

Model Minority Myth & the Double-Edged Sword

The anti-Asian COVID-19 racism has brought to the fore questions about where Asian Americans are situated in the national discourse on race.¹ In the popular American narrative and imagination, Asian Americans are perceived as the “Model Minority”: quiet, hardworking, and studious. This positive characterization is supported by studies showing that Asian Americans are the most educated and most affluent of any other racial groups in the U.S.²

While the Model Minority stereotype may seem flattering on the surface, it also includes the less positive attributes of being weak, docile, complacent and overly deferential. In reality, it is a myth that oversimplifies Asian culture and assumes all Asian Americans are successful, which masks the multiple problems and bias that Asian Americans face in the workforce, at schools, and in the communities in which they reside. *This myth is especially problematic and dangerous because the anti-Asian violence and hate crimes that are currently playing out on streets across the U.S. are a direct consequence of Asian stereotyping.*

Why the Model Minority is a Myth

The term “model minority” was first used in 1966 by sociologist William Peterson in a New York Times Magazine article to praise the ability of Japanese Americans to gain success and capital in the United States, solidifying the stereotypes of Asians as “industrious and rule-abiding” as compared to African Americans, who were still struggling against systemic bigotry and poverty.³ Since then, this myth has been invoked politically to question the existence of institutionalized racism in America and manipulated to compare Asian Americans to other racial minorities. For Asian Americans, the stereotypes generated from this myth have been harmful on many levels.

To start, this myth disregards the widespread disparities of income, education and wealth that exist among different Asian communities, consisting of refugees, recent immigrants, and individuals who are first generation and beyond. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Asian Americans as a diverse group that includes more than 20 different cultures and religions originating from East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, and unlike other racial minorities, numerous languages are spoken which poses a challenge for the larger community to unite around common goals and address complex needs.⁴

¹ The term “Asian Americans” also applies to Pan-Asian Americans, AAPI, and Asians in this document. These terms describe people of Asian descent in the U.S.

² 2018 Nielsen Company report

³ “‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used As A Racial Wedge Between Asians And Blacks,” NPR CODE SWITCH, 2017

‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used As A Racial Wedge Between Asians And Blacks

⁴ US Census Bureau

The economic and educational challenges facing many segments of the Asian community are generally obscured and counterbalanced by the popularized success of some Asian Americans. For example, Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans have significantly higher poverty rates than the general population and fewer than 15 percent have college degrees.⁵ Moreover, the Asian American unemployment rate rose significantly during the pandemic because nearly a quarter of the Asian American workforce is found in service industries, with many in the hard-hit frontline jobs. Those job losses have attracted less attention compared to other racial groups due in part to the Model Minority Myth.⁶

This myth has historically boxed Asian Americans as “competent but cold,” excelling at STEM and fields requiring strong analytical skills but lacking in some of the soft skills that are needed for leadership and advancement, such as interpersonal, communications, and advocacy skills. One result of this stereotype is that Asian Americans in the arts, media, film, and creative fields generally receive less coverage and support from mainstream establishments.

In the corporate board room and at executive ranks, the perception that Asian Americans are well represented is also erroneous and misleading. Ascend research shows that Asian Americans on the whole make up 12 percent of the professional workforce and yet only 4.4% of all Fortune 1000 board members are Asian American, with Asian American women faring the worst at just 1.47%.⁷ Another Ascend study launched last year using the latest EEOC data (2018) across all industries also shows that while all racial minorities were underrepresented at the executive level relative to their professional levels, Asian men and women were the most likely to be hired but the least likely to advance to become executives. The study concluded that race has a greater effect on the glass ceiling than gender alone.⁸ Another study revealed that white professionals were twice as likely to be promoted into management roles than their Asian American counterparts.⁹

The myth’s presumption of Asian success in corporate America and beyond leads to the exclusion of Asian Americans from important discussions about workplace diversity and breaking the glass ceiling.

The Myth and Its Adverse Effects on Other Groups

By casting Asian Americans as the “good minority” and portraying them as less likely to “rock the boat” or challenge the status quo, the Model Minority Myth perpetuates racist attitudes and stereotypes toward other minorities, namely Blacks and Latinx, and has long been used as a

⁵ Pew Research Center, 2017; See also “Ethnicity Data Is Critical to Address the Diverse Needs of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders,” AAPI Data, 2018

⁶ “‘Overlooked’: Asian American Jobless Rate Surges But Few Take Notice,” NPR, October 1, 2020

⁷ “Asian representation on Fortune 1000 Boards,” Ascend/KPMG, 2020

⁸ “Race, Gender, and the Double Glass Ceiling: An Analysis of EEOC National Workforce Data,” Ascend, 2020

