Reinforcing or Challenging the Status Quo: A Grounded Theory of How the Model Minority Myth Shapes Asian American Activism

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Compared to other People of Color in the United States, Asian Americans are often seen as uninterested in activism. Furthermore, the widespread model minority myth (MMM) perpetuates the monolithic image of Asian Americans as successful in society and thus unaffected by racial oppression and uninterested in activism. Despite others' perceptions, Asian American college students have historically engaged in activist efforts and worked to reject the stereotypical views of their racial group as apolitical under the MMM. However, much remains to be learned about the consequences of the MMM on Asian American college students' perceptions and engagement in activism, and how such individuals make sense of the MMM and activism through interacting with their ecological contexts. Thus, the present study addresses this gap in the literature and is guided by the question: How do Asian American college students' perspectives and engagement in activism develop and operate in relation to the MMM? Using a constructivist grounded theory analytic approach, 25 Asian American college students participated in semistructured interviews, and our findings developed a grounded theory of how Asian American college students are embedded within micro- and macrolevel environments (e.g., familial, cultural, and societal contexts) that uphold the MMM and further shape how they make sense of and engage in activism. Results further revealed the consequences of the MMM as a legitimizing ideology on Asian American students' attitudes toward and involvement in challenging and/or reinforcing the status quo. Implications for future research and practice supporting Asian American activism and the broader pursuit for social justice are discussed.

Public Significance Statement
The present study suggests that Asian American college student activism needs to be understood in relation to the model minority myth. This study highlights the interconnections among the sources, experiences, and consequences of the model minority myth, as well as informs future research and practice that further explores Asian Americans in their work toward social justice.

Keywords: Asian Americans, model minority myth, activism, ecological contexts, grounded theory

Amidst horrific incidents of anti-Asian violence that have surged since the pandemic, Asian Americans have engaged in various social justice efforts such as the forming of the Stop Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Hate coalition and hashtag activism campaign to combat racial discrimination against their communities (Tao et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2023). Many Asian American activist groups have also cautioned against utilizing these incidents as reasons to increase policing, and instead, they have further pursued solidarity and activism with other communities of color and supported the Black Lives Matter movement (Litam & Chan, 2021; Wong & Liu, 2022). But despite these realities, the dominant narrative of Asian Americans in U.S. society continues to fall under the model minority myth (MMM), where Asian Americans are largely viewed as unaffected by racial oppression and unengaged in racial justice work (Sue et al., 2021). This typecasting of Asian Americans as a problem-free group may appear

positive and harmless on its surface, but its ramifications are divisive (Kiang et al., 2017). The MMM is inaccurate, given that it lumps together a diverse group with varying privileges and vulnerabilities and minimizes the significant racial discrimination faced by the Asian American community. Furthermore, a growing body of research demonstrates that when Asian Americans internalize the MMM, they are less likely to be interested and engaged in activism (Lin, 2020; Litam & Chan, 2021; Matriano et al., 2021; Ouch & Moradi, 2022; J. Tran & Curtin, 2017). Thus, Asian Americans may adopt detrimental assumptions that are pervasive in U.S. society and view their own racial group as unaffected by racism, which in turn may shape disinterest and disengagement in efforts to challenge inequality.

Yet, Asian Americans have a rich history of involvement in sociopolitical efforts to resist systemic oppression and continue to fight in the struggle for social justice in the United States (Fujino & Rodriguez, 2022). Asian American college students in particular have worked to reject the stereotypical perception of their racial group as apolitical under the MMM and play a major role in challenging racial inequity (Museus et al., 2021). However, much remains to be learned about the consequences of the MMM on Asian American college students' perceptions and engagement in activism, and how such individuals make sense of the relationship between the MMM and activism through interacting with their ecological contexts. Uniquely drawing from literature on legitimizing ideologies and ecological contexts, the present study contributes to the extant research by providing an in-depth, qualitative exploration of how Asian American college student activism develops and operates in relation to the MMM. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, this study sought to develop a theory of the MMM's role in activism grounded in the lived experiences of a sample of Asian American college students. In the following sections, we review the literature on how the MMM shapes Asian American activism by serving as a legitimizing ideology and operating within and through various ecological contexts.

The MMM as a Legitimizing Ideology

In their recent commentary, "Who are the Asian Americans?" Sue et al. (2021) wrote, "Of all stereotypes associated with being Asian American, none is more notable than that of being a model minority—an exceptional group that is successful and achieving, deserving to be emulated" (p. 690). Scholars define the MMM as a set of stereotypes of Asian Americans as a homogeneous group that is hardworking and self-disciplined, as well as having achieved high levels of academic and economic success (Poon et al., 2016). The MMM also presents a set of interpersonal stereotypes about Asian Americans as shy, quiet, submissive, and lacking sociability. While some Asian Americans view the MMM stereotype with pride given that it portrays their group as high achieving, others experience the stereotype as burdensome as it breeds pressure to live up to unreasonable expectations (Chou & Feagin, 2015). Indeed, internalizing this stereotype has been associated with greater psychological distress, anxiety, and depression for Asian Americans (Gupta et al., 2011; Yoo et al., 2015).

