

THE SELF-PROTECTIVE FUNCTION OF THE
MODEL MINORITY MYTH FOR WHITE AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT

I investigated the hypothesis that endorsing the model minority stereotype—the belief that Asian Americans are intelligent, hard-working, and successful—increases Whites Americans’ self-esteem. I argue that this occurs because Whites’ self-esteem is threatened by the possibility that they do not deserve their position in society. The model minority stereotype provides evidence for Whites that minority groups can succeed based on merit, bolstering the belief that society is fair and Whites deserve what they have. In four studies, I demonstrate the link between the model minority stereotype and self-esteem as well as for the idea that the model minority stereotype impacts self-esteem because of Whites’ concerns over system legitimacy.

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Introduction

People tend to derogate other social groups in order to bolster their individual self-esteem (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987). Despite this, White Americans strongly endorse the belief that Asian Americans are intelligent, competent, industrious, hard-working, and academically and economically successful (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969; Katz & Braly, 1933; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005; Osajima, 1988). Even more surprisingly, Whites believe Asian Americans possess these positive instrumental characteristics more than people in their own racial group (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998).

It is easy to understand the function of negative stereotypes: they serve as downward social comparisons that protect self-esteem (Fein & Spencer, 1997) and justify the rejection of out-groups (Allport, 1954). It is more difficult to discern the purpose a positive stereotype of an out-group. In the current work, I explore the function of the positive Asian-American stereotype for White Americans.

The model minority and self-esteem

Research on self-esteem maintenance and downward comparisons suggests that endorsement of the model minority stereotype should decrease Whites' self-esteem. People generally want to feel good about themselves (Allport, 1955; Maslow, 1968; Rosenberg, 1979; Taylor & Brown, 1988) and the social groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16). They can maintain positive social identities, and consequently, their individual self-esteem, by derogating outgroups and making downward comparisons to groups they believe are worse-off than themselves (Crocker et al., 1987; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, when Whites

subscribe to the belief that Asian Americans are more intelligent, hard-working, and successful than their own racial group, we might expect their self-esteem to decrease.

I propose that instead, positively stereotyping Asian Americans may *increase* self-esteem in White Americans. People have a strong desire to believe that the world is just and that they deserve what they have (Lerner, 1980). Importantly, people experience negative emotions (Austin & Walster, 1974; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973) and threats to their self-concepts (Rosette & Thompson, 2005) when they believe they have more than they deserve. In the United States, the norm of meritocracy dictates that one's outcomes (e.g., socioeconomic status) are deserved when they are the direct result of individual merit (i.e., ability and effort) (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) and the belief that one's positive social outcomes are not merited negatively affects Americans' self-esteem (e.g., see Schervish, Coutsoukish, & Lewis, 1994, p. 118). Similar equity concerns extend to the group level: when White Americans believe they are unfairly privileged over other racial groups, they feel guilty (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Mallett & Swim, 2007; Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006; Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005; Swim & Miller, 1999) and their self-esteem is compromised (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007; Swim & Miller, 1999). The belief that Asian Americans have succeeded by effort and hard work might be seen as proof that the United States operates as a legitimate meritocracy and that Whites deserve their relative advantage (cf. Fiske et al., 2002; Lin et al., 2005; Osajima, 1988). Therefore, I propose that positively stereotyping Asian Americans may allay Whites' equity concerns, consequently *increasing* their self-esteem.

Overview of Studies

In the current research, I provide evidence that the model minority stereotype leads to higher self-esteem in White Americans because it provides proof that the racial hierarchy, and Whites' position within it, is legitimate. In Study 1, I assessed whether White Americans have higher self-esteem the more they endorse the model minority stereotype and whether this effect was driven by the belief that the system is legitimate. In Study 2, I tested the hypothesis that when Whites are confronted with evidence of racial inequality, they will have higher self-esteem when they endorse the model minority stereotype. On the other hand, I predict that when Whites are told that there is no racial inequity, the model minority stereotype will not be linked with higher self-esteem. Study 3 tests the assumption that Whites must believe that Asian Americans have earned their success in order for it to increase the legitimacy of the system, and therefore their self-esteem. Finally, in Study 4, I provide evidence that endorsing the model minority stereotype can be used to protect self-esteem when it is vulnerable (i.e., when an individual is unaffirmed). Together, the results of four studies suggest that endorsing the model minority stereotype increases Whites' self-esteems because it allays their concerns about system legitimacy.

Study 1

In Study 1, I sought evidence for the idea that White Americans' endorsement of the model minority stereotype increases their self-esteem because it enhances perceived legitimacy of the system that produces the racial hierarchy and their advantaged position within it. Specifically, I hypothesized that the belief that Asian

Americans are a model minority group positively affects Whites' self-esteem. Further, I anticipated that this effect would be driven by the belief in system legitimacy.

Previous research has demonstrated that Whites feel guilty when they believe that their dominant position in society is illegitimate (Iyer et al., 2003; Mallett & Swim, 2007; Miron et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2005; Swim & Miller, 1999). White guilt may negatively affect self-esteem, so I also explored the possibility that White guilt drives the effect of model minority stereotyping on self-esteem. I predicted that the belief in legitimacy of the hierarchy, and not White guilt, would mediate the effect of model minority stereotype endorsement on self-esteem.

