

Book Review

Nicholas D. Hartlep. *The Model Minority Stereotype: Demystifying Asian American Success*. Information Age Publishing, 2013. 300 pp. (ISBN 9781623963583)

When looking at race-based research, typically you are presented with literature that examines the inequalities and inequities that exist when comparing African Americans and Whites. The Black-White binary is so frequently presented in social scientific research that it is self-limiting insofar as it does not adequately consider the experiences of Asian Americans. It is critical that research moves beyond the Black-White binary and includes the experiences of Asian Americans. Fortunately, within the academy and beyond, debates and conversations have emerged regarding what a group of people comprise “the model minority.” Recently a *New York Post* report identified eight superior “cultural” groups in the United States: Jewish, Chinese, Iranian, Lebanese, Nigerian, Cuban, and Mormon¹. Many Asian Americans viewed Amy Chua’s report with suspicion because it was interpreted as perpetuating the “model minority” myth.

In the *Model Minority Stereotype: Demystifying Asian American Success* Hartlep does a splendid job at carefully expounding upon literature that reveals who Asian Americans are said to be, versus who they are racialized to be. Unfortunately, the model minority stereotype homogenizes Asian Americans, causing all Asians to be

¹ Maureen Callahan, “Tiger Mom: Some cultural groups are superior,” *New York Post*, retrieved on September 29, 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/01/tiger-mom-some-groups-are-just-better-than-others/>

cast as successful, regardless if they are actually struggling academically. *The Model Minority Stereotype* consists of eleven chapters, entitled: (1) Testing and Asian American Academic Achievement and Attainment, (2) Who are Asian Americans?, (3) Asian American Socioeconomic Standing, (4) Asian American Health and Social Welfare, (5) Interdisciplinary and Methodologically Approached Research on the Model Minority Stereotype, (6) Encyclopedic and Bibliographic Research on the Model Minority Stereotype, (7) Model Minority Movies and Media, (8) Model Minority Newspaper Articles, (9) Classical Model Minority Articles, (10) Dissertations and Theses on the Model Minority Stereotype, and (11) Methodology². *The Model Minority Stereotype* does not include the model minority stereotype beyond the North American context (c.f. this *Studies on Asia* special issue installment).

Chapter 1 provided a great foundation for the remainder of the book by sharing a story that is revealed in Jean Kwok's novel *Girl in Transition*. Kwok writes about Kimberly Chang, a girl who must work in a sweatshop to help her mother pay bills. Kimberly attended a poorly run inner-city school before she was admitted into a preparatory school for high-achieving students. She does well academically despite being accused of cheating. The narratives contained in *Girl in Transition* support the Asian model minority myth. After Kimberly completed Harrison Prep, she received a full scholarship to Yale University. However, in a turn of events, Kimberly becomes pregnant before attending Yale. Kimberly delays attending Yale so that she can raise her child. Nonetheless, She eventually manages to graduate with honors from Yale and go on to attend Harvard Medical School. Clearly, Kimberly's story is applicable to the model minority stereotype. This chapter also draws

² Nicholas D. Hartlep, "Testing and Asian American Academic Achievement and Attainment," in *The Model Minority: Demystifying Asian American Success* (Information Age Publishing, 2013), p. v.

upon twenty statistics from an online source regarding Asian American achievements. Hartlep notes that these statistics are semi-detailed and are not entirely correct. Asian Americans, viewed through the lenses of “model minority” and “ethnic gloss,” appear to be *homogeneous* from the outside. But, the population is in fact, *heterogeneous* from within³. The model minority myth implies that Asian Americans experience the world in a singular way, and that they do not have problems. Therefore, according to Hartlep, the problems of homogenization and erasure are focal issues for the Asian American community, and deservedly should receive attention.

Hartlep referenced a 2011 report by the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF), entitled “‘We’re Not Even Allowed to Ask for Help’: Debunking the Myth of the Model Minority.” This report focuses on the how Asian Americans are performing in the New York public school system. CACF’s report includes information as to why clinical psychologists the model minority stereotype is a burden for Asian American students. If you are not a genius, teachers and others within educational communities marginalize you, as if you are inadequate as a person. As previously noted, there should be a clear distinction between who you are as a person, and your academic performances.

In chapter 2, Hartlep reviewed (a) the familial and cultural structure of various Asian American subgroups (e.g., Filipino, Chinese, Southeast Asian, and Japanese); (b) Asian American’s religious and collective orientations; (c) the model minority stereotype and teacher perspectives on the model minority stereotype; (d) the socialization of Asian American children; and (e) Asian American heterogeneity, hybridity, and resistance⁴.

³ Nicholas D. Hartlep, “Harvard to the NBA: Deconstructing Jeremy Lin as the ‘Model Minority,’” *Korean Quarterly* 15 (2012): pp. 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

A myriad of published literature are available to help combat the underachievement of non-Asian minority groups, such as African Americans. However, there is a dearth of literature that sheds light on the vicious experiences of Asian Americans who fail to rise to the levels implied of a “model minority.” Because Asian Americans are naturally expected to make perfect grades in classrooms and on standardized tests, the question becomes, what happens to those who fail to achieve high grades, and who do not attend elite colleges and universities? Hartlep writes, “Asian Americans who do not assimilate or acquiescence to the model minority often experience, and are disciplined through social violence. Parallel to how African Americans experience racism for the assumptions that they lack the ability to achieve academically, Asian Americans and other members of the model minority experience racism based on the assumptions that they are overachievers based on their ethnicity and racial background. Both of these assumptions are equally as dangerous, as they disregard people as individuals, and judge them according to the group they are associated with.” To this extent, studies⁵ show that stereotypes negatively impact both African Americans and model minority students. Both of these groups experience enormous amounts of pressure to make high grades and scores well on tests. While encouraging all students to be academically successful is a positive idea, it becomes negative when the essence of their being is predicated on a test score.

