

Asian Americans are Not the “Model Minority”

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Frank
Wu

Asian Americans are wrongly assumed to be doing well, uniformly and virtually without exception. The stereotype, dubbed “the model minority myth,” has been debunked again and again, but it persists in ideological claims that Asian Americans demonstrate racial discrimination that has been eliminated and hard work is all it takes to do well. The earliest articles in the academic discipline of Asian American studies addressed the myth. Entire books have been written analyzing in detail what its durability suggests about the color line. But like any bias, this seemingly positive prejudice has proven difficult to defeat. Yet it is worth trying once more, as objectively as possible.

It is true that on average Asian Americans report household incomes that are on average higher than others — even Whites. As we applaud the individuals who have achieved the proverbial American Dream, however, we should realize these numbers, as the cliché about statistics suggests, can be intentionally abused as well as unintentionally misunderstood. The more accurate, and thus better, picture of Asian Americans is as a “bipolar” population. The curve is not a bell curve, but instead has two peaks across the distribution. Asian Americans are both rich and poor.

To begin with, some — not all, because the refutation of a generalization should not be another falsehood — Asian immigrants represent “brain drain.” They arrived in the past and continue to come now with human capital in the form of education or a kinship network or financial capital in the straightforward sense of wealth. They should not be juxtaposed against African-Americans, or, for that matter, native-born Asian Americans who are distant cousins. African immigrants, Black and White, also include those who undoubtedly were among the privileged “back home.” Complimenting one minority to disparage another minority should be called out. It is the classic strategy of divide-and-conquer.

Despite the association of Asians with education, it appears Asian Americans receive lower “return on investment” than Whites for their degrees. On average, Asian Americans have more schooling, but, on average, they enjoy less economic advantage as a result. In Silicon Valley, Asian Americans are promoted into management at much lower rates than would be predicted in the absence of inequity. The Ph.D. immigrant from Korea may be bossed around by the B.A. graduate who is more junior and less qualified but happens to be a White American and male on top of that.

The details of Asian American success are significant. If the data is disaggregated, as it should be for factual truth even if that is opposed for political purposes, it turns out some Asian American ethnic groups (Indians especially) are, if we insist on generalizing well-to-do, while others (Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders) are not. Asian Americans also are much more likely to live in homes with multiple wage-earners, including multi-generational families such as those owning small businesses requiring 24/7 sacrifice. They are concentrated geographically in areas with higher incomes matched by higher costs of living. These variables distort any comparison. That is even without accounting for disparate circumstances created by race itself.



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For Asian Americans, the complication of the “perpetual foreigner syndrome” and the dismissal of “you all look alike” render many impressions suspect. The figures are inflated for Asian Americans because of the inclusion of Asian foreign nationals. These may be high-net-worth investors who hold green cards and are absentee landlords, or expatriate professionals and managers with international corporations. A fifth-generation Japanese American is not the same as a Japanese executive sent by Tokyo for a three-year stint running American operations.

Asian Americans themselves may deny, or perhaps not be aware, of the disparities among Asian Americans or the history of the community. Some Asian Americans, for example, are angry about undocumented immigration. Consistent with popular culture, their perception is that the phenomenon is essentially Latino. Yet there are significant numbers of Asians who entered the nation improperly or who have violated the terms of their visas. The original “illegal immigrants” were the “paper sons” who cheated the Chinese Exclusion Act by pretending to be the offspring of a fellow from the same village, who was not their actual father. Today, the patrons of an all-you-can eat buffet might not identify with the servers pulling double shifts for minimum wage. The former were recruited with scholarships and rewarded with visas; the latter make do as best as they can, hoping on these shores to better their prospects.

Ironically, the belief that Asian Americans face no problems creates its own problems, especially for students who are struggling, not conforming to expectations academically or coming out as LGBT. They may be excluded from programs, even those meant to be open to all, because they are not recognized as suffering or as citizens. They may perceive lack of sympathy, which may be real lack of sympathy. There is a terrible trend of Asian American student suicide likely exacerbated by these factors. The stigma associated with it prevents discussion much less treatment.

By many measures, Asian Americans are between African-Americans and other people of color on the one hand and the White majority on the other hand. But Asian Americans display such differences that virtually all of the images turn out to be unreliable for policy decisions. What Asian Americans deserve, or what is effective, may vary by the specific case. That may be the story of our diversity, for all of us and each of us.

Frank H. Wu is the William L. Prosser Distinguished Professor at the University of California Hastings College of the Law. This summer he will assume the presidency at Queens College in New York. You can follow him on Twitter@frankhwu