Method

Participants and procedure

Fifty-two White participants (15 males and 37 females) with ages ranging from 20 to 67 ($M = 34.63$, $SD = 10.77$) completed the study online. Upon entering the study website, they gave informed consent, completed questionnaires assessing endorsement of the model minority stereotype, perceived legitimacy of the racial hierarchy, self-esteem, and White guilt. Finally, they were thanked and received a \$5 gift certificate from an online retailer as compensation for their participation.

Dependent Variables

Endorsement of the model minority stereotype. In order to assess endorsement of the model minority stereotype, I asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with nine statements suggesting that Asian Americans are intelligent, hard-working, and successful on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items included, "Many Asian Americans are not very smart (reverse-

scored)", "Asian Americans are generally hardworking people", and "Most Asian Americans are successful in work and school", $\alpha = .88$.

Perceived system legitimacy. To measure participants' belief that American society is a legitimate system where people deserve the positions they occupy in the social hierarchy, I asked participants to rate their agreement with the statement, "People who work hard can succeed in our society" from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Self-esteem. To assess participants' self-esteem, I administered the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale. Participants rated their agreement with ten items on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items included, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", "I take a positive attitude toward myself", and "At times I think I am no good at all", $\alpha = .92$.

White guilt. I administered the White Guilt scale (Swim & Miller, 1999) to assess the extent to which participants felt guilty due to Whites' privilege at the expense of other racial groups. The scale included five items including, "Although I feel my behavior is typically nondiscriminatory, I still feel guilt due to my association with my race," and "I feel guilty about the past and present social inequality of Black Americans (i.e. slavery, poverty)", which were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), $\alpha = .92$.

Results

I predicted that endorsement of the model minority stereotype would have a positive effect on self-esteem. To test this hypothesis, I regressed self-esteem on model minority stereotype endorsement. As predicted, I found that the more White

participants believed that Asian Americans are intelligent, hard-working, and successful, the higher their self-esteem, $B = .33$, $SE B = .15$, $\beta = .30$, $p < .05$.

In order to explore the role of perceived system legitimacy in explaining this effect, I conducted a mediation analysis according to the steps outlined by Aiken and West (1991). Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the measured variables can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of measured variables in Study 1

| | Mean | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|--------------------------------|------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| 1. Model minority stereotyping | 4.93 | .96 | -- | | | |
| 2. Perceived system legitimacy | 5.96 | 1.36 | .56** | -- | | |
| 3. Self-esteem | 5.81 | 1.07 | .30* | .40** | -- | |
| 4. White guilt | 3.17 | 1.63 | -.10 | -.22 | -.27* | -- |

Note. $N = 52$

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

As reported above, endorsement of the model minority stereotype significantly predicted self-esteem. Next, I regressed perceived system legitimacy (the proposed mediator) on model minority stereotype endorsement. I found that model minority stereotype endorsement positively predicted legitimacy, $B = .79$, $SE B = .17$, $\beta = .56$, $p < .001$. Then I regressed self-esteem on perceived system legitimacy and found that legitimacy positively predicted self-esteem, $B = .31$, $SE B = .10$, $\beta = .40$, $p < .005$.

Finally, I simultaneously entered model minority stereotype endorsement and perceived system legitimacy as predictors of self-esteem. I found that the effect of model minority stereotype endorsement on self-esteem became non-significant, $B = .12$, $SE B = .18$, $\beta = .11$, $p = .50$, whereas the effect of perceived system legitimacy on self-esteem remained significant, $B = .26$, $SE B = .12$, $\beta = .33$, $p < .05$. A Sobel test confirmed that the mediation was significant, $z = 1.96$, $p < .05$.

Unexpectedly, gender moderated the effect of model minority stereotype endorsement on perceived system legitimacy, $B = .55$, $SE B = .14$, $\beta = .38$, $p < .001$, such that males showed a significant positive effect of model minority stereotype endorsement, $B = 1.25$, $SE B = .20$, $\beta = .88$, $p < .001$, whereas females did not, $B = .16$, $SE B = .21$, $\beta = .11$, $p = .44$.

Finally, I sought evidence to rule out the possibility that White guilt mediated the effect of positive stereotyping Asian Americans on self-esteem. I followed the same steps outlined above, substituting White guilt for perceived system legitimacy in the analysis. As reported above, there was a significant positive relationship between stereotyping and self-esteem. Further, there was a significant negative relationship between white guilt and self-esteem, $B = -.18$, $SE B = .09$, $\beta = -.27$, $p = .05$, showing that Whites felt better about themselves when they felt less guilt due to their racial group's privilege. However, there was no relationship between positive stereotyping of Asian Americans and white guilt, $B = -.17$, $SE B = .24$, $\beta = -.69$, $p = .49$. Further, when I simultaneously entered positive stereotyping and white guilt as predictors of self-esteem, the effect of positive stereotyping remained significant, $B = .30$, $SE B$

= .15, $\beta = .27$, $p < .05$. Therefore, the positive impact of endorsement of the model minority stereotype on self-esteem was mediated by perceived system legitimacy, not White guilt.

