

Yes, I Am Helping “Model Minorities”: A Narrative of a Bicultural and Bilingual Asian Social Worker

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Abstract: The “model minority” perception creates barriers for Asians in seeking health and social services in the context of their racial positioning and racial realities in the United States. As a bicultural and bilingual Asian social worker, I see the value of Asian Critical Race Theory (Chang, 1993) and the need to apply this theoretical framework in delivering health and social services to Asian populations facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian Critical Race Theory raises awareness on the “model minority” myth and how it is another form of racism against Asian Americans. This narrative is about Asian clients who I had worked with in the field, who I found were burdened by the “model minority” myth.

Keywords: model minority, Asian Critical Race Theory, COVID-19–related racism, biculturality, bilingualism, Asian social workers

Becoming a Bicultural and Bilingual Social Work Researcher

Experiencing three pregnancies on three different continents (the United Kingdom, South Korea, and the United States), I have found the greatest disparity to be in the United States. In both other countries, I benefited from national health insurance. In the United Kingdom, all the medical procedures and examinations, regardless of your status, are free of charge or at a minimal expense. In South Korea, patients have a copay, yet it is also very affordable to see specialists. Interestingly, in the United States, my delivery was followed by numerous phone calls to and from the health plan and the hospital I was in, since I had relatively moderate coverage. Due to miscommunication caused by my incorrect demographic information, it took more than half a year to resolve all the issues. At the end of those challenges, I had a new outlook on my life as an immigrant in the United States.

I have seen my racial and social positioning—as a pioneer in an unfamiliar social system, hampered by a language barrier, hurdling through unexpected difficulties—for as long as I have lived here. It was very daunting for my family and me. Because of these realities, I could easily relate to the Asian immigrant population with limited English proficiency. This led me to begin working in a community-based nonprofit organization as a full-time program administrator, which further directed me in my path to becoming a bicultural and bilingual Asian social worker.

In the field, I met a family who became undocumented when their former employer was unable to submit the proper documents on due dates. Since then, “John” (the husband) has lived in the United States as an undocumented immigrant for 16 years due to labor trafficking by his former employer. John studied business at the master’s level upon his arrival in the United States; his wife studied art at university. Ever since they lost their legal status here, he and his wife have not undergone any dental treatment. Facing all these challenges, John was very reluctant to share his feelings and experiences with me because he understood that Asian community members

would not take such a discussion favorably. John did not want to draw any attention from the Asian community that he belongs to because of his legal status.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants, especially Asian immigrants, have faced yet another level of racism: COVID-19–related racism. The Trump administration promoted the misperception that Asians are the carriers of the COVID-19 virus and media-fueled anti-Asian sentiment replicated the inappropriate naming of the pandemic. Experiencing newly heightened racism against Asians at the personal, community, and national level, I needed to do something to fight against it as a social work researcher. I focused on the ecological dynamics shaping Asian Americans’ needs, access, and use of social and health services in my doctoral practice. Specifically, I have been applying an ecological lens to understand how the obstacles of Asian immigrants—such as linguistic barriers, legal status, and racial positioning and realities—have shaped their use of these services in the United States.

Learning Asian Critical Race Theory

While searching for a theory regarding Asian Americans and the racism they experience, I have found that Asian Critical Race Theory (Asian CRT) underscores Asians’ racial positioning and racial realities in the United States. As rooted in Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory, Asian CRT argues that the Black-White binary racial paradigm under Critical Race Theory is insufficient to understand other minorities like Asian Americans (Chang, 1993). The heightened racism of the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfirmed the racial positioning and racial realities of Asians in the United States. This racism against Asians has always been there, even though Asians are praised as the “model minority.” The “model minority” myth refers to the stereotyping of Asian Americans as successful, hard-working, and free from barriers to success, such as any health and social issues and racial discrimination (Museus & Kiang, 2009). Asian CRT argues that this “model” framing of Asian Americans is racism after all since Asians are also portrayed as “perpetual foreigners,” regardless of their immigration generational status (Museus & Kiang, 2009).

In addition, media highlighting that Black people are the main perpetrators of anti-Asian hate crimes has evoked anti-Black sentiment and reignited the Black-Asian conflict (Wong & Liu, 2022). Subsequently, white people are excluded from this conflict and positioned at the top of the racial hierarchy. In fact, Christian nationalism is the strongest predictor of xenophobic views of COVID-19, and the effect of Christian nationalism is far more significant among white than Black respondents (Perry et al., 2021). After all, there is no doubt that racial minorities—both Asian and Black people—have experienced high levels of discrimination during the pandemic (Wong & Liu, 2022).