However, other scholars argue the MMM is not simply a stereotype but rather a racial device and rhetorical strategy with insidious implications for perpetuating white[1] supremacy in the United States (Poon et al., 2016). Historically, the MMM has functioned as a political tool to justify racial inequality by discrediting the role of racism in the lives of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), but in particular Black Americans (C. J. Kim, 1999). The origin of the term "model minority" can be traced back to sociologist William Petersen, who wrote about the socioeconomic success of a select segment of Asian Americans, specifically Chinese and Japanese Americans, in contrast to the poverty of Black Americans in the 1960s. While Asian Americans were lauded for their strong work ethic, Black Americans were stigmatized as a lazy and inferior group who inherently did not value academic achievement. These views of racially minoritized groups persist today and have resulted in unfair racial hierarchies, where Black Americans are at the bottom, White Americans are at the top, and Asian Americans are positioned in the middle as "honorary Whites" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022).

C. J. Kim's (1999, 2018, 2023) work further theorizes how Asian Americans are racialized vis-à-vis White and Black Americans. According to her theory of racial triangulation, Asian Americans are more "relatively valorized" than Black Americans, yet are less valorized than White Americans, because they are "civically ostracized" from society, or perceived as perpetual foreigners who can never fully assimilate in America and thus are limited in their political power (C. J. Kim, 1999). Asian Americans are restricted in their civic voice in order to serve as an example of a racial group that has become successful without "complaining," and stereotypes of Asian Americans as quiet and obedient bolster this image (Chou & Feagin, 2015). Moreover, C. J. Kim's (2023) recent work emphasizes that Asian Americans have real structural advantages relative to Black Americans, and that "many if not most Asian Americans embrace the boon of not-Blackness. Like other immigrants, they achieved socioeconomic progress in part by 'stepping on the backs' of Black people" (p. 13). And yet, while Asian Americans have aligned with anti-Black racism, they do not receive the full protection of white privilege. White Americans remain at the top of U.S. racial arrangements, and the MMM contributes to the marginalization of Asian Americans such that "white supremacy has pushed them down, and anti-Blackness has provided the floor beneath which they cannot fall" (C. J. Kim, 2018, p. 226).

Expanding on this work, the present study conceptualizes the MMM as a legitimizing ideology, or a set of beliefs that justify the status quo and perpetuate inequality in society (Jost & Major, 2001). Legitimizing ideology theory asserts that people are motivated to perceive existing social systems as legitimate and fair, because doing so provides psychological benefits, such as an increased sense of control and avoidance of existential threat. Endorsing legitimizing ideologies involves individual and cultural attributions to systemic problems, such as maintaining that hard work always equates success and individuals are solely responsible for their socioeconomic status (Jost, 2021). The MMM functions as a legitimizing ideology that justifies the "American dream" of meritocracy and victim-blaming explanations of inequality rather than acknowledging structural barriers to upward mobility (Yi & Todd, 2021). Furthermore, by

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[1] We capitalized "White" when used to label a group of people. We did not capitalize "white" when discussing concepts of white supremacy, white privilege, and whiteness. Aligned with previous scholarship (Dumas, 2016; C. J. Kim, 2023; Liu et al., 2023), "white" is not capitalized to highlight the instability of these social constructs and to assert a critical stance against white supremacy.

portraying Asian Americans as a monolithic group of problem-free minorities, the MMM dismisses Asian Americans' experiences of marginalization, including anti-Asian violence, xenophobia, and microaggressions, which can further take on different meanings and create unique challenges for Asian Americans of different ethnicities, skin tones, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007).

Scholars argue Asian Americans' internalization of the MMM is a form of internalized racism, which is a particularly insidious, often unconscious manifestation of racism (Hwang, 2021). It involves the subjugation of one's own racial group through the adoption of white supremacist messaging and has been associated with decreased self-esteem, sense of belonging, and quality of life among Asian Americans (David & Okazaki, 2006; Gupta et al., 2011). These findings are in line with extant scholarship on legitimizing ideologies, which posits that justifying the status quo has consequences for the well-being of oppressed groups (Jost & Major, 2001). Yet, the motivation to rationalize inequality persists among marginalized groups because endorsing legitimizing ideologies fosters a shared sense of social reality, even if false, where people believe structural barriers no longer exist and everyone has an equal chance at success (Jost, 2021). Thus, marginalized group members who endorse legitimizing ideologies are less likely to perceive themselves as targets of prejudice, are more likely to accept blame for structural disadvantages they face, and moreover, are less likely to engage in activism geared toward reducing inequalities (Yi et al., 2020). For Asian Americans who internalize the MMM, there also may be a reluctance toward engaging in activism out of fear of "rocking the boat" and the belief that it may be more beneficial to conform to the racial status quo (Chou & Feagin, 2015). Internalization of the MMM further damages interracial solidarity and has been empirically linked to greater endorsement of anti-Black stereotypes, decreased support for Black Lives Matter, and less engagement in intergroup collective action (e.g., participating in rallies for other BIPOC) among Asian American college students (Matriano et al., 2021; Ouch & Moradi, 2022; Yi & Todd, 2021). Using a qualitative approach, the present study explores how the MMM, as a legitimizing ideology, hinders Asian American activism.

