A+ Does Not Mean All Asians:
The Model Minority Myth and Implications for Higher Education

Nathaniel A. Victoria

This paper explores the model minority myth and its current implications for higher education. Analysis of literature from the counseling, journalism, institutional research, and student services fields illustrates how the myth perpetuates stereotypes, both nationally and in the higher education field. Additionally, the implications of enrolling increased numbers of Asian Pacific American (APA) students relative to the number of higher education and student affairs professionals with APA lineage are discussed.

Have you ever sat next to an Asian student in class and wondered how she managed to consistently get straight A's while you struggled to maintain a B- average? . . . Asian students are considered amongst the best and the brightest in America. And although we hesitate to stereotype all Asian students, we cannot deny that, as a whole *[italics added], they are doing something right.* (Abboud & Kim, 2006, p. 1)

This paragraph opened Dr. Soo Kim Abboud and Jane Kim's (2006) new book, *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers—and How You Can Too.* The disproportionate numbers of Asian Americans in what Abboud and Kim call the "top universities in the country," such as Cornell University and Johns Hopkins University, intrigued these sister authors. Attempting to explain this fact, they concluded that it "*has nothing to do with how they are born and everything to do with how they are raised*" (p. 2). I am shocked by the authors' failure to notice the perpetuation of what many Asian Americans find insulting—the model minority myth.

Traditionally, the model minority myth names Asian Americans as law abiding, physically and mentally healthy, economically wealthy, and academically successful (Kobayashi, 1999). This conception began in a 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article when social demographer and University of California, Berkeley Professor William Peterson used the term *model minority* to describe Japanese Americans who were increasing their social status financially as well as educationally through sheer effort. Since then, print media such as *Time, The New York Times, The New York Times Sunday Magazine, Fortune Magazine,* books like *Top of the Class*, and television shows, such as *NBC Nightly News* and *60 Minutes*, have perpetuated this stereotype (Chang,

Nathaniel A. Victoria received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wesleyan University, where he majored in both Dance and Psychology. He is originally from Media, Pennsylvania and holds an assistantship as the Academic Support Specialist for the College of Education and Social Services. As he approaches the end of his second-year in HESA, he is looking forwards to his future adventures in Washington, D.C.

1993; Kobayashi, 1999; Wu, 2001). Nina Asher (2002) suggests another layer to the stereotype when stating that "as the model minority, Asian Americans are doubly marginalized, 'simultaneously exalted and ignored in the U.S. imagination'" (pp. 268-269). If we address our individual actions through personal reflection, we can work toward making the double minority status non-existent. This article critically analyzes these assumptions and examines their ramifications for higher education practitioners.

Challenging the Hegemony

Model minority is one of the many labels human beings utilize to make sense of the world. We are burdened with much information, so we adjust by systematically filing it. However, a consequence of this phenomenon is stereotyping, something that Ganahl, Ge, and Kim (2003) define as "a prevailing and frequently used image of one group as uniform (rather than as individually differentiated) used to categorize all members of the group on a limited number of dimensions" (p. 5).

Social stereotypes grossly generalize people. As Robert Chang (1993) asserts, the social stereotype of the model minority is dangerous because "it renders the oppression of Asian Americans invisible." This stereotype causes some to see Asian Americans as successful and free from oppression. "This invisibility has harmful consequences, especially when those in positions of power cannot see" (para. 6). Invisibility due to generalizations is one problem with the model minority stereotype. The uniqueness of each individual is lost in the stereotype.

The selection of the term *Asian Pacific American* (APA) that this article uses illustrates this problem. During the Civil Rights Era, the term "Asian American" appeared in an attempt to unify the community. Kobayashi (1999) suggests that this social construct continues to reify the problems of the community. The APA community has diversified, yet "the term 'Asian American' has remained unchanged" (p. 5). There also may be a trend among Asian Americans to reconnect and create stronger ties with their ethnic origins, such as California Filipino Americans separating themselves in state personnel surveys (Nadal, 2004).

