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Inclusive Policy, Diverse Perspectives: Affirmative Action and the Model Minority Among University Students

Jannie Nguyen

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Inclusive Policy, Diverse Perspectives:
Affirmative Action and the Model Minority Among University Students

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
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of Honors Requirements

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ABSTRACT

In lieu of the recent Supreme Court overturn of affirmative action, Asian American students were on the forefront as the main racial group defended in this case. The model minority stereotype obscures societal perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans as collectively intelligent, hard-working, and submissive. Whereas the stereotype appears frequently in academic settings, this research aims to understand and contextualize the perceptions on affirmative action among Asian college students within the context and social dynamics of the model minority stereotype. A qualitative approach was deployed to garner nuance narratives of fifteen participants in the study. Participants in the study represent Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White racial groups. The narratives of the participants were obtained through direct, personal interviews (IRB 23-0909). The study found that most participants were familiar with the model minority stereotype and its implications in educational settings. Instances of both positive and negative perceptions of the stereotype on academic achievement were found. Participants held varied and nuanced perspectives on affirmative action policies in higher education, regardless of their experiences with racial stereotypes. In part, participants' experiences with the model minority stereotype suggested their sympathies, or lack thereof, towards affirmative action policies. The study aims to portray the understandings of affirmative action among university students, particularly those of minority groups. Further research without limitations would be most productive to answering the research question as posed in the study.

Keywords: Asians, Asian Americans, Model Minority, Stereotype, Myth, Affirmative Action, Education, Policies, Supreme Court.

DEDICATION

This honors thesis is dedicated to my sister, Diana Nguyen. Diana, you are the best person I know. You were my first best friend and my first role model. As I grow older, I realize that you had to overcome all the “firsts,” so I did not have to. We always talk about how difficult it was growing up in a household where mom and dad predominantly spoke Vietnamese, and the challenges we had to endure in school as kids who spoke English as our second language. We have shared experiences of others who taunted us for our appearance, the way we smelled of incense and dầu xanh, and the fear we had bringing our homemade lunches to school. I want you to know, despite all those things, you were (and still are) the coolest person I know.

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No matter where our education and careers will take us in the future, I will always be the weird little sister who enthusiastically waits for you when you get off the bus.

I am forever indebted to you. I love you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAPI	Asian American Pacific Islander
APA	Asian Pacific American
DEI	Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MMS	Model Minority Stereotype
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
SFFA	Students for Fair Admissions
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Math
US	United States
USM	University of Southern Mississippi
VSA	Vietnamese Student Association
WWII	World War Two

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The discourse surrounding affirmative action in higher education has been characterized by sustained controversy and legal scrutiny, particularly considering recent judicial proceedings as per the Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. (2023) and vocal opposition from certain student groups. A critical imperative emerges in comprehending the perspectives of minority students who have assumed key roles as stakeholders within these contentious discussions.

This thesis seeks to explore the attitudes and experiences of Asian college students towards affirmative action, with a specific focus on those enrolled at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM). Central to this inquiry is the fundamental question: "How do Asian college students perceive and contextualize affirmative action, considering their individual experiences and the societal dynamics of the model minority construct?"

Students of various racial backgrounds were consulted in the research process to ensure nuance and facilitate comparative analysis of experiences influenced by societal biases and their attitudes surrounding affirmative action policies. Specifically, the thesis attempts to ascertain whether individuals subject to preconceived stereotypes exhibit sympathy towards affirmative action initiatives or conversely manifest a lack thereof.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Against the backdrop of evolving legal frameworks and ongoing debates, an examination of how Asian college students perceive and negotiate affirmative action policies provides invaluable insights into the intricate racial dynamics prevailing within higher education. This literature review aims to highlight a crucial gap in existing scholarship by synthesizing past research on the intersection of the model minority myth, affirmative action, and political engagement amongst Asian students.

The review of literature incorporates separate models of (a) the Asian political experience, (b) experiences associated with the model minority stereotype, and (c) affirmative action in higher education with considerations of additional variants to each model. While the examination of the model minority stereotype (MMS) and affirmative action is integral to the thesis research process, an exploration of Asian minority politics offers a framework for understanding the levels of engagement with policies, thereby facilitating the initial scope of Asian students' attitudes towards affirmative action policies.

Asian Political Experiences

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, and their political engagement has been a topic of research in the last two decades. Asian Americans do not typically identify themselves with a political party (Nguyen & Garand, 2009). This phenomenon has shown change within the twenty-first century. Like minority groups, Asian Americans comprise of a variety of people coming from different origins, heritage, financial status, etc. Ishiyama and Lai (2022) reports that the "APA community is not a monolith as it consists of over 30 ethnoracial groups" (Ishiyama and

Lai 2022, 161). In their editorial, the authors contend that Asian students are one of the fastest growing populations of college students; “of all U.S. residents enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions,” Asian students rose from 2% to 7% between fall 1976 and fall 2016 (Ishiyama and Mai 2022, 161).

Despite their increasing numbers and diversity, Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) have largely been overlooked in national political discussions, partly due to historically low political participation rates. Ishiyama and Mai report, “APA voter turnout has hovered around 30%, compared to the national average of 50%” (Ishiyama and Mai 2022, 162). However, with heightened political polarization and the results of close election margins, both major political parties are intensifying their efforts to appeal to APA voters, particularly in highly contested swing states. This suggests a potential shift in APA political influence in future elections.

While historically seen as politically inactive and conservative with strong ties to the Republican Party, Asian Americans have become increasingly politically engaged in recent years (Nguyen and Gerand 2009). The authors highlight the start of an important shift in political affiliation among Asian Americans and their growing political engagement throughout their texts. These findings may suggest the beginning of a political realignment among the Asian American community. A survey of Asian-Pacific-American voters conducted across the US found that 46% identified as Democrats, 31% as independents, 10% as Republicans, and the remaining 13% as third-party or unsure (Wong 2000). A study by Nguyen and Garand (2009) in California, Texas, and Virginia showed that roughly half of the Asian American adults identified as nonpartisan, while the other half identified as Democrats or Republicans.

Throughout history, the Democratic and Republican parties used the issue of Asian immigration as means of distinction from their political opponents and to appeal to their respective constituents (Torres-Spelliscy 2021). The legal status and treatment of Asian Americans were often connected to the political climate and rhetoric of the time (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882). The branding of Asian Americans is related to the generalized political rhetoric surrounding these individuals. Furthermore, as Asian Americans are an immigrant-dominated group, Janelle Wong (2000) argues that the development of partisanship among Asian Americans immigrants derives from the impact of age and political exposure. The author finds that younger immigrants are less likely to identify with a political party than older immigrants, and that exposure to American political institutions increases the likelihood of party identification.

Otherwise marginalized by mainstream media, older Asian Americans' alternate access to political news can be seen as the first step to "deracialization," in which minority candidates can appeal to a broader, multiethnic audience (Collet 2008). Another study by Wong et al. (2005) suggests that the Republican party has traditionally ignored Asian American voters and their policy demands, resulting in lower levels of political mobilization among this group. In contrast, Ramakrishnan (2011) suggests that Asian Americans tend to vote for Democrats due to their perception that Democrats are more supportive of their policy demands on immigration, education, and healthcare.

Preliminary studies are still being conducted on Asian voter attitudes towards affirmative action policies in the recent overturn of affirmative action as set forth in *Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. Presidents and Fellows at Harvard College*, 600 U.S. (2023).