Discussion

In Study 1, I found that endorsement of the model minority stereotype positively predicted Whites' self-esteem and that this association was driven by the belief that the system that produces the social hierarchy is legitimate. These results consistent with the idea that the existence of a model minority provides social proof that Whites' position relative to other racial groups is the result of a fair process and that the belief in system legitimacy, in turn, increases self-esteem.

However, because I measured positive stereotyping of Asian Americans in Study 1, I cannot conclude that there is a causal effect of model minority stereotype endorsement on self-esteem. In Study 2, I manipulated the ability to positively stereotype Asian Americans in order to better establish causal evidence for this idea. Further, I manipulated system legitimacy in order to demonstrate that the model minority stereotype only enhances self-esteem when Whites are confronted with the possibility that their position is illegitimate. When they believe their racial group's position is the result of a fair process, the existence of a model minority should not increase self-esteem.

Study 2

In Study 2, I attempted to establish the causal effect of model minority stereotyping on self-esteem. In order to do so, I manipulated Whites' ability to endorse the model minority stereotype. Further, I manipulated perceived legitimacy of

the system that produced the racial hierarchy in order to demonstrate that Whites' self-esteem is only enhanced by model minority stereotyping when they need to combat perceptions of system illegitimacy. Importantly, in this study my manipulation of system legitimacy explicitly refers to the legitimacy of the racial hierarchy, rather than the social system in general.

I predicted that when Whites were confronted with evidence that the system that produced their advantage is illegitimate, they would have higher self-esteem when they were able to endorse the model minority stereotype than when they were not. On the other hand, when Whites were told that racial groups are treated fairly, I predicted that the ability to endorse the model minority stereotype would not improve self-esteem because there would be no need to combat perceptions of illegitimacy.

Additionally, as in Study 1, I anticipated that *measured* model minority stereotyping would be positively associated with self-esteem. However, I anticipated that this would only be the case when Whites were confronted with information suggesting their group's position is illegitimate. When they did not need to bolster the legitimacy of their position, I predicted that measured model minority stereotyping would not be associated with increased self-esteem.

Method

Participants and procedure

Seventy-five White participants (23 males and 52 females) with ages ranging from 22 to 63 ($M = 36.33$, $SD = 11.16$) completed the study online. Upon entering the study website, they gave informed consent, read information about the extent to which the racial hierarchy in the United States is legitimate, and completed questionnaires

assessing their endorsement of the model minority stereotype and self-esteem. Importantly, only half of the participants were given the opportunity to positively stereotype Asian Americans by filling out the questionnaire assessing endorsement of the model minority stereotype, which served as a manipulation of ability to endorse the stereotype. Finally, all participants were thanked and received a \$5 gift certificate from an online retailer as compensation for their participation.

Manipulation of system legitimacy. In order to manipulate whether White participants believed the system that produced their group's dominant position in society is legitimate, they were randomly assigned to read information stating either that there is racial inequity in the United States or that there is not.

Participants in the *inequity (no inequity)* condition read the following:

Most social scientists agree that, even today, non-White Americans *face many disadvantages that White Americans do not (have attained equality with White Americans in many important ways)*. Below is a list of *non-White disadvantages (ways that non-Whites have attained equality)* compiled from sociological, psychological, and economic research.

1. Not being White *decreases (does not affect)* the quality of medical care one receives.
2. Not being White *decreases (does not affect)* the chances of being hired to a prestigious position.
3. Not being White *decreases (does not affect)* the chances of being paid a higher salary.

4. Not being White *decreases (does not affect)* the chances of having a rental application accepted or being able to purchase a home in an area that is affordable and desirable.
5. Not being White *increases (does not affect)* the chances of being followed or harassed during daily activities, such as shopping.
6. Not being White *increases (does not affect)* the amount of psychological energy needed to protect oneself from overt instances of racism or to worry about racially ambiguous experiences.
7. Not being White *decreases (does not affect)* the chances of having financial applications approved.

Manipulation of ability to endorse the model minority stereotype. Participants in the *able to endorse* condition were asked to complete the questions I used to assess endorsement of the model minority stereotype in Study 1, $\alpha = .88$. Participants in the *not able to endorse* condition were not given the questions.

Dependent Variable

Self-esteem. In order to assess participants' self-esteem, I administered the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale used in Study 1, $\alpha = .90$.