Ecological Contexts and Asian American Activism

The present study also examines how the MMM operates within and through ecological contexts of family, Asian cultural processes, and U.S. societal hierarchies to shape Asian American college students' perspectives and engagement in activism. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST) provides a broad framework for understanding Asian American college students, specifically through their interactions with (a) *microlevel* contexts, or individuals in their immediate surroundings such as their family members; as well as their existence within (b) *macrolevel* contexts, which include cultural values and practices and broader social, political, and economic systems. It is important to acknowledge EST was developed through a White American lens and has been criticized for undertheorizing the impact of systemic racism on the development of BIPOC (Liu et al., 2023). Thus, we also draw from Spencer's (2006) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST), which emphasizes that systemic racism is a contextually embedded stressor that creates vulnerabilities for BIPOC. PVEST

extends on EST by conceptualizing how individuals understand their racial identities, perceive societal inequality, and engage or not in activism as forms of meaning-making of one's ecological contexts (Cunningham et al., 2023; Hope & Spencer, 2017). Some ecological contexts may facilitate critical consciousness development, where people become aware of how structural forces maintain privilege and oppression rather than attributing inequities to individual factors (Watts et al., 2011). Other ecological contexts may not provide opportunities for growing critical consciousness and instead enable the development of legitimizing ideologies (Barr & Neville, 2014). According to PVEST, when marginalized groups are in either of these contexts, activism can serve as an adaptive coping strategy, where individuals take an active role in changing oppressive social conditions (Hope et al., 2019). Together, these frameworks informed our focus on examining microlevel familial contexts and macrolevel cultural and societal contexts as sources of the MMM that reinforce the status quo and have consequences for how Asian Americans make sense of and engage in activism.

Microlevel Familial Contexts

Family is an important microlevel context where beliefs are transmitted to Asian American college students. A sizable body of literature demonstrates how Asian parents socialize their children under the MMM (Juang et al., 2017). Parents may embrace the MMM by encouraging or pressuring their children to live up to high educational expectations, as well as differentiating their children and themselves from negative stereotypes of other racially minoritized groups (Yoon et al., 2023). For example, Atkin and Ahn (2022) found that Asian Americans received and adopted anti-Black and colorblind messages from their parents that reinforced unjust racial hierarchies and dismissed structural barriers to success. Such findings are in line with the conceptualization of the MMM as a legitimizing ideology, which when endorsed by parents, may instill a sense of hope that their children can attain the "American dream" through academic prowess and justifies the sacrifices they have made to immigrate to the United States. Research shows Asian parents implicitly and explicitly pass on their internalized MMM to their children, which in turn can have negative consequences for Asian American youth's mental health and well-being (Yoo et al., 2015). Yet little is known about how parents' endorsement of the MMM shapes their children's engagement in activism. Building on previous findings of Asian American parental socialization messages, the present study explores how Asian American college students' interactions with their family may shape activism engagement.

Macrolevel Cultural and Societal Contexts

The present study also investigates the role of macrolevel contexts of Asian culture and U.S. societal hierarchies in the lives of Asian American college students. We conceptualize Asian culture as a macrolevel phenomenon that is constructed and maintained through shared beliefs and behaviors of individuals and involves the adoption of cultural values and participation in collective activities that have roots in Asian cultures of origin (e.g., respecting authority, practicing interdependence; Uchida et al., 2020). Such Asian cultural processes may play a role in how Asian American individuals make sense of the MMM. Yoo et al. (2010) found greater endorsement of specific Asian cultural values (e.g.,

conformity to norms, family recognition through achievement) was associated with greater internalized MMM among Asian American college students. P. Y. Kim and Lee (2014) further demonstrated how the adoption of certain Asian cultural values, specifically emotional self-control, explained the linkage between internalized MMM and reduced willingness to seek mental health support. These authors theorize that such links between adopting certain facets of Asian culture and internalized MMM may be attributed to the desire to strengthen a positive sense of identity as an Asian American and more generally preserve a positive self-image. Thus, while Asian cultural processes may, at times, reinforce the MMM, it is important to consider the function that internalizing the MMM may serve for individuals, particularly in light of the larger U.S. societal context. The MMM operates within and through U.S. societal hierarchies of white supremacy and anti-Black racism, where People of Color are pitted against each other (Poon et al., 2016). While some Asian Americans may become critically conscious of the MMM's harmful implications, the ubiquitous nature of the MMM facilitates widespread adoption of the myth, where Asian Americans may internalize beliefs that their racial group is problem-free, that structural disadvantages for BIPOC do not exist, and that alignment with white supremacy and anti-Black racism is beneficial (C. J. Kim, 2023; Yoon et al., 2023). Extending this work, the present study explores how Asian American college students make sense of the MMM through interacting with Asian culture and U.S. societal hierarchies, as well as how these macrolevel contexts may shape their activism.