In addition to previous factors, income, education, and ethnic identity influence the likelihood of Asian Americans contributing to political campaigns (Cho 2002). In a survey of Asian American Christian immigrants in Southern California, Audette, Brockway, and Weaver (2017) found that religious conversion was associated with changes in political identities and partisan affiliations. The authors suggest that Christian churches may be important sites for political mobilization and engagement among Asian American immigrants (Audette, Brockway, and Weaver 2017).

Another sub-category in this socialization approach is the argument that specific experiences of social exclusion affect political attitudes and behaviors (Kuo 2017). Kuo (2017) found that Asian Americans who report experiencing social exclusion are more likely to identify with their ethnic group and more likely to vote for Democratic candidates. Relevant to recent events and popular news, Asian Americans have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, in terms of social exclusion (i.e., Covid-19 coined as the “Chinese Virus”), health outcomes, and political attitudes. A series of surveys and experiments found that individuals who perceive elites as prioritizing their concerns are more likely to identify as Democrats and to support policies aimed at addressing social issues such as hate crimes and discrimination (Chan, Kim, and Leung 2022).

Overall, the literature is useful for a basic understanding of the common shared values among the Asian electorate which can lead to influence their choice at the polls. The recurring theme within these literatures is Asian Americans tend to consider their personal values, traditions, experiences, and accessibility to participate in the political system. To provide a better focus for the research question, I would suggest another

consideration to the socialization approach and include the “model minority myth” as it may contribute to the lack of party efforts to mobilize voters. In conclusion, the literature is focused on the priorities of these voters and suggests for political parties to appeal to these demands; however, more research and literature are needed to investigate the patterns of this potential party realignment among Asian Americans and their overall attitudes towards political engagement.

Stereotype Defined

According to Zhou and Paul (2016), a stereotype is defined as a collection of commonly held characteristics and traits attributed to specific social groups. In addition, they suggest that stereotypes are formed through social categorization, whereby individuals within society classify themselves and others into different social groups based on factors like ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or occupation. Furthermore, social stereotypes are fostered by the presumption that members of the same group also exhibit specific shared attributes, including appearance, personality, beliefs, and behaviors (Zhou and Paul 2016, 1084). The understanding of the composition of social stereotypes introduces the scope for an in-depth examination of Asian-specific constructs, particularly the model minority, which will be a central theme throughout this paper.

The Model Minority Stereotype

The model minority myth stereotypes Asian Americans as intelligent, hard-working, obedient, and diligent. They are thought of as more academically, socially, and economically successful than other minorities. Therefore, Asian Americans are the “model” minority group for other marginalized groups. The stereotype also contends that

Asian Americans are less discriminated against and self-sufficient in comparison to other non-white races such as Black Americans and Hispanic Americans. Asian minorities are believed to excel in math and science education.

The model minority myth is a controversial concept first introduced in a 1966 New York Times Magazine by William Petersen in his article, “Success Story, Japanese American style.” In Petersen’s article, he “praised on Japanese Americans and AAPI” (Asian American Pacific Islanders) for their successes “despite years of racial prejudice, discrimination, pre-WWII anti-Japanese sentiment, hate crimes, and other adversities, were still able to achieve high socioeconomic status through hard work and cultural values that called for discipline, work ethic, and compliance to social hierarchy” (The University of Michigan n.d.). Therefore, the model minority label acts as a justification for “lack of government action in alleviating socioeconomic disparities between certain demographic groups. The perpetuation of the model minority myth pins colored communities against one another as community leaders begin to think: if Asian people can be successful, then what becomes the excuse for Blacks, Hispanics, Arabs, etc.? The model minority myth perpetuates through the cracks of the Black-White binary.

The model minority myth, ostensibly celebrating the success and achievement of Asian Americans, necessitates acknowledgment of its inherent harms. By oversimplifying individual experiences and challenges, this myth compromises the legitimacy of their accomplishments. Concentrating solely on narrow stereotypes portraying Asian Americans as intrinsically intelligent, industrious, and affluent disregards the varied experiences within these communities. Beyond the veneer of

achievement lies a spectrum of untold narratives—accounts of adversity, discrimination, marginalization, and societal pressures.

The model minority stereotype posits that Asians achieve success due to their purportedly strong cultural values, yet their cultural practices are often viewed unfavorably by others. For instance, Asian students may encounter perplexed or disdainful reactions when bringing homemade lunches to school. Furthermore, this stereotype suggests that Asians excel primarily in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, leading to skepticism about their qualifications when pursuing opportunities in other disciplines such as the social sciences or arts. Consequently, the model minority myth presents a paradoxical portrayal of Asians that neither serves their individual identities nor contributes positively to societal perceptions. Instead, it perpetuates discrimination and creates additional obstacles for Asian individuals.

Asian minorities oftentimes first experience the model minority stereotype in educational settings as academic success, racial identity, and social perceptions are overlapping in these settings. Oftentimes, achievements in academics for Asians lead them to being positioned as the “role model” by their teachers, a designation that, while seemingly positive, carried with it burdensome sense of racialized “otherness” (Lee 2022). The paradoxical nature of these experiences, wherein efforts to assimilate and excel academically in order to mitigate racialization as a “foreigner” ultimately reinforce stereotypical perceptions of Asian students as socially “aloof” and solely focused on scholarly pursuits (Lee 2022). The dichotomy of being perceived as both a “model student” and a perpetual “foreigner” underscores the dynamics of racialized identity

within educational contexts. There lies a sense of racial estrangement despite academic achievements.

Asian Feminine Constructs

Asian Pacific Islanders encounter multifaceted discrimination, each rooted in distinct stereotypes unique to the Asian identity. The focal point of my research lies in the examination of the Asian MMS. However, it is important to contextualize this stereotype within the broader spectrum of prominent stereotypes confronting Asians, such as the pervasive hyper-sexualization of Asian women. This holistic approach is crucial for comprehending the overarching framework of discrimination imposed upon Asians by Americans within American society.

The deliberate selection of the MMS as the primary focus stems from its prevalent manifestation within academic settings. Nonetheless, the discourse surrounding the hyper-sexualization of Asian women holds significance as it provides nuanced insights into the experiences of women within educational environments. While there exists an intersection between these two stereotypes, a brief exploration of the hyper-sexualization of Asian women is warranted to deepen our understanding of how these women interpret their experiences in academia as an approach to the overall comprehension of the MMS.

The Vietnam War and the Second World War era witnessed a notable surge in the hyper-sexualization of Asian women, particularly exemplified by the phenomenon of Vietnamese bar girls, Japanese geisha, or prostitutes catering to American troops (Zhou and Bryant 2016, 1088). This period marked the inception of the enduring feminine archetype, perpetuated through various manifestations of Asian female sexualization. Within this framework, sub-categories of female objectification emerged, prominently

featuring the “Dragon Lady” and “Lotus Blossom” stereotypes (Zhou and Bryant 2016, 1084). The former characterizes Asian women as inherently seductive and erotic, wielding an assertive sexual allure (Zhou and Bryant 2016, 1088). Conversely, the authors assert that the Lotus Blossom stereotype portray these women as “excellent wives, cute, docile...” (Zhou and Bryant 2016, 1088). In addition, this phenomenon is described as “hyperfeminine” (Pyke and Johnson 2003, 36). These stereotypes, integral for comprehending the socio-historical narratives surrounding Asian women, persist within mainstream media as a commodification of Asian women and exerts a “racially hierarchal value system” of Asian femininity (Durham 2001, 205, 207).

Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 600 U.S. (2023) and its Implications

In a highly significant 2023 Supreme Court case, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* 600 U.S., the legality of race-conscious admissions practices came under scrutiny. The petitioners, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. (SFFA), contended that Harvard University's holistic admissions review process, which incorporated race as one element amongst many, resulted in discrimination against Asian American applicants (600 U.S. 5-6). In its defense, Harvard University emphasized the critical importance of fostering a diverse student body and asserted that its use of race was implemented in a nuanced and balanced manner (600 U.S. 2-5). However, the Supreme Court, in a six-to-three decision, issued a verdict in favor of SFFA. The Court determined that Harvard's admissions process infringed upon the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment by employing racial considerations in a manner that placed

Asian American applicants at a disadvantage, leading to a higher standard for their admission compared to other racial groups.

Justices Thomas, Gorsuch, and Kavanaugh concurred with the Court's decision. Justice Thomas argues that affirmative action "highlights our racial differences with pernicious effect" and "racial progress on campuses adopting affirmative action admissions policies has stagnated, including making no meaningful progress toward a colorblind goal" (600 U.S. 44 (2023)).

In opposition, Justice Sotomayer and Jackson dissent. Justice Sotomayer argues: "Today, this Court stands in the way and rolls back decades of precedent and momentous progress. It holds that race can no longer be used in a limited way in college admissions to achieve such critical benefits. In so holding, the Court cements a superficial rule of colorblindness as a constitutional principle in an endemically segregated society where race has always mattered and continues to matter" (600 U.S. 2 (2023)).

This landmark decision effectively overturned prior legal precedents that sanctioned the use of affirmative action programs in college admissions, potentially inaugurating a new era in admissions practices within higher education. However, based on the recent overturn of the Supreme Court case and district cases previously held, the assumption is challenged and may suggest nuanced variations in Asian perspectives on affirmative action.

Deminorization in Higher Education

According to Currier (2022), DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) efforts have exposed college campuses "as places where minority populations have not necessarily felt represented or 'seen' by their peers" (Currier 2022, 204). Similar to earlier defending

arguments made in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. (2023), Currier supports that Asians may face stricter evaluations in their college applications; she explains that this exclusion stems from the perception that Asians are “overrepresented in higher education” in comparison to other minority groups (Currier 2022, 204). The perception that Asian students have an advantage over other non-white groups is rooted in the MMS and diminishes the significance of Asians as a minority group. Currier explains this phenomenon as “deminorization” which results in “‘negative action’ rather than affirmative action” for APA students when employing education policies (Currier 2022, 205).

Furthermore, in regard to women in academic settings, Currier presents various shortcomings as an Asian female professor in higher education within the broader context of a lack of Asian faculty. Currier writes, “To compound these problems, Asian women are often faced with an additional layer of stereotypes to combat” (Currier 2022, 206). The hyper-sexualization of APA women (as previously described in sub-section IV. “Feminine Constructs”) persists in academic institutions where students and male colleagues “undercut their intelligence and undermine their authority” (Currier 2022, 206). Against the backdrop of the model minority stereotype, APA women in academia often encounter additional conflicting stereotypes based on feminine constructs. Currier reports the “image of the lotus blossom” stereotype damages APA women’s qualifications as serious scholars, whereas expectations of “the Tiger Mom or Dragon Lady stereotype” standardize their authority as forceful and intolerant. In conclusion, racial and gendered stereotypes influence an academic environment wherein APA women faculty are disadvantaged with a “no-win situation” (Currier 2022, 208). APA women

face a racial stereotype that is rooted in systemic discrimination of women and the overarching deminorization of Asian individuals, which perpetually harms the validity of their scholarship and educational contributions.

The Model Minority and Affirmative Action in Higher Education

As forementioned, the image of Asian Americans as a model minority – a monolithic group achieving academic and economic success – has pervaded American discourse for decades. This stereotype, while seemingly complimentary, obscures the diverse realities of Asian American experiences and can have unintended consequences. One crucial area where the MMS intersects with lived experiences is in higher education, particularly regarding affirmative action policies.

Affirmative action policies aim to create a more diverse student body in colleges and universities by actively considering factors like race and ethnicity in admissions decisions. This practice seeks to address historical and ongoing patterns of discrimination that have limited access to higher education for certain racial and ethnic groups.

Authors such as Patil (2022) argue that affirmative action is not effective in its intentions for other minorities but works only in favor of Asian and white American students. The author claims that “Asian Americans and White students have been ‘lumped’ together to create a coalition against other minorities in the affirmative action context.” This claim not only further reinforces the MMS but also assumes that Asians attribute their success in these settings due to their premeditated alignment with Whiteness. Patil holds that, “a way to reverse this” is for Asians to join “solidarity movements that seek to create bonds between minority groups” (Patil 2022, 1657).

While Patil's argument resonates within the framework of Asian assimilation into American white culture, it falters in its suggestion that Asians are the exclusive beneficiaries of affirmative action policies. This assertion undermines his critique of the purported “coalition,” reflecting the stereotype that portrays Asian Americans as “distinct from and superior to other minorities” (Patil 2022, 1656). In contrast, Ishiyama and Lai (2022) report statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of all U.S. residents enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions from fall 1976 to fall 2016: “the percentage of Latino/Latina students rose from 4 to 18% (a 450% increase)...(the fastest growing group) whereas the percentage of APA students rose from 2 to 7% (a 350% increase). The percentage of Black students also increased from 10% in 1976 to 14% in 2016...during the same period the percentage of White students fell from 84 to 57%” (Ishiyama and Lai 2022, 161).

Moreover, Patil's examination of the alignment of Asian Americans with whiteness within the Black-White binary presents a somewhat pessimistic perspective on Asian successes and individuality. His assertion that “despite not being forced to align with Whiteness, Asian Americans continue to do so” suggests a lack of agency or critical engagement with their own identity and experiences (Patil 2022, 1641). Furthermore, Patil seemingly introduces a concept of “Asian privilege” (in alignment with White privilege) which posits a coalition between Asian Americans and Whites, implying that they enjoy similar privileges and benefits in educational institutions. However, this overlooks the varied experiences of Asian Americans, many of whom face discrimination and barriers to success. Additionally, the notion that Asian Americans only align with whiteness when it is advantageous perpetuates a simplistic understanding of identity

politics and fails to consider the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their identities in diverse contexts. Overall, while Patil raises important questions about race and identity, his argument may oversimplify the complexities of Asian American experiences and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

In another study employing critical race theory, Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo (2019) contest the overturn of affirmative action. They suggest that while affirmative action may be modest in its intentions, it is not responsible for discrimination within college admissions. They condemn the practice of utilizing Asian American students as scapegoats to conceal the perpetuation of white dominance in higher education, asserting that it is unjust (Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo 2019). They contend that blaming affirmative action for perceived discrimination against Asian American applicants perpetuates a divisive politics of resentment: “The tactic of applauding Asian American educational achievement and bemoaning their victimization by affirmative action plays into the powerful and durable majoritarian narrative of the ‘model minority’” (Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo 2019, 1,12). They argue that this approach deflects attention from the real issue of maintaining elite college and university spots for white students. The diversity within the Asian American community and notes that opposition to affirmative action is a minority view among them (Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo 2019, 13). Despite variations in opinion among different Asian American subgroups, surveys consistently indicate strong support for affirmative action, with over 60% favoring it (Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo 2019, 13). The authors advocate for fair, holistic, race-conscious college admissions processes that prioritize underrepresented students of color, challenging narratives that benefit white individuals (Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo 2019, 14). They

criticize right-wing organizations for exploiting Asian Americans to oppose affirmative action, which they argue only worsens intergroup resentment and perpetuates white privilege in higher education. From a critical race theory perspective, Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo (2019) assert that affirmative action is not the cause of the controversy surrounding Asian American students; rather, it is white supremacy that underlies inequalities in selective higher education (Moses, Maeda, and Paguyo 2019, 19, 20).