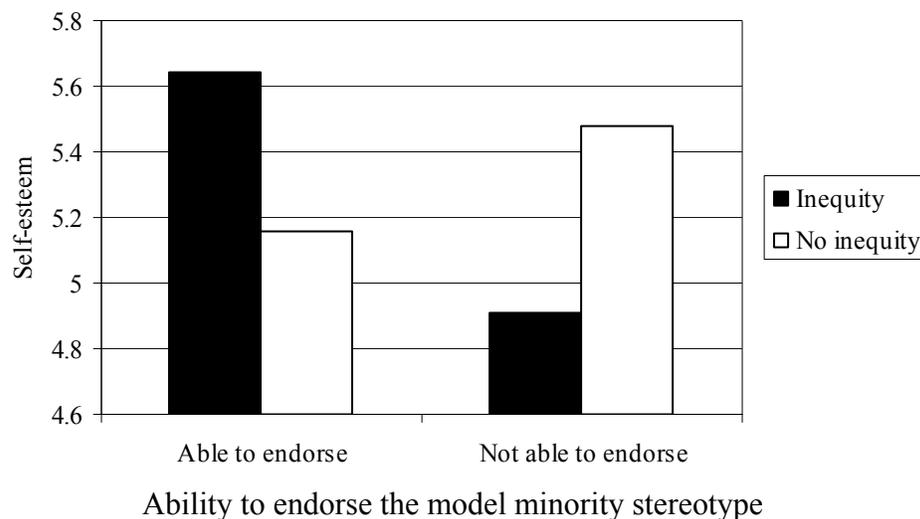
Results

There were no gender effects so gender is excluded from the analyses below. I predicted that Whites who were told that the system that produced the racial hierarchy is illegitimate would have higher self-esteem when they were able to endorse the

model minority stereotype than when they were not. On the other hand, when participants were told that there is racial equality, the ability to endorse the model minority stereotype should not improve Whites' self-esteem because there is no need to combat perceptions of illegitimacy of their racial group's position. In other words, participants in the *no inequity* condition should not differ in self-esteem as a function of the inequity manipulation.

To test these predictions, I conducted a two-way ANOVA. There was no main effect of either the manipulation of system legitimacy, $F < 1$, or the manipulation of ability to endorse the model minority stereotype, $F < 1$, on self-esteem. However, I did find the predicted interaction of the two manipulations on self-esteem, $F(1, 72) = 4.34, p < .05$, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Effect of of system legitimacy and ability to endorse the model minority stereotype on self-esteem in Study 2



Pairwise comparisons revealed that in the *inequity* condition, Whites had higher self-esteem when they were able to positively stereotype Asian Americans ($M = 5.64, SD = .90$) than when they were not ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.21$), $F(1, 72) = 3.85, p = .05$. In the *no inequity* condition, Whites' self-esteem was no greater when they were able to endorse the stereotype ($M = 5.16, SD = 1.30$) than when they were not ($M = 5.48, SD = .84$), $F < 1$.

As in Study 1, I also expected that there would be a positive association between *measured* endorsement of the model minority stereotype and self-esteem, but that this pattern would only be present in the *inequity* condition. In the *no inequity* condition, there should be no association between endorsement of the model minority stereotype and self-esteem because there is no need for Whites to protect the self from threats caused by perceived illegitimacy of their position. I conducted a correlational analysis to test this hypothesis. I could only test the association between *measured* endorsement of the model minority stereotype and self-esteem in the *able to endorse* condition because in the *not able to endorse* condition, participants did not provide ratings of their endorsement of the model minority stereotype. Confirming my prediction, in the *inequity* condition, there was a positive association between endorsement of the model minority stereotype and self-esteem, $r(20) = .44, p = .05$. On the other hand, in the *no inequity* condition, there was no association between endorsement of the model minority stereotype and self-esteem, $r(23) = -.06, p > .1$.

Discussion

In Study 2, when Whites were told that there is racial inequity, their self-esteem was higher when they were given the opportunity to endorse the model

minority stereotype than when they are not. On the other hand, when they were told that there is no racial inequity, the ability to endorse the model minority stereotype did not increase self-esteem. Further, *measured* model minority endorsement was positively associated with self-esteem when Whites were confronted with racial inequity, but not when they were told that the races are equal.

In sum, the results of Study 2 provide evidence of the causal impact of Whites' belief in the model minority stereotype on their self-esteem. Further, they support my proposal for the process by which positively stereotyping Asian Americans increases self-esteem by demonstrating the conditions under which the model minority stereotype does and does not increase self-esteem. Specifically, when Whites are confronted with evidence that the system that produced their advantaged position is illegitimate, model minority stereotyping increases their self-esteem. On the other hand, when Whites are assured that there is equity among racial groups, the existence of a model minority group does not bolster self-esteem. This allows that the existence of a minority group that has succeeded based on merit increases Whites' self-esteem *because* it combats perceptions the illegitimacy of their group's position in the social hierarchy.

The results of Study 2 also shed light on those from Study 1. In Study 1, there was a significant positive effect of stereotyping Asian Americans on Whites' self-esteem. In Study 2, this effect was only present in the condition in which they were confronted with evidence of system illegitimacy. When they believed that the system was legitimate, there was no positive effect of endorsement of the model minority

myth on self-esteem. This suggests that in Study 1, White participants believed that their position in society is not completely legitimate.

