

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE SHIBBOLETH

ANÁLISIS CRÍTICO DEL ESTEREOTIPO DE LA MINORÍA MODELO SHIBBOLETH

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ABSTRACT

The author conducted a thematic review of the literature on the model minority stereotype (MMS). MMS writings ($n = 246$) included peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed materials spanning from the 1960s to present. Writings were reviewed if their title included “model minority.” The purpose was to review the MMS critically. Six major themes were found to recurrently appear in the MMS literature. Those themes were the following: (1) critiquing colorblindness, (2) countering meritocracy, (3) demystifying Asian American exceptionalism, (4) uncovering divide and conquer stratagem, (5) problematizing Asian American homogenization, and (6) unmasking the “yellow peril” stereotype. Implications for the education of Asian students in America and abroad are shared.

RESUMEN

Se ha llevado a cabo un análisis temático de documentos que giran en torno al estereotipo de la minoría modelo. Entre los escritos analizados (variable = 246) se encuentran materiales revisados por personal experto y no experto, y sus fechas abarcan desde 1960 hasta la actualidad. Los documentos se seleccionaron aplicando el criterio de que en su título apareciese «minoría modelo», y el objetivo ha consistido en examinar de manera crítica el mencionado estereotipo. Como resultado, se han identificado seis grandes temas recurrentes en los documentos sobre el estereotipo de la minoría modelo: (1) crítica del daltonismo; (2) oposición a la meritocracia; (3) desmitificación de la excepcionalidad asiático-americana; (4) revelación de la estratagema «divide y vencerás»; (5) problematización de la homogeneización asiático-americana; y (6) desenmascaramiento del estereotipo del «peligro amarillo». Se han puesto en común sus implicaciones en la educación del alumnado asiático dentro y fuera de América.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars have found the “model minority stereotype” (hereafter referred to as MMS) to be a shibboleth (*viz.* a common belief) and racialized moniker for Asian Americans (Lee, 2001, 2003, 2005). What the MMS conceals is vital for understanding why the stereotype negatively impacts the education of Asian American students (e.g., see Tayag, 2011). This literature reviews analyzes ($n = 246$) writings on the MMS.

The purpose of the present article is to review the MMS critically, which some scholars, such as Weaver (2007, 2009) and Lee (1996, 2005) have found to negatively impact Asian American students. First, the origins of the MMS are traced. Second, a description of the methodology that was used to locate literature is shared. Third, trends found in the MMS literature are shared. Attention is paid to the previous work conducted by eminent MMS researchers. This review confirms the work of others (e.g., see Hartlep, In-Press; Lee, 1996, 2005) that the MMS has negative consequences for Asian American students. Two important implications are shared related to improving the educational experiences of Asian American students followed by a conclusion.

2. TRACING THE ORIGINS OF THE MODEL MINORITY IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICAⁱ

The “model minority stereotype” (MMS) in the United States of America (U.S.A.) is said to have originated as a direct consequence of the publication of William Petersen’s (1966) *New York Times Magazine* article, “Success Story: Japanese American Style.” In his highly-cited article, Petersen pointed out how the Japanese were doing extremely well, unlike the African Americans in the U.S.A. Petersen’s (1966) article fed the public’s understanding that Asians (Japanese) were “model minorities” worthy of

emulation. Later, the MMS characterization broadened to include the Chinese, and it eventually was a term used to describe all Asian groups residing in America.

Previous scholarship—such as Ngo and Lee (2007) and Lee (1996, 2005)—has identified the quintessential qualities of an Asian American model minority are the following: (1) apolitical orientation to life, (2) working hard, (3) not questioning the established order, (4) being apolitical, and (5) assimilating into middle-class culture. Initially, during the 1960s, and especially during the 1970s, the Japanese/Chinese were successful at possessing all five qualities mentioned above. African Americans, on the other hand, according to Hsia (1988), were thought to possess none of the five qualities, leading to their social demonization and stigmatization. Consequently, many scholars critique the model minority, contending that its discourse serves as a rhetorical—social, political, and educational—device that is used to divide and conquer African Americans and Asian Americans (as well as other minorities), while maintaining the *status quo* and *modus operandi* (e.g., see Hartlep, In-Press). According to Shrake (2006) and Hartlep (In-Press) the MMS still continues to function this way in contemporary U.S.A.