Assessment of Literature and the Literature Gap

The model minority stereotype, despite its seemingly positive facade, masks the true experiences of Asian Americans. It attributes success to inherent traits rather than acknowledging the hard work and challenges faced by this community. While exploring Asian feminine stereotypes is valuable, my research intentionally focuses on the model minority myth for two key reasons. First, it allows for nuanced perspectives from participants of all genders, encompassing the stereotypical burdens most Asians encounter in academia. Second, the model minority stereotype encompasses characteristics like intelligence, economic success, and high-paying careers—factors that shape the challenges faced in academic institutions.

My focus on this stereotype does not disregard gender stereotypes, nor does it limit the study to solely racial issues. However, the recent Supreme Court decision overturning affirmative action, which aimed to create fairer admissions for minorities, highlights the potential removal of the "high standards" often applied to Asian applicants. This, in essence, strives to undermine the bias associated with the model minority stereotype within college admissions. The overturn of affirmative action sets the questions: How do Asian college students feel about this? Without affirmative action, are

fairer applications presumed to meet the demands for diversity and equity in higher education? Therefore, studying this stereotype provides a productive lens to explore how Asian groups are marginalized in comparison to other minorities, despite the petitioner's arguments and the Court's decision in favor of Asian American applicants.

While existing literature explores the model minority status and affirmative action debate, my research delves deeper by examining the motivations behind these issues from the perspectives of various racial groups. This approach utilizes a more personal research methodology, reaching out to a diverse range of people of color and even including white individuals, a group often excluded in such studies. While my research primarily involves Asian participants, it aims to bridge the gap in the literature by incorporating perspectives from various ethnicities, moving beyond the monolithic view of the model minority stereotype.

Unlike some existing literature with a conservative view on Asian success, which potentially reinforces stereotypes, my research will reveal that many people of color, including Asians, seldom attribute their success to aligning with whiteness. They hold pride in their cultures and reject assimilation into dominant white and Eurocentric standards.

My research is not an autobiography or a case study; it provides a nuanced analysis of diverse perspectives regarding the policies shaping academic communities, acknowledging the intersectionality of these experiences. Ultimately, this research aims to highlight the experiences associated with the model minority stereotype and challenge the notion of Asian students as passive and agreeable in academia. And in the same

context, my research will observe their motivations for affirmative action policies, despite the controversial ruling as set forth by its overturn.

CHAPTER III: INITIAL EXPECTATIONS

Prior to conducting research on how college students perceive and comprehend affirmative action within the context of individual experiences and societal dynamics, particularly concerning the perceived model minority, initial expectations were formulated. It was hypothesized that (a) Asian college students have been subjugated by the model minority stereotype at least once in an academic setting, and (b) if Asian students have experienced this stereotype, they will likely express sympathy towards affirmative action in higher education. As the intention of affirmative action is to alleviate racial inequalities within higher education, I expect that Asian participants will generally express support for it as they have experienced racial discrimination, most likely rooted in the MMS. This hypothesis stems partly from personal experience as an Asian college student, recognizing the impact of cultural stereotypes on academic acceptance.

Asian students often encounter educational challenges shaped by societal expectations and familial pressures, leading to a narrow definition of academic success. This environment fosters a perception of innate abilities and predetermined paths, further exacerbated by external influences such as peers and faculty. These factors contribute to a lack of acknowledgement of individual struggles and capabilities beyond stereotypical assumptions.

Similar expectations were held regarding perceptions of affirmative action among different racial groups in the study. For Black students, reports on experiences with stereotypes of under-achievement and socioeconomic pressures were anticipated to suggest their attitudes towards affirmative action. Conversely, Hispanic or Hispanic

mixed-race students were perceived with no expectations due to my lack of interaction with this racial group in my academic environment. In addition, it was hypothesized that white students might assert their lack of personal experience with stereotypes while advocating for affirmative action as a means of fostering equality in education across all racial groups.

The present study holds significance in introducing a normative approach towards affirmative action. It is rational to expect minority groups, including Asians, to support affirmative action given its original intent of mitigating societal barriers to education. I contend that Asian students have experienced harm to the validity of their academic achievements due to racialization by the MMS, therefore they will likely be sympathetic towards affirmative action in higher education. However, the study uncovers a nuanced understanding wherein individuals' lived experiences and unique perspectives contribute to varying degrees of support or opposition towards affirmative action. This refined perspective acknowledges that individuals' attitudes towards affirmative action may be suggested not only by personal experiences but also by their perceptions of its implications for themselves and others within their social environment.

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

The research investigates the lived experiences of University of Southern Mississippi (USM) students in relation to stereotypes concerning race and affirmative action in higher education. Through an exploration of the lived experiences and viewpoints of these individuals, particularly within the context of racial dynamics, this study aims to highlight their comprehension and stance concerning affirmative action initiatives. The selection of a qualitative methodology is deliberate, as it aligns with the nuanced and intricate nature of personal narratives. This approach is most suitable for probing inquiries related to race and its intersectionality with individual experiences, allowing for candid and unfiltered discourse within a confidential environment devoid of external influences.

Research Design

This study's conceptualization is rooted in the recognition of the intricate nature of phenomena such as race, stereotypes, and individual lived experiences. Consequently, a qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate, given its capacity to delve deeply into these complex domains. Through the utilization of interviews, the research endeavors to uncover the underlying meanings embedded within the perspectives of the participants. This methodological choice affords flexibility in tailoring interview questions to the unique circumstances of each participant, thereby fostering a personalized exchange that is conducive to qualitative data collection. In comparison to the standardized nature of surveys, this approach prioritizes the cultivation of genuine and authentic dialogue, which is essential for capturing the nuances of individual experiences. Moreover, the qualitative design facilitates a comprehensive exploration of

the personal narratives and intricate overlap inherent in the participants' lived realities, unencumbered by the constraints typically associated with experimental research paradigms.

Participants

Given the recent legal developments pertaining to affirmative action, notably by the Supreme Court of the United States' decision and the ensuing debates spurred by Asian students' protests at Harvard University, the study adopts a deliberate focus on Asian students within the USM community. This selection is made for pragmatic reasons, aiming to highlight the perspectives of students attending a university located in the "Deep South" of America as opposed to those attending an Ivy League institution. Specifically, eight out of the fourteen participants are of Asian descent or identify as Asian mixed-race individuals. In addition, to ensure a comprehensive examination of perspectives, the remaining participants consists of two Black students, two Caucasian students, and two participants of Hispanic descent or Hispanic mixed-race. This deliberate selection aims to foster a diverse range of viewpoints and experiences regarding stereotypes, thereby enabling a nuanced exploration of the variations in stereotype dynamics across different racial groups.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants for this study were recruited primarily via social media platforms and interpersonal networks. Recruitment messages, tailored to suit the respective communication mediums, were sent via text messages and GroupMe messaging channels. Rather than employing a mass email distribution to qualifying students, recruitment efforts were strategically targeted through peer outreach initiatives. This methodological

decision was motivated by a desire to maintain control over the participant population and ensure a more personalized engagement process. Leveraging my existing acquaintances within the university community, I extended invitations to potential participants, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation and the importance of mutual agreement on scheduling logistics.

