

Psychological Effects on being Perceived as a “Model Minority” for Asian Americans

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Abstract

Asian Americans' achievement in education and science/technology fields has dominated the mass media for several decades, leading to a label “model minority” for Asian Americans. A thorough literature review has been conducted to examine the impact this stereotype has on the psychological wellbeing of Asian Americans. This literature review illustrates (a) the diversity of Asian Americans in regard to education and professional achievement; (b) the challenges and issues facing Asian Americans despite the model minority label; and (c) harmful effects of the model minority stereotype on psychological wellbeing and it reduces services to Asian Americans. The literature review findings demonstrate that Asian Americans have a similar rate of psychological distress as the White American population, experience the same emotional and behavior problems, and undergo enormous pressure to excel academically. The model minority myth built on a few elite members of the group masks the diversity within the group in regard to socioeconomic status, occupational attainment, academic achievement, and need for services. The psychological stress experienced by many Asian Americans is ignored because of this empirically inaccurate discourse. The model minority myth also creates social isolation and discrimination for Asian Americans. In conclusion, difficulties experienced by Asian Americans become invisible to policymakers, and the model minority myth silences the needs and limits the resources to serve Asian Americans.

Key words: psychological distress, lack of service, within-group diversity, invisibility, stereotype, social isolation

摘要

亞裔在教育 and 科技方面的成就充斥了美國大眾媒體，致使亞裔有了模範少數民族的標籤。本文獻綜述就這一刻板印象對亞裔心理狀態的影響進行了分析，以期達到以下目的：(1) 展示亞裔的多樣性；(2) 亞裔所面臨的挑戰和問題；(3) 模範少數民族刻板印象對心理健康的傷害以及服務的短缺。文獻綜述發現亞裔有與白人類似比例的心理憂慮，同樣的情感和行為問題，而且經歷了巨大

的學業壓力。建立在個別菁英之上的模範少數民族神話掩蓋了整個族裔在社會經濟、職業狀況、學業成就、和服務需求方面的多樣性。許多亞裔所經歷的心理壓力由於這一不正確且未經驗證的說法而被忽略了。模範少數民族這一標籤還給亞裔造成了社交孤立和歧視。總之，模範少數民族一說使政策制定者看不見亞裔所面臨的困難和服務需求並且限制了對亞裔服務的資源。

關鍵字：心理憂慮、服務欠缺、族裔多樣性、刻板印象、視而不見、社交孤立

Introduction

Asian Americans have been portrayed by various media outlets as the “model minority” since the 1960s for their academic excellence, high incomes, stable families, low crime rate and little use of mental health services (Chu, 2002; Gloria & Ho, 2003; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Academic successes, particularly highly acclaimed achievement in science and technology fields, are probably the most notable stereotypes of Asian Americans. However, the validity of the “model minority” label and the impact of such labeling on the psychological wellbeing of Asian Americans have been challenged by many researchers. This paper examines the impacts of the model minority myth on the psychological welfare of Asian Americans through a comprehensive literature review. The main goal is to dispel the widespread belief that Asian Americans as model minority are immune to mental health problems. The specific objectives are to illustrate (a) the diversity of Asian Americans in regard to education and occupational achievement; (b) the challenges and issues facing Asian Americans despite the model minority label; and (c) the harmful effects of the model minority stereotypes on the psychological wellbeing and under-services to Asian Americans.

A literature search has been conducted to collect information on the impacts of model minority label on Asian Americans. The search terms includes single or combination of the following: Asian Americans, model minority, academic success, psychological needs, psychological stress, emotional adjustment, mental health, counseling psychology, school psychology, educational psychology, cognitive

psychology, and social psychology. The collected sources of information has been synthesized to several themes: Diversity, reality of Asian Americans, identity confusion, invisibility, and psychological impacts. Each of these themes is described in detail below, with an aim to examine the impacts of model minority label on Asian Americans.

Diversity

Asian Americans as a minority group is diverse in many dimensions: the original ethnic backgrounds represent more than forty groups (Sandhu, 1997); a noticeable gap exists among Asian Americans in their academic achievement and success (Yang, 2004); financial resources and access to education varies across Asian American families (Lew, 2004), particularly Southeast Asian Americans experience difficulty in education and socioeconomic quality (Chang & Le, 2005); the group also demonstrates different acculturation levels and diverse life experiences (Zhou & Xiong, 2005). As Chang and Le (2005) argued, the cost of narrow focus on the academic achievement of some members overlooks the diversity among Asian American groups.

Resources and access to education for the working-class and middle-class parents of Asian American students is different (Louie, 2001). It is a misconception that every single Asian American youngster will go to or can afford Ivy League universities. Those students growing up in suburban areas have different life experience than those growing up in urban areas. Asian American parents of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to the opposite of commonly held views, expect their children to enroll in vocational training schools rather than universities (Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002). The diversity in socioeconomic sources is not only reflected in access to education equity, but also in attitudes among Asian American groups. For instance, the second-generation Korean Americans distinguish themselves from those Korean Americans who are less successful in financial attainment (Ecklund, 2005). At the same time, those students who need financial assistance for college may be denied such help because of the generally held misconception that Asian Americans are wealthy.