During the late-1950s and early-1960s, the result of strong international pressure, the United States needed to make other foreign countries, as well as its own country, believe that America was not racist, but rather a democracy wherein anyone, regardless of their race or ethnicity, could achieve the American Dream (Lee, 2010). The “American Dream” is the “master script” (Swartz, 1992), or the “majoritarian stock story” (Noblit & Jay, 2010) that the MMS discourse feeds and proselytizes. Consequently, the MMS is understood to be constitutive of a 20th Century or “Cold War creation” (e.g., see Lee, 2010) that is simultaneously representative of a modern-day “Horatio Alger” story (e.g., see Ono & Pham, 2009).

3. METHODOLOGY

Literature for this literature review was located through a series of purposeful steps. Both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed documents were included. Since titles inform readers what they will surely encounter if they read a document, only literature that contained the words “model minority” in its title was reviewed for this review. Documents included in this review are writings such as articles, books, book reviews, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, journalistic writings, newspaper columns, reports, and monographs. Imel (2011) states that literature reviews may be chronological, conceptual, methodological, or thematic. The present literature review was an exhaustive and thematic one.

3.1. Searches for Literature

Since the focus of the literature review was thematic (Cooper, 1988, 1998; Imel, 2011; Torraco, 2005), concentrating on the MMS, first, batteries of general Google Alerts, and Google Scholar Alerts were set up (with various combinations of the following controlled vocabulary terms: Asian American + Oriental + Model Minority + Education + Stereotype + Myth + Model Minority Stereotype + Model Minority Myth + Stereotype Threat). Second, a search for literature was conducted using three separate methods: (1) First, by using the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/index.html>) website (using the same phrases above); (2) Second, by using the WorldCat (<http://www.worldcat.org/>) website (using the same phrases above); and (3) Third, by cross-referencing bibliographies and reference pages contained within literature that was already located and reviewed.

3.2. Trends in American Model Minority Literature

Indeed, the “model minority stereotype” (MMS) is something that many scholars have written about (see Table 1 below). Although it is now over five decades old, the MMS remains, and continues to gain, considerable academic attention well into the 21st century (e.g., see Rim, 2007). Evidence of its increased attention can be seen in the frequency of writings on the topic.

Table 1 highlights the numbers of writings on the MMS by decade, beginning during the 1960s based upon the author’s review of the literature.

Table 1. *Frequency of U.S.-Based Model Minority Stereotype Writings*

Decade	Number of Writings
1960s	2
1970s	6
1980s	30
1990s	54
2000s	154
<i>Total</i>	<i>246</i>

Note. See this article’s list of references for a complete detailed list of MMS writings by the decade.

It is clear that the MMS is a sociological phenomenon that continues to increase in academic appeal. Although this article only reviewed MMS literature based on research conducted in the U.S.A. (including Canada), other scholars have written about the MMS in other contexts, such as in China (Fang, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), New Zealand (Chung & Walkey, 1988), and India (Dechamma, 2012).

4. MAJOR THEMES

After reading the 246 “model minority stereotype” (MMS) documents referenced in Table 1 (and in the references list of this article), six clear themes emerged. The six following salient themes were found within the reviewed literature:

- ***Critiquing Colorblindness.*** Much of the MMS literature attempts to dispel the notion of colorblindness. Colorblindness is problematic since it is used to support the idea that Asian American success is a function of their diligence and effort (e.g., see DeGuzman, 1998; Kawai, 2005; Teshima, 2006).
- ***Countering Meritocracy.*** At times an analog to colorblindness, many MMS writings attempt to problematize meritocracy, which often ignores the plight of Asian Americans by focusing on the group’s prosperity (e.g., see Weaver, 2007, 2009).
- ***Demystifying Asian American Exceptionalism.*** Much literature on the MMS understands that applauding Asian Americans for their academic exceptionalism can lead to the suppression of the needs of other oppressed people of color. Highlighting Asian American students’ success serves to hide and mask forms of educational inequity and disproportionality, like the overrepresentation of Asian Americans in gifted and talented education, as well as the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education (Hartlep, 2010).
- ***Uncovering Divide and Conquer Stratagem.*** Many MMS writings conclude that the MMS is a “wedge” that is used to maintain White supremacy. Maintenance comes in various forms, but by and large, the MMS is

predictable since it focuses on the individual while glossing over the structural (e.g., see Lew, 2002, 2004, 2011).