In addition, the qualifying participants were required to be enrolled in a university or college and actively pursuing a degree. It was assumed that these individuals would represent the racial demographics specified, namely eight participants of Asian descent, two Black participants, two Caucasian participants, and two Hispanic participants, to ensure a diverse and representative pool for purposes of the study. This approach aimed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences in higher education. By targeting individuals who fit these criteria, the study sought to facilitate meaningful dialogue on the topics of race, stereotypes, and affirmative action among a varied cohort of participants with the understanding that individuals from various racial backgrounds may offer differing viewpoints on these subjects.

Materials and Instruments

The study employed Microsoft Word as the primary tool for presenting interview questions to participants and for documenting the ensuing conversations. Also, the voice memo application on my mobile device served as the recording mechanism for interviews, a method previously approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (protocol number 23-0909) and the participants (see Appendix A). Subsequently, transcripts of the interviews were generated utilizing the transcription functionality within

Microsoft Word, facilitating the systematic organization and analysis of the qualitative data obtained.

Procedures and Data Analysis

Furthermore, the structure of the interview was tailored to center on the model minority stereotype, with adaptations made to probe for any additional stereotypes relevant to the participants' experiences. Given the distinctive role of the model minority stereotype within Asian communities, particular emphasis was placed on assessing its influence. To accommodate the diverse racial identifications of participants, questions concerning the "model minority stereotype" were adjusted accordingly, focusing more broadly on "stereotype(s)" for individuals not of Asian descent. Participants were encouraged to provide instances where they perceived the model minority stereotype's impact on their interactions within the academic environment. Subsequently, inquiries delved into whether participants experienced any pressures to conform to these stereotypes, and the subsequent implications for their well-being and self-identification.

Ethical Considerations

The study acknowledges the inherent vulnerability of participants during the interview process, given the sensitive nature of topics of race and ethnicity, personal experiences, academic acceptance, and stereotypes. In accordance with ethical standards, the IRB (23-0909) was granted approval, with explicit recognition of potential risks pertaining to psychological and emotional distress stemming from discussions surrounding particular experiences and perhaps, the recollection of prejudices.

To mitigate these risks, stringent measures were implemented to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. Participants' identities were safeguarded, with

their responses anonymized throughout the research process. Furthermore, individuals' names were withheld in the presentation of research findings, thus protecting their privacy and preserving confidentiality. These ethical standards were placed to uphold the integrity of the research endeavor and protect the well-being of the participants involved.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS PART I: THE MODEL MINORITY

Interactions with MMS

Of the fifteen participants, fourteen (93%) reported that they have encountered or have heard of the model minority stereotype. There were ten participants who reported that they have been subjected to the stereotype, mostly by their peers and some, by their teachers. All Asian or Asian mixed-race students (nine) reported they have been explicitly subjected by the MMS. For example, in an interview with Participant B (2024), they reported: “In high school, a lot of kids would expect me to automatically be the smartest kid or even, get the information quicker.” An instance that highlights the “math and science genius” characteristic of the MMS is evident in Participant M’s response (2024): “In high school, people always been like ‘oh, of course you made a hundred on your math test because you’re smart,’ but I was not the smartest kid in math class.” Furthermore, in their words, Participant J (2024) provided details on how their professor “...expects more from me compared to my other researchers. I’m just going to say it – they’re white.” Participants B, M, and J all identify as Asian or Asian-mixed race. The remaining 33% of students, not of Asian descent, who have encountered the MMS, have either reported instances where they observed their Asian peers being stereotyped, or they are aware of the stereotype but cannot provide an example due to the demographic of their classrooms based on their previous or current academic institutions. Participant A (2024), who identified as Hispanic, provided a unique report in which their high school consisted of an Asian majority. They recalled: “I saw many of my Filipino friends oftentimes succumb to stresses put on by their families and the academic environment. Our headmaster was also Filipino, and due to the model minority status...we oftentimes

saw stricter punishments put on with our Black and Hispanic counterparts and really idolizing the school to prison pipeline; while the select students that were her same ethnicity, they were held to this higher esteem than other students.”

Pressures Related to Racial Stereotypes

Participants in the study reported that they have felt pressure to conform to the expectations associated with the model minority stereotype. The question was adjusted to fit the person’s racial identification; in this case, the participant was asked if they felt any pressure to conform to the stereotypical expectations associated with their race.

Those of ethnic minority backgrounds (i.e., Pakistani, Vietnamese, Chinese, Hispanic, Nepali, and African) all reported instances where they have felt pressure to conform to the expectations associated with stereotypes. Participants of Asian descent agree they have experienced pressure to be skilled at mathematics and science curriculums. Although all nine Asian participants reported that they experienced the MMS, there were variations in the outlooks of their experiences. Of these participants, some claimed that the expectation to be skilled in academia is, essentially, not something to be ashamed of or viewed as negative. Participant M (2024) answered: “...mentally and everything stress-wise, I get hurt. But I try to conform to being smart because people are like ‘hey, you’re smart,’ and I kind of like that. This is terrible, but I like being thought of as smart, and I like if people think that Asian people are smarter...having academic validation is a good part—not good—but the part I like seeking.” In another report, Participant N (2024) stated “I think it comes naturally to me” and “the pressure I receive here which, is almost none” when asked if they had felt pressure to “live up to the expectations.” Furthermore, the participant explained their response to the lack of

academic pressure felt in the United States by comparing the expectations from their country of origin: “back home in Indonesia, it’s just so many people who are better...we’re good at STEM and math...the more pressure people put on us to do better.”

The two Black students in the study both reported significant pressure to undermine racial stereotypes. These stereotypes, ranging from perceptions of criminality to assumptions about intelligence and capability, create a pervasive burden for these individuals within the academic community. Participant F (2024) reported, “For me, I would say it was always kind of like surprising in school when I did well, or like when my test scores were higher than everybody else. I think a lot of times growing up, just kind of seeing how everybody was so surprised, just by me doing better than anybody.” Participant L (2024) attested to the pressure of pursuing education amidst racial stereotypes: “I have felt the need to beat the stereotypes and not to be associated with them, so I feel like as a black daughter I have to work ten times harder than everyone else.”

Most of the Asian students experienced pressure as early as middle school and all throughout high school. They were expected to have high performance in the classroom and earn higher test scores than their peers. In an interview with Participant C (2024) who reported himself as “average performing” throughout high school, he recalls, “...all the non-Asian students in the class are like, ‘Oh, why don't you make grades like that person or whatever. And I would make a B, but they'll be like, ‘Oh, I thought Asians never make B’s. I thought y'all always only make straight A’s.’” The notion that Asian students are innately intelligent and perform higher than other minorities create an atmosphere of intimidation for those who are subjected to the stereotype. When asked if they could

provide an example of a time when they felt the model minority stereotype affecting their experiences within the academic community, Participant N (2024) replied, “Well, I cannot answer that question because I am that Asian guy. I’m good at math.”

Furthermore, participants vividly recalled experiences where their academic achievements, specifically math and science, were attributed solely to their Asian identity with remarks like, “Oh, it’s because you are Asian,” being commonplace (Participants D, G, and I 2024). Such encounters highlighted a tendency to attribute academic success not to diligence or effort but rather to innate abilities, thereby diminishing the recognition of their conscientious hard work, diligent study habits, and determination.

