

How the 'model minority' myth harms Asian Americans

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May is [Asian and Pacific American Heritage Month](#), a time when Americans celebrate the profound contributions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders—a group that is commonly abbreviated as AAPI—to U.S. society. It's also a time to acknowledge the complexity of AAPI experience.

And as [a professor who studies equity and inclusion in business](#), I think the focus on AAPI communities this month provides an excellent occasion to push back against a stereotype that has long [misrepresented and marginalized](#) a diverse range of people: the myth of the "[model minority](#)."

The term "[model minority](#)" first appeared in [popular media](#) in the 1960s to describe East Asians—primarily Japanese and Chinese Americans—as having high educational attainment, high family median income and low crime rates. That label has since been applied to all AAPIs.

[More than half](#) of native-born Asian Americans have heard of the "model minority" description. Among those who are familiar with it, 4 in 10 feel it is harmful.

Racially visible, in practice invisible

The narrative of the "model minority" portrays Asian Americans as uniformly successful and privileged. Yet the reality is far more complex. In reality, AAPIs encompass over [20 distinct ethnicities](#), yet are often lumped into a single category.

This obscures wealth and status disparities within the community. Income inequality among AAPIs is high, with more than 10 groups,

including [Burmese, Hmong and Mongolians](#), experiencing poverty at rates equal to or worse than the national average.

The myth of the model minority [erases the struggles](#) of these underserved communities. It also perpetuates the harmful notion that AAPIs don't need support or advocacy to address systemic inequities.

The myth also undermines AAPIs in the workplace. Research shows that the depiction of AAPIs as diligent and hardworking has burdened them with [additional responsibilities](#). Unfortunately, their efforts often go unnoticed. Stereotypes portraying Asians as passive and unassertive also frequently lead to their talents [being overlooked for managerial and leadership positions](#). Top executives in Fortune 500 companies of East Asian descent [make less](#) than their non-Asian counterparts.

AAPIs also often encounter unique barriers to upward mobility in the workplace—a phenomenon known as the "[bamboo ceiling](#)." They may struggle to align with stereotypical Western models of leadership, which include [assertiveness and extraversion](#), and are disproportionately [passed over for promotions](#), particularly into upper-level management.

Forever foreign

Alongside the myth of the model minority, another related narrative holds that AAPIs are [perpetual foreigners](#)—a manifestation of racism or xenophobia, where naturalized or even native-born Americans are viewed as outsiders because of their ethnic or racial background.

This myth has persisted despite generations of assimilation. Asians have often been viewed as outsiders since their arrival on American shores in the mid-19th century, labeled under the broad umbrella of "Orientals" and subjected to [a variety of stereotypes](#).

As a result, AAPIs often face [intrusive questions](#) about their origins, such as "Where are you really from?" and "Your English is really good." These and similar microaggressions can lead AAPIs to grapple with a sense of otherness that undermines their [sense of belonging](#) at work and beyond.

The belief that AAPIs are America's "other"—compounded by historical prejudices such as the "yellow peril" and contemporary scapegoating during events such as the COVID-19 pandemic—[fuels xenophobia and anti-Asian violence](#). This poses a real and immediate threat to the safety and well-being of AAPI individuals and communities.

Time for a post-model-minority narrative

The model minority narrative not only implicitly denies remedies to systemic discrimination, but it also harms other marginalized and oppressed groups. It implicitly suggests that non-Asians and non-Asian Americans cannot be considered model minorities.

Successful AAPIs are often presented as examples of what's possible through hard work and grit—which masks the [systemic barriers](#) they, like other people of color, must overcome to succeed. This, in effect, pits different racial groups [against each other](#).

This Asian Heritage Month—and all year round—I hope people can embrace a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of AAPI experiences. A [few ways](#) to do this include amplifying the voices of underrepresented AAPI communities, challenging stereotypes and advocating for policies that address the systemic inequities faced by all marginalized groups.

And instead of [narrowly defining success](#) in terms of elite credentials and earning power, Americans might want to consider celebrating more

[diverse forms of achievement](#), too.

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