

# *Stereotypes of Minority Students in American Education*

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**Abstract:** While people are aware that minority students are experiencing certain levels of inequality and unfair treatment in education, this literature review helps to explore the stereotypes of minority students in education by focusing on the Asian and African American students. This review shows some social reasons behind the formation of those stereotypes and how the stereotype threat and consciousness might affect minority students' performance, identification, and future development. The review also covers the idea of color-blind racism and connects it to the formation of those minority groups' stereotypes.

## **1. Introduction**

Education is an essential tool that the minority groups such as Asians and African Americans can utilize to integrate into the new society and move upward. However, certain stereotypes are always formed toward Asian and African American groups. Those default stereotypes might decline the opportunities for the success of those two minority groups of students and create an unequal environment in the classroom. For example, people are always saying that Asian students are good at math, which makes them feel embarrassed to declare they are not. It seemed to be their fault if they did not achieve that expectation.

It is essential to understand the social reasons behind the formation and outcomes of those stereotypes to improve the current academic environment and provide those minority groups with the appropriate aid. There are several questions to think about: What has caused American society to form certain kinds of stereotyped expectations toward the group of those two minority groups of students? How do their racial identities play roles in those phenomena? How would those stereotyped expectations affect those students' achievements and performances? Educators have to look at those minority students' variable school performance instead of giving a misleading expectation of their accomplishments based on their racial identity.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Some of the Stereotypes of Asian and African American Students

Minority students are constantly portrayed with specific characteristics based on their racial identity. Stacy J. Lee once did an ethnographic study on many Asian American high school students and introduced that Asian American students were depicted as academic superstars or model minorities in common sense. [1] People tend to believe in those stereotypes because they think Chinese students always work hard and that Chinese culture believes in the importance of education. However, she examined and divided the Asian students into four groups and found out how those Asian students who shared a common ethnic identity had unique perspectives on schooling and academic performances. The academic achievement myth has always existed, but not all Asian students are successful. In reality, both high and low achievers exist in Asian students. Those low achievers would experience anxiety and be embarrassed to ask for help when they did not live up to the standards of those model-minority stereotypes.

Also, their academic performances are hindered by those stereotyped characteristics, stopping them from getting appropriate support. For example, Xuan, one of the interviewees in Lee's study, stated that Asian students feel upset when they do not do well in science or math, and the teachers would blame their failures on not working hard enough. For those Asians who do well in math and sciences, teachers would not praise their achievement because they believe that Asian students have math and science genius. [1] Whatever their academic performances are, people easily relate them to the stereotypes. Those stereotypes affect both low-achieving and high-achieving students, and Asian students should not be labeled as low achievers simply because they did not fit certain expectations based on their racial identity. If they are not successful in some expected regions, it does not mean they are low-achievers.

Furthermore, some stereotypes turned Asian students off, and they started to revolt in the schools. Another interviewee in Lee's study told his story that he refused to perform well in school because he wanted to disparage the label of Asian male who only cares about mental rather than physical development. [1] He wanted to join the navy and felt offended by this model-minority stereotype; he spent more time emphasizing his physical strength than schoolwork.

Not only are Asian students experiencing the effects brought by the model-minority stereotype myth, and African American students are another big minority group that educators should pay attention. In Fordham and Ogbu's article the burden of acting white, they state that white Americans did not want to admit that black Americans were capable of intellectual achievement. As a result, many black Americans started to doubt their intellectual ability and define academic success as white people's privilege. [2] So those black students began to discourage each other from acting like white students who strive in their academics, and those black students who could perform well did not try to put effort into schoolwork.

There is a story in the same article about how a white fifth-grade teacher gave a black student a bad grade on an outstanding essay because the white teacher did not believe in the denial of plagiarism of this black student. [2] This black student decided he would never try hard in school again and felt humiliated by showing his talent. He felt hopeless about putting in because whatever he did would not help him succeed. The white teacher made this decision only because he believed black students were not talented enough to write such a good paper and would not have this intellectual achievement. However, this stereotyped achievement myth misled this teacher and brought long-term adverse effects to this black student. Those minority students are becoming ambivalent about success and are limited by those labeled characteristics, and those students tend to perform worse in school than their potential. So every educator needs to eliminate the model-

minority stereotype myth and value students' performances without considering their racial identity.

## **2.2. The Social Reasons behind the Formation of Those Stereotypes**

### **2.2.1. Profound Cultural Differences**

The profound cultural differences may contribute to the formation of stereotyped ideology toward minority groups. In the book *Review of research on education*, the three authors found that educators have an assumption about the profound foreignness of Asian American students, which underlined the model minority stereotype. [3] It is dangerous to perpetuate the construction of Asian Americans as profoundly different and use it to explain their academic success. The model minority stereotype might help to emphasize and deepen racial relations in the United States. People tend to have a stereotyped sense of Asian culture, such as stability, respect, tradition, and so on, and those Asian students are labeled as quiet, obedient, silent, and so on. For example, Asian culture always emphasizes the role of family cohesion and respect for older members, so children are more obedient to their parents. Asian parents also pay more attention to their children's academic performances and believe education can bring upward mobility. So many teachers have formed stereotypes of Asian students and parents as only caring about grades instead of other extracurricular activities. Many researchers have related those positive characteristics of Asian cultures to those Asian students' high achievement in academics.