When asked what the effects of the MMS has had on the well-being and self-identification of the participants, many participants responses aligned with what they had said previously about the question regarding the pressures associated with the stereotype. However, some participants answered with variations and offered a new perspective. For example, Participant A (2024) reported the “nature of competitiveness” and that they “almost felt inferior” if they did not live up to the standards as set forth by their Asian peers. Participants A, C, and F (2024) all mentioned feeling pressured to excel academically and experiencing disappointment when they fall short of these expectations. In addition, a common feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt emerged as Participants B and H (2024) expressed feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and self-criticism, respectively stemming from the pressure to conform (like “eyes are watching you”) to the MMS and the fear of not meeting those standards. Moreover, Participants D and G (2024) shared frustrations about their achievements being discredited or undervalued by others due to the stereotype, leading to feelings of anger and unfair treatment. Since this stereotype has

been engrained in Asian students ever since the start of their academic pursuits, they have constructed negative feelings regarding their intelligence if they do not meet or exceed the expectations. Participant D (2024) remarks, "...it does pressure me to want to be a smarter student because people kind of make fun of Asian people that are not smart." Participant E (2024), who is of Hispanic descent, discussed the impact of the stereotype on their personal life, citing experiences of disrespect toward immigrants and difficulties maintaining relationships due to cultural biases. On the other hand, some participants expressed neutrality to stereotype's impact, acknowledging awareness of it but uncertain about whether it has had a significant negative or positive effect on their self-perception (Participant I 2024). Furthermore, Participant J (2024) stated: "I don't really have anxiety. But if I had someone else in my place, he would have definitely felt the pressure of living up to something." This comment suggests a sense of detachment from the stereotype's direct impact on their own well-being but acknowledges the potential pressure experienced by others to conform to its expectations. As a Black American, Participant L emphasized a strong sense of self-acceptance and pride in their identity, stating, "I've never felt like I wanted to be another race. I always enjoyed being who I am." Despite the challenges posed by racial stereotypes, they expressed determination to remain true to themselves: "But in affecting my day to day, it has made me prouder of who I am and just to express myself even more because I am not going to tone myself down just to fit in with other people." This sentiment underscores their resilience and refusal to compromise their authenticity to conform to societal expectations.

Representation in Higher Educational Institutions

This section will provide the participants' significant perspectives on representation within their respective institutions. Representation plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' experiences and sense of belonging within academic or organizational environments. It encompasses not only visibility but also the acknowledgment and validation of diverse identities and backgrounds. Through their experiences and insights, participants shed light on the significance of representation and its implications for their sense of inclusion.

A recurring theme of underrepresentation was evident in Participant A and B's (2024) responses as they expressed general feelings of being “overlooked and not highlighted” within USM's Greek life community. Significantly, Participant A reported on their tokenization within these organizations at USM during Hispanic Heritage Month when they would be “posted on the [sorority's] Instagram,” but afterwards, the overall engagement with the Participant's cultural heritage dwindled. In addition, Participant D (2024) highlighted the discomfort of being one of the few Asian students in their classes. Shockingly, Participant M (2024) reported: “Probably the biggest thing that's happened a lot this semester is my white professor confusing me for another Asian girl and that happens so much that it is actually infuriating...kind of invalidating your whole entire existence...there's 60 or 70 people in my cohort which is predominantly white, and none of them get that. I've seen it happen with Black girls too.”

Moreover, amidst the departure of the only female professor in the department, Participant E and O (2024) voiced concerns about the absence of female candidates among the finalists for the position, signaling a perceived lack of priority given to gender

diversity. Similarly, by citing recent departures of black advisors and a perceived lack of representation in leadership roles, Participant F (2024) highlighted the absence of black males in higher positions within the university. Despite the lack of representation of Asian, Black, Hispanic, and overall female students in faculty members and mentors at the university, Participant C found a sense of community and leadership representation within the Asian community at the university through the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) which marked a positive experience.

CHAPTER VI: FINDINGS PART II: AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Diversity as an Educational Value

All participants agreed that diversity is an educational value. When asked to expand on their responses, most participants responded similarly in that they thought diversity is necessary and productive for learning differences in culture and pursuing variations in perspectives in education. In addition, certain participants affirmed that uniformity would result in monotony and detract from the overall enjoyment of their educational experience. In particular, Participant I (2024) stated, “I think diversity is an educational necessity just because if you study the same population over and over again, you’re never going to learn as much as you could if you were to learn about other people and places.”

Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education

Affirmative action initiatives in higher education provoke varied perspectives among participants, each offering insights into the complexities surrounding diversity and inclusion efforts. Participant I (2024) expressed reservations regarding affirmative action policies, particularly concerning the potential for tokenization and erosion of individuality: “That’s so tricky because I can tell they’re trying, but it’s not working. For example, some schools have a certain ratio of ethnic minority students that they’re required to admit. And to me, I feel that’s kind of taking away their personality and just admitting them because of their race.” They highlighted concerns that such policies might reduce applicants to their racial identities, diminishing the importance of personal characteristics and uniqueness in the admissions process. Moreover, Participant G shared perceptions of affirmative action primarily benefiting specific racial groups, particularly

in STEM fields, while overlooking the diverse talents and interests within those groups. They suggested that the focus on certain academic disciplines reinforces stereotypes and fails to recognize the breadth of abilities and interests among individuals from those racial backgrounds.

In contrast, acknowledging systemic inequalities in education, Participant E argued that affirmative action serves as a means to address these disparities. They noted that schools with predominantly minority populations often face fewer resources and funding compared to predominantly white schools. Affirmative action, in their view, attempts to mitigate these inequalities by providing opportunities to underrepresented groups and creating a more level playing field. Similarly, participants K, N, and O expressed support for affirmative action, highlighting its positive impact on diversity across socioeconomic, racial, and national origin lines. They emphasized the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and leveling the playing field in education, viewing affirmative action as a necessary step towards achieving greater inclusivity and representation in higher education institutions. Additionally, Participant H provided a historical perspective on affirmative action, acknowledging its origins in addressing discriminatory practices against marginalized groups. While recognizing its importance in providing opportunities to historically excluded populations, they also noted ongoing debates about its efficacy and potential negative consequences, particularly due to recent controversies and legal challenges.

Affirmative Action: Equal or Unequal?

All participants were asked if they thought affirmative action has allowed for more equal educational opportunities or has it reinforced unequal educational

opportunities. Of the fifteen participants, thirteen (86%) responded that they believe it has expanded equal educational opportunities to more diverse groups; one participant held that it has reinforced unequal educational opportunities, and one participant had split decisions in which they thought affirmative action may have reinforced both equal/unequal opportunities.

Participants who advocate for affirmative action as a means of expanding educational opportunities share a common belief in its role in leveling the playing field for minorities and people of color. They perceive affirmative action as a mechanism that provides individuals from diverse backgrounds with a chance to pursue higher education despite historical discrimination. Participant A (2024) articulates this viewpoint succinctly, stating, “I think it's allowed for equal opportunity. When you look at spaces that have been historically white dominated, not even just white dominated, white male upper class dominated – people with money. When you're looking at when women were finally able to even attend universities alongside men, it was white women first and then minorities in America. So yes, I think it's just kind of started leveling the playing field. I mean, it did start to allow more equal opportunity and access into higher education, but the Supreme Court overruled it.” This perspective underscores the perception that affirmative action has initiated progress towards equitable access to higher education, albeit amidst broader societal inequalities and challenges.

In contrast, Participant N (2024) argued that affirmative action has reinforced unequal educational opportunities. Upon further discussion, the reasoning behind their sentiment was embedded in the perception that equality cannot be achieved by minority groups without the inequality of some individuals from the majority. In the interview,

Participant N stated, “I think, again based on my permanent knowledge of it, if there are two sides of the spectrum, if we prioritize these people in legacy admissions—and the students coming in are of that majority—it feels to me once this issue of unequal opportunity arises, they [college admission] go too far to the other spectrum, like ‘oh, let us decrease the opportunity for these selective people and increase the amount of students from less-privilege backgrounds.’ It hurts some of these people—the majority.”

