

You may be wondering ...

Not all stereotypes are bad, right? I've heard people say that Asian students are all hard working and high-performing. How can a stereotype like that be harmful?

This is a common misconception. Even stereotypes that on the surface appear positive, such as the “model minority myth,” can have negative ramifications for young people.

The Asian American Community is Not a Monolith

The model minority myth suggests that Asian Americans are a model minority because they are smarter, more successful, more academically oriented, and so on. The model minority myth makes assumptions about an individual based on common perceptions about their group¹. Stereotypes make it easier to characterize people, but when we lean on them, we can inadvertently force people into categories that don't fit their actual personal characteristics – like a square peg in a round hole. The Asian community is **not** a monolith, and many different national-origin and ethnic groups within the larger Asian community have vastly different immigration histories and contemporary experiences in the U.S. American context².



The Harm Behind Model Minority Stereotypes

“He said, ‘I’m so surprised by grades like this from someone like you.’”

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.”

– Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn⁸

The model minority stereotype can actually harm Asian American students

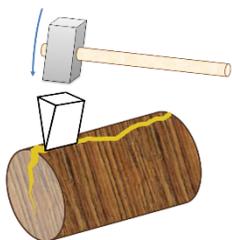
The model minority myth can prompt teachers to have especially high expectations for their Asian students³. Students can feel an enormous amount of pressure to meet these expectations, and as they strive for these sometimes-untenable standards, their mental health can suffer immensely⁴. In one research study of Asian-American high school and college-aged students, Asian-American students reported more symptoms of depression, more social problems, and less social support than their white peers⁵.



The Model Minority Stereotype Disregards Discrimination Against Asians

The model minority myth is also harmful because it minimizes or makes it possible to ignore the racism that Asian-Americans experience⁶. When Asian American youth experience racism, people often point to the model minority myth to try and dispel the history of systemic discrimination against these communities⁷.

The Model Minority Stereotype Can Be Used as a Tool Against Other Minorities



Sometimes people point out high-performing Asian American students in the context of comparing them to students from groups that they believe are lower-performing. The argument goes something like this, “If the Asian American community can do it, why can’t these other groups do it, too?” This sets ethnic-racial communities against each other and ignores the different ways that systematic racism has historically impacted specific ethnic-racial communities⁹.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Let's Talk

It is important to engage students in conversations about how and why “positive” stereotypes are harmful. Divide your classroom into small groups. Ask each small group to first define the model minority myth or stereotype. Then, ask students to develop a list of reasons why these “positive” stereotypes can be harmful. Finally, challenge students to identify ways that we might eradicate this common misperception that “positive” stereotypes exist. Have a representative from each group share out what their group discussed.

Key Takeaway:

All stereotypes are harmful. No stereotype is good or positive. At their core, stereotypes make generalizations about an individual based on group membership. Stereotypes erase people’s individuality, lived experiences, and identities.

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