Furthermore, Teranishi et al. (2004) once found that Chinese students had the highest percentage of choosing to attend a private college. [3] People also tend to relate these findings to Asian cultures by saying that Chinese parents are willing to spend more on children's education and Chinese students are good at getting good standard test grades. While people are trying too hard to connect this phenomenon to stereotypes, they ignore another critical factor behind this phenomenon: socioeconomic status. Not all Chinese families can afford tuition for their children, and not every Chinese family values the importance of education. Those examined students are from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, so it is also necessary to examine other inter-sectional approaches instead of superficially focusing on racial-cultural differences and stereotypes.

### **2.2.2. Religification**

In the article named *The Religification of Pakistani-American Youth*, the author Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher introduces another cultural production process called religification. It means that religious affiliation, rather than race or ethnicity, has become the core identity category for certain people. [4] Because of the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States, Muslims have been labeled as a dangerous, aggressive, and problematic minority group. Those minority students from Muslim religious backgrounds feel isolated and find it hard to fit into the American mainstream because of those characteristics related to their religion. The adverse historical events will affect people's opinion toward one specific group related to their religious identity, especially when this group is the minority. In China, there have been several terrorist attacks in the past decades related to the Xinjiang terrorists, the minority ethnic group in China who have religious beliefs different from the Chinese mainstream society. People started to have a stereotyped negative impression of this ethnic group nowadays. They are constantly being mentioned when people are discussing any threatening social actions. Those minority groups also have many invisible disadvantages, such as fewer job opportunities or less social trust. People are forming those stereotyped ideas and defining those characteristics upon certain minority groups based on their religious affiliations.

### 2.2.3. Socioeconomic Status

William Labov's article *Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence* states that a deficit theory of verbal deprivation labeled the black students in the ghetto school areas. It means that those black students received little oral stimulation or heard minimal well-formed language, so they are disadvantaged at verbal expression. [5] It is said that those black children from those ghetto areas cannot speak complete sentences, do not know the names of familiar objects, and cannot form logical thoughts. Labov criticizes this deficit theory and states that not all black children in those urban ghetto areas experienced shortages, and many have the same vocabulary as anyone else learning English. It is hazardous because people are using this deficit theory to account for expecting those black children to perform poorly in all school subjects.

However, in reality, those bad performances are related to socioeconomic status. Those black children lack language skills because they are from lower-income homes and lack interaction with parents at home. Parents did not have much time to get involved in those children's daily life, and there was a lack of conversation between them. Those children did not have enough communication practice when they were young and did not want to speak out about their problems to their parents. On the contrary, middle-class black children have much more language superiority than lower-class black children. So, language deficiency should not be blamed on racial identity. The myth of this deficit theory may create more problems because it will make people fail to discover the actual defects and solve the problems.

### 2.3. Some Outcomes of Stereotypes

While educators know some of the possible social reasons behind the formation of those stereotypes, it is also essential to understand how those stereotypes might negatively influence those minority students' performance, identification, and future developments.

#### 2.3.1. Stereotyped Threat

While poverty and low socioeconomic status might be why African American students perform poorly in school, another possible reason is that they are aware of the expected stereotyping of their inferiority. Valerie Maholmes introduces the idea of "stereotype threat" while examining the minority students' achievement gap in the article *Revisiting Stereotype Threat*. She states that some African-American college students perform badly because they fear their academic performance would confirm the stereotypes that they are intellectually inferior to other peers. [6] The fear of confirming their labeled intellectual inferiority rumors brings to the result that those African American students are willing to put in more effort to improve their performances because they feel stressed to face the outcome, whether the result will be success or failure.

Educators should be aware that the stereotype threat might cause an achievement gap among those minority groups and make those minority students unwilling to show themselves. Consequently, stereotype threat might hinder minority students from trying to escape the constrained characteristics because they are afraid their effort might be useless, and their failed performance will confirm and deepen the stereotyped humor. Those minority students are stressed when they cannot meet positive expectations and are worried about their failures, which might ensure some of the stereotypes.

Furthermore, according to Clack McKown and Rhona S. Weinstein, stereotype threat also assumes that something in the social environment would activate a relevant stereotype. [7] Stereotypes may be activated directly when something is explicitly connected with ethnic or racial identity. However, stereotypes can also be activated indirectly when the social context invokes

stereotypes without explicitly priming a stereotyped identity. [7] And both direct and indirect activation is likely to happen in school. According to several studies in the article, when those minority students were under an indirect threat condition where they were told to take a test related to intellectual ability, African American students tended to perform worse and showed a negative stereotype activation. Those African American students in another non-threat condition where they were told nothing about the test before taking it tend to perform better. When those minority students are aware of the negative stereotypes, that consciousness will be quickly activated both directly and indirectly in daily life and hamper those students' cognitive performance.