The Present Study

While a growing number of studies examine how and why Asian Americans engage in activism, little research has examined the role of the MMM in Asian American student activism, particularly through the lenses of legitimizing ideologies and ecological environments. Thus, the present study addresses this gap and is guided by the question: How do Asian American college students' perspectives and engagement in activism develop and operate in relation to the MMM? Using a qualitative inquiry approach, this study provides an in-depth examination of how micro- and macrolevel ecological contexts of family, Asian culture, and U.S. societal hierarchies shape Asian American college students' meaning-making and lived experiences with the MMM and activism. The present study further investigates the consequences of the MMM as a legitimizing ideology on Asian American college students' attitudes toward and involvement in challenging and/or reinforcing the status quo. Specifically, this study utilizes constructivist grounded theory, where we draw from extant theoretical work on legitimizing ideologies and ecological contexts to develop a theory of how the MMM shapes Asian American activism.

Method

Inquiry Approaches and Positionality

Constructivist grounded theory allows researchers to create theories to describe how and why social processes occur (Charmaz, 2014). Compared to previous grounded theory approaches, constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that the researcher is not a "tabula rasa" and indeed enters the research process with preexisting knowledge. For the present study, we draw from theoretical work on ecological environments and legitimizing ideologies. Also, we were informed by the critical–ideological paradigm, which emphasizes how lived experiences are socially constructed and shaped by power, privilege, and oppression (Levitt et al., 2021). This paradigm articulates that a key goal of research is to challenge the status quo and aid in the liberation of oppressed groups, as well as stresses the role of researcher biases and values in the process (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, it is important to acknowledge our positionalities and how our personal and professional experiences have shaped this investigation. For example, the first author's research interests stem from her identities and experiences as an Asian American, and more specifically as a second-generation Korean American ciswoman. Her interest in college student activism is shaped by her undergraduate experiences of engaging with social justice issues and developing strong connections with her Asian American identity. As a graduate student, she worked professionally with Asian American college students and has continued to experience how college environments can facilitate identity and activism development. The second author identifies as a White, gay, cisman, professor who conducts research related to whiteness, social justice, religion, and LGBTQ health equity. Both authors' training in clinical-community psychology and experiences engaging in scholarship on critical race studies, social change, and ecological analysis have informed their values and commitments to conducting research that considers contextual factors and ultimately challenges systemic inequality.

Study Participants and Procedure

The present study was conducted as the first author's dissertation project. We received approval from our university's institutional review board. A total of 25 Asian American college students participated in the project, five of whom were recruited for the member-checking process. The first 20 participants were recruited through the Psychology Department subject pool, contacting student organizations, and posting flyers on campus. The goal of these procedures was to obtain a sample of Asian American students that varied in their amount and type of activism, along with representation of other intersections of diversity (e.g., ethnicity, gender). The first author conducted interviews from January 2018 to May 2019. Each student was given a pseudonym and reported their ethnicity, gender, and class year (see Table 1). Additionally, students responded to the question, "Are there other aspects of your identity that you would like to share?" and provided other identities, such as their ability status and religion. These 20 students engaged in semistructured interviews on topic areas, such as attitudes toward the MMM and perspectives and experiences of activism. Participants were asked if they were involved in activism, and depending on whether they responded "yes" or "no," different follow-up questions were asked (e.g., If "no": Tell me more about why not. How do you feel about activism? Why do you think others engage in activism?). A final set of interview questions explored connections between topic areas (e.g., How, if at all, does the MMM play a role in your activism?). Four interviewees were randomly selected to receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

Finally, the first author engaged in a twofold process of member-checking, where emerging findings were tested and developed through further data collection. This process supported the validation of results by seeking "disconfirming evidence" and

Table 1

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Class year	Other social identities[a]
Alex	Filipinx	A-gender	First year	Gay
Bobby	Korean	Man	Senior	—
Chloe	Chinese	Woman	Sophomore	—
Devin	Taiwanese	Nonbinary	First year	Mental disabilities (social anxiety, panic attacks, depression)
Eva	Indian	Woman	Sophomore	Straight
Florence	Korean	Woman	Senior	Heterosexual, not religious, middle class
Gabby	Korean	Woman	First year	Christian, lower middle class, bisexual
Harrison	Indian	Man	Junior	Muslim
Ian	Chinese, Lao	Man	Junior	—
Jessica	Filipinx	Woman	Sophomore	Catholic
Kayla	Filipinx	Woman	Senior	U.S. citizen
Leah	Pakistani	Woman	Junior	First-generation immigrant, heterosexual
Miranda	Taiwanese	Woman	First year	Second generation, upper middle class
Naomi	Chinese	Woman	First year	Upper middle class, catholic
Olivia	Indian	Woman	First year	Straight, catholic, middle class
Penelope	Korean	Woman	First year	Middle class
Quinn	Indian	Woman	Senior	Lower class
Rowan	Thai, Puerto Rican, Mexican	Man	Senior	Straight, middle class, nonspiritual
Sam	Chinese	Questioning	First year	Lower middle class
Tia	Chinese	Woman	Senior	No religion, straight, middle class
Una[b]	Chinese	Woman	Senior	
Valerie[b]	Chinese	Woman	Junior	
Willow[b]	Korean	Woman	Sophomore	
Xena[b]	Filipinx	Woman	Junior	
Yuri[b]	Taiwanese	Woman	Senior	