The aggregate data might show better academic achievement of Asian Americans, but a detailed analysis of subgroups actually show that a large number of them had difficulty succeeding academically (Yang, 2004). Suzuki, Mognami and Kim (2002) found in their recent study, that Asian American college students, compared to other groups,

scored lower on verbal and performance section of a standardized aptitude test. Asian American students were also found to have a higher likelihood of academic probation and withdrawal from college when compared to other ethnic groups attending a small, private college (Toupin & Son, 1991).

Reality of Asian Americans' Psychosocial State

The truth of Asian Americans is different from what is portrayed in mass media. Quite contrary to the model minority myth of immunity of mental health problems, Asian Americans, just like any other ethnic groups, experience similar mental health issues. Asian Americans have been found to have high prevalence of domestic violence (Yoshihama, 2001), similar rate of alcohol abuse (Varma & Siris, 1996), and significant psychological distress (Lee & Ying, 2001). Asian Americans are often the victim of racial harassment (Delucchi & Do, 1996). Despite the model minority stereotype, youth gang problems, particularly in urban cities, affect many children, their families and communities (Tsunokai, 2005). In school settings, Asian American students, compared to students of other ethnic backgrounds, are found to show lower sense of coherence and overall competence and to have fewer friends in other ethnic groups (Ying, Lee, Tsai, Hung, Lin, & Wan, 2001). Not surprisingly, Asian Americans, especially foreign-born Asian Americans, experience greater level of intrapersonal and interpersonal stress than Whites (Abe & Zane, 1990). In work settings, Asian Americans are subject to discrimination of various forms (e.g. being passed over for promotion) by peer employees (Bell, Harrison, & McLaughlin, 1997).

Sue, Sue, Sue, and Takeuchi (1998) challenge the model minority stereotype by arguing that the public portrayal of Asian Americans as having a lower rate of mental disorders is a misconception. In fact, one recent study found that Asian Americans have a comparable rate of depression and anxiety as White Americans (Gee, 2004). The reasons for underutilizing mental health services and higher rate of premature termination may be due to the lack of culturally appropriate services. Asian Americans typically do not seek mental health services (Leong & Lau, 2001). Underutilization of mental health services may also indicate less or more-difficult access to mental health services for Asian Americans (Chiu & Lee, 2004). However, when they do seek service, Asian Americans present more-severe symptoms and stay longer in treatment with lower dropout rates than other ethnic groups (Chen, Sullivan, Lu, & Shibusava,

2003).

Pertaining to school adjustment in academic and behavior domains, the Chinese American adolescents reveal more problems than Caucasian American students and their counterparts in mainland China. They have negative perception of school environment, feel inadequate in academics, and are found to experience depression, anxiety and social stress (Zhou, Peeverly, Xin, Huang, & Wang, 2003). The Chinese American students also express their feelings of fear, anger and frustration for being bullied frequently in school. The media portrayal of model minority only worsens the school experience of many Asian American students (see the Psychological Impacts section).

The stereotypes of Asia Americans' attainment in professional jobs in science and engineering are actually indicative of occupational segregation (Leong & Serafica, 1995). Data from the National Science Foundation show that Asian Americans do not necessarily have the same mobility rate or do equally as well as their other ethnic counterparts in science and engineering fields (Tang, 1997). Asian Americans, to a larger extent, aspire to occupations of tertiary qualifications (Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002), though they may have higher achievement in academics. A comprehensive exploration of the reasons for career ceilings facing many Asian Americans is out of the scope of this paper, however, a partial explanation might be the *status quo* incurred by model minority myth that masks the actual needs of Asian American workers.

Identity Confusion

For many Asian American children, living in two cultures is a challenge. Many studies have found that acculturation levels and cultural identity have significant impacts on individuals' psychological adjustment (Helms, 1995; Nguyent, Messe & Stollack, 1999; Sandhu, 1997). Asian American children often struggle with conforming to the dominant cultural norms while maintaining their traditional cultural values. Identity confusion and negotiation become inevitable. It is especially true when the expectations from home and outside of home are inconsistent. One typical example is how Asian American parents highly value academic performance of their children while peers value socialization skills more than academic performance. Korean immigrant youth, for instance, were found to shift their identities to accommodate different expectations across various interpersonal context (Yeh, Ma, Madan-Bahel, Hunter, Jung, Kim, Akitaya, & Sasaki, 2005)..

Acculturation and cultural adjustment difficulties were found to be contributing factors to mental health status (Yeh, 2003). It seems that maintaining traditional heritage has positive impacts on better outcome in academics, but not necessarily so on mental health status. Chow (2004) found that Asian Americans' maintenance of cultural and language heritage contribute to school performance for a sample of immigrants in Canadian schools. However, another study by Wong (2001) found that high orientation towards traditional culture and low orientation towards mainstream culture are related to more symptoms of depression.