### **2.3.2. Stereotype Consciousness**

Clack McKown and Rhona S. Weinstein also argued that when children realize that others endorse stereotypic beliefs, they gain an insight into others' social motives which will further affect their relationship to other individuals, social settings, and society. [7] Students who are aware of the negative stereotypes people have on them will become concerned that their academic performance at school will be judged based on their racial identity and worry about the existing stereotypes about their intellectual abilities.

Furthermore, studies have proved that children will start with developing the ability to infer an individual's stereotypes and then become aware of some other widely held stereotypes, and the social context will have an effect on children's developing beliefs about themselves and others. [7] Those minority students have the ability to infer that their teachers might expect less of students from their ethnic groups to teach. This idea will further affect how those students will respond to teachers' instructions and how they want to perform in the class. Also, they will infer that their classmates from other ethnic groups might also have such negative stereotyped thoughts upon them so they will feel unconfident and not assertive when others challenge their ideas. The shadow of such self-abasement and lack of self-confidence will further affect how they interact with people around them after they leave school and enter society.

As an educator, it is very important to pay attention to the students' awareness of both personal and other stereotypes. School is one of the most important social institutions which help the formation of early age awareness of the surrounding social context. Children got into contact with the social world outside the home and they started to form such negative social recognition such as stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination through learning and interacting. Minority students are easier and more sensitive to perceive stereotyping directly from teachers, so school should be the institution that helps hinder the stereotyping consciousness of those students to avoid stereotype threats.

### **2.3.3. Disidentification and Career Choice**

Stereotyped myths do bring not only negative influences on academic performance but also many parts of life. The stereotype threat might also affect minority students' major and career choices. Markus Appel and Nicole Kronberger state in their article *Stereotype Threat Prior to Test Taking* that the repeated activation of a negative stereotype might lead to a chronic disidentification from a domain or school. [8] For example, there are much higher school drop-out rates for African American students, and the threat-induced disidentification should be responsible. Also, black students are always related to the myths of lower intelligence ability, so there are lower rates of picking a STEM major than white and Asian students. On the contrary, many Asian students are expected to study STEM majors because they are labeled intelligent, hard-working, and non-talkative. Their families also encourage them to pick a STEM major because it will be easier for them to get a high-salary job. So the stereotype threat impacts academic performance in the short

term and affects students' future choices in the longer term. Those negative stereotypes made those minority students form a prediction of their failures in certain areas and discouraged them from trying to disturb and get rid of the stereotyped myth.

### 2.3.4. Color Blind Racism

In the book *Racism without racists*, author Eduardo Bonilla-Silva introduces the ideology and rhetoric of color-blind racism in which rulers receive solace by believing they are not involved in creating and maintaining inequality. The ruled are charmed by the *hegemonic ideology*. [9] It means that people express racism by avoiding using racist terms and denying the racial connection. They tried to use diminutives to decrease the power of their words, such as "I am a little against...". But they are still racist but trying to cover it up and hurt those victims by declaring their innocence. Those people avoid presenting their discrimination directly, and sometimes those color-blind racism talking were brought out unconsciously.

Labeling minority groups is also a type of color-blind racism rhetoric. People always say Asian students are good at math and blame their failures for personal reasons such as not working hard enough. But nobody is saying that white people who did not perform well in math or science are because they did not intend to study hard. And nobody is judging a white boy who wants to join the navy, and people believe that white people are more athletically advantaged. Furthermore, the teachers questioned the talented black students, so why did the teacher not judge the white students' work? And there is research on studying black children's poor language performance in ghetto area schools but ignored the fact that there are also numerous white children with poor language skills. Those labels are based on racial identity, and people use those stereotypes to define those minority groups' students' characteristics. Even positive features may make minority students feel pressured and uncomfortable. Educators should be more cautious about forming those stereotypes and be aware of the influences those might bring when teaching and evaluating students' performances.

Another idea of minimization of racism introduced in the article refers to a frame that discrimination is not the central factor affecting minorities' life. [9] It means that people are saying that the minority's situation is better now, and they should not blame discrimination as the reason for all of their failures and the unfairness they have received. However, the influences of the 911 attacks on Pakistan-Americans have not been eliminated as time passed. As long as people remember the episode, this minority group will always be the target of discrimination. Educators should avoid color-blind racism in jobs. And have to face the problem of discrimination directly and help students under different circumstances. Thea Renda Abu El-haj's research shows how young Palestinian Americans feel excluded and lose national identity.

## 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, educators should first be aware of and realize what stereotyping thoughts they have upon minority students before teaching. And also, avoid connecting students' failure and success to their racial identity. Blindly using model minority stereotypes to explain academic performance will lead to ignorance of the actual shortage in education. To eliminate the stereotype threat, educators should also focus on the formation's social reasons, such as minority students' profound cultural differences, socioeconomic background, and religious affiliation. The stereotype threat and consciousness will further influence those students' disidentification and future career choices. Lastly, educators should also be aware of color-blind racism and avoid making students feel uncomfortable unconsciously.

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