- ***Problematizing Asian American Homogenization.*** A preponderance of the literature on the MMS discusses the sociological fact that Asian Americans constitute a heterogeneous population that follows a bimodal distribution. Therefore, this MMS literature argues that it is statistically improbable that Asian Americans are universally successful (e.g., see Museus, 2008; Museus & Kiang, 2009).
- ***Unmasking the “Yellow Peril” Stereotype.*** Much of the MMS literature discusses the fact that the “yellow peril” stereotype is a parallel to the MMS. Many MMS writings compare/contrast the putative “positive” stereotype to the supposed “negative” stereotype of times past (e.g., see Palmer, 1999; Saito, 1997; Shim, 1998; Wong, 1976).

5. EMINENT MODEL MINORITY SCHOLARS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND ABROAD

Although many scholars have dedicated their careers to demystifying the “model minority stereotype” (MMS), an extensive analysis of the literature—in this case, 246 documents—reveals that Stacey Lee, an Educational Foundations Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, should be considered the United States’ foremost MMS scholar.

Lee has dedicated her career to the study of the MMS, and has written many articles (e.g., see Lee, 1994, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007), books (Lee, 1996, 2005) and book

chapters (Lee, 2007; Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009; Park & Lee, 2010) on this topic. Other eminent Asian American model minority scholars include Frank Wu (e.g., see Wang & Wu, 1996; Wu, 2012), Jaime Lew (Lew, 2002, 2004, 2011), Robert Teranishi (Teranishi, 2002), and John Palmer (Palmer, 1999; Pang & Palmer, 2012). Another established scholar from outside of the United States is University of Hong Kong post-doctoral fellow Gao Fang who has also written extensively on the MMS (e.g., see Fang, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b).

6. THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF THE MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE

North American-based research indicates that the “model minority stereotype” (MMS) has a deleterious impact on the education of Asian American students (e.g., see Lew, 2002, 2004, 2011; Weaver, 2007, 2009). Asian American students who are struggling academically may be reluctant to seek help from teachers provided that they perceive them to be bright overachieving students (Ngo & Lee, 2007) and undeserving of attention. Thus, teachers may falsely assume that their Asian American students do not need educational support services (i.e., special education, language instruction), when in fact they do. Evidence of this—Asian American students not getting help when they need it and teachers assuming Asian Americans do not need help, when in fact, they do need it—can be seen in the unequal distribution of students of color in special education and gifted education circles. Existing scholarship documents that Asian Americans are overrepresented in gifted and talented education programs and underrepresented in special education programs (e.g., see Hartlep, 2010). Contrast Asian American students’ reality of being overrepresented in gifted and talented education with that of African

American students' overrepresentation in special education (Harry & Klinger, 2006), and one begins to see the outcome of the tacit racialization of students. The MMS thus negatively impacts both Asian American students and African American students.

Furthermore, it can be easily argued that *some* (although not all) Asian Americans may benefit from special education services, educational support services they are unable to access if they are believed to be “super minorities” (Teranishi, 2002). Asian Americans' concentration in gifted and talented education programs might be a function of a “halo effect,” whereby well-meaning teachers' cast Asian American students as being intellectually superior to other students. In fact, Asian Americans have been said to “out white Whites” (Chen, 2004). There is nothing wrong with educational and social success, but not if it is the result of a “false positive.” Frank Wu pointed this out—the problem of “false positives”—when he wrote the following:

It would be bad enough if the model minority myth were true. Everyone else would resent Asian Americans for what Asian Americans possess. It is worse that the model minority myth is false. Everyone else resents Asian Americans for what they believe Asian Americans possess. (as cited in Rim, 2007, p. 38, italics added)

Indeed, it is quite possible that the Asian American students that are incorrectly identified as model minorities may be the result of teachers' self-fulfilling prophecies and/or some sort of practitioner's Pygmalion effect.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EDUCATION OF ASIAN STUDENTS IN AMERICA AND ABROAD

There are many important implications that can be drawn from this review. The first is related to existing MMS research that has been documented outside of the United States of America (U.S.A.). For instance, Asians in China, New Zealand, and India are impacted by the mendacious myth too; the MMS is not a uniquely American stereotype. The *BBC* featured a news story that highlighted Asian students' success in New Zealand.ⁱⁱ The newscast made it appear to its viewers that Asian students were superior to all other ethnically/racially diverse groups of students in New Zealand. Clearly, then, the MMS is a transnational or international myth, and might easily be imported to other countries and loci (e.g., see Pon, 2000). The implication, then, is that the MMS might also impact Asian students abroad. Educators need to be aware of this possibility and protect their Asian students from being incorrectly stereotyped. Consequently, future research might consider exploring the MMS in other countries and settings.