Studies 1 and 2 provide evidence for the idea that the model minority stereotype functions to maintain Whites' self-esteem. However, an important assumption remains untested. I propose that Whites must not only believe that Asian Americans are successful in the United States, but that they *deserve* their success, in order to buffer self-esteem. This is because Whites' self-esteem is contingent on the belief that they have what they deserve. In order to believe that the system is such that people succeed by merit, Whites need a model group that has been able to succeed *by its own merit in spite of its minority status*. Asian Americans can serve as this model minority, but only if they have achieved by merit. In Study 3, I provide evidence suggesting that the key element of the model minority myth that allows Whites to protect their self-esteem is the idea that Asians have succeeded based on merit.

Study 3

In Study 3, I manipulated the cause of Asian Americans' success. I told participants that Asian Americans are a successful minority group either because their group has a tradition of hard work or that U.S. immigration laws favor admitting Asian immigrants who are already wealthy and highly educated, an advantage that they pass down to their children. I expected that Whites' self-esteem would be higher when they believed that Asian Americans succeeded because of hard work than immigration laws because of an increase in perceptions of system legitimacy.

I also predicted that this effect would depend on whether or not Whites were highly identified with their racial group. I reasoned that only when Whites believe

that their racial group membership affects their outcomes does the possibility of White privilege become a concern. When Whites do not feel closely linked with their racial group, they should not experience threat to their self-esteem when they believe that Whites are advantaged in society and therefore the model minority myth should not affect their self-esteem.

Method

Participants and procedure

Fifty-seven White participants (23 males and 34 females) with ages ranging from 20 to 61 ($M = 34.00$, $SD = 9.86$) completed the study online. Upon entering the study website, they gave informed consent, read information about the cause for Asians' success in American society, and completed questionnaires assessing their perceived system legitimacy and self-esteem. Finally, all participants were thanked, debriefed, and received a \$5 gift certificate from an online retailer as compensation for their participation.

Manipulation of the cause of Asian Americans' success. In order to manipulate how White participants believed Asian Americans succeeded in American society, they were randomly assigned to read what they were told was an excerpt from a newspaper article stating either that Asian Americans are highly educationally and economically successful in the United States because of a tradition of hard work or because Asian immigrants arrive in the U.S. already wealthy and well-educated. Thus, participants were either informed that Asians succeeded in the U.S. because of merit or because of inherited advantage.

All participants read the following:

A report released this year by the Center for Social Surveys concludes that Asian Americans are the most educationally and economically successful racial group in the United States, relative to Caucasians, Blacks, and Hispanics. Asian Americans excel in higher education: they make up roughly 35% of admissions at the top 30 U.S. colleges, outstripping all other racial groups. Further, 44.1% of Asian Americans obtain college degrees, compared with 24.4% nationwide. In terms of economic attainment, Asian American households have the highest median income in the United States, at \$57,518.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to either read that Asians have succeeded educationally and economically because of their own hard work or because of immigration policies. Participants in the *merit* condition read the following:

Fueling their success has been a tradition of hard work, which has been passed down through generations of Asian immigrants. These immigrants arrive in the United States with the drive to succeed that pushes them to excel. Asian immigrants are usually relatively poor, have low levels of education, and are in need of jobs when they arrive in the United States. Therefore, even though Asian immigrants arrive in the U.S. at the bottom of the social ladder, their third and fourth-generation descendants reach the top because of the tradition of self-discipline.

Participants in the *non-merit* condition read the following:

Fueling their success has been U.S. immigration policy, which favors entrance for highly educated and trained elites from Asia. These immigrants arrive in the United States with resources that allow them to succeed. Asian immigrants are usually privately wealthy, have high levels of education, and have job offers before they arrive in the United States as a result of family connections. Importantly, this privilege is passed on to future generations. Therefore, even third and fourth-generation Asian Americans have benefited from the head start that their families had when they arrived in the U.S.

Dependent Variables

Perceived system legitimacy. To measure participants' belief that American society is a legitimate system where people deserve the positions they occupy in the social hierarchy, I asked participants to rate their agreement with the same statement used in Study 1, "People who work hard can succeed in our society" from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