Chapter 3 has the potential to present a conundrum for many readers. Before reading this chapter, I automatically assumed that the model minority stereotype in P-16 schools would lead to successful and lucrative careers in post-college and graduate studies. However,

⁵ A.I. Toldson,, K.M. Woodson, & R. Braithwaite, “Academic Potential Among African American Adolescents in Juvenile Detention Centers: Implications for Reentry to School,” *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 49 (2010): accessed on September 29, 2014, doi: 10.1080/10509674.2010.519666.

Hartlep opens the chapter by stating the following: “Given that the model minority stereotype implies that Asian Americans are economically stable and successful, this chapter annotates writings on critiques of such a trope.”⁶

In this chapter, Hartlep cited, from a publication of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. In this publication, the author states, “typical indicators of success, such as education and income [socioeconomic success], have not been properly adjusted for extraneous factors.” “For example, variables such as the number of wage earners, the education of wage earners, and the type of occupation must be considered.” While these variables should be considered for model minorities, these questions should be asked when readings any race-based research. This chapter has the potential of dismissing assumptions regarding the financial status of those who are labeled at the model minority⁷.

In chapter 4, Hartlep highlights the importance of disaggregated data when explaining the Asian American health and social welfare. Asian Americans are often denied academic support because of the model minority stereotype. Unfortunately, the assumption that all Asian Americans are healthy can cause them to not seek nor receive the necessary medical care. Misleading quantitative studies regarding the model minority often render Asian Americans invisible. This chapter includes literature that reveals data regarding Asian American homicides and suicides, particularly among women.

In the beginning of chapter 5, Hartlep cited a question that was asked by W. E. B DuBois, which was, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Vijay Prashad asked a similar question, “How does it feel

⁶ Hartlep, *The Model Minority: Demystifying Asian American Success*, pp. 131.

⁷ Hartlep, *The Model Minority: Demystifying Asian American Success*, pp. 133.

to be a solution?”⁸ While I respect both of these scholars, my questions are, “A problem for who?” and “The solution for who?” It is important that we critically respond to those who are labeling us as problems and solutions. This chapter compares the model minority to the Mormon minority. According to Chen and Yorgason, the Mormon minority status implies “the Mormons and Mormonism are rich, successful, powerful, and their influence is spreading.”⁹ The assumption is that these groups have ascended to success based on their self-reliance, hard work, loyalty, and obedience to the American pathway to success. The undertone of these kinds of statements is that “if you have not ascended to the Americanized version of success, it’s because you have not worked hard enough.” This kind of thinking ignores the concept of institutional racism that impacts all minority groups. Chapter 6 alludes to the fact that the model minority stereotype is largely absent from encyclopedic and bibliographic research. It is imperative the model minority stereotype scholars’ work be included across all academic presses.

While chapter 6 reveals where model minority stereotype are absent, chapter 7 highlights where the model minorities are misrepresented. While the media show African Americans as being thugs, poor, violent, unsuccessful, problematic, and unintelligent, they stereotype Asian Americans as being mathematicians, scientists, inventors, and wealthy. Both of these stereotypes inaccurately describe both Asian Americans and African Americans. Hartlep did a spectacular job at providing literature the aims to debunk these racist and despicable depictions. According to chapter 8, newspapers disseminate similar images.

⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁹ Ibid., 114.

There is a popular quote that says, “If you do not know where you came from, you will not know where you are, or understand where you are going.” In chapter 9, Hartlep reviews classical articles in order to help readers understand how the model minority stereotype is constructed. He suggests that “it is important to understand that an overwhelming number of classical pieces rely on cultural explanations for Asian American’s success.” This chapter is explicit when explains that while some scholars aim to refute the model minority stereotype, they unintentionally reinforce it in their narratives.

Chapter 10 provides a list of dissertation studies that have been written on the model minority stereotype. Hartlep concludes chapter 11 by offering advice to model minority stereotype scholars. He writes, “The annotations and synthesis of literature in this book are intended to provide insight and foresight that will inspire scholars to develop cutting edge scholarship.”

In order to challenge systems of inequality and false understanding, model minority stereotype scholars must come out of the ivory tower and work with Asian American youth. What about the Asian American child who needs special education services? What about the speech impaired Asian American student who is being bullied for not reading aloud in class? What about the struggling Korean college student who is contemplating suicide?

Hartlep has provided foundational literature in this extensive text. I caution us not to allow this book just to be another reference or footnote. Instead, this book should be used to enhance the lives of those who are negatively impacted by the model minority stereotype. This book is a helpful book for practicing PK-16 teachers, model minority stereotype scholars, and critical race theorists.

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