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MODEL MINORITY The term “model minority” refers to **minority** groups that have ostensibly achieved a high level of success in contemporary US society. The term has been used most often to describe Asian Americans, a group seen as having attained educational and financial success relative to other immigrant groups. The “model minority” label on its surface seems to be an accolade because it appears to praise Asian Americans for their achievements. However, a critical analysis of the way the term is used and the consequences of its use suggest that there are pernicious effects of classifying Asian Americans, or any racial group, as a model minority.

History of the term

The term “model minority” was coined in 1966 by sociologist William Petersen in an article he wrote for *The New York Times Magazine* entitled “Success story: Japanese American style.” Petersen emphasized that family structure and a cultural emphasis on hard work allowed Japanese Americans to overcome the **discrimination** against their group and achieve a measure of success in the United States. Numerous popular press articles subsequently appeared describing the “successes” of various Asian American groups. Explanations for the

seeming success of Asian Americans focused variously on Confucian values, work ethic, centrality of family, and genetic superiority. One factor that was often overlooked in these accounts was US immigration law. The 1965 Immigration Act reversed years of restrictive immigration policies that virtually banned all immigration from Asia, allowing for a greater number of immigrants to enter the United States from non-Western countries, including countries in Asia and Latin America. Although this act lifted previous geographic restrictions, it allowed only those with certain backgrounds to enter the United States. After immediate family members of those already in the United States, the second priority was recruiting professionals and scientists. As a result, a large influx of highly-educated professionals (such as doctors and engineers) and scientists from Asia left their home countries after 1965 and immigrated to the United States. It is this group of Asian Americans, and their children, that make up a significant portion of the Asian American community today. A radical change in US immigration policy can thus explain some of the individual success stories profiled in popular press articles describing Asian American success.

Model minority myth?

Although there are national statistics that suggest that Asian Americans have achieved some measure of success in US society, disaggregating the statistics reveals a different story. According to the 2006 Census data, when combined into one group, Asian Americans earn a greater household income than Whites (\$66,060 vs \$53,910), Blacks (\$32,876), and **Latinos** (\$38,853). Educational attainment from the 2000 Census shows a similar pattern: a greater percentage of Asian Americans attend college than Whites (65 percent vs 54 percent). On the face of it, the Asian American community may appear to be

doing quite well. However, the term “model minority” is often accompanied by the word “myth” because many scholars have argued that the assumptions that Asian Americans are doing well is overgeneralized and inaccurate. First, the use of household income statistics obscures the fact that many Asian American families have larger households with more adults who are employed than White families. Second, although some Asian American ethnic groups may be doing relatively well, there are many Asian American ethnic groups that not doing well compared to the rest of the US population. For instance, according to the 2000 Census, Cambodians have a per-capita income of \$10,215, and over 90 percent of their population does not have a bachelor’s degree, significantly lower than the comparable statistics for the US overall (\$21,587 per capita income and 76 percent without a bachelor’s degree). Third, Asian Americans make up a disproportionately high percentage of those living in poverty; the 2005 Census data reveals that 11 percent of Asian Americans live below the poverty line, compared to 8 percent of Whites. Asian Americans are also uninsured at a higher rate than Whites (18 percent vs 11 percent). Focusing on the Asian Americans who have “made it” renders invisible those in the community who continue to struggle.

Relying on aggregate household income and education statistics also obscures the fact that White Americans still hold a disproportionate number of the top positions in US society. Even today, there is only one Asian American governor and two Asian American senators (both from Hawaii). Similarly, the top-level positions in business are still overwhelmingly filled by Whites. Asian Americans have also encountered a glass ceiling, making up less than 1.5 percent of the top executives in Fortune 1000 firms. Perhaps most telling, Asian Americans realize lower returns on their education than Whites, meaning that

Asian Americans require more years of education to achieve the same level of income as Whites. Asian Americans, like other minority groups, have not yet achieved a level of success that is commensurate to the success of Whites, even when education differences are controlled for across the two groups. Moreover, this is true even of Asian Americans born in the United States, suggesting that a lack of facility with English does not fully explain the greater achievement of Whites. Taken together, these observations reveal that the model minority **stereotype** is problematic because it masks many of the struggles faced by Asian Americans.

