Information Resource

A University Student's Perspective on the Model Minority Myth

As part of her university experiences, Vivian Biwei Huang a student from the People's Republic of China, worked at the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.* Her concern about racial stereotyping led her to review the literature on the model minority myth that surrounds Asian students.

The following are her personal reflections on the topic.

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What is the Model Minority Myth and How Should We Deal with It?

A personal Perspective from Vivian Biwei Huang,

a UCLA Student from The People's Republic of China

Have you been around campus and heard people saying: "Asian kids are so smart!" Even before I came to the U.S., I heard the statements about Asian students doing much better academically than others in America. After coming to Los Angeles, I also gained the impression in class and from friends and media that Asian-Americans did much better than other minority groups.

But I ask: Do you think this is true of all Asian-Americans? Furthermore, how has this influenced you and others?

What is the Model Minority Myth?

The model minority myth, of course, is a stereotype. It suggests that "Asian Americans are more academically, economically, and socially successful than other minority groups" (Yoo, 2010). As with many stereotypes, the statement has some truth based on some aggregated statistics. For example, in comparing reading and mathematics performances of white and Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) 7th graders, the AAPI students did as well as white students on the reading test and significantly better on math. Within the AAPI students, Japanese, Chinese and Korean students all did better than white students (Pang, Han and Pang, 2011).

On the other hand, a great deal of research highlights the negative impact of the model minority myth not only for Asian-American students, but others as well. This body of research emphasizes the myth's role in denying the frequent racism faced by Asian-American students and its role in creating interracial tension (Yoo, 2010). It also stresses the failure to consider subgroup and individual differences (Pang, Han & Pang, 2011) and deemphasizes the academic problems some Asian experience (Wing, 2007).

My experience is that the myth produces advantages and disadvantages, My focus here is on enhancing understanding of the myth and how the disadvantages might be minimized and the advantages maximized in K-12 school settings for all students.

Expectation, Values, and Motivation

Many people think that the reason Asian students succeed academically is that Asian culture emphasizes the value of the academy. Given that, other factors also seem to have played a role in establishing the myth in the U.S.

Significantly, the Immigration Act of 1965 encouraged many Asians with wealth and knowledge to move to the U.S. (Andrews, 2003). These new immigrants highly valued academics. They passed down their values to their children and expected them to achieve.

Personally, my parents conveyed their high value of academics from my early years, telling me stories about themselves. My father was the first college student in his hometown. He went from a rural village in southeast China to the capital Beijing, and then he was sent by his university to the US to do postdoctoral work. He always stressed that his diligence and education brought him amazing experiences and a proficient life. He also compared himself to those from his hometown who did not study well and did not enjoy the benefits he had. In my mind, I came to believe that education could bring more good things than one could imagine. Moreover, before I even went to school, my parents always told me that I was really great and could get good grades. I internalized this expectation and studied hard to get the amazing outcomes my parents talked about and to sustain my pride.

Expectations and Pressure? Many people have questioned whether the Asian style of parenting brings too much pressure on their children. From my personal experience, high expectations were beneficial because of the positive way my parents posed them and the many supports they provided.

I have observed that many Asian American parents provide supports such as extracurricular training in math and their home languages. While perhaps an extreme example, the "Tiger mom" Amy Chua forced her daughters to take extra classes and restrained free time after school, and her daughters achieved extraordinarily in academically and musically (Lui & Rollock, 2013). In China, almost every friend of mine had the experience of taking math, English or science classes after school or on weekends. Although we hated those courses back then, I see this as the way our parents supported and enhanced our success.

My experience suggests that it is important to have high expectations, but these need to be established appropriately and accompanied by encouragement and good supports. Parents should watch tones and attitudes. Many Asian parents tend to focus on academic outcomes and ignore their children's psychological needs. In the press to be competitive, students need parents to show their love and affection and that they are a continuous source of support. Too many students seem to feel that if they cannot do well in school their parents are not going to love them. My Chinese friends often said their parents compared them to classmates and said "look at him (or her)! You have the same teachers and same classes why can't you do as good!" That, of course, was the last thing they wanted to hear.