On the other hand, clearly defined cultural identity, especially bicultural competence, were found to be beneficial for Asian Americans' psychological development. Specifically, a supportive environment has been found to even augment the healthy development of Asian American's psychological development. Gloria and Ho (2003) found that social support is the strongest predictor for academic persistence, more than environmental comfort and individual characteristics when college experiences are examined. Wong (2001) found that social connectedness and positive parental relationship are associated with lower occurrence of depression. Lee (2005) further found that ethnic identity pride is a moderator between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms, providing resilience to Asian American youth.

Invisibility

The danger of the model minority myth lies in its reinforcement of a misconception and obstruction of the true nature of Asian Americans. For instance, when Paek and Shah (2003) recently investigated how Asian Americans were portrayed in media, they found the participants in the study viewed Asian Americans as being good at technology, having higher educational achievement, and making more income. Based on earlier discussions in this paper, it is clear that this stereotypical image is not accurate and the image has been formed based on preconceived perception of the success of a few elite group members in the Asian American population (Sandhu, Leung, & Tang, 2003).

The model minority myth is detrimental to the interests of many Asian Americans because this empirically inaccurate discourse masks the diversity (in regard to socioeconomic status, educational attainment, academic achievement, and need for services) within the group (Lee, 1994; Tsunokai, 2005), and consequently, difficulties (limited English skills,

miscommunication, discrimination and alienation) experienced by Asian Americans has become invisible to policymakers (Yang, 2004).

Lew (2003) argues that there are limited studies about academically-at-risk Asian American students because of the prevalent perception of them as a model minority. As a result, Asian American students' problems are not recognized. In other words, grants and other resources are not geared towards helping Asian American children. As a result, Asian American students become invisible in our society; the economic and social structure resources to help them are not available, ignored, or denied. Invisibility denies concerns of Asian Americans' needs at work as well (Sun & Starosta, 2006).

Invisibility is a form of discrimination, maybe subtle or even unintentional as Sun and Starosta (2006) have argued, but it creates barriers for Asian Americans in work settings and schools. The model minority may sound glorifying; in reality, it masks the problems experienced by Asian Americans, impedes their access to resources and services, and institutes indifference (Wong & Halgin, 2006).

Psychological Impacts

Not only that the psychosocial state of Asian Americans is misrepresented in the model minority label, the label itself can be potentially harmful to individuals as well. The model minority fallacy creates social isolation for Asian Americans because it leads others to misunderstand and alienate Asian Americans. For instance, Asian Americans have been found to be perceived by other groups and sometimes by themselves as superior than Whites (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998). Another study has found Asian American students experience difficulty in being friends with their peers in school settings because of their favored status (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Goto, Gee and Takeuchi (2002) found that 21 percent of the 1,500 Chinese American interviewed reported unfair treatment in their lifetime and still feel discriminated.

Social isolation and discrimination could potentially contribute to cultural marginalization (Sue & Sue, 1990)--a psychopathological state in which individuals do not feel a part of either the traditional or dominant culture. Basically, marginalized individuals experience no emotional or social affiliation to any social group and lack a social support system. Cultural marginalization is found to be significantly related to depression (Kim, Gonzales, Stroch, & Wang, 2006). Social isolation might lead individuals to internalize their psychological

problems. In fact, psychological stress has been found to relate to internalization of inferior status to dominant group and social class difference (Zhou & Xiong, 2005). Further, internalization of model minority stereotype is significantly related to depression (Chen, 1995). Another study found that Asian Americans experience feeling of shame as a result of internalization of model minority stereotype (Chu, 2002).

The Asian American students might be good students, i.e. no discipline referrals and good grade report cards, but such academic behaviors does not mean Asian American students do not experience psychological distress (Lee & Ying, 2001). The gap between the self-reported and peer-rated social anxiety and depression of Asian Americans show underestimation by peers on both psychological problems (Okazaki, 2002). The author reported that internalization of model minority label intensifies Asian Americans' difficulty of exhibiting their psychological distress.

One major element of the model minority myth is the excellent academic achievement of Asian American students; however, the cost of fulfilling this stereotype image may result in deteriorating parent-child relationship and increased likelihood of anxiety and depression due to parental pressure to academic achievement (Tomiki, 2001). In Asian cultures, family plays a central role in education; family socialization process and parental attitudes have strong effect on school performance (Asakawa, 2001), but it can also be a source for personal conflict and further marginalization (Louie, 2004). Parent-child relationship deteriorates as a result of the indebtedness felt by children for their parents' high expectation and sacrifice (Park & Kim, 2006).

Summary

It is evident from this review of the current research that the model minority label could be very detrimental to the psychological health of Asian Americans. The model minority myth, an invalidated mass media product on a few elite members of the group, actually ignores the diversity within the group and the psychological stress experienced by many Asian Americans. The findings from this review consistently reveal that many Asian Americans in fact deal with many psychosocial difficulties including social isolation, mental disorders, and discrimination. The widespread stereotype of model minority only obstructs the true picture of Asian Americans for educators, policy makers, and general public, further alienating Asian Americans. Consequently, the model

minority myth silences the needs of and limits the resources to serve Asian Americans.

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