Consequences for Asian Americans

While some Asian Americans embrace the seemingly positive characterization of their group, others resist it because of the negative consequences it has for the Asian American community. On the one hand, social psychological experiments have shown that being stereotyped as smart may benefit Asian Americans in test-taking situations because positive stereotypes about one’s group can boost performance. On the other hand, the model minority myth can be harmful to Asian Americans who may feel pressure to live up to unrealistic expectations. In addition, believing that Asian Americans are a model minority diverts attention away from any discrimination they may have faced and continue to face. Asian Americans who mention discrimination may seem to be complaining about something that does not exist or is not serious. However, discrimination against Asian Americans is real. Asian Americans are often mistaken for foreign citizens, are believed to be more loyal to Asia than to the United States, and have little political support among other Americans. Moreover, although being stereotyped as smart may seem like a good thing, seeming too competent garners feelings of envy and competition, especially in

situations where resources may be scarce (such as during bad economic times). Envied groups are also often viewed as cold and unsociable, reflecting a tradeoff between competence and likability in perceptions of social groups. Thus, although the model minority's high competence may be (begrudgingly) admired, it can at the same time undermine liking for the group and lead to **prejudice**. Whites have initiated hate crimes against Asian Americans because of a belief that Asian Americans were achieving too much and taking resources, such as jobs, away from Whites. The model minority myth can also obscure socioeconomic diversity within the Asian American community and prevent Asian Americans who need assistance from getting it. More research is necessary to identify the situations in which the model minority label benefits as opposed to harms Asian Americans.

Consequences for relationships between minority groups

Scholars argue that the model minority label serves to undermine positive relationships between ethnic groups. The model minority myth reinforces the American dream by promoting the image that hard work pays off. This rhetoric can be divisive, because it can be used as a tool to reinforce the subordinate position of other minority groups ("they made it, why can't you?") and prevent cooperation between Asian Americans and other minorities. In addition, the characterization of Asian Americans as a model minority can be used to undermine support for programs that help other minority groups to achieve success, such as affirmative action, by suggesting that affirmative action beneficiaries should be able to work hard and achieve success without any assistance.

Consequences for majority groups

Asian Americans' status as the model minority also has negative effects on

Whites. Referring to Asian Americans as a model minority not only compares them to other minorities, but it has also been used to suggest that Asian Americans are, in the words of a *Newsweek* article "outwhiting the Whites." Reminding White men about the stereotype of Asian superiority in math results in White underperformance because they are fearful of confirming the stereotype that their racial group has inferior abilities in math. In some parts of the country, this fear is manifested in White parents pulling their children out of schools with high Asian American populations so that their children do not have to compete with Asian American students.

Summary

The model minority label characterizes Asian Americans as a hard working and docile racial group that has achieved financial and educational success in the United States. On the face of it, this label may seem to be an accolade, but a closer examination of the assumptions and the consequences that accompany such a label reveal the problematic nature of this construct. The model minority label renders invisible Asian Americans who are not successful, creates resentment by other groups, and pits racial groups against one another. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the use of the term "model minority" to describe any racial group is problematic. [SC & GB]

Key readings

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MULTICULTURALISM The first decade of the twenty-first century in the West has been marked by a profound re-evaluation of multiculturalism as a prescription for living together in complex, **postcolonial**, multiethnic societies. Paradoxically, globalization – the spread of the neoliberal economic doctrine around the world – while certainly resulting in increased cultural diversity, has often been met with a retreat into a narrow, ethnoracial **nationalism** that eschews the inevitability of hybridization. In Europe, since 2004 in particular, states such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Denmark, once advocates of multicultural policy, have declared multiculturalism to be “in crisis.” They now espouse the integration of “national values” to replace what is seen

to be the permissiveness of multiculturalism past which, according to Trevor Phillips, resulted in societies “sleepwalking into **segregation**.”

However, the multiculturalism which today is deemed to be beset by crisis relates not so much to the policies put in place by various governments in recognition of cultural, ethnic and religious pluralism in their societies, but to the fact of diversity itself. As David Goodhart wrote in his controversial 2004 article, “too much diversity” discourages social **solidarity** in a welfare state: the more different someone is from oneself, the less likely an individual is to want to share resources with her. The notion that Western societies risk disintegration from an excess of diversity reveals the problematic definition of multiculturalism itself, which this article addresses.

David Goldberg (2004) distinguishes between descriptive and normative multiculturalism. The former describes the ethnic, cultural, religious and national plurality of Western, postcolonial, urban spaces resulting from increased global migration since the end of the Second World War. The second is a prescriptive outlook which actively celebrates the proliferation of diversity, even insisting on the relative value of different **cultures** to each other, thus resisting the hegemony of national(ist) culture. As Goldberg notes, “‘The multicultural’ has been caught in an oscillation between these two understandings: description and prescription.” In reality, the often begrudging recognition of the former resulted in a variety of policy arrangements that sought to appease “minority communities” in the interests of maintaining social harmony in the face of “racial” unrest and without revoking a commitment to a narrative of the homogeneous nation.

Anthias and Yuval-Davis, in their 1992 work *Racialized Boundaries*, portray multicultural policy as a response to the realization that the “melting pot does not