

2019

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Recommended Citation

Ly, Tiffany (2019) "Effects of Model Minority on Adolescents' Mental Health," *Writing Waves*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/writingwaves/vol1/iss1/12>

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Effects of Model Minority on Adolescents' Mental Health

Tiffany Ly

Keywords: Model Minority, Mental Health, Interview, Asian American

MINORITY groups, like Asian-Americans, in the United States have combated racism by assimilating into mainstream American culture. Because they had to acclimate themselves to the mainstream culture, Asian-Americans felt that they had to “prove themselves” socioeconomically and academically through their contributions to society. Over time, the stories of successful Asian-Americans got the attention of others while the lesser successful stories were forgotten. This is how model minority stereotype started. Model minority is defined as a demographic group whose members are perceived to achieve a higher degree of success than the average population (Wikipedia). Although the stereotype puts Asian-Americans in a positive spotlight, it also puts pressure on the entire ethnic group to be more successful than the peers around them. Not only is it a societal pressure, but the pressure also comes from the family setting through traditional culture. At first glance, the model minority stereotype that Asian Americans are academically and socioeconomically superior may not seem damaging; but in reality, the Asian culture puts pressure on its students resulting in the overarching issues of mental health in different aspects their life, ultimately altering their outlook on the future.

In the Asian culture, there is a strong emphasis on family values and respect. From a very young age, children are taught that their identity is with their family. The parents of these Asian-American children expect nothing less than their full allegiance, meaning that they expect their children to obey all of the rules that are set in place for them. Any actions of rebellion, in the eyes of the parents or any other elders, are seen as an act of disloyalty. In my personal experience, I have found it really hard to encounter new and different things that would aid in creating my own identity. Every action and idea, that I've had differing from my family, has been seen as wrong because it isn't anything that my family has experienced or believed in. Especially in many Asian households, having different perspectives is looked down upon because there is a fear of the unknown; parents do not want their children to walk down the “wrong” path because it reflects back onto the parents' ability to properly raise their children. Because Asian-American adolescents are expected to identify with their family, there is an amount of respect that is required to be shown to any

elders to show that their parents have raised them well; respect is equated to self control. Asian-American children are expected to be in control of their emotions, speech, and movements, as they are a reflection of their parents. Children are molded into what their parents believe they should be, resulting in "culturally rooted stigma and shame related to psychological problems" (Shen). Parents believe that their children will be happy and successful in the pathway they have chosen for them, so the thought of their children having psychological problems is unimaginable. Asian-American youth often have no outlet for self-expression, making it difficult to have a voice for themselves. When Asian-American children are disrespectful, it is assumed that their parents have failed in raising their children the "proper way;" resulting in shame, which is avoided at all cost.

Asian-American children are looked at through a microscope. The things they are associated with represent who their parents are. Because the actions of the child reflect back onto their parents, Asian parents will push "their individual goals through the lives and accomplishments of their offspring" (Lui, Rollock). Children in Asian culture are seen as replicas of their parents. Parents will lay a specific path for their children expecting them to be successful, eliminating any other possible outcomes that the child may have had for themselves. Margaret Yee, San Francisco high school teacher, says "They don't feel free to be anything else... You can be docile and high-achieving, but you can't have a voice" (Counseling@NYU). This makes it really hard for Asian-American children to be happy; they are forced into a future that doesn't involve their passions. Asian parents paving and expecting their child to follow the most successful path creates "pressure for youth to live up to the image, and create unrealistic and inaccurate expectations." (Kiang). Children don't understand the pressures of becoming successful in their adult life; the towering pressure from the child's parents could potentially lead to mental instability later in life. These kinds of pressures should not be introduced until the child has matured and has an understanding of what success means to them. Stripping them of their childhood innocence makes it more difficult in the future to feel satisfied with their life decisions and achievements.

In the stereotypical view, Asian-American children are "supposed" to be naturally smart, achieving scholars. It is almost unheard of that an Asian-American is struggling in their academic life. This assumption creates "an over-generalized and erroneous belief that Asian Americans as a minority group are not confronted with ... barriers to success." (Cheng). Assuming that Asian-American students are not faced with daily challenges supports the idea that Asian-Americans are academically superior; putting more pressure on already struggling students to succeed in all of their endeavors. This pressure adds stress in a student's life, making it seem like they are not allowed to ask for help. Because there is an assumption that Asian-American students are not academically challenged, "the group has been stereotyped as a "model minority" whose members cannot possibly be troubled or need assistance" (Shen). Everyone needs help at different points in their life and concluding that Asian-American students do not need assistance denies them the option of seeking

help. Not only does this false assumption become a social norm, but it also lessens the resources and services that are allocated to this group of people. Without proper counseling to work through the societal and familial pressures, students are on a path of downward spiral that could be translated into their adult life.