[a] "—" indicates the participant answered no to the question "Are there other aspects of your identity you would like to share?" New member-check participants were not asked this question. [b] Indicates new member-check participants.

worked to mitigate confirmation bias (Morrow, 2005, p. 256). Both components of the member-checking process were conducted from March 2021 to August 2021. It was especially important to conduct these interviews in 2021 to consider how the phenomenon of Asian American activism may have changed in the context of COVID-19. For the first component of this process, the first author met with five of the 20 previously interviewed participants, who represented a range of Asian ethnic backgrounds, genders, academic years, and levels of activism engagement, to discuss initial interpretations of analyzed data from the whole sample. Then, using the previous recruitment procedures, the first author met with five new participants to engage in a similar process, with the addition of further inquiring about their experiences that may have not been represented in the initial findings shared with them. Each of these participants received a $15 Amazon gift card as compensation. Member-checking participants' data were incorporated into the results, where direct quotes and observations of their perspectives and experiences were included among the results of the original 20 participants. The member-checking process not only helped to confirm or disconfirm data collected in the previous interviews but also provided additional insights into how Asian American students' perspectives and experiences may have changed since 2019.

Analytic Strategy

Interview data were analyzed through a constructivist grounded theory analytic process (Charmaz, 2014). This process involved writing memos, which document the researchers' observations and reflections throughout the project (Charmaz, 2014). For example, the first author wrote a "bias" memo at the beginning of the project

that reflected on how her East Asian identity may shape her perspectives on inter- and intraracial hierarchies, which may differ from the perspectives of South and Southeast Asian participants. The second author also wrote a bias memo, noting how his position as a White gay professor of his age may shape how he engaged with the interview text. Also, the authors looked for theoretical saturation during data collection, where redundant findings may have emerged and additional interviews did not reveal substantially new information (Morrow, 2005). The first author was the primary coder and began with a line-by-line coding process, which involved identifying units of meaning through close examination of the data. She then developed focus codes, or themes that were identified through comparing initial codes, and finally engaged in an axial coding process to examine relationships across focus codes and organize them into a coding system with broader, more encompassing key categories that subsume several subcategories (Charmaz, 2014). The second author supported the coding process in his role as the first author's dissertation chair. He approached this process as providing a reflective space for the first author to process and reflect on their analysis. In his initial bias memo, he also reflected on the potential challenges of coding across role (professor/graduate student) where this power differential could lead to (a) his ideas being weighted more heavily than they should and (b) him self-silencing and not providing adequate feedback out of a concern that his voice would carry too much weight. To address this tension, he viewed his role as being a careful listener, asking curious questions to create a space for himself and the first author to engage in reflexivity (Morrow, 2005). He also provided support by line-by-line coding the first two interviews and discussing coding with the first author, and then meeting on a regular basis to discuss emerging

findings, often asking questions to facilitate reflexivity. Finally, he also provided feedback on how to approach the process of member checking. Overall, in this coding process, the researchers aimed to construct meaning by developing themes that captured the lived experiences of participants.

Results

Figure 1 visually represents our study findings and emerging theoretical model of the role of the MMM in Asian American activism. The model portrays how the MMM boxes Asian Americans into an unjust racial system and serves as a barrier to activism. Yet, in our sample, many Asian American college students break out of this box and engage in activism to challenge the MMM and change the status quo. The model also demonstrates how Asian Americans are embedded within micro- (e.g., familial) and macrolevel environments (e.g., cultural and societal contexts) that create and consequently maintain the MMM. In the sections below, we first illustrate the lived experiences of Asian American college students under the MMM, specifically their experiences in understanding and navigating Asian American stereotypes and racial–ethnic hierarchies. Next, we

Figure 1
Theoretical Model of the MMM Shaping Asian American Activism
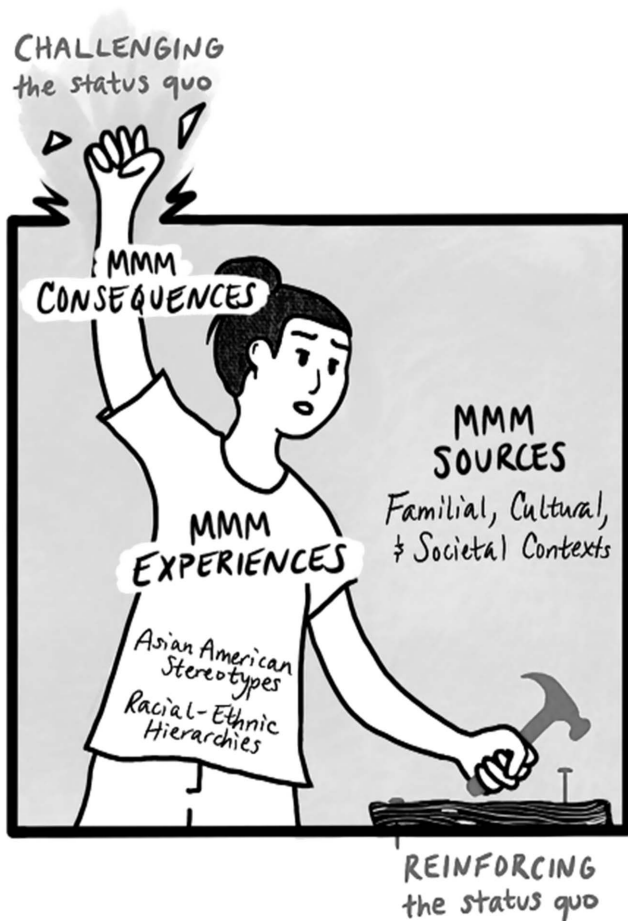
Note. This figure was illustrated by Markera Jones. MMM = model minority myth.