Many believe that racial categories are social constructions; this perspective has been supported in recent years due to the various studies that suggest there is no genetic code for racial phenotypes (Kobayashi, 1999; Riehm, 2000). The terms used in this paper will fall within this discourse of social constructionism. I combat one debilitating factor of the model minority myth, invisibility due to generalizations, by incorporating research on communities that fall within the APA category, while staying sensitive to specific ethnicities when possible.

The APA community encompasses a variety of groups that have resided in the

United States for various lengths of time. The Chinese, for example, have lived here since the 1800s when they were primarily employed as railroad workers (Takaki, 1993), while the Hmongs and the Laotians are more recent immigrants, immigrating to the country beginning in the 1980s. These differences lead to two problems within the APA community with respect to the model minority myth. The first is the potential lack of knowledge about the historic oppression that APAs have suffered. The United States has oppressed many APA groups, from the Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1924, to the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII. It was not until the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 that roughly two thirds of the APA population came to the United States (Schevitz, 2000, as cited in Ying, Lee, Tsai, Hung, Lin, & Wan., 2001). Ying et al. suggest that this wave of immigration and "the timing (concomitant with the civil rights movement) . . . [leave] many Asian Americans . . . unaware of this country's anti-Asian history" (p. 62).

Another error of the model minority stereotype is that it imposes a single classification on these varied and disparate communities while internally implementing a "divide and conquer" mentality. This mentality maintains smaller groups and does not allow for the building of larger coalitions. The assumed wealth of the APA community is an example of this usage. A superficial examination of census data shows that the median APA family income is higher than that of all other racial categories. When critically analyzed, however, this average ignores four key differences in the APA family structure when comparing it to the Caucasian structure. APA households tend to have more than one person earning income; looking at the mean income ignores this fact. Also, APAs are disproportionately concentrated in three states where wage and standard of living are higher, namely California, New York, and Hawaii. In addition, almost 95% of the 12.5 million APAs live in metropolitan areas. Related to the recent immigrant status of some APAs, there are also great disparities amongst the different ethnic groups (Chang, 1993; Chen, 2003; Kobayashi, 1999; Tatum, 1997). Kim & Valadez (1995) state that "while median family income of Asian Americans was $41,251 in 1990, median family incomes of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmongs were $33,909, $18,126, $23,101, and $14,327, respectively" (p. 2).

The final area of contention relates to another element of the model minority myth—education. Commonly held beliefs insist that with more education comes more wealth; however, inherent in this assumption is that all degrees, regardless of the race, ethnicity, gender of the individuals holding them, are equal. This assumption is not true when accounting for the effects of race on income (Barringer, Takeuchi, & Xenos, 1990; Chang, 1993; Suzuki, 2002). Professor Frank Wu (2001), expert witness for the Student Defendant-Interveners in the University of Michigan Law School Affirmative Action trial, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, discusses the falsity of this phenomenon. During his testimony, Professor Wu eloquently disentangled the

financial elements of the model minority myth. Using data from the 1995 Federal Government Glass Ceiling Study and controlling for education and occupation, he illuminated the fact that APAs in the United States make significantly less than their Caucasian counterparts. They also receive fewer promotions.

Dr. Jeffrey C. Chen (2003), former CEO of the General Science Corporation, also unpacks the idea of education as a gateway toward future success. Dr. Chen discusses the APA cultural phenomena that led to less success: APA culture has a tradition of humility, as well as a lack of alliances in the corporate sphere outside of their respective cultures. He suggests that the cultural aspects of what would be considered "submissive" in the United States facilitate the passing over of APAs for promotions.

Separate but Equal

The concept of race as a social construction was previously introduced, and it is important to recognize that the United States still operates within it. Beverly Tatum (1997) uses David Wellman's definition of racism, a "system of advantage based on race" (p. 7), to describe the current U.S. racial situation. Because of the colonial nature of the U.S. settlement, coupled with the fact that Caucasians hold the colonizer status, Caucasians are the only members of U.S. society that can act in a racist manner. But all people, regardless of their race and ethnicity, are able to act on their prejudice, what Tatum defines as "a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information" (p. 5). The model minority myth supports this idea of universal prejudice.