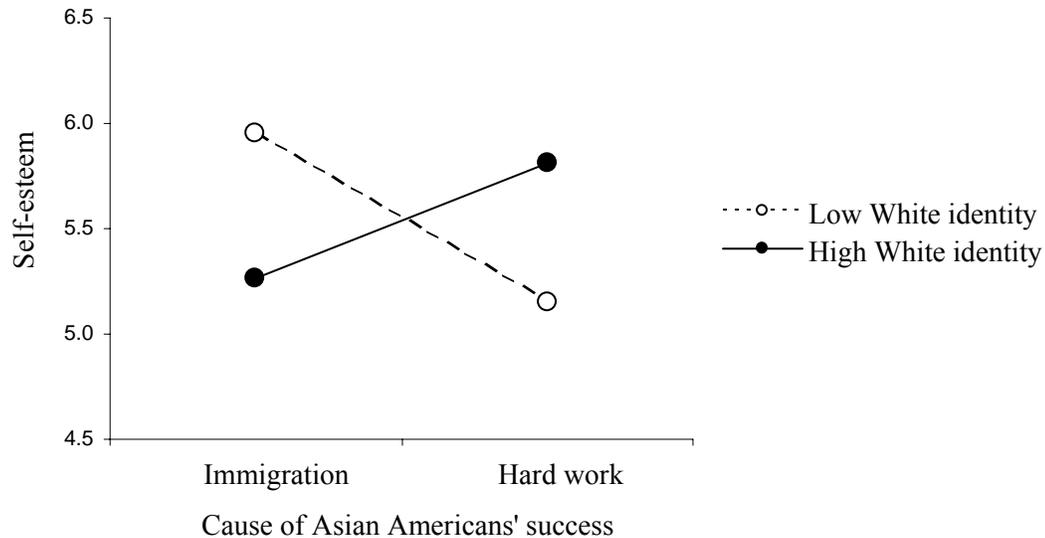
Self-esteem. In order to assess participants' self-esteem, I administered a shortened, five-item version of the same Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale used in Studies 1 and 2. Items included, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", "I feel that I have a number of good qualities", "I am able to do things as well as most other people", "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others", and "I take a positive attitude toward myself", $\alpha = .88$.

White racial identity. I assessed White participants' belief that their outcomes are tied to those of the White racial group by administering the nine-item White Racial Identity scale (Lowery et al., 2007), which measures participants' belief that they share a common fate with their racial group. Participants rated items on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items included, "My opportunities in life are tied to those of my racial group as a whole" and "Even assuming that my racial group as a whole enjoys unfair advantages in society, these advantages don't extend to me personally", $\alpha = .59$.

Results

I predicted that when Whites believed that Asian Americans succeeded in the United States due to merit, they would have higher self-esteem than when they believed that Asian Americans are a successful group because of immigration policies. However, I predicted that this effect would be moderated by White racial identity. To test this hypothesis, I regressed self-esteem on the manipulation of the cause of Asian Americans' success, White racial identity, and their interaction. There was no main effect of cause of Asian Americans' success, $t < 1$, or of White racial identity, $t < 1$, on self-esteem. Importantly, I found the predicted interaction between cause of Asian Americans' success and White racial identity, $B = .43$, $SE B = .19$, $\beta = .30$, $p < .05$. In order to visualize this interaction, in Figure 2 I plotted the effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on self-esteem at high (plus 1 *SD*) versus low (minus 1 *SD*) levels of White racial identity.

Figure 2. Effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on self-esteem at high and low levels of White identity in Study 3

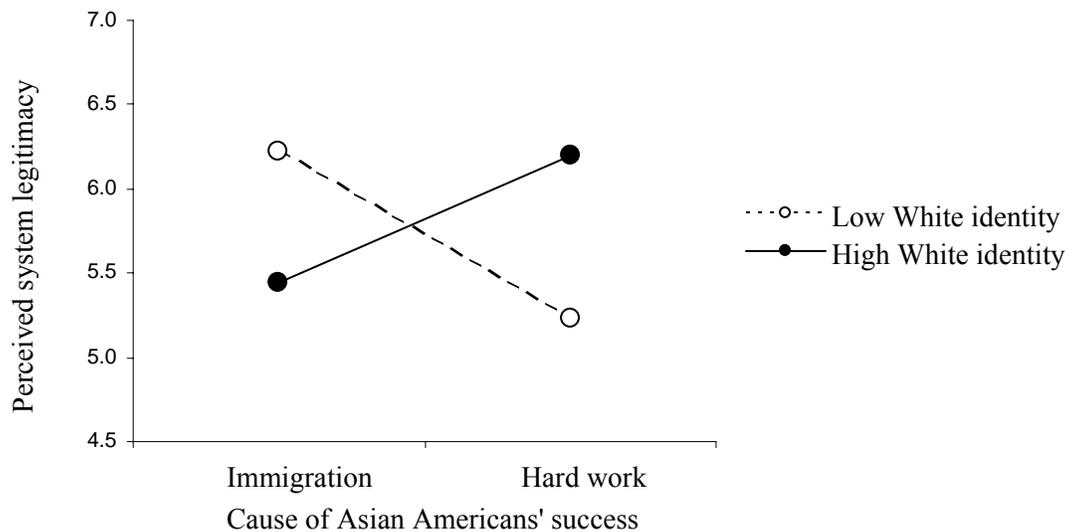


Simple slopes revealed that for highly identified Whites, the effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on self-esteem was nonsignificant, $B = .27$, $SE B = .21$, $\beta = .25$, $p = .19$, although the pattern was as predicted, where self-esteem was higher in the *merit* than in the *non-merit* condition. For low identified Whites, there was a marginal effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on self-esteem, $B = -.40$, $SE B = .21$, $\beta = -.36$, $p = .06$, such that self-esteem was higher in the *non-merit* than the *merit* condition.

