



Remodeling the Majority

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Officials stand in front of a massage parlor after a shooting Tuesday in Atlanta. BRYNN ANDERSON

On March 16, eight individuals in the Atlanta area were senselessly killed during a shooting spree that occurred in several spas and massage parlors. Of those killed, six of them were Asian women. Although the shooter claimed the shooting was not racially motivated, the specific targeting of certain establishments may have suggested otherwise (Brumback & Wang, 2021). For many, this tragic event joins the thousands of cases of assault, murder, and violent crime directed towards Asian Americans in the past year. A recent study found that anti-Asian crimes have seen a 150% increase in the past year (Farivar, 2021). While anti-Asian hate crimes have seen a recent increase, the underlying racism and stereotypes are not new phenomena.



The “model minority myth” is just one example of these stereotypes, and it has become increasingly pervasive since the 1960s (Wong & Halgin, 2006). The model minority myth refers to the idea that all Asian Americans are hardworking, free of problems, live with traditional family structures, adhere strongly to their sense of culture, and serve as a ‘model’ for other minorities to follow (Kiang et al., 2017). The myth generally places emphasis on family and traditional values, education, and hard work as a way of explaining the successes of Asian Americans in the United States. Although it may seem harmless and even complimentary, individuals actually living as part of this ‘model minority’ know just how harmful and damaging it can be. Underneath the seemingly flattering phrase is a stinging reminder that racism runs deep, even when it is less than obvious. In fact, this ‘positive’ image of Asian Americans is actually a conglomeration of less-than-appealing stereotypes about Asians; it is “a view of Asian Americans as foreign and unpatriotic; a belief that there is little racial discrimination in America; a feeling that racial minorities have themselves to blame for persistent poverty...; a hostility to foreigners, immigrants, and immigration; and a hostility to...increase opportunities for Asian Americans and other ethnic minorities,” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, 331). There are several reasons why this thinking is dangerous, and it is important that individuals recognize the damaging effects it can have.

One big family

The “model minority myth” hinges on the idea that Asian Americans are so successful because of their “traditional values” and family structures. Frankly, the suggestion that values, traditions, family structures, and theologies are identical across countries is nonsense. For the model minority myth to work, there must be some uniting and common factor across all Asian Americans that somehow set them apart from other minorities while also setting them up for success. In this way, it is assumed that all Asian Americans are a part of the same big family structure with the same values and same way of life. Is it *really* the case that growing up in Mongolia is the same as growing up in India or Thailand? Do parents from Japan and parents from Cambodia *really* raise their children in exactly the same ‘traditional Asian way’? While it is true that there are similarities between Asian countries, it is not the case that every single Asian family in every single Asian country has the same family values or traditional family structures.



But this is the assumption that the model minority rests on. Otherwise, the entire myth crumbles. This myth requires an extremely high level of homogeneity and does not leave room for the recognition that different Asian countries have different values. These broad strokes result in overgeneralizations and harmful stereotypes. The truth is that immigrants from various Asian countries approach life, school, and business in very different ways, therefore resulting in varying levels of wealth and success (Zhang, 2019).

Self-made success

Just as it is false that every Asian family has the exact same values, it is equally untrue that every Asian student is a high achiever who excels academically. What is especially troubling is the assumption that Asian Americans are more successful than other minorities simply because they work harder, study more, and have superior family structures. This erroneous belief not only creates an undue burden for young Asian American students to carry, but it also makes it more difficult to advocate for programs and opportunities aimed at diversity for Asians (McGowan & Lindgren). Additionally, certain groups of students within the Asian American community are actually struggling scholastically, but this reality is often overlooked because it does not fit the mold of the model minority (Kiang et al., 2017).

Notably, it is no coincidence that hard work and education are the main tenets of the model minority myth; and it is not a coincidence that these factors are touted as being the reason for Asian American success in the United States. Not only is this harmful to Asian Americans who must face the repercussions of living under such social expectations, but other minorities must also deal with the implications of being viewed as an ethnic minority that is less hardworking, less smart, and less focused on family values. The model minority myth has been used to actively demonize minorities and characterize them as complainers who are too lazy to work. Numerous articles have been written describing the determination of Japanese Americans, the work ethic of Chinese Americans, and the success of both; while simultaneously comparing them to “problem minorities” that were comparably less determined (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006, 332). By using Asian Americans as the ‘model’, racism is effectively removed from the conversation. According to Museus and Kiang, “the myth has been used strategically by

opponents of equal opportunity policies and programs to support the notion of meritocracy with evidence that racial discrimination does not exist or impede the educational and occupational progress of racial/ethnic minorities” (Museus & Kiang, 2009, 5).

Quiet racism



"Love Our Communities: Build Collective Power" rally against anti-Asian violence. March 13, 2021. Ringo Chiu/AFP via Getty Images

One of the most harmful aspects of the model minority myth is that it “masks...hostility toward Asian Americans” (McGowan & Lindgren, 332). It is difficult for some to empathize with the experiences of Asian Americans who have faced racism because they are constantly presented as the miracle minority that excels in top universities, secures high-paying jobs, and has perfect family structures. When that is the only narrative produced, the instances of racism and harmful circumstances are silenced. For years, this myth has allowed racism to continue quietly in the background. The model minority myth will focus on the high number of Asian Americans attending university but will neglect to mention that wealth inequality both within



and outside the Asian American community has been increasing in recent years (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018). The income gap between Asian Americans is staggering, but this is rarely mentioned (Zhang, 2019; NHPR, 2020; Austin, 2012). Asian Americans also face an elevated poverty rate and make less than their white colleagues at a high school level (NPR, 2018; Asante-Muhammad & Sim, 2020). These same articles will discuss the hard work and determination of Asian Americans, but fail to explore how young Asian Americans face racism in school. Some studies even report that 100% of students have faced some type of repercussion from the model minority myth (Kiang et al., 2017).

At the very least, it should be remembered that education and money do not equate to an absence of racism. No amount of schooling or wealth can account for the lives that were damaged, altered, or lost as a result of hatred towards Asians. Relative wealth can serve as one possible indicator of racism, but it certainly cannot be used exclusively as a measure of racism.

Where do we go from here?

Recognition is only the first step. It is important that individuals take the time to consider whether or not they play a part in perpetuating the model minority myth. From recognition must come active deconstruction. Individuals should actively seek to reframe the way they think about Asian Americans. Of course, this does not suggest that Asian Americans do not work hard or are not deserving of their accomplishments. On the contrary, it has become evident over centuries of Asian participation in the American economy that Asians have provided significant contributions to the growth and strength of the United States. But Asian Americans should be seen for who they really are: an incredibly diverse people with different beliefs, values, and family structures who work hard to overcome the hardships and challenges they have faced *and continue to face*. In the end, perhaps it is not so much about creating a model minority, but instead remodeling the way the majority think about the minority.



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