Teachers' Expectations. Researchers have long cautioned about teachers tendencies to track students into high and low achievement groups based on inappropriate expectations (Oakes, 1985). In high competitive school settings, teachers may pay extra attention to students who do well academically while ignoring the needs of students who are not doing well. One of my friends transferred to my middle school in 8th grade. She did not do well on the first couple exams because she was adjusting to the new environment. This led her teachers to view her as a weak student. She felt ignored and sometimes even mocked by her teachers. Her teachers were not supportive; she felt helpless when her grades were bad. She had to find her own way through this hard time where teachers were not available for her. Through her own perseverance, she caught up and mastered the material. She was soon among the top five out of 50 students. Then, her teachers paid more attention to her and tried to help her at all times. Fortunately, she did not buy into the idea that she was not a good student. If she had, she might have and given up trying and might not have gone to college. Clearly, teachers' attitudes toward students make a difference; schools need to create an environment that provides the type of supports that enable an equal opportunity for all students to succeed.

Managing Expectations. Establishing appropriate long-term and short-term goals for students are an important way for teachers and parents to help students manage achievement expectations. Mastery goals, of course, are important. In an experiment conducted at Hong Kong University, "the pursuit of mastery goals (i.e., the goal focused on the development of self-referenced competence) positively predicted deep learning strategies and negatively predicted surface learning strategies" (King, McInerney & Watkins, 2011). At the same time my personal experience suggests that, long term goals should reflect what the student values most. Short term goals should reflect immediate learning objectives designed to enhance continuing growth and development. For example, a long term goal for me as a new immigrant student was to get into a top university in the US. Pressing short term goals were to overcome the language barrier and then achieve good grades. With these accomplished, the next goals were to participate in leadership programs and clubs as a basis for achieving the long term goal.

Enhancing Expectations. Clearly, expectations matter. Various programs are trying to enhance expectations among groups that have not done well at school. Universities and other institutions outreach to urban schools to inform students and their parents of the value of education and to encourage higher expectations and motivation related to academics. All families are encouraged to use after school programs and extracurricular courses to help their children do better. Parents and teachers are cautioned to avoid deficit thinking about youngsters, to minimize negative effects of inappropriate competition, and to work to ensure equity of opportunity for success at school.

Personal Problems and Interracial Tension

I think the most serious problem produced by the Model Minority Myth is social pressure, for both Asian and other students. Studies find that Asian students indeed are perceived as performing better academically than other minority groups of students, more motivated to do well in college than other groups, and most likely to succeed in careers (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa & Lin, 1998). Moreover, Asian students often are characterized as nerdy or smart or both and as having no academic problems.

Cautions have been made that these perceptions can create personal problems and interracial tension in classrooms. Yoo (2010) notes that Asian and Asian-American students tend to hide their personal problems and are less likely to seek help because they do not want to break this "good" stereotype. Howard (2010) suggests that merely thinking of this stereotype or trying to confirm or disconfirm it can negatively affect performance on tests. A considerable body of research has identified such *stereotype threat* as the risk of confirminga negative stereotype about one's social group as a personal characteristic (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Besides the personal impact, the emphasis on racial group differences often contributes to interacial conflict.

My recommendation for minimizing these social pressure problems is to openly discuss the Model Minority Myth in classrooms. The simple fact is that individuals differ a lot. I think the lack of communication between different racial groups is a major cause of the personal problems and interracial tension. If students effectively discuss such matters, they can finally get the sense that the Model Minority is only a myth.

I had this experience when I was in a social justice class talking about race. The professor instructed students to say what stereotype they had toward each racial group. Naturally, at first it was awkward. After a while students just said out loud

what they thought. There were agreements and disagreements. Through the discussions and arguments, students came to see that the stereotypes were overgeneralizations and mostly inaccurate. This did reduce the interracial tension at least in the class.

Concluding Comments

It is essential that teachers, parents, and students work together to maximize advantages and minimize disadvantages stemming from the model minority myth, in-and-out of school. Along with high expectations, the need is for encouragement and support for all students and avoiding negative stereotyping. Moreover, strategies to enhance communication between students of different racial backgrounds seem critical in reducing misunderstandings and minimizing the negative effects of stereotypes.

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