Unit 2 - Exploring the Myth of the "Model Minority"

What is the Myth of the Model Minority? What are the implications of this myth on students? On science?

NGSS connections: ***Practices:*** *Asking Questions and Defining Problems; Developing and Using Models; Analyzing and Interpreting Data; Obtaining, Evaluating, and Communicating Information; Engaging in Argument from Evidence;* ***CCCs:*** *Patterns; Cause and Effect; Systems and Systems Models.*

Starting point for instructors

- Do Unit 0 - Setting the Stage before this, and review norms if needed.
- It can be helpful to have introduced the notion of systemic thinking before implementing this lesson. We recommend teaching Unit 2 - Systemic Racism and/or Unit 2 - Systemic Sexism prior to this lesson. Instructors can also connect content in this lesson to Unit 2 - Meritocracy and/or Unit 2 - Stereotype Threat - all of these lessons address systemic thinking.
- The Model Minority Myth is an evolving and complex concept. It may be helpful to review the articles in the Lesson Plan Resources.
- It's important to note that 'Asian American' is a broad category and one that may require further unpacking than this short lesson allows. Furthermore, the U.S. Census includes only "Asian" as a racial identity option.
- Discussions about the Myth of the Model Minority can bring some unique challenges. The context of your school and community population, as well as the experiences of your students, will introduce multiple perspectives even among the same racial identity. *Some specific things to think about:*
  - If you have other populations of students from nondominant backgrounds (e.g., Black or Latin@) you may want to first introduce Unit 2 - Systemic Racism as a precursor.
  - Do not make assumptions about your students' racial identities based on their appearance.
  - This discussion can be polarizing for students and teachers (both Asian American and non-): some may have experienced the Myth, some may have experienced the Myth without being aware of it, and some may not have heard of the Myth.
- Facilitators may have populations that don't have many Asian American students. To help students learn more about their lived experiences, we suggest the following resource:
  - I am Asian American from Learning for Justice.

Optional Pre-Lesson Student Exploration / Bell-Ringer

Before coming to class/at the start of class, students may complete the reflection and activity below.

Individual student reflection: How familiar are you with Asia? With the countries that constitute Asia? Could you locate these countries on a map?

Map "Quiz": Try to locate as many Asian countries as you can using this Map Quiz!
This "quiz" can be done as a class, in small groups, or individually. It can be done on computers or a printed paper map. *(Note: Papua New Guinea is often considered a Pacific Islander nation, but is still included on this particular quiz.)*

Optional reflection questions for students:

- What did taking this quiz bring up for you? Is there anything that was surprising as you identified the locations of the countries in Asia?
- What do you know about these countries, their histories, and their political relationships with the country you live in?

In-Class Investigations

What Does the Data Tell Us About Asian American Representation in STEM Fields? (45 min)

This lesson begins with students returning to the pie charts from Unit 1 - Data Analysis & Representation (direct link to the pie charts). In small groups, students answer the following:

- Are Asians underrepresented or overrepresented in science? (*See Instructor Note below.*)
- How do you think these data define which people are categorized as "Asian"?
- What questions do you have about the data?

If students have not already made this connection on their own, the instructor can explain that while Asian American is a broad category that is commonly used (e.g., on the pie charts above), it does not tell the whole story. Ask students, using the table below, how does this compare/contrast to the pie charts from Unit 1?

- Statistics about what groups of people are found within "Asian American."

Implications / Take-away / Transition
Ask students to predict the representation of subgroups within the "Asian American" label who obtain graduate degrees. Look at these graphs showing education levels of a few Asian American subgroups in comparison to all Americans to get an idea (a graduate degree is typically part of the pathway to becoming a scientist).

- Students in small groups: What do you notice about the following graphs? Representation Graphs among Asian Groups (NPR) ← (Note: Statistics regarding Asian American subgroups in STEM are not widely available. *Instructors: if you find such data, please reach out!*)
- ***For more detailed breakdown of races:*** National State of AANHPIs Report (pgs 59-61, 112-119)

Instructor Note:

The data show that Asians are actually overrepresented in science, and as such can be seen as a "privileged" group. Students may think this data suggests that there ought to be fewer Asians in science, in contrast to previous lessons on Racism and Sexism. However, one key idea here is that Asians are not a monolith and, therefore, the category of "Asian" and their overrepresentation in STEM may actually obscure information about underrepresentation of some Asian subgroups in STEM fields

For example, Deepa Shivaram writes, "Hmong, Vietnamese, Filipino, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans all fall under the broad category of Asian, but their experiences the U.S. when it comes to things like education levels can vary greatly from other Asian groups such as Chinese, Korean, Indian and Japanese. Some South Asian groups such as Bhutanese and Burmese also face lower levels of educational attainment." (NPR)

It may also be important to note that many members of the "Asian American" group in the USA see their identity primarily as American, and might have little connection to the (modern-day) countries from which perhaps distant relatives immigrated.

What is the Model Minority Myth? (30-40 minutes)

Myths about particular "model," or ideal, minorities exist in popular culture. This lesson focuses on one such model minority myth - that Asian Americans are particularly good at doing science.

Instructors can introduce the Myth of the Model Minority for Asian Americans by first defining it:

"This myth characterizes Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population through some combination of innate talent and pull-yourselves-up-by-your-bootstraps immigrant striving." (Learning for Justice)

(A related stereotype is that all Asian Americans are smart and good at math. There is no evidence that Asian Americans have greater innate talent or math ability.)