This model minority stereotype has shown to have both positive and negative effects on Asian-American individuals. The thing about model minority stereotypes is that they are a positive outlook on a specific ethnic group. How society views Asian-Americans can, in some cases, motivate those Asian-Americans who do not fit the stereotype to live up to those standards. In the beginning, those individuals may feel like they are playing a role; but, with time, the Asian-Americans students can develop to "hold [a] positive interpretation of one's behavior and favorable views of the self, one can internalize such attitudes and incorporate them into one's own positive self-evaluations." (Kiang). Although in some situations the outcomes are positive, the model minority stereotype can also have students second-guessing their accomplishments. Asian-American individuals "might become more sensitive to how they are treated by others as well as encounter more opportunities to be seen as a stereotype..." (Kiang). Students may start to believe that their accomplishments came to them because they were labeled as Asian-American, not because they worked hard to earn it. They start to doubt their abilities to achieve challenging awards and this leads to the decline of their mental health. This causes students to work harder to prove to themselves that their work is worth the reward, putting more unnecessary pressure on themselves.

With the societal and familial pressures combined, Asian-American students are more susceptible to mental instability. Being under constant pressure of not failing themselves, their parents, or the stereotype society has made for them is a lot to handle, especially at a young age. The constant pressure at home and in a public setting makes it almost impossible to find a safe, open space where they can relieve their stress. Constantly stressing over uncontrollable things affects adults, so its effect on students and children can be detrimental to their future successes. Asian-Americans "constitute a heterogeneous group with disconcerting mental health statistics, and the model minority stereotype appears to mask the unmet mental health needs of Asian Americans." (Cheng). In 2014, the United States Census Bureau col-

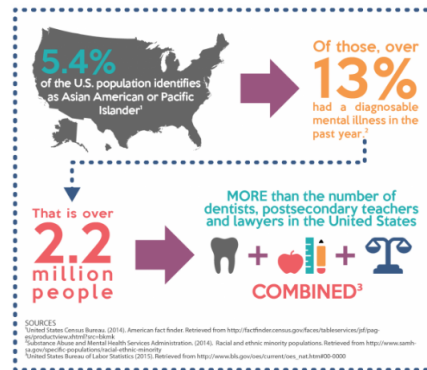


Figure 1: Infograph from Mental Health America's "Asian American/Pacific Islander Communities and Mental Health"

lected data which was used with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's data to get a rough calculation of how many lives the model minority stereotype has taken just from one year. The results presented a problem that is bigger, as indicated in Figure 1.

With the abundant assumptions, there are only a handful of people who are aware of the issue to look out for the mental health statuses of Asian-Americans. The insignificant amount of resources for assistance and the immense pressure on Asian-Americans combined creates a situation where they feel like they should not ask for help (Cheng). In my own personal experience, I feel pressure coming from society, my family, but mostly myself. I am the eldest of three children, so my entire life my parents expected me to act a certain way to show my siblings the "right" way to behave. In school, I tried my best to do as well as I could, but some days weren't my days. Because my parents had put so much pressure on me for getting good grades, I felt ashamed when I did do poorly. Even when I performed better than the class average on an exam, my parents expected more from me; their expectations were set at receiving an A. In my opinion, it ruined my educational experience. Now, I feel when I do make a mistake, it should have been avoided; even if making mistakes is a common part of the educational process.

Amber Cui, an Asian-American student at Cal State Monterey Bay, also personalizes the issue through her own experience with model minority and how it continually affects her daily activities. In an interview with Cui, a first-time freshman, she sheds light on the issue and shares her thoughts and personal experience dealing with the model minority stereotype. When asking Cui about her struggles living as an Asian-American with the model minority stereotype, her responses revealed how negatively the stereotype had impacted her. She talked about her parents and how they raised her as an Asian-American child; how it was hard for them to instill traditional culture into their kids because they lived in a predominantly white neighborhood. Her parents tried their best to raise Cui in a traditional Asian household.