I also predicted that the interaction reported above would be driven by the perception that the U.S. operates as a legitimate meritocracy. If this were the case, I expected that there would be a similar interactive effect of the manipulation of the cause of Asian Americans' success and White racial identity on perceived system legitimacy as there was on self-esteem. Therefore, I conducted the same analysis

reported above with perceived system legitimacy as the dependent variable. There was no main effect of cause of Asian Americans' success, $t < 1$, on perceived system legitimacy. There was a positive relationship between White racial identity and perceived system legitimacy, $B = .61$, $SE B = .25$, $\beta = .44$, $p < .05$. I found the predicted interaction between cause of Asian Americans' success and White racial identity, $B = .55$, $SE B = .18$, $\beta = .40$, $p < .005$. In order to visualize this interaction, I plotted the effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on perceived system legitimacy at high (plus 1 *SD*) versus low (minus 1 *SD*) levels of White racial identity in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on perceived system legitimacy at high and low levels of White identity in Study 3



Simple slopes revealed that for highly identified Whites, there was a marginally significant effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on perceived

system legitimacy, $B = .37$, $SE B = .19$, $\beta = .34$, $p = .06$, such that self-esteem was higher in the *merit* than the *non-merit* condition. For low identified Whites, there was a significant effect of cause of Asian Americans' success on perceived system legitimacy, $B = -.49$, $SE B = .20$, $\beta = -.46$, $p < .05$, such that self-esteem was higher in the *non-merit* than the *merit* condition.

To provide more direct evidence for the proposed mediation, I conducted an analysis according to the steps outlined by Aiken and West (1991). As reported above, there was a significant interaction between the manipulation of the cause of Asian Americans' success and White racial identity on self-esteem as well as on perceived system legitimacy (the proposed mediator). Next, I regressed self-esteem on perceived system legitimacy and found that legitimacy positively predicted self-esteem, $B = .33$, $SE B = .13$, $\beta = .32$, $p < .05$. Finally, I simultaneously entered cause of Asian Americans' success, White racial identity, their interaction, and perceived system legitimacy as predictors of self-esteem. I found that the effect of the interaction between cause of Asian Americans' success and White racial identity on self-esteem became non-significant, $B = .29$, $SE B = .20$, $\beta = .21$, $p = .15$, whereas the effect of perceived system legitimacy on self-esteem remained marginally significant, $B = .25$, $SE B = .14$, $\beta = .24$, $p = .09$. However, a Sobel test revealed that the mediation was not statistically significant, $z = 1.50$, $p = .13$.

Discussion

In Study 3, I provided evidence that the belief that Asian Americans have succeeded because of *merit* is the key characteristic of the model minority myth that helps Whites maintain their self-esteem and that the model minority myth impacts

Whites' self-concepts only when they are highly identified with the White racial group. I also provided further evidence that the belief that the United States is a legitimate, meritocratic system drives the effect of belief in the model minority myth on self-esteem.

Study 3 has several limitations. Most importantly, I did not find the expected significant simple effect of White racial identity on self-esteem in the condition where Whites were told that Asians succeeded based on merit. Further, the results of the mediation analysis were not statistically significant, though they trended in the predicted direction.

More importantly, none of the studies presented thus far provide direct evidence for the idea that the model minority stereotype can be used to protect Whites' self-esteem from threat. In Study 4, I provide evidence for this idea by manipulating the need to protect self-esteem.

Study 4

If endorsing the model minority stereotype can be used to protect Whites' self-esteem from the threat of system illegitimacy, then Whites whose self-esteem is protected should not have the need to recruit belief in the model minority. In Study 4, I experimentally manipulate the need to protect self-esteem with an affirmation. I predict that Whites who are affirmed will not need to protect their self-esteem from threat and therefore will show lower endorsement of the stereotype than Whites whose self-esteem is vulnerable (i.e., unaffirmed participants).

Method

Participants and procedure

Sixty-nine White participants (16 males and 53 females) with ages ranging from 31 to 67 ($M = 40.72$, $SD = 9.52$) completed the study online. Upon entering the study website, they gave informed consent, completed a manipulation of self-esteem, and responded to questionnaires assessing endorsement of the model minority stereotype and perceived legitimacy of the racial hierarchy. Finally, they were thanked and received a \$5 gift certificate from an online retailer as compensation for their participation.

Affirmation manipulation. In order to manipulate self-esteem, participants completed a standard self-affirmation manipulation (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997). All participants were asked to read a list of eleven personal values, including “artistic skills/aesthetic appreciation”, “sense of humor”, and “relations with friends/family”. Participants in the affirmation condition were asked to choose their most important value from the list and then to write several sentences about a time when that value was important to them. Participants in the control condition were asked to choose their least important value and to write about why that value might be important to someone else.