describe what participants cited as the sources of the MMM, which stemmed from their families, Asian culture, and broader society. Finally, we discuss how reinforcement of the status quo is a consequence of the MMM, which is visually represented in the model as the individual's hand that hammers down the box and keeps it intact. This imagery is drawn from the Japanese proverb, "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down," which represents the Asian cultural value of conformity (Tokunaga, 2003). However, the other hand, which breaks out of the box, represents participants' engagement in activism to challenge the status quo. This hand is raised into a fist, which historically is a symbol of racial solidarity originating from Black Power movements (Marback, 2008). Overall, our emerging model depicts the interconnections among the sources, experiences, and consequences of the MMM and emphasizes challenging racial oppression through Asian American activism.

Experiences of the MMM

Navigating Asian American Stereotypes

Many participants defined the MMM as a set of stereotypes that oversimplifies the experiences of Asian Americans. Primarily, participants described stereotypes that portray Asian Americans as hardworking, academically and economically successful, and highly intelligent particularly at math and science. Harrison described how people perceive members of his racial–ethnic group:

> In high school, people said, "Oh you're Indian, you'll get into college, you don't have to worry." Because the model minority image is that being an Asian American, you're supposed to succeed, you're smart, you'll probably go into the field of math, you'll probably be an engineer, doctor or lawyer.

Many participants problematized these sweeping stereotypes, such as Alex, who asserted the MMM "discredits all this complexity of an entire continent, so I feel it's very unhelpful. People should really try to stray away from 'these people are really hardworking because they are Asian,' but instead 'they are hardworking because they are that person.'" Participants expressed frustration about how these stereotypes, although seemingly positive, place generalizations on a diverse group and rob Asian Americans of their personhood.

Many participants described a process of how they learned the MMM is perpetuated by society and can have negative implications for those on the receiving end of stereotypes. Some participants reflected on how they learned about the tensions of conforming to MMM stereotypes, such as Alex, who experienced a shift in feeling proud to be the model minority:

> Sometimes it would feed your ego, like "Oh yes, I'm smarter than other people," but it started to inflate your ego to the point where you feel you're better than other people, which I do admit, for a long time I fed into that. But when I really started to look into it, I was like, "Wow, I'm not really being appreciated for anything else, beside the 'Can I copy your homework?' type of thing." It's interesting, because of course you want to be thought of as smart, but then they don't have an understanding of who you actually are.

Chloe similarly reflected:

> I feel proud to be Asian, and it was normalized in everyone's mind that I have to be smart … but these stories said before my time are not something I can control. It wasn't until I became older that I learned

about it. These are things outside of me, they are created by society and how they define me. But they don't define me.

Many participants described how the MMM portrays Asian Americans as "problem-free," which can have negative consequences for mental health. They reflected on the pressures they previously and currently face to meet MMM academic expectations. Naomi explained how it was stressful to attend her high school because of the assumptions of her peers and teachers:

> People think I'm supposed to be super good at certain things, when in reality I'm just kind of average in those things. But I feel like I'm supposed to be perfect … if you don't fit into that category, that can take a really big toll on you, because you think, "I'm not good enough. I'm not doing this right. I'm letting myself down. I'm letting others down."

Many participants also emphasized the role of Asian families in pressuring them to succeed, such as Florence, who reflected:

> The model minority idea kind of gives me anxiety. Because in Asian culture, you're expected to do everything for your family, so it's always in the back of my mind, "I'm not doing enough to pay back my parents and be grateful to them."

Because MMM stereotypes depict Asian Americans as high achieving, some participants felt that they could not seek help for academic concerns. Sam discussed how Asian Americans may not receive academic help due to pervasive MMM stereotypes:

> I think my struggles academically are not perceived or not really believed. Also, I've heard about how an Asian American girl failed C.S. at my high school, and her instructor told her, "You can't be failing because you're Asian American." So she stood up and she talked about how she felt like she wasn't getting the help that she needs.

Thus, MMM stereotypes that position their racial group as "problem-free" created challenges for participants to seek help.