Reflecting back onto her youth, Cui recalls feeling as though her accomplishments were overlooked because she was an Asian-American student. Giving the specific example of her journey with mathematics, stating "I am terrible at math." She goes on to say that there is a misunderstanding when it comes to the model minority stereotype; peers around Asian-American students believe "that we 'naturally' understand things when in reality, we only understand it because we work hard to understand it." She is determined to show others that her accomplishments are being achieved through a continual effort. She communicates that with her immense efforts to prove others wrong, she gets stressed and goes into a state where she believes she cannot get the tasks completed. Furthering the conversation, she discusses the pressure she feels and how it affects her mental health overall. Cui goes back to when she was in grade school, when she was pushing herself towards the model minority stereotype without realizing it. She was "mentally confused because I found myself listening to what others thought what I should be and not what I wanted to be." She became conflicted with herself, and is still continuing to work with herself so that she can be the

best possible version of herself for herself, not to fit into a stereotype.

The implications of model minority causes Asian-American adolescents to feel as though they are not emotionally supported through their life. The stereotypes creates a divide between Asian-Americans and their peers; Asian-Americans are placed on a high pedestal academically and socioeconomically making it hard for them to live as ordinary individuals. It creates a pressure that mentally is unhealthy. There is no concrete solution that would get rid of model minority; model minority comes from generations of culture and assumptions. As generations go by, Asian American model minority may fade with the gradual fade of strict, traditional Asian culture. But it is not enough just to wait for the stereotype to go away; those in society perpetuating the model minority stereotype need to be informed about the issues that many Asian Americans are faced with mentally. Then, they can become educators informing others on the overall declining mental health of Asian-Americans; educators teaching the youth are most influential since they can instill the value of empathy before the youth become perpetrators of the stereotype. In Cui's interview, she believe that there is no way to reversing the effects of model minority since the stereotype has been present in so many generations. There are many opinions on whether model minority can be reversed, but a key takeaway to combating this stereotype is having empathy. Having empathy links Asian-Americans with those who believe that Asian-Americans sit on pedestals; they will better understand what Asian-Americans are truly experiencing, which could potentially stop model minority.

Annotated Bibliography

"Asian American/Pacific Islander Communities and Mental Health." *Mental Health America*, 30 June 2016, www.mentalhealthamerica.net/issues/asian-american-pacific-islander-communities-and-mental-health. Accessed 10 December 2018.

In this article, there was a graphic that I thought was really interesting. It showed that over 2.2 million Asian-Americans were struggling with mental health. The graphic had information from the US Census Bureau and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which are both very credible sources. Adding this graphic into my paper will really show my audience how bad the problem is getting. Percentages look really small, but when the percentages turn into numbers, it becomes more real. Reading that over 2 million people are struggling mentally because of a stereotype will really encapsulate what the stereotype is doing to a whole ethnic group.

"Burdened with Worry: How the Pressure to Succeed Can Affect Asian American Students." *Blog*, 25 Sept. 2017, counseling.steinhardt.nyu.edu/blog/asian-americans-burdened-with-worry/. Accessed 11 April 2019.

Cheng, Alice, et al. "Model Minority Stereotype: Influence on Perceived Mental Health Needs of Asian Americans." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2017, pp. 572–581. Accessed 24 October 2018.

In Alice Cheng's article, Cheng discusses the issue of the stereotypes of model minority of Asians and the effects it has on their mental health. The stereotype assumes that Asians don't face any barriers because they are academically and professionally successful. It puts their mental health aside and solely focuses on their achievements. Research shows that there are low reported rates of mental health problems, but research also shows that the Asian population has elevated depression and suicide rates. Stereotyping Asian-Americans also limits the resources and services that are available to them because the stereotype leads to assumption (somehow the assumption becomes true). This contributes to my paper because this is a large problem not only for model minority children, but also adults. This could potentially be the reason why students are afraid to be counseled because there is an idea ingrained that they are successful and don't need it. Those who need help also might not be able to find the resources or services because they are not abundant.

Cui, Amber. Personal Interview. 14 November 2018.

With Amber's interview, I was able to see if the information I found online matched with her personal experience, which it did. She talked about her struggles in grade school and how she tried to force herself into a stereotype that was making her unhappy. She felt as though her accomplishments were lesser because Asian-Americans around her were succeeding in larger achievements. With the addition of an interview, I will have personal experience in my paper so that the audience can see that the issues are currently still happening to Asian-American lives. It is relevant because with many stereotypes, many people don't believe that they are perpetrators when they are unconsciously are. See Field Notes.

Kiang, Lisa, et al. "Model Minority Stereotyping, Perceived Discrimination, and Adjustment Among Adolescents from Asian American Backgrounds."

Journal of Youth and Adolescence, vol. 45, no. 7, 2016, pp. 1366–1379.

Accessed 13 October 2018.