Some scholars believe that the term *model minority* was created to perpetuate power dynamics that existed at the time of its creation in the Civil Rights era. Rohrlick, Alvarado, Zarua, and Kallio (1998) suggest that it was produced to "be a divisive term. Some believe that the implicit message in the term is that other minority groups are at fault for their own lack of success" (p. 2). Elizabeth Martinez (2004) concurs in her essay *Seeing More than Black and White*, stating:

> The "model" label has been a wedge separating Asian Americans from others of color by denying their commonalities. It creates a sort of racial bourgeoisie, which White Supremacy uses to keep Asian Americans from joining forces with the poor, the homeless and criminalized youth. (p. 116)

Combating this label is essential for successful coalition building to happen.

Education Re-examined

The model minority myth is the pervasive framework in which all APAs must work. Some APAs, such as Abboud and Kim (2006), do not recognize that they

perpetuate this stereotype. Although their book provides valuable information on raising children, it suggests that playing "an active role in [children's] education" or "promoting an environment of healthy competition" are values unique to the APA community. By essentializing these characteristics as "Asian," as well as generalizing their experience as Korean Americans to the entire APA community, Abboud and Kim perpetuate the myth that all APAs are successful in the classroom. Research contradicts this mentality: "Delucchi and Do (1996), Kim (1997), Thatchenkery and Cheng (1997), and Walker-Moffat (1995) all point out that Asian [*sic*] students' performance has a bimodal distribution, meaning that there are extremely high achievers and others who are not" (Kobayashi, 1999, p. 12). Ying et al. (2001) also suggest, "success in the classroom does not implicate effective functioning in life" (p. 60). Their study found that for those APAs that were successful academically, their competence in other areas was not necessarily equal. All APAs are not "top of the class."

Even for those APAs that successfully achieve in their higher education aspirations, the diversity of their areas of study is lacking. Dr. Nirmala Kannankutty (2003), Senior Analyst for the National Science Foundation, found that "compared to other ethnic groups, relatively high proportions of Asian American and Pacific Islander students are taking high school math and science courses" (p. 21). Other studies suggest that there is "pressure to excel and plan ahead for careers that ensure future financial security and success" (Asher, 2002, p. 274). Could situational and cultural characteristics explain this phenomenon? Is the model minority myth exacerbating this phenomenon? In short, yes.

The Immigration Act of 1965 facilitated the entry of many more diverse groups of APAs into the United States, and these diverse groups on average have come with many more professional degrees. For example, roughly 13% of Filipino Americans in the United States in 2000 were affiliated with medicine, with 6% of U.S. born Filipinos in the medical field. When compared to the over 15% of immigrants in the field, one can see that many more professionals are immigrating with degrees rather than pursuing education here (Bankston, III, 2006). This high proportion of immigrants in the professional field could be one reason why APA children are pushed towards math and the sciences.

Sijuwade's (2001) study of family characteristics between Caucasian and Asian American high achievers suggests that parental educational expectations influence professional tracking. Sijuwade found that "all Asian parents report that they expect their children to make an average grade of 'A,'" and that "nearly half of the Asian parents (46%) hope their children would choose the medical field" (p. 164). He believes that "most Asian parents still preserve the traditional attitude that parents would play a major role in their children's education and career choice" (p. 165). The idea of what Alicia Campi, research coordinator at the Immigration Policy

Center of the American Immigration Law Foundation, calls the *Confucian ideals* possibly propagates the idea that math and science are the proper academic arenas. She says "tradition back home is that education unlocks opportunities. So there is a lot of pressure on their kids to succeed, no matter what job the parents have" (as cited in Woog, 2006). Kim and Valadez (1995) also suggest that APAs believe that "good education is perceived the most important means to gain economic success and social respect" (p. 8). These two things are important in APA culture. Working in this framework as well is the fact that "parental expectations and self-concept and vision are suggested to be factors which best explain higher education aspirations for all students" (p. 20).