Asian CRT and its central tenets, such as “Asianization” with its two primary constructs (the model minority and perpetual foreigners; Wong & Liu, 2022; Lee, 2023), are crucial in analyzing what Asians and their descendants experience and how they are positioned as one racial minority group in the United States. Any action of labeling or framing of a racial minority group can make an impact upon them which is labeled and framed (Gary, 2005). It is what I have witnessed in the field through John’s case.

Working with Jane

Another client of mine, “Jane,” has allowed me to see how the “model minority” perception can be dangerous for Asian people in need of help. When I first met Jane, she was a single mother with two children who had mixed legal status. According to Jane, she was called to the immigration court because the language school, where she attended previously, was involved with immigration fraud. All the attendants of the institution during a certain time frame were being tracked down, questioned, and asked to revoke their current legal immigration status.

When Jane first came to the United States 20 years ago, she briefly attended the language school to learn English and maintain her student status so she could stay in the United States legally. Back then, the school was perpetrating fraud against immigration policy—a fact unknown to Jane at the time. Before long, Jane found a job and moved to a different state. Seven years later, Jane gained permanent residency status, often called a green card, in the United States. Being able to travel freely with no visa restrictions, Jane then left for her native country to visit her family since she had not returned in almost a decade. She had been busy raising her two children on her own. There, Jane spent time with her mother and her extended family.

Upon her return to the states, Jane found that her permanent residency status was revoked due to her history of being a student in the language school. Jane, therefore, became undocumented along with her oldest, who was only 14 years old. Her younger child, born in the United States, faced no changes. Because of her younger child being a US citizen, Jane was let go at the airport by the immigration officer and was told that she’d be notified for further action. Soon, the date for her deportation court hearing was scheduled, and Jane started to consult with immigration attorneys. The legal fee was something she could not afford, so her extended family members in Korea sent money to help, but it did not last long.

This is when I first heard of Jane at the end of 2016. Jane’s friend asked me if there was anyone I could refer, since Jane was greatly struggling, financially and emotionally. Jane was also very reluctant to meet other Asian community members since she did not want anybody to know about her challenges. I was not the exception.

Nevertheless, I was able to find Jane an immigration counselor who offers a free consultation for undocumented immigrants in the United States. Jane’s case was unique. “Amy,” Jane’s youngest child, was only 12 years old. If Jane were to be deported, her youngest would be left alone in the United States as a US citizen. Because of the potential issue of family separation, Jane’s case was delayed several times based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Although all these actions occurred long before the pandemic hit, the following court hearings and activities were delayed during the pandemic once again. After a number of delays, the final decision date was scheduled on a weekday in August 2021.

In the meantime, Jane’s oldest child became a senior in high school. All those years starting from 2016, I was informed of the progress of Jane’s case by her friend who first reached out to me and the legal counselor who had been working with Jane all along. I did not seek or reach

out to Jane because of my experience with John (he did not want anyone to know about his matters).

In June, I received a long email from Jane asking me for a recommendation letter. As a social work researcher specializing in the racial positioning and racial realities of Asian immigrants in the United States, and as someone who has had various statuses in the United States—a student, an authorized foreign worker, a dependent of an authorized foreign worker, and a derivative of legal permanent resident—I knew the importance of the recommendation letter at the immigration court. I assured her that I would write one that was as detailed as possible on my findings and experience as a bicultural and bilingual social worker in the Asian American community. We talked for a long time, and I just listened to what she had to say. I sympathized with her struggle and admired her dedication to her children, which I had heard from other church members. I also heard that her two children had been raised well—helping their mom wherever she went—at church and community centers. When I learned that they did not know about their mother’s situation and struggle with the immigration court, I was very much moved by her dedication and sacrifice for her children. Jane did not want her children to be seen as incompetent in the community due to her challenges. As a single mother living in poverty, she worried about her children before herself.

I made two points in my recommendation letter to the deportation court judge regarding Jane’s case. First, I shared two pillars of Asian cultural values—*familism* and *collectivism*—and how they can positively and negatively impact Asian families in the United States. Familism consists of warm, close, supportive family relationships and prioritizing family over oneself (Joo et al., 2023). Collectivism refers to a society, a culture, or an economy that values the group over individual interests (Lee et al., 2023). In my opinion, these traditional values still persist among Asian immigrants in the United States to preserve their heritage in a pattern somewhat different from that of their host land. In short, the concepts of familism and collectivism put the wellbeing of family and group over individuals. Jane is not an exception.