In Lisa Kiang's article on model minority, Kiang presents an issue of stereotyping in the Asian American community. She talks about the positive and negative effects of model minority, which is a type of stereotyping. In the Asian American community, stereotypes include promoted academic and socioeconomic adjustment. She takes into consideration whether model minority stereotyping can be considered discrimination and how it affects the people being stereotyped. Both positive and negative effects are taken into consideration when studying the issue. Not only does this source explore the negative effects of model minority, but also explores the positive effects; this is very relevant since model minority is still occurring today in many Asian households. This article can contribute the different effects in model minority, as well as raise the question of whether model minority is an effective way to get children and young adults

to be successful or whether the effects of model minority is detrimental to the youth.

Lui, P. Priscilla, and David Rollock. "Tiger Mother: Popular and Psychological Scientific Perspectives on Asian Culture and Parenting." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2013, pp. 450–456. Accessed 3 November 2018. In Lui and Rollock's article, the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua is analyzed and studied. This article points out ideas why parents decide to parent their children authoritatively. Some really big ideas were that parents want their offspring to continue actively living in their culture (so that tradition is not lost) and their offspring are an extension of them. This is relevant because there is always two sides to a story, so with both perspectives my paper will be more informed and accurate. I think that the addition of this article to my paper will show that model minority is not just a stereotype, but also a way of parenting that Asian American parents believe that is the most effect. This article gives reason to why parents are continuing to parent in this style, while all of my other sources are showing the negative effects on their offspring using the same parenting style; showing how complex this issue really is.

Shen, Yih-Jiun. "Demystifying the "Model Minority" Encounter: Concerns and Challenges in School Counseling With Asian Americans." *New Waves*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–18. Accessed 20 October 2018. In Yih-Jiun Shen's article, Shen focuses her study on acculturation. Asian Americans are less likely to ask for help because in Asian culture asking for help is associated with shame. As children, they are instilled that they should bring their family honor and have a perfect academic career. Also in Asian culture, it is discouraged to speak about mental health and deemphasize the importance of verbal communication, closing a lot of outlets for them to release some of their stress. In the long run, it puts their mental health in jeopardy because they have pent up emotions that need to be released. Even though many believe that Asian Americans are thriving because of their educational successes, there are many statistics that show many that don't make it to that level, making them feel as though they are lesser than they are. This is relevant because this is one of the bigger issues of model minority because the stereotype associated with Asian Americans creates an environment where Asian Americans feel like they can't reach out for help since they are perceived as academically superior.

Spencer. "Asian-American Families - Religion And Cultural Values." *Gender, Family, Definition, Fathers, and Family - JRank Articles*, family.jrank.org/pages/104/Asian-American-Families-Religion-Cultural-Values.html. Accessed 26 November 2018.

In the article, the author writes about the driving values of the Asian culture. Many of the values in the Asian culture come from various religious beliefs. The author also writes about how they keep their values alive through the use of churches and summer camps for children. This article is relevant because it

would explain why some of the Asian values are so strict (they have been believed for thousands of years). This is a good contribution to my paper because this gives context to why Asian and Asian-American parents choose their desired parenting styles. It also explains to the audience why they chose that style opposed from another. It gives good context to the issue of model minority and where it comes from.

Field Notes

Interviewer: Tiffany Ly

Interviewee: Amber Cui

14 November 2018 10:30 PM, CSUMB Yarrow Hall

Q: Do you feel as though your accomplishments are because people stereotype you as an Asian? And why?

A: Yes, Amber wants to go against the Asian stereotype. Her example was math, which she said she was bad at. She works really hard to understand it. Not everyone is "naturally smart," it takes effort and patience to get it perfect. Because she is apart of the stereotype, she "goes against the grain" and tries to prove everyone wrong. She wants to live different.

Q: What were your parents' parenting styles? Strict?

A: Her parents immigrated to the U.S. at a very young age, so it is difficult for them to enforce the same rules that they were held up to. It was also hard to raise Amber in traditional culture because they were residents of a "predominantly white neighborhood."

Q: How do you think these pressures affect your mental health?

A: Societal pressures do affect her mental health because she is both Asian-American and a woman. She was pushing herself really hard, and wasn't realizing that she was pushing herself to be the stereotype. Amber became mentally confused because you found herself listening to what others thought she should be and not what she wanted to be. And in this time of trial and error, it really made her feel conflicted because she didn't fit in the stereotype or what she thought of herself.

Q: Do you think there is a solution to reversing this stereotype?

A: No, the only way Amber can think of is to go against the stereotype. Reversing the stereotype is like trying to get rid of thousands of years of culture. Changing something like model minority would take generations.