Moreover, when posed the same question about affirmative action and educational opportunities, Participant G (2020) viewed it as a situation with equal potential for both positive and negative outcomes, describing it as a “50/50” proposition. The participant expressed their perception of disparities in educational opportunities between international students and citizens in the United States, suggesting that international students, particularly Asians, may excel in certain fields like STEM due to their training and skills but may not have equal access to opportunities compared to American citizen. The participant speculates that affirmative action may be driven by universities’ desire to improve educational rankings, particularly in STEM colleges, rather than promoting diversity across all majors or disciplines.

Appropriate and Necessary

Participants expressed varied perspectives on the appropriateness and necessity of affirmative action policies in the current educational system. Participant L emphasized the importance of diversity and cultural exchange, suggesting that affirmative action is necessary to counteract monotony and promote exposure to different cultures and traditions. Similarly, Participant H highlighted the ongoing disparities in funding and

resource allocation among different racial groups, indicating that affirmative action remains necessary to address these inequalities.

Participant B stated the transformative potential of affirmative action in providing opportunities for individuals from underprivileged backgrounds to access education and improve their prospects. They emphasized the role of affirmative action in leveling the playing field and empowering individuals to pursue better opportunities. In contrast, Participant K expressed reservations about affirmative action, suggesting that past implementations may have led to negative consequences and backlash. They advocated for a cautious approach, proposing that universities should refrain from implementing affirmative action policies and instead assess the pros and cons before making any decisions. Furthermore, Participant O admitted uncertainty about affirmative action policies, acknowledging a lack of sufficient knowledge to form a definitive opinion. They emphasized the importance of continual improvement and suggested that there is always room for refinement in educational policies.

Benefits and Challenges

None of the participants mentioned encountering significant challenges or benefits related to affirmative action, either personally or through acquaintances. However, Participant G (2024) shared their experience as an international student and highlighted additional hurdles they face, particularly in applying to competitive programs like medical school and PhD programs. They noted the extra paperwork and questions pertaining to legality that they encounter compared to their white peers, illustrating that while affirmative action may facilitate access to educational spaces, it does not eliminate all obstacles for international students. This sentiment highlights the ongoing barriers

international students may encounter within educational institutions and beyond, even with affirmative action policies in place.

Merit vs. Diversity

Participants offered varied perspectives on whether colleges should prioritize diversity, merit, or both in their admissions processes. Out of fifteen participants, thirteen (86%) advocated for a balanced approach that considers both merit and diversity, while two participants emphasized the importance of merit over diversity.

Participant A (2024) emphasized the interconnectedness of diversity and merit, arguing that individuals from diverse backgrounds bring unique lived experiences that contribute to the educational environment. They advocated for considering both academic achievements and life experiences, suggesting that merit encompasses more than just academic accomplishments. Additionally, they critiqued the notion of meritocracy, highlighting how privilege and societal biases can influence perceptions of merit. Conversely, Participant I (2024) expressed a preference for a neutral approach to diversity, suggesting that admissions should focus on merit and individual qualities rather than enforcing specific diversity quotas. They emphasized the importance of considering factors like work ethic alongside academic merit, advocating for a more meritocratic approach to admissions. Similarly, Participant M reported: “More so merit. When your race gets put into it, then people start making weird judgments and opinions of you. I think when it comes to school, it’s better to consider your grades and your performance because I think that shows how much work you’re going to put into to it rather than race.”

Participant F highlighted the importance of maintaining a balance between merit and diversity for the university's overall success. They suggested that prioritizing merit ensures excellence and competitiveness, which can attract funding and resources. However, they also recognized the value of diversity and suggested that it should complement merit rather than detract from it. Participant L endorsed considering both academic performance and diversity in admissions decisions, emphasizing the potential contributions individuals can make based on their unique backgrounds. They argued that admissions should evaluate applicants based on their ability to enrich the educational environment and make positive contributions to the community.

Influences on Race-Conscious Academic Scholarships

When asked if the participants felt their academic acceptance at USM has been harmed, neutralized, or benefitted from race-conscious policies, particularly regarding scholarship opportunities, participants offered a spectrum of perspectives. Most participants did not report that race-conscious scholarships harmed them, but rather described their experiences with such scholarships as neutral. They explained that this neutrality stemmed from either not actively seeking out these scholarships or not being aware of any that were available for them.

Participant A (2024) expressed feeling personally benefitted, attributing their success to their familiarity with avenues for funding based on their racial background. They cited their participation in programs like the McNair Scholars Program, which targets first-generation racial groups, as instrumental in securing research opportunities and funding. They emphasized the importance of awareness regarding funding opportunities and noted that such avenues may not always be widely advertised.

However, they indicated that scholarships not specifically focused on racial groups may not necessarily favor individuals based on their race. In addition, Participant D (2024) explicitly recalled: “They’ve benefitted me because I got some scholarships from being a color person.”

Moreover, Participant L (2024) highlighted a perception of both benefit and neutralization in their scholarship experiences. They suggested that scholarships, particularly those donated by affluent individuals to the school, could benefit students like themselves. However, they also hinted at a sense of neutralization, perhaps indicating that their scholarship experiences were not solely influenced by their racial identity. Another example of neutral impacts from race-conscious scholarships was evident in Participant C’s (2024) response: “I think it's neutralized because I didn't apply for any scholarships that are only available for Asian American students. I have a transfer scholarship for two years, so I think it's neutralized.”

CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Based on the findings of the study, my initial expectations that Asian college students have experienced the model minority stereotype at least once in an academic setting is upheld as all nine Asian students who were interviewed at USM reported instances when they were subjected to the stereotype. However, there are some variations in the outlook of experiences that I did not account for prior to conducting the research. Some participants offered perspectives that challenged the severity of the model minority stereotype's impact on their educational experiences, which was unexpected.

These students reported stress on having to undermine the validity of stereotypes by excelling in academic subjects like math, science, and healthcare. They were compelled to defy these stereotypes to assert their dignity, competence, and worth as individuals. Contrary to societal assumptions, Black American students often express pride in their self-identification as they navigate the stress of debunking stereotypes. Black Americans often experience significant pressure to challenge and disprove the stereotypes that society has placed upon them.

The reasons for the stress of meeting these expectations come from many factors, but there are mainly two. The first being "disproof." The second reason for stress developed from stereotypes is opposite of the former: "reinforcement." It becomes evident that there are two extreme sides of this socially constructed intelligence spectrum in which Asian students perceive themselves and others perceive them, with the desirable side being "smart" and the other, "dumb." Hence, the concept of meeting these expectations is not necessarily viewed as unfavorable. Indeed, being acknowledged for one's intelligence and academic accomplishments within the university is inherently

positive. However, framing the pursuit of such validation as commendable serves to reinforce the stereotype. This reinforces the misconception that Asian Americans are compliant and acquiescent to the majority's expectations. While the student perceives intelligence and academic achievement as meritorious, others may interpret them as merely conforming to the stereotype, thereby disregarding their efforts and attributing their success solely to intrinsic abilities associated with the model minority stereotype.

The pressure experienced by Asian American students due to stereotypes takes two forms: the initial expectation to perform exceptionally well, and the subsequent reinforcement of these expectations throughout their educational journey. Beginning in middle school and persisting through high school students are confronted with the burden of living up to the model minority stereotype, resulting in heightened stress levels. Despite these expectations originating from external sources such as peers and parents during earlier education, the pressure transitions to become self-imposed as students advance to higher education. Thus, the influence of the model minority stereotype extends beyond mere perception, impacting the internalized pressures faced by Asian American students.

