"Racial Weaponization: How The Model Minority Myth Undermines Black-Asian Solidarity" by Nidhi Krishnan

In the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, Asian Americans have been the frequent subjects of xenophobic attitudes. Crimes against Asian Americans have spiked while politicians have referred to the virus as the "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu." However, Asian Americans are not the only group that has faced hardship due to the pandemic as Black Americans are disproportionately dying from the virus due to vehicles of systemic racism such as housing segregation, criminal justice inequities, and healthcare inaccessibility (Taylor). The coronavirus has adversely affected both the Asian and Black communities, yet these groups are often pitted against each other in mainstream political discourse, undermining avenues for solidarity.

In a 2020 survey, a respondent explained that they "tend to think of Asian Americans in comparison to [themselves] and [their] ethnic background. Asian Americans are a 'good' minority; [they are] a 'bad' minority" (Krishnan). This quote demonstrates the broader trend of the weaponization of the model minority stereotype. The model minority stereotype portrays Asians as smart, hardworking, educated and successful (Kim). Prima facie, this stereotype seems harmless and even flattering towards Asian Americans; however, the irony is that even this seemingly positive stereotype poses grave danger to both the Asian and Black community.

From its conception, the model minority stereotype has always had anti-Black implications. Sociologist William Peterson coined the term in his 1966 article when he compared the successes of Japanese and Black Americans, arguing that Japanese Americans had successfully overcome discrimination through perseverance and work ethic. In contrast, Petersen implied that Black Americans had failed to pull themselves up from the bootstraps and succeed in the face of oppression. Over the course of the article, Petersen paints Black Americans as a failure while praising Japanese Americans for succeeding in the face of adversity (Petersen). Thus, at its inception, the model minority stereotype had the effect of shaming Black Americans.

This narrative is not one of the past; rather, it continues to pervade discourse in America to this day. In 2017, Andrew Sullivan penned a piece that portrays the United States as a post-racial society and used the economic success of Asian Americans to justify his theory. In his piece, he asserts that Asians have successfully overcome racial barriers by "maintain[ing] solid two-parent family structures" and placing "enormous emphasis on education and hard work." He concludes by insinuating that the roadblock to equity isn't structural racism; rather, it's the lack of hard work amongst the Black community (Sullivan). Thus, the model minority stereotype has retained its anti-Black roots as it is still used as a weapon against the Black community.

Petersen and Sullivan both attribute the relative economic successes of Asians to inherent differences in intellectual capacity and hard work, but this narrative is dangerous as it supports the idea of biological or cultural differences between races. High-achieving Asian American groups, such as Chinese and Indian Americans, are not inherently smarter or more hardworking than Black Americans. Rather, there is a great deal of selection bias that stems from the United States' immigration laws. In 1965, the United States changed its immigration policies to advantage educated and skilled workers (Hassan). These reforms dramatically affected and continue to affect the demographics of the immigrant population. Chinese immigrants to the

United States are 12x more likely to hold a college degree than Chinese civilians living in China, so the attributes and qualities of U.S. immigrants are not reflective of those of the entire ethnic groups to which they belong (Hassan). Thus, despite the model minority narrative, Asian Americans are not inherently more successful than Black Americans. Rather, the Asians who were allowed to immigrate to the United States were those with education and specialized skills.

In addition to insinuating falsehoods about the intrinsic abilities of different racial groups, the model minority narrative ignores the different lived experiences of Asian and Black Americans. While both groups have faced discrimination, the methods and extent of this discrimination have varied vastly. One cannot compare the "systematic discrimination" that has been inflicted on Black Americans to the experiences of Asian Americans (Chow 2017). Discrimination towards Asian Americans, though still a threat to equity, has overall proven less severe and institutionalized (Chow 2017). Thus, the comparison between Asian and Black Americans fails to account for key differences between these two races.

The debate over affirmative action serves as a prime example of how the model minority stereotype has been weaponized against Black Americans. According to the model minority narrative, Asian Americans successfully overcame discrimination without any extra support; anti-affirmative action advocates question why Black individuals cannot do the same through race-blind policies (Cole 17). By drawing this false comparison that fails to account for differences in lived experiences and selection effects caused by the United States' immigration policies, the anti-affirmative action lobby weaponizes the model minority stereotype. This weaponization pits Asian and Black Americans against each other and ultimately undermines support for affirmative action.

As seen through the works of Petersen and Sullivan, who are both white, the weaponization of the model minority stereotype was not born out of the Asian American community. Similarly, the majority of Asian Americans do not support this racial weaponization, as it occurs in affirmative action discourse. Edward Blum, the white leader of the anti-affirmative action lobby had spent a lifetime fighting against the policy when, in 2014, he started to recruit Asian Americans as plaintiffs for his lawsuits. In Blum's own words, he "needed Asian plaintiffs" (Blum 2015). Even though Asian Americans were used to advance Blum's anti-affirmative action agenda, the overwhelming majority of Asian Americans support affirmative action. When California residents voted on Proposition 209, which would have outlawed the use of race as a selection criterion in public employment and education, 61% of Asian American voters voted against this proposition while white voters served as the main base of support for this anti-affirmative action proposal (The Nation). Likewise, even when Michigan voters passed a similar anti-affirmative action ballot proposition in 2006, 75% of Asian Americans voted against the proposition (The Nation). The majority of Asian Americans support affirmative action, yet this group is often used as a mascot to rally against this initiative (Cole 22).

Mike Cole, a professor of education at the University of East London, contextualizes the trend of Asian Americans being used to advance the anti-affirmative action initiatives. He writes:

> With the affirmative action debate as it's typically carried out, Asian Americans are brought into this debate as a wedge group. Instead of bringing us in to expand the

dialogue, instead of bringing us in to recognize that we are American citizens, that we are minorities, that we have a stake in this process, and that civil rights laws protected us, what often happens is Asian Americans are brought in to this debate, and held up, and that message is heard over and over again that they made it, why can't you. (Cole 17)

Thus, Asian Americans are often used as strategic pawns to undermine support for affirmative action. Although the weaponization of the model minority stereotype continues to pit Asians against Blacks, there may be an opportunity to build solidarity between these communities in the midst of a pandemic that has resulted in negative — albeit drastically different— ramifications for both communities. By rejecting the model minority myth and acknowledging its anti-Black history and implications, we can fight back against the racial weaponization of this stereotype. This is an integral step in building avenues for solidarity between the Asian and Black communities.

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