

# What Is the Model Minority Myth?

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When I was halfway through the 11th grade, my pre-calculus teacher pulled me out into the hallway. He wanted to talk about my latest test. “You can do better than this,” he said. “I’m so surprised by grades like this from someone like you.”

*Someone like you?* I’d never done particularly well in his class, so the implication of his words churned in my stomach. In that moment, I felt acutely the weight of the dark braid trailing down my back and the glasses slipping down my nose.

I knew my performance was being evaluated not against my own earlier work but against the image of the perfect, straight-A, Asian student who lived in my teacher’s mind: the myth of the “model minority.”

The myth of the model minority is based in stereotypes. It perpetuates a narrative in which Asian American children are whiz kids or musical geniuses. Within the myth of the model minority, Tiger Moms force children to work harder and be better than everyone else, while nerdy, effeminate dads hold prestigious—but not leadership—positions in STEM industries like medicine and accounting.

This myth characterizes Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population through some combination of innate talent and pull-yourselfes-up-by-your-bootstraps immigrant striving.

## What’s So Bad About the Model Minority Myth?

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While most people agree that negative stereotypes of Asian Americans are harmful, some still question the harm of the model minority myth. What could be so bad about being part of a group that’s seen as being successful?

Like all stereotypes, the model minority myth erases the differences among individuals.

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My own 11th-grade experience offers one example. My mother is Malaysian Chinese; my dad is white. I am usually perceived as Asian. So, because of the model minority myth, my failure to reach an expected level of achievement in math was attributed to some kind of deficiency or lack of effort on my part.

Instead of differentiating for me like I saw him do with others in the class, my teacher let me continue to slip. I was not offered extra help or any other support, and I did not know how to live up to the image of the model minority student. I stopped trying.

While I was eventually able to overcome this negative self-image, many others are not. Asian American college students have higher rates of attempting suicide than those in other groups. The model minority myth hides the pressures and paradoxes inherent within an Asian American identity. If you don't fit into the myth, it is hard to find your place at all.

## The model minority myth ignores the diversity of Asian American cultures.

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Data about Asian American achievement typically lumps this diverse population together into a singular group. Taken as a whole, it shows that Asian Americans tend to hold higher degrees and earn larger incomes than the general population. These successes are often attributed to differences in family attitudes toward education. From these metrics and attributions, the stereotype emerges that Asians are winning in their pursuit of the American Dream. But when we break these numbers down, the myth begins to crack.

Take pay disparities, for example. For every dollar the average white man makes in the United States, an Asian Indian woman makes \$1.21 and a Taiwanese woman makes \$1.16. A Samoan woman makes \$0.62. A Burmese woman makes 50 cents. The experiences of these groups are not the same.

## The model minority myth operates alongside the myth of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.

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The model minority myth is just one of a collection of stereotypes about Asian American people. Popular television and films exoticize Asian culture and peoples. If you're a man, you're a kung fu master. If you're a woman, you're a submissive sex object. If you're gender non-binary or transgender, you don't exist at all. Mickey Rooney's racist portrayal in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* lives in our collective imagination alongside every East or South Asian actor who has played a bit part as a humorless doctor or IT guy.

Buried under these stereotypes, the message is clear: Asian Americans are all the same—and all different from other Americans. On one hand, Asian Americans are often perceived as having assimilated better than other minority groups. On the other hand, Asian Americans are seen as having some foreign quality that renders them perpetual outsiders.

It's a paradox familiar to every Asian American who regularly faces the question, "But where are you from, *originally?*"

## The model minority myth erases racism against Asian Americans.

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Positioning Asian Americans as beneficiaries of the bounty of the American Dream, the myth of the model minority ignores the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Japanese internment in the 1940s. It suggests that the U.S. has always been a welcoming place for people of Asian descent, in spite of the mass lynchings of Asian Americans in the 19th century and the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982.

The myth persists in spite of the fact that 1 in 7 Asian immigrants in America today is undocumented and facing potential deportation, a fact that is repeatedly overlooked in our national conversation about immigration. The model minority myth says Asian Americans are doing well today and must therefore have benefitted from an elevated status among people of color, in spite of centuries of systematic discrimination.

## The model minority myth is harmful to the struggle for racial justice.

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The myth says that Asian Americans have played within the rules of the American system to their own group benefit. The success of some groups of Asian American immigrants is often held as an example toward which other groups should strive. It suggests that Asian Americans are doing well and that if other groups would only work harder, have stronger family bonds and get over their histories of oppression, they too would succeed.

When paired with racist myths about other ethnic or racial groups, the model minority myth is used as evidence to deny or downplay the impact of racism and discrimination on people of color in the United States. Given the history of that impact on black Americans particularly, the myth is ultimately a means to perpetuate anti-blackness.

The model minority myth pits people of color against one another and creates a hierarchy in which Asian people are often represented at the top. By putting people of color in competition with one another, the myth distracts us from striving together toward liberation for all.

## Dismantling the Myth

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Understand that the collective is important while individual differences still exist.

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The term *Asian American* was coined in the late 1960s as a means of harnessing the collective power of people of Asian origin, much in the same way the term *Hispanic* was first used. Asian American political identity was strongly inspired by the Black Liberation Movement. Today, more inclusive terms like Asian-Pacific American (APA) or Asian American

Pacific Islander (AAPI) signal the continued need for collective striving against similar experiences of racism and imperialism within our various ethnic subgroups. This collective political identity remains important.

At the same time, focusing solely on collective identity can perpetuate the model minority myth: The experiences of the most visible Asian American ethnic groups can hide the experiences of other groups.

Some studies of educational achievement have shown that certain Asian ethnic groups, particularly those from parts of East and South Asia, indeed score very well in some subject areas. When students from these groups consistently do better than even white students, it is easy for educators to take inherently biased actions based on a belief that all Asian students are innately intelligent and hardworking. Those same studies, however, reveal that other Asian ethnic groups have vastly different results. For example, Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander students in particular often underperform when compared with all other racial and ethnic groups.

As an educator, it is important to understand the different histories and experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander students and communities. Some of these communities arrived in America as refugees escaping war or genocide, and some were imported as sharecroppers to replace enslaved people of African descent after the Civil War. Still other communities, particularly those native to various Pacific Islands, were here long before white settler colonialism. As educators, we must unlearn the biased, simplistic beliefs that we might hold about what it means to be Asian American or Pacific Islander in order to better attend to the real needs of our students and communities.

## Feature Asian American figures and texts in your classroom.

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One of the commonly felt experiences of Asian Americans is that of being invisible or erased. The model minority myth means that neither our historical struggles nor activism tend to be covered in schools and classrooms. The significant underrepresentation of Asian American educators furthers this problem.

Asian American and Pacific Islander history has been a part of American history for centuries. May is AAPI Heritage Month. Use this as a starting point, but do not limit your conscious inclusion of AAPI people and experiences to a single month. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders comprise the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States. We must make a conscious effort to represent these stories and people in our classrooms, regardless of our own identities and those of our students.

## Raise awareness in yourself and others.

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There may be names and examples in this piece with which you were unfamiliar. Learn about activists like Grace Lee Boggs, Larry Itliong and Yuri Kochiyama. Say the name of Vincent Chin. Teach your students about Ela Bhatt. Research Supreme Court cases like U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind and Lum v. Rice.

Dive into data to help understand the collective and individual experiences of various AAPI groups. Check your own biases and assumptions. Do not let a student like me slip through the cracks because you expect her to be smarter or more studious than her classmates.

As you raise your own awareness, you'll help those around you to understand and dismantle the model minority myth as well.