Jane had been working hard to keep her children safe and instill these traditional Korean philosophical values of familism and collectivism in them. She had also been emphasizing the importance of being exemplary students for the next immigrant generations to have more and better opportunities. To set a good example for her children, Jane volunteered to provide companion care for older Korean adults.

On the other hand, familism and collectivism do not tend to accept diversity in most circumstances (Joo et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Jane is a single mother with two children. This family dynamic is not viewed as a norm in Asian culture; children from this background will most likely be outcasts and bullied at school. Over time, this view has become more influenced by Western culture, but it is still prevalent.

Another point that I stressed for the judge was that in the case of Jane’s deportation, Amy would be left alone in the United States. She would not be welcomed by her Asian community, even by her guardians, which could negatively impact her mental and behavioral health. However, if Amy would return to Korea along with Jane, it would be also challenging for her to be educated

in Korea, as Amy lacks appropriate cultural and linguistic understanding compared with her peers. It would not be surprising that Amy would experience a hard time in a Korean school and might not receive the same quality of education as she does here in the United States. Overall, her educational opportunity would be much more narrowed there. I submitted my letter to the judge a week before the hearing.

The hearing day was a rainy day. I left for the immigration courthouse early. There, I met Jane for the first time while wrapping up our umbrellas. Jane looked very tired. I could not say anything, and so I offered a smile. Jane, her legal counsel, and a court-appointed interpreter left to meet the judge and prosecutor first. Two hours passed, and they then looked to me to confirm if I had written the letter at the final stage. After this short encounter, I had to wait again. It felt very long waiting for the verdict. When Jane came back to the waiting room, she was crying.

Her petition was granted, and she was pardoned based on the humanitarian grounds that a family cannot be separated. The legal counselor said that out of her four decades of professional work in the immigration court, this was only the second time that her client was pardoned. I was so happy to have been a part of this historical moment in supporting someone in need.

Conclusion

Since its conception, social work has been a profession dedicated to improving society and protecting marginalized and vulnerable populations. The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being by meeting the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). The Asian immigrant population is one of these groups. Nevertheless, my experience suggests that they often find it challenging to seek appropriate health and social services when needed due to a framework imposed upon them: “model minority.” Asians are praised as exemplary minority populations, free from the need for health and social services. In reality, Asians do experience many health and social challenges like any other marginalized group. Even so, many are discouraged from seeking help because of how they are viewed in the United States. The model minority perception also tends to impact inter-community dynamics for those much marginalized in many ways.

Additionally, familism and collectivism may also play a critical role for Asians in the United States. Because of these values that put families and communities before individuals, Asian Americans may work very hard for the sake of one’s family and community, which subsequently may collide to create the “model minority” tag. On the other hand, because of familism and collectivism, Asians may find it hard to open up and share their personal and family matters with others. Considering all the cultural values and racial positioning of Asian Americans, it is not surprising that people like John and Jane waited so long to reach out for help. Throughout the interpersonal interactions with both John and Jane, I can confirm that the complexities that they each carry as one of the “model minorities” are beyond many peoples’ understanding. Because of the external and internal pressure to meet this cultural standard of societal expectations, Asians often carry extra psychological burdens in their daily lives (Lee et al., 2023). This psychological burden was a key barrier to John and Jane in seeking assistance.

During the pandemic, we have witnessed the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on culturally and racially marginalized populations, including Asians. The racism against Asians and their dependents have been heightened (Joo et al., 2023; Lee, 2023; Lee et al., 2023). After almost one and a half centuries of the immigration history of Asian Americans, they are now getting together as one racial group to raise awareness of their racial experience. I know that Asian populations have multiple needs on top of existing challenges, just like any other vulnerable, oppressed, and marginalized group. It has always been there. Yet, these needs were not reflected correctly; social perceptions and expectations like the model minority myth obfuscate our needs and present us as free from all obstacles—thus cutting us off from support all to satisfy the dominant group’s ideology of hierarchies of oppression. However, what I see and hear is very different from this fallacy. After all, Asians are the same people I help as a bicultural social worker who understands their challenges by sharing in their cultural values and struggles. I wish I could see more social workers like me fighting against the “model minority” myth. Ironically, I am a social worker who is helping the “models” of minorities. If these models have that many challenges, what about those who are not models in our community?

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