Chapter 12
The Model Minority Narrative and Its Effect on Asian American Identity and Social Status

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ABSTRACT
Asian Americans have been conceptualized as a model minority for their apparent success in socioeconomic, academic, and professional settings, where other minorities have struggled. However, studies have suggested that this image is only a popularized stereotype, with academic underachievement, poverty, mental health issues, and cultural struggle prevalent amongst different Asian American communities. This chapter is a meta-analysis of studies on the model minority narrative, its influence on the social perception of Asian Americans, and its effect on shaping self-identity for Asian Americans themselves. This chapter also discusses the role the narrative plays in hindering racial parity and inter-race relations through furthering the marginalization of minority groups, silencing the voices of social change while maintaining the imbalance of status and power that currently exists in the United States.

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INTRODUCTION

The conceptualization of Asian Americans as a model minority arises from their perceived success in socioeconomic, academic, and professional settings, where other minorities have struggled. This idea suggests that Asians have somehow “made it” in U.S. society through perseverance and hard work, and have become a model for other minorities to follow. The somewhat observable trends in Asian American academic achievement and socioeconomic success have led to the widespread belief of this narrative, with these perceptions of success coming from other races, as well as from Asian Americans themselves (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998).

However, numerous ethnographic studies have revealed issues within Asian American communities that suggest the model minority narrative is no more than a generalization. The prevalence of cases highlighting academic underachievement, poverty, discrimination, issues of mental health, and culture and identity struggle amongst different communities suggests that Asian Americans are not the homogeneously successful group they are depicted as. Researchers argue that the perpetuation of the model minority narrative carries negative implications not just for the Asian American community, but also for other minorities as wider issues stemming from inequalities in race, power, and economics are hidden by the generalizing myth.

This chapter first aims to provide a meta-analysis of studies on the model minority narrative. As Mackey and Gass (2005) stated, meta-analyses allow for the comparison of studies with differing sample sizes. Through this, the chapter aims to provide an understanding of the model minority narrative’s far-reaching effects on Asian American identity, both on a wide scale as well as on the individual level. This chapter analyzes the idea that the influence of the model minority narrative negatively affects the social and psychological well-being of Asian Americans both through the stereotyping it perpetuates and through the creation of a false and difficult image for them to live up to. Also discussed is the idea that the narrative is detrimental to racial equality in the United States through its furthering of the marginal status of minority groups and maintenance of the hierarchies of status and power that currently exist. Lastly, this chapter suggests areas of research to increase our understanding of the silenced Asian-American minorities, helping to more effectively provide for them relevant and useful social care.

THE MODEL MINORITY NARRATIVE

The popularization of Asian Americans as a minority success story began in the 1960s. One of the first and most well-known examples was an article in the 1966 *New York Times* praising Japanese Americans as model citizens: peaceful, hard
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