A few participants also described how the MMM is comprised of stereotypes about Asian Americans as quiet, shy, and compliant. Penelope described how the MMM tells Asian Americans that they should "blend in, don't do anything that creates a lot of attention. But still contribute a lot to society, just be more in the background." Sam further asserted that "Asian Americans are not typically known to have leadership skills … they internalize the MMM of being kind of robotic, doing the work, not necessarily being the stakeholder, the leader." Furthermore, Leah stated:

> Part of being a model minority is just staying silent, staying implicit in the social structures … if they make a joke about being Asian or South Asian, like "You guys are taxi drivers," you'll laugh and say, "Haha yeah, you're so right."

Overall, participants perceived MMM stereotypes of being quiet as an obstacle for Asian Americans to speak out against injustice or broadly voice their concerns.

Navigating Racial–Ethnic Hierarchies

Several participants also emphasized how experiences of the MMM may differ across Asian ethnic groups. They explained how all Asian Americans are subjected to the MMM, but society primarily recognizes East Asians as model minorities. When defining the MMM, Tia, a Chinese American participant, specifically asserted that "Chinese people are the model minority. If you're Chinese, you're

basically gonna do well, or like, you have to do well." Participants discussed how, compared to East Asians, Southeast and South Asian groups experience certain disadvantages that contradict the MMM. For example, Quinn, an Indian American participant, elaborated on differences in socioeconomic status and education level based on Asian ethnicity:

> It's really easy to put people in these boxes and say, "You're a model minority," but it looks different for different people. Everybody assumes that Asians are the most college educated, which is true, of all the minority groups … However, the majority of those degrees are from community colleges, so there is clearly an economic divide there. And Southeast Asians have some of the highest high school dropout rates, and people don't look at that. They just aggregate the data and say, "All of you guys are model minorities."

Quinn also described "a difference between how South Asians are successful or not too, versus how it's like for East and Southeast Asians." She noted that South Asians experience "an added layer of racism … after 9/11 there was a heightened amount of racist attacks on South Asians … those are experiences you're never going to have if you're East or Southeast Asian." Harrison, another Indian American participant, also discussed these differences:

> [White Americans] see us as neutral, but there are groups that see us as negative, especially depending on what type of Asian American you are. If you're East Asian, you're just the person that's good at math, and they're like, "Cook my Chinese food." If you're South Asian or Middle Eastern, you're a terrorist, and we don't like you.

Such experiences of discrimination are in opposition to the "problem-free" MMM image and highlight how Asian Americans perceive that there is an ethnic-based hierarchy, where participants described East Asians at the top.

Some participants further noted how, in the broader U.S. racial system, Asian Americans are depicted as a privileged racial minority group that does not experience oppression. Alex stated how the MMM has obscured their disadvantages based on various identities: "A model minority is probably not going to be transgender and gay … I genuinely do not think that my identity, or my lifestyle rejects … I am rejected by that myth." Naomi further explained that the public thinks "if you're the model minority as an Asian, you're almost as equal to a Caucasian." Participants described how the MMM portrays Asian Americans in close proximity to whiteness, but they argued that Asian Americans are not given the same advantages as White Americans. Chloe elaborated:

> We're fondly looked upon, but not fondly enough. It's this discourse that we are smart enough, successful enough, but in actual reality they would never give us the amount of opportunities they would give to a White American. It's just not the same.

Naomi further stated, "There's also that weird thing where you're not fully Caucasian, but you're also not fully American, versus you're not fully Asian. So there's that discrepancy that does create issues." Thus, Asian Americans are seen as outsiders and cannot be accepted as American, which participants discussed is often synonymous with whiteness.

When reflecting on race relations in the United States, a few participants emphasized that Asian Americans are positioned "in-between" White Americans and other racially minoritized groups, such as Black and Latinx Americans. Eva stated, "Other people

perceive Asians like … 'they're the *good* minority,' which is stupid, because what's a good and bad minority?" Leah also noted,

> The whole concept of the model minority is messed up to me and stems from not a good place. It's a hierarchy and you're putting certain people below and certain people above, and you're telling those people below to come up to the ladder and assimilate.

Participants discussed how their positioning in the racial hierarchy impacts how they relate to other groups. Sam described:

> It's something that I'm still grappling with, because as an Asian American, I see other People of Color and it's like, "How am I supposed to perceive you? Are you competition? Are we supposed to be friends?" As an Asian American, I think the way I interact with people is different than if I were White. It just complicates relationships.

Thus, participants experienced unique tensions with other People of Color due to the comparison and competition perpetuated by the MMM.

In our emerging theory of the MMM and Asian American activism, the experiences of navigating stereotypes and racial–ethnic hierarchies are interconnected. Asian American college students described how they are monolithically perceived as a hardworking, compliant racial group and experienced high expectations and pressures to uphold this image. Findings also revealed that Asian Americans experienced the MMM as a racial bind, where they are placed between White Americans and other People of Color. Asian Americans are presented as a model of minority success, and the MMM dismisses their struggles, such as their different experiences of marginalization based on Asian ethnic groups. These lived experiences of Asian American college students provide a foundation for understanding how the MMM is important in shaping activism, and in the next sections, we describe the sources and consequences of the MMM in relation to Asian American activism.