Unintentionally fulfilling the model minority stereotype early in their childhood, Asian American students at the university level continue to experience stress with high performance and test scores. At this rate, the model minority stereotype has flourished throughout the students' educational journeys. In lower education, the participants reported experiencing the expectations associated with the model minority stereotype among other students' comments or through parental pressure. However, as the Asian American student enters higher education, the pressure has been reported to stem from

within and has resolved to self-pressure. The impact of the model minority stereotype is internalized within Asian American students, and later, it disguises itself as motivation for future success. Consequently, many Asian university students start to embody the traits associated with this stereotype.

It is important to note that most students who reported that they were subjected to the stereotype recalled their experiences from high school. Some even said they did not experience it much, or at all, when coming to college. The initial pressure to conform diminishes as students internalize and adopt the characteristics prescribed by the stereotype. For instance, the pressure to excel in math and science transforms into pressure to pursue prestigious careers in these fields.

In addition, initial expectations were rooted in the assumption that individuals who align with the model minority stereotype would be more likely to possess a greater inclination towards affirmative action. However, the study suggests that those who diverge from this stereotype would perceive its necessity differently. The analyzation of the findings suggests two distinct models: those who perceive their academic trajectory as consistent with [the model minority] stereotype(s), and those who perceive themselves as entirely detached from it. Surprisingly, some participants expressed indifference towards the stereotype, finding no issue with being associated with traits such as academic and financial success.

Additionally, variations in levels of support for affirmative action were noted among participants, with some expressing less enthusiasm than initially anticipated. As Asians are not a monolithic group, it was revealed in the study that their experiences with the model minority stereotype is also not monogamous.

In contrast to the initial expectations, participants' attitudes on affirmative action did not uniformly conform to the hypothesized alignment. This unexpected contrast may be partially attributed to their institutional experiences, particularly within settings such as USM, where students from partially Asian backgrounds or those less acquainted with prevalent racial dynamics in the United States showcased divergent perspectives. Notably, these individuals tended to prioritize conceptions of fairness and meritocracy over personal encounters with racial identity.

The multiplicity of viewpoints observed may be rooted in various factors, including mixed-race identity, wherein individuals may perceive enhanced autonomy and diminished constraints in their educational endeavors compared to those more closely associated with conventional Asian stereotypes. Moreover, select participants advocated for the adoption of a merit-based admissions paradigm, in pursuit of an educational system devoid of race-centric considerations.

Participants originating from countries where Asians constitute the majority population, as opposed to being a minority in the United States, may have encountered lesser exposure to the subtleties of racial stereotypes pervasive in American society. Consequently, their attitudes towards affirmative action may have been less suggestive by encounters with discrimination or marginalization predicated on race. This underscores the imperative of recognizing the heterogeneous backgrounds and experiences of Asian college students when scrutinizing their perceptions of affirmative action within the scope of societal stereotypes and higher education.

Furthermore, a common theme that appear in the participant's negative responses towards the model minority stereotype is the idea of a "token Asian," which proves

consistent with the “model” factor in the model minority stereotype. The rejection of this image of an ideal figurehead among the participants’ racial group showed signs of negativity to their outlook on themselves as a minority. In addition, it was interesting to find that Asian participants of mixed-race and transracial backgrounds expressed more favor in regard to a meritocracy over a diversity-based (or a combination of merit and diversity-based) college admissions process. This suggests a consistency with the majoritarian narrative of meritocracy, which is normally argued in favor of white-dominated spaces in academia.

Lastly, potentially due to the high-acceptance rate of USM admissions, participants lacked the awareness of any challenges or benefits related to affirmative action policies in their college admissions as opposed to a highly competitive institution, such as Harvard college as forementioned in the literature review and which laid the foundation for this research.

CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION

This research is subject to several limitations, primarily concerning the composition of the participant population. As the study does not encompass the entire spectrum of Asian, Black, Caucasian, and Hispanic university students, the findings do not fully represent the diverse array of perspectives within, or outside, of these demographic groups. In addition, the omission of a focused examination of participants' gender, nationality, wealth status, and age further constrained the study's scope, although efforts were made to acknowledge and contextualize their responses within these dimensions.

Furthermore, the validity of the information gathered may be affected by the inherent variability in participants' recollections and descriptions of their experiences. As memories and perceptions can evolve over time, the reliability of the data may be subject to fluctuations. These limitations address the need for cautious interpretation of the findings and highlight areas for potential future research to address the nuances in understanding.

While Asian American students often face societal pressure to pursue STEM studies and excel academically, as presumed by the stereotype, it is incumbent upon universities to transcend the constraints associated with this stereotype. Instead, they should strive to create environments where students who flourish under such expectations are not only embraced but actively sought after in the admissions process. However, culpability lies with universities in perpetuating this cycle by prioritizing students who conform to certain stereotypes and pursue majors deemed "desirable." Nevertheless, addressing this issue delves into a separate realm altogether.

The overlap between these chapters underscores the interconnectedness of racial stereotypes and their impact on individuals' academic journeys. Whether through encounters with the model minority stereotype or broader racial stereotypes, participants navigate a complex landscape shaped by societal perceptions and expectations. Their responses reflect a range of experiences, from resilience and pride to frustration and self-doubt, highlighting the need for greater awareness, dialogue, and research surrounding racial stereotypes in academic settings. Ultimately, these findings emphasize the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments that recognize and celebrate diversity while challenging harmful stereotypes and biases.

Overall, common themes in the participants' responses include the recognition of ongoing disparities and the potential benefits of affirmative action in promoting diversity, "leveling the playing field," and providing opportunities for underprivileged individuals. However, concerns were also expressed about potential drawbacks and the need for careful consideration and assessment of such policies' effectiveness.

This study aims to prioritize the perspectives of individuals impacted by affirmative action policies, particularly within Asian minority communities. It is crucial to emphasize that Asian minorities are not a homogeneous group, as often constrained and perceived by the model minority stereotype. Similar to any minority group, Asian students come from diverse backgrounds, each possessing unique preferences and values. My aspiration is for educational institutions, big or small, to address these disparities and amplify the voices of individuals who have historically been subjected to racial stereotypes. Whether through affirmative action policies or through further research and potential policy reforms, I hope to see initiatives that uplift these individuals across all

spheres of education and society. Asians are frequently misconstrued as complacent and submissive, despite facing discriminatory practices and perceptions. Through this study, I aim to contribute fifteen additional narratives that embody individuality, determination, and advocacy, envisioning a more equitable future in academia wherein policies like affirmative action will no longer need to be implemented to necessitate the fair and inclusive admissions of diverse students.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of Research Integrity

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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI using the Incident form available in InfoEd.
- The period of approval is twelve months. If a project will exceed twelve months, a request should be submitted to ORI using the Renewal form available in InfoEd prior to the expiration date.

PROTOCOL NUMBER:	23-0909
PROJECT TITLE:	The Model Minority Stereotype Among Asian and Non-Asian University Students and Perceptions on Affirmative Action in Higher Education
SCHOOL/PROGRAM	Political Science & Legal Studies
RESEARCHERS:	PI: Jannie Nguyen Investigators: Nguyen, Jannie-Steedman, Marek D-
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION:	Approved
CATEGORY:	Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL:	14-Nov-2023 to 13-Nov-2024

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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