⁹ Harvard Business Review, 2017

political tool to invalidate the struggles of other minorities. More tellingly, it has absolved racist systems from any accountability for the inequities that exist within them.¹⁰ The argument is that racial bias does not exist because if it did, how then can “Asian success” be explained? This implies that other minorities have not achieved the levels of socioeconomic success that Asians enjoy because of a lack of strong family values, hard work, and appreciation for education, and handily dismisses issues like structural barriers and deep-seated racism. This assertion maintains that if Asian Americans can build themselves up with few resources and take advantage of the opportunities embodied in the American Dream narrative, other minorities should be able to do the same. Given such opportunities, Asian Americans should stay quiet, be grateful and preserve the status quo.

The act of labeling one group as the good minority possessing unique cultural qualities places this group at odds with other racial groups and obscures other factors, such as high ethnic capital and immigration status, as contributors to success. This characterization, when situated in complex circumstances such as a pandemic, positions Asian Americans as more privileged than other racial groups and inevitably makes them easy targets of verbal and physical attacks.

The sad and unspoken truth is that many Asian Americans have worn the badge of the Model Minority proudly to gain acceptance into the dominant culture without realizing that there is a double-edged sword that excludes them from participating in race and equity discussions or ascending to executive ranks. The Model Minority does nothing to minimize the fact that Asian Americans become hate targets, and are scapegoated as “perpetual foreigners” during periods of international conflict, economic recession, and/or worldwide pandemic.

The other reality is that Asian Americans are the invisible minority. Although some subgroups experience the highest levels of poverty in the US., Asian Americans are often stripped of the programs that are accorded to other racial minorities. At the top levels of U.S. leadership, Asian Americans are generally overlooked for cabinet positions and Supreme Court representation.¹¹ In popular culture, before *Crazy Rich Asians*, Hollywood had overlooked Asian men as romantic leads in mainstream movies.

On the whole, Asian Americans are wedged in an uncomfortable position as white adjacent on the one hand and as people of color on the other, and the complex set of stereotypes has rendered them invisible in discussions of race and prejudice in America. Because anti-hate is not a zero-sum game, it is imperative to acknowledge that animosity may arise among minority groups advocating for their needs; and it is critical to recognize the importance of not pitting minority groups against each other. As the popular saying goes, does it make sense for these groups to fight over the crumbs when the pie should be bigger and divided equitably among all groups?

Ascend's Mission to Dispel the Myth

¹⁰ See, for example, the studies of Richard Lee, PHD, Professor of Psychology at Univ of MN

¹¹ See, for example, “Senators back off vow to withhold support of Biden nominees,” AP, 2021 and “Will the U.S. Supreme Court get its first Asian American justice?” Washington Post, 2016.

In recent years, Ascend Foundation research has drawn attention to the systemic bias against Asians in corporate culture which stems from the Model Minority Myth. At the onset of COVID-19, the rise of anti-Asian sentiments, along with the adverse and unequal impact of this pandemic on communities of color, galvanized us to join forces with peer organizations to create a Joint 5-Point Action Plan to condemn bias and promote inclusion. This collaborative effort garnered the support of over 110 companies, and we are now better positioned to use a multi-faceted approach to amplify this message and focus on constructive actions to address racial equity for all groups.

The ACT (Allies Coming Together) Initiative, created in 2020, was designed to support and empower the Pan-Asian community to be more race conversant to combat systemic bias and develop allyship strategies. ACT is one of many programs that support Ascend's core focus of building holistic Pan-Asian leaders and to help institutions move away from the model minority mindset and embrace the individuality of Asian professionals toward a culture of tolerance.

The ACT Dialogs and Survey reveal that only 57 percent of respondents in corporate felt comfortable speaking up and discussing racism in their workplace.¹² As a start, companies should allow a safe space for Asian Americans to voice their concerns in an honest and open manner without fear of recrimination. These concerns should then be shared with the company's leadership and other non-Asian counterparts. Overall, companies can only succeed in the long-term if their leaders foster a professional environment that promotes inclusivity and belonging, further nurturing a safe, welcoming and equitable work culture for all its members, especially for the forgotten ones.

The Ascend Impact Fund, which will launch in April 2021, will focus on expanding our awareness raising, advocacy, thought leadership, allyship, education, and community engagement work that addresses the adverse effects of the Model Minority Myth in both the short and long term. It is set up for our corporate members and peer allies to work together in creative ways to engage with local communities toward the goal of promoting greater racial equity and harmony.

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¹² ACT Survey, Ascend, 2020