Another factor may be the outside influences that students face. Lee (1996) illuminates APA issues when describing the stereotypes they may hear. She found that "geniuses," "overachievers," "nerdy," "great in math or science," "competitive," "uninterested in fun" and "4.0 GPAs" are all common terms. Also, Hallinan and Williams (1990) stress the impact of the peer-influence process on higher education aspirations. These stereotypes track APAs into their current fields.

<center>Perpetuating the Homogeneous Field?</center>

Recognizing the model minority myth is the first step in solving issues APA students face. Even Caucasian practitioners in the field of higher education who espouse pluralistic ideals may be falling prey to this pervasive myth. Using the Situation Attitude Scale (SAS) (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1969), Liang and Sedlacek (2000) found that Caucasian student affairs practitioners reacted differently toward APAs. These practitioners rated APA students' actions, such as fixing a computer, more positively according to the SAS when compared to the same action done by a student whose race was not specified. Liang and Sedlacek said that as "Ancis et al. (1996) reminds us, differences in an apparently positive direction do not necessarily suggest that prejudicial attitudes are absent" (p. 10). How would the non-technological APA student feel when the expectation of competency is discussed? Recognizing we all bring bias when working with students, including APA students, is important.

Bias affects not only APA students but also APA professionals. Although the numbers of practitioners of color are increasing, there is a disparity amongst the races. In January of this year, I was told that "about 3% of NASPA's [National Association of Student Personnel Administrators] membership has indicated that they are Asian or Pacific Islander" (E. Soleyn, personal communication, January 17, 2007). Although NASPA membership only constitutes one area of higher education, it is fairly representative of the field at large. In the fall of 2003, there were only 4,813 Asian Americans who held full-time positions in executive, administrative, or managerial jobs in higher education. When compared to the total

of 180,161, the mere 2.7% is troubling ("Employees in Colleges and Universities," 2006). It is disheartening to see the limited number of APA practitioners.

The Chronicle of Higher Education's (2006) recent findings in "A Look at Minority and Female Doctorate Recipients" suggest a continuation of disparity in educational leadership. In 2004, only 94 Asians (6.5% of total receiving doctorates) received their doctorate in "Research and Administration" in the field of education. When compared to the other racial demographics (Black, 614 or 32.9%; Hispanic, 214; or 18.2%, and American Indian, 38 or 29.5%), Asians are not really "ahead of the game" in all aspects (p. B16). If students feel engaged when they perceive a community, and one way to feel connected to a community is seeing others who look like them (Tatum, 1997), it is imperative that we increase the number of APAs in the field. We cannot let the dearth of APA leaders continue.

One way to increase the numbers of future APA leaders is to bring them into the leadership pipeline earlier. Programs, such as the NASPA Undergraduate Fellowship Program (a higher education practitioner preparation program), need to actively ensure that they do not perpetuate the inequity already existing in the field. Also, the number of APA people doing leadership programs with such groups as Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. and the American Council on Education needs to increase. Institutions need to support APA practitioners in their professional development.

Two necessary attributes of higher education in its current framework are a critical perspective and an individualistic attitude. The current structure does not incorporate some values espoused by the APA community, such as the Filipino core values of "fellow being; loss of face or shame; and social acceptance, the achievement of status and power, and getting along with the group" (Enriquez, as cited in Nadal, 2004). Also, do the existing stereotypes of APAs suggest an environment open to APA members? Consider the following examples:

> "Submissive," "humble," "passive," "quiet," "compliant," "obedient," "stoic," "devious," "sly," "tend to hang out in groups," "stay with their own race," "condescend to other races," and are "racist," "not willing to mesh with American culture," "try to be like Americans," "want to be Caucasian," and "act F.O.B. [fresh off the boat]." (Kim & Yeh, p. 2)

By the field's perpetuation of the "model minority" myth, limited number of APA administrators will remain. We need to change our environment, welcome new APA practitioners, and create a climate conducive to everyone's success.

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