Dependent Variable

Endorsement of the model minority stereotype. In order to assess endorsement of the model minority stereotype, participants were asked to complete a subset of the same questions used to assess endorsement of the model minority stereotype in Studies 1 and 2 including, “Asian Americans are generally hardworking people”,

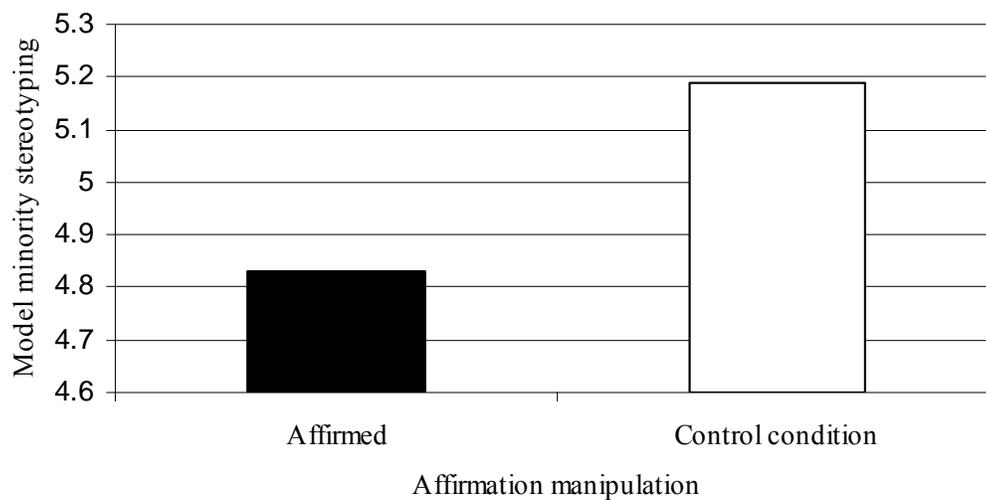
“Most Asian Americans are well-off”, and “Asian Americans are generally smart people”, $\alpha = .60$.

Results

There were no gender effects so gender is excluded from the analyses below. I predicted that participants who had been affirmed would endorse the model minority stereotype significantly more than participants who remained un-affirmed. If the model minority stereotype can improve Whites’ self-esteem, then when Whites are already affirmed should have less of a need to endorse the stereotype,

To test this hypothesis, I conducted a one-way ANOVA. Participants endorsed the model minority stereotype marginally less when they were affirmed ($M = 4.83$, $SD = .86$) than when they were not ($M = 5.19$; $SD = .67$), $F(1, 67) = 3.61$, $p = .06$. The effect can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Effect of affirmation manipulation on model minority stereotyping in Study 4



Discussion

In Study 4 I provide evidence that Whites can recruit the belief in a model minority to protect their self-esteem. Specifically, when Whites' self-esteem was buffered by an affirmation manipulation, they endorsed the model minority stereotype less than when their self-esteem was left vulnerable.

General discussion

Previous research on stereotyping and self-esteem demonstrated that negative stereotyping protects self-esteem because it allows individuals to make downward comparisons to other groups (Fein & Spencer, 1997), implicitly suggesting that positive stereotypes of outgroups should *decrease* self-esteem. However, in the current research, I demonstrate that positively stereotyping Asian Americans *increases* Whites' self-esteem. I provide evidence that Asian Americans, as a model minority group, provide social proof that the United States operates as a meritocracy. The belief that the system that created racial inequality is legitimate assuages Whites' equity concerns, consequently increasing their self-esteem.

In Study 1, I demonstrated that the belief that Asian Americans are competent, hard-working, and successful increases Whites' self-esteem, and further, that this effect is driven by perceptions that the United States is a legitimate meritocracy. In Study 2, I found that when Whites are threatened by the possibility that there is racial inequity, they experience higher self-esteem when they are able to positively stereotype Asian Americans than when they are not. In Study 3, I provided some evidence in support of the assumption that the key feature of the model minority stereotype that helps protect Whites' self-esteem is that the model minority group is

believed to have succeeded *because of merit*. Finally, in Study 4, I show that Whites can recruit the model minority stereotype to protect their self-esteem when it is vulnerable.

The current research provides evidence for the importance of the belief that Whites deserve their advantage for Whites' self-concepts. Previous work demonstrated that Whites' self-esteem was threatened by perceptions of group privilege (Lowery et al., 2007). The current work goes further, showing that group privilege is so disconcerting that Whites will even engage in unflattering upward comparisons in order to maintain the belief that they deserve what they have.

These results have important implications for Asian Americans. Although the model minority stereotype is superficially positive and might be expected to benefit Asian Americans, it actually has many negative effects, both interpersonal and intrapersonal. First, Whites are threatened by Asian Americans due to their model minority characteristics, and this drives negative attitudes and emotions toward Asian Americans (Maddux, Galinsky, Cuddy, & Polifroni, 2008). Additionally, the model minority stereotype can negatively impact Asian Americans' mental health: Asian Americans believe they have to live up to a sometimes impossible ideal and may hide failures in order to maintain this positive image, leading to further failure and low self-esteem (Lee, 1994). The negative effects of the model minority stereotype on Asian Americans may be particularly difficult to escape due to the importance of the stereotype for the esteem of White Americans.

Future extensions of this work might include more closely examining the role of perceived system legitimacy in Whites' self-esteem. It might be that the belief that

the system is legitimate, in and of itself, is enough to protect self-esteem because of a general desire to see the world as just. However, I expect that system legitimacy positively affects self-esteem because it allows that Whites' own position *within* the system is just.

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