Sources of the MMM

Microlevel Familial Contexts

Familial contexts had a strong impact on how Asian American college students understood and experienced the MMM. Many participants reflected on how their parents were a source of the MMM, particularly transmitting the pressures of needing to work hard and academically succeed. Xena discussed how her parents pressure her to focus on academics in college rather than social or extracurricular activities:

> Whenever I call my parents and say, "I'm going out," they're like, "Remember you're there for education." I feel like on a college campus it's hard. This happened when I was doing philanthropy stuff, like, "I'm going out to do a presentation, I've been spending a lot of time on it," and I would be questioned as to, "Why are you spending so much time doing that and not studying?"

Thus, Xena felt discouraged by her parents to engage in philanthropic efforts, which she described as a form of activism. Miranda further explained that she wants to academically succeed "for myself and also for my parents, because they're like, 'We sacrificed so much for you, we gave you this, we gave you that' … it's not really guilt tripping, but I feel like to a degree that's how parents get their kid to think they gotta give back to the family."

Many participants internalized their parents' academic expectations tied to the MMM, where their academic achievement was a familial duty.

Some participants' families also communicated to participants to distance themselves from sociopolitical issues, such as racial inequality. A few participants discussed how their parents acknowledged the existence of racism, yet encouraged them to ignore it. Some participants recounted how their families directly experienced and endured anti-Asian discrimination. For example, Bobby explained his parents were "victims of a hate crime. But my dad told me, 'No one can drag you down. Keep it in, keep your chin up, and live your life.'" Quinn described:

> My parents believe they need to have this level of sacrifice when they come to this country … they feel like, "If I endure racism, or if I endure sexism plus racism, that's just the cost of me being in this country. I need to learn English as well as I can, as fast as I can. That's the cost of living in all the liberties that we have."

Kayla stated that her parents endorse "this more conservative idea of keeping your mouth shut, keeping your head down, as long as the system is working in your favor, even though it's unjust." Thus, parents also reinforced the MMM stereotype of Asian Americans as silent and compliant within the U.S. racial system, which is in opposition to engaging in sociopolitical activism.

Furthermore, some participants discussed how their families have adopted negative attitudes toward other People of Color, particularly Black Americans. Alex described:

> I remember with the Black Lives Matter movement, they were like, "What does it mean, Black Lives Matter? They're doing drugs," like very stereotypical assumptions … and I was like, "It doesn't mean Filipino Lives don't matter." They have very concrete ideas on what's right and wrong, and trying to shimmy out of that thinking is very difficult.

Participants recognized how their families perpetuated victim-blaming narratives about Black Americans and may have lacked a structural understanding of racism. Participants also reflected on how their parents' generation view Black Lives Matter and other activist efforts against anti-Black racism as unnecessary and even harmful. Yuri discussed how her parents

> think that Black people get hated on a lot because they stand up for themselves. And they think that Asian people are doing it right because they're not standing up for themselves, and that's why we don't get hated on as much.

In line with the MMM, some participants' families engaged in comparison of Asian Americans and Black Americans and viewed such racial hierarchies as fair and just.

Macrolevel Cultural Contexts

More broadly in Asian cultural contexts, several participants discussed how the MMM can be linked to certain Asian cultural processes (e.g., adopting cultural values, participating in collective practices), some of which they perceived to be antithetical to engaging in activism. For example, participants reflected on how the emphasis on respecting elders and authority figures in Asian culture may reinforce MMM stereotypes of being quiet and compliant. Miranda stated:

I value my parents' opinions a lot, and my parents will follow politics, but at the same time, they are the quiet type and would not go out and protest or anything, and I feel like I picked up on that.

Chloe similarly noted that her parents discouraged her to participate in politics because, in Chinese culture, it is "dirty to get involved in politics and stir up power dynamics." However, Chloe described how she persisted and engaged in sociopolitical activism, but experienced tensions between activism and deference to authority:

We tried to open up a youth council to do activist work and outreach in Chinatown, but that wasn't very supported … trying to get youth's voice heard in the Chinese community. There's the Chinese belief that youth shouldn't have a lot of things to say, compared to the older generation which should be well respected. That was always such a problem.

Kayla further described how deference to authority expands to those in power in society broadly:

I think it's a very Asian concept to not question authority and to not ask questions of anyone … for example, my parents have some very traditional ideas where they accept that they can't do anything about [injustice] at all. Even though they can, but they just accept that things are the way they are.

Such Asian cultural processes had an impact on how participants made sense of the MMM, which in turn shaped their perceptions and engagement in activism.

Several participants discussed collectivism, or interdependence and prioritization of the group over the self, as another significant Asian cultural process that shapes how participants experience the MMM and activism. They described how Asian cultures emphasize conformity to group norms and expectations, and adoption of collectivistic values can motivate individuals to further uphold the MMM. Harrison elaborated:

The older generation is big on making sure that the model minority image is still there, because they want to be that. They don't want to be the minority that's the problem in America, they want to be the ones to succeed. That's very relevant in an Asian