psychological Effects on being Perceived as a 'Model Minority' for Asian Americans." This paper approaches the model minority myth from the psychological perspective by critically reviewing the documented evidence on the psychological impact of the model minority stereotype.

The third paper, by Annette B. Hemmings, is "Researcher Roles, Relations, and Representations in Ethnographic Studies of Asian American Students." This paper discusses the roles of qualitative researchers in relation to research participants and how ethnographic representations are shaped by contextualized interpersonal dynamics.

The fourth paper, by Wei Pan and Haiyan Bai, is "Methodological Gap in Quantitative Analysis of Cross-Cultural Research Data." This paper discusses statistical procedures, power issues, and databases in quantitative cross-cultural research and provides an empirical example to illustrate how these gaps can be

addressed.

The last paper by Duc-Le To is "What Have We Demystified and What Remains to be Demystified in Model Minority Research?" This paper provides a summative framework for model minority research by critically synthesizing what we have learned from the above three lines of inquiry and recommending future directions to advance this knowledge base.

Through a collaborative effort, this Special Issue builds a comprehensive model for demystifying Asian American students' educational experiences. It is hoped that by bringing together multiple perspectives in an integrated framework, we are one step closer to understanding the model minority myth.

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