At first glance, overrepresentation and stereotypes about being talented may seem positive. In small groups, Have students brainstorm ways that the Myth of the Model Minority might impact students studying science or folks in STEM fields *negatively*. Students might come up with *negative* impacts of the Myth of the Model Minority such as:

1. Ignore differences among different groups' representation
2. Ignore systemic racism still (and previously) enacted on groups, even when they may be overrepresented in a particular (STEM) setting
3. Isolate and reject individuals who do not fit or conform to that group
4. Place immense pressure on Asian American individuals to maintain that positive stereotype instead of highlighting a broken system (connecting to Unit 2 - Meritocracy)
5. Ignore the needs of individuals who are assumed to have resources & education by not distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary immigrants and their descendants, who tend to have different access to resources and support
6. Maintain genetic/racial determinism that *Asian Americans are more capable in STEM because they are Asian Americans,* and validate other harmful stereotypes (see #8)

7. Maintain negative stereotypes about politeness and conformity (contributing to a lack of leadership roles) and reinforce the message that Asian Americans are something other than American
8. Distance Asian Americans from DEI efforts to eliminate systemic racism

As a class, share out and generate a list. Then discuss the following: “how might someone who disagrees respond to this list?”

There are additional resources to elicit ideas and support conversation in the Lesson Plan Resources.

Instructor Note:

At first glance, students may not understand why the Model Minority Myth is problematic. Society has maintained for generations that the Model Minority is a *good* thing. To help students dig deeper and see the flaws, it may be useful to share a brief history of Asian Americans and their journey from being denigrated to becoming the poster for how immigrants ought to behave and act (see Lesson Plan Resources for links). Policies like the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (America’s first race-based immigration ban, which lasted for over 60 years) and the wrongful imprisonment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II may help students understand why some Asian Americans might have embraced the Model Minority Myth at first as a protective measure. The American fight against communism abroad, and civil rights protests at home, may help students understand why the Model Minority Myth’s framing was embraced by white Americans too: it gave white Americans "protection" that allowed them to point to successful Asians as proof of the ostensible equality of American society, thus making them feel less racist and providing cover for racism against other groups that undermined the civil rights efforts.

What other influences affect Asian American experiences in STEM? (30-40 minutes)

Use the Jigsaw Classroom Routine to have students discuss the resources below.

- Even when a group (such as Chinese) is overrepresented in STEM, they still experience racism and marginalization. This excerpt from Suzuki's autobiography (3 pages), gives an example of how Asian Americans experience racism in a way that negatively impacts their ability to do science.
- Another way in which Asian Americans experience various stereotypes that might affect their capacity to succeed in STEM is within the context of intersectionality.
    - Intersectionality 101 Learning for Justice *(use if students are not familiar with the term)*
    - Intersectional discrimination NIH *(general discrimination examples for Asian American women)*
    - A replication attempt of stereotype susceptibility (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999): Identity salience and shifts in quantitative performance. APA PsycNet *(The abstract from this paper alone tells the results and can be used alone without the full article.)*
- An example of anti-Asian American-policy/violence/etc in current society is the reactions and treatment of Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Exit Slip: Have students respond to this short prompt. “How have your views of Asian Americans in science [or STEM field of your choosing] shifted since we started this lesson?”

Post-Lesson Homework

Read and Reflect

Read “The Problem With ‘Asians Are Good at Science’” (The Atlantic) and respond to the following reflection questions:

1. Pick one idea from the article that resonated with you personally. Share that idea and how it made you feel.
2. How do the examples mentioned in the article or in class conflict or resonate with your own perceptions, beliefs, and/or experiences?
3. This article talked about how social pressure perpetuates the Myth of the Model Minority. How could such social pressures exist/function in your local context and/or social media feed? Discuss.
4. Do you see any evidence of the Myth of the Model Minority here in our school?

Further reflection:

- What do you think it means to be a model (science) student? Does this align with your own sense of self?
- Does the definition of a model science student stay the same in every course?

- Write about what it might feel like if you like science but you do not act like a model science student.
- Where do you think the sense of a model science student comes from? Is there anything that you do, intentionally or unintentionally, to pass along that sense to others?
- This lesson explored ways in which a "positive" stereotype can still create harm. Can you think of any other 'positive' stereotypes that might have similar negative effects? [Connection to *2 - Stereotype Threat*]

Possible Extension - A deeper dive into the complexity of Asian representation in Elite Secondary Schools

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Read "How It Feels to Be an Asian Student in an Elite Public School" (NY Times - may be behind a paywall) and respond to the following reflection questions in or out of class:

1. Consider the following points of data from the article:
    a. "Sixty-three percent of the city's public school students are Black and Latino yet they account for just 15 percent of Brooklyn Tech's population. For Asian students, the percentages are flipped: They make up 61 percent of Brooklyn Tech, although they account for 18 percent of the public school population."
    b. "Fully 63 percent of Brooklyn Tech's students are classified as economically disadvantaged. Census data shows that Asians have the lowest median income in the city and that a majority speak a language other than English at home."

    How can we reconcile this data with the idea that these schools are "bastions of elitism" in need of a "racial reckoning"?
2. The article names several possible solutions to evening the admissions playing field as proposed by students and teachers:

    "Establish variable passing scores so that economically disadvantaged, Latino or Black districts face somewhat lower bars than a wealthy majority-white district on the Upper West Side. Offer the exam to all eighth graders as a matter of course, and improve tutoring. Build out gifted and talented in nonwhite districts."

    What do you think of these solutions? Can you think of any others that might work?

Note: This extension could be connected to Unit 2 – Affirmative Action as well as a recent case in a high school which the Supreme Court declined to hear.

Resources

- Lesson Plan Resources