

3.1 - The Model Minority Myth

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Level(s)	5-12
Lesson Overview	Good Americans (1950 – 1960s). This lesson will explore the model minority myth, introduced in the 1960s by publications such as <i>The New York Times Magazine</i> and <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> , applied on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) and examine the realities and experiences of this non-monolithic community. Students will use data from the U.S. Census to compare and contrast AANHPI communities. Students will then look at the 2018 lawsuit against Harvard University’s admission policies as a case study to investigate the ways the model minority myth can be used as a wedge between different communities of color.
Lesson Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students will be able to define the model minority myth and identify the reasons it was created.• Students will be able to analyze the impact of the model minority myth on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (AANHPIs).• Students will learn how the model minority myth has shaped the relationship of the AANHPI community with other groups of color in the United States.

The Model Minority Myth Essay:

How can being an upstanding American citizen be a double-edged sword? After over a hundred years of anti-Asian sentiment and legislation, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (AANHPIs) post-World War II welcomed the possibility that their fellow Americans would no longer view them as competition for jobs or threat to national security, but instead as “good Americans.” This idea of the “good American” or “model minority” recasts AANHPIs as prime examples (the first-ever Asian named American Mother of the Year in 1952) of representing the quintessential American values of opportunity, meritocracy, and the American Dream.

For individual AANHPI, the model minority stereotype created a set of limiting and potentially harmful expectations that were difficult to live up to. AANHPIs are not one monolithic group. They are composed of people from different countries, cultures and values—and as such, socio-economic success was not universal. Such praise of AANHPIs by the media though called into question the fact that there were many within the community who did not get the services and government assistance they needed.

During the 1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement continued the fight for the equality of all Americans, and the federal government invested in social welfare programs (War on Poverty and Great Society), the concept of the model minority became a stereotype used to pit AANHPIs against other communities of color. News publications such as *New York Times Magazine* and *U.S. News & World Report* ran articles extolling the ways Asian Americans capitalized on the American Dream with their work ethic and emphasis on education. By doing this, delegitimized centuries of systematic and systemic oppression—harsher degrees of discrimination, unemployment, and imprisonment—that shaped the experiences of many Black American, Latinx, and Native American communities.

APIs instead have benefited greatly from the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and affirmative action policies of the era, prevented discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or

national origin in education, employment, housing and federal programs. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to the creation of the Immigration Act of 1965 which lifted limitations on AAPIs entering the country and becoming citizens.

The model minority stereotype however continued to resurface throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In 1987, *Time* ran a cover story “Those Asian American Whiz Kids.” In 2011, media outlets ran articles on Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. And most recently in 2018, a legal battle on the use of affirmative action in college admissions at Harvard University would once again demonstrate how the model minority myth could be used as a wedge between communities of color.

Works Cited:

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Vocabulary:

- **Delegitimize**¹: to make something **seem** not **valid** or not **acceptable**
- **Discrimination**²: to distinguish someone as being inferior or less than, especially based on their sex, race, religion, gender, or age
- **Extol**³: to praise highly
- **Meritocracy**⁴: a system, organization, or society in which people are chosen and moved into positions of success, power, and influence on the basis of their demonstrated abilities and merit
- **Monolithic**⁵: a large, regular, without interesting differences
- **Quintessential**⁶: embodying or possessing the essence of something
- **Stereotype**⁷: a simplified and over-generalized understanding or image of a group of people, place, or thing; when referring to a group of people, stereotypes can lead to certain expectations/assumptions of how or what that group may act, think, talk, care about, etc.
- **Systematic**⁸: something done according to a specific system, plan or method
- **Systemic**⁹: of or relating to a system.

¹Definition adopted from Cambridge Dictionary

²Definition adapted from Oxford Dictionary

³Definition adopted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

⁴Definition adopted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

⁵Definition adapted from Cambridge Dictionary

⁶Definition adopted from vocabulary.com

⁷Definition adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

⁸Definition adopted from yourdictionary.com

⁹Definition adopted from dictionary.com

Discussion Questions:

1. How and why did the model minority myth develop?
2. Does the model minority myth present an incomplete, potentially stereotypical view of AANHPIs? If so, how and what are the costs of this incomplete view?
3. What are the realities of the experiences of different AANHPI communities?
4. Does the model minority myth serve as a tool to create division between different groups of Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? If so, how?

Activity 1:

Model minority stereotype. Asian Americans are not a monolithic group.

A. Activating prior knowledge:

Begin with a discussion on stereotypes.

1. Are there such things as “positive” or “good” stereotypes?
2. If stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations, what impact might they have on groups of people who are stereotyped?

B. What are the realities for different AANHPI ethnic groups?

1. After watching this lesson’s video and reading this lesson’s essay, “The Model Minority Myth,” ask students to research from the list below.
 - a. Statistics of different Asian groups that are living in the United States.
 - b. Statistics on how AANHPI groups are doing in terms of education.
 - c. Statistics on how AANHPI groups are doing in terms of income level.

Encourage students to use data from

<https://aapidata.com/policy/education/>

<https://aapidata.com/policy/poverty/>

2. As students embark on their research, ask them to consider the following questions:
 - a. How are different AANHPI ethnic groups faring? Are different groups having the same experience? Different experiences?
 - b. What are the disparities within major Asian ethnic groups?
 - c. What are the realities for different AANHPI ethnic groups?
 - d. Based on what you know about the realities for different AANHPI ethnic groups how might this reality help AANHPIs’ drive for diversity in all aspects of American society in jobs, services, government funding, employment, small business, education, etc?

Activity 2:

Why was model minority myth created?

Discuss the following questions with the students:

1. During World War II, how were Japanese Americans treated? Why would being seen as “Good Americans” be so important to Asian Americans after the war?

2. What are the characteristics of a “Good American”? What are the connections between this stereotype and ideas about the American Dream and meritocracy?
3. How is the “Good American”, the model minority, used in the 1960s? What was the historical context of the 1960s? Was the model minority image used in the discussion of the War on Poverty?

Activity 3:

How the model minority myth hurt AANHPIs and coalition building?

- A. How does the model minority myth hurt AANHPIs?
 1. What types of discrimination do AANHPIs face? Do AANHPIs get treated as foreigners even if their families have been in the U.S. for several generations?
 2. How might the idea of the “Good American” create problems for AANHPIs? What kind of behavior is expected of them? How might the model minority stereotype potentially be an obstacle or benefit for advancement in various aspects of American society for AANHPIs?
- B. How does the model minority myth hurt AANHPIs in coalition building?
 1. AANHPIs as “model minority” are perceived to have achieved a higher level of success than other minority groups. Do you think this thinking is problematic? What does it imply about other minority groups?
 2. What types of discrimination do other minority groups face?
 3. Describe the benefits that AANHPIs actually gained through the Civil Rights Movement.
 4. Do AANHPIs need alliances with other groups of people? Why or why not?
 5. How does this idea of “model minority” hurt AANHPIs in their attempts to build coalitions or alliances with other groups of people?

Activity 4:

Affirmative Action and the Model Minority Stereotype

In 2018, a group of more than a dozen Asian American students brought a lawsuit against Harvard University, arguing that the university’s admissions practices discriminated against Asian American applicants. According to the plaintiffs, Harvard admissions officers often assigned Asian American applicants with strong academic credentials lower ratings for admissions criteria related to personality traits. The plaintiffs, called Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), alleged that the admissions office needed to use these lower personality ratings in order to keep the number of Asian American students at Harvard from becoming too high.

In 2019, Judge Allison D. Burroughs ruled against the SFFA, stating she believed that Harvard’s admissions policies were fair and that affirmative action, a set of admissions policies designed to improve opportunities for students of color, did not hurt Asian American students’ chances of getting into the college. The case raised strong feelings among different members of Asian American communities: while some agreed with the plaintiffs, others felt that affirmative action was a fair process for groups of color, particularly African American and Latinx students.

- A. Discussion Questions:
 1. Based on what you know about AANHPI is not a monolithic group, how might affirmative action support AANHPI students applying to college?
 2. How might the model minority stereotype potentially be an obstacle to college admissions for AANHPIs?
 3. How would affirmative action help AANHPIs in the work place?

4. Describe how the model minority myth is used to drive a wedge between AANHPIs and other communities of color in policies like affirmative action.
- B. Creative writing options for students to choose:
1. In what ways have people tried to stereotype you? How are you more than these stereotypes? Write a letter to the people who have stereotyped you, in which you share how you are more than the stereotype they have placed on you.
 2. The model minority stereotype has historically been used to drive a wedge between different groups of color. How would you try and bring different groups together? Create a visual representation showing how and/or why different groups of people need to come together.

Further Information:

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