It is safe to say that model minority scholarship in America has mushroomed in the 2000s (there are more writings in the 2000s than in the four previous decades combined). Consequently, scholars in the U.S.A. must continue to develop *avant-garde* ways to discuss how the MMS impacts and influences the educational experiences of Asian American students—the fastest growing minority group. As a result of the immensity and profundity of their growth, this article concludes by sharing two implications that education policymakers, psychologists, and practitioners should consider whenever discussing the teaching and learning of Asian American students:

- ***Understand the Diversity of This Student Population.*** According to the most recent U.S. Census statistics, Asian Americans represent the fastest growing minority group in the United States. Indeed, according to the

2010 U.S. Census (e.g., see Humes, Jones, and Ramírez, 2011), “The Asian [American] population grew faster than any other major race group between 2000 and 2010” (p. 4), and “Over the decade [from 2000-2010], the Asian alone population experienced the fastest rate of growth” (p. 5). In addition to its incredible rate of growth, the Asian American population is extremely heterogeneous and diverse. The Asian American population encompasses over 20 nations, with 60 different ethnic groups, and more than 100 languages and dialects (Africa & Carrasco, 2011; CARE, 2008, 2010, 2011; Hsia, 1988; Lee & Kumashiro, 2005). Asian students in America are a highly diverse and heterogeneous group.

- ***Understand How Stereotype Threat Impacts and Influences the Education of Asian American Students.*** Claude Steele (e.g., see Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995) coined the term “stereotype threat.” Stereotype threat describes how individuals can become anxious and/or concerned in situations where the potential to confirm a negative stereotype about their social group exists. Consequently, Steele (2010) believes that “stereotype threat is a standard predicament of life” (p. 5); and most teachers would agree that he is right. For example, Asian American students may feel pressure to not fail, which would disconfirm the model minority stereotype. This situation has been demonstrated in research that finds that Asian American students internalize the MMS (Trytten, Lowe, & Walden, 2012). Therefore, the pressure to achieve (a consequence of the MMS) can be strenuous and burdensome, leading to

fatigue, mental distress, and/or result in psychological and/or emotional stress for Asian American students.

Increased levels of educational stress may become a health concern for Asian Americans since stress has led to Asian American students committing suicide (Leong, Leach, Yeh, & Chou, 2007; Lester, 1992). Teachers must not place excessive pressure to succeed on their Asian American students. Conversely, teachers must also understand when, and/or be able to tell, if their Asian American students are placing too much pressure on themselves. School psychologists and counselors have the responsibility to speak with and counsel Asian American students who might be anxious about their current achievement (grades) and/or performance in school. This is especially true, as Yates (2009) indicates, “the model minority stereotype has resulted in the creation of unrealistic standards and social and psychological pressures among the Asian American population” (p. 529). Educators must understand the reality of Asian American students.

8. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The MMS is suggestive of Asian American success, but what the stereotype conceals—White supremacy and White racial hegemony—is vital for the continuation and credibility of the “American Dream.” The myth of the “American Dream” is an important “stock story” for the general American population. This review of the literature has shared the results of a critical review of 246 writings on the MMS in the U.S.A., revealing that the existing MMS scholarship has relied on the following six approaches in effort to destabilize the myth: (1) critiquing colorblindness, (2) countering meritocracy, (3) demystifying Asian American exceptionalism, (4) uncovering divide and conquer

stratagem, (5) problematizing Asian American homogenization, and (6) unmasking the “yellow peril” stereotype.

By centering and contextualizing “just the facts”—in this case, statistics and anecdotes on Asian American students’ struggles—and how “stereotype threat” (Steele, 2010) impacts the education of Asian American students, policymakers and practitioners are forced to reject the notion that Asian Americans are universally successful (e.g., see Van Ziegart, 2006).

After reviewing the literature on the MMS, it is apparent that the stereotype of success is dangerous for Asian students in the U.S.A. Demystifying the MMS is an important pursuit given that Asian Americans represent the fastest growing racial minority group in the United States (Strasser, 2012). Thus, it is a demographic certainty that Asian American students will remain an ever-growing part of American schools and education. But as mentioned previously, the MMS is also an important issue for Asian students outside of the U.S.A.

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Endnotes

ⁱ This thematic and exhaustive literature review strictly reviews the model minority stereotype (MMS) in North America (including Hawaii and Canada), and does not address the MMS in other international contexts such as China, New Zealand, India or elsewhere. The words “model minority” had to appear in the document’s title in order to be included.

ⁱⁱ “Are Asians Smarter” is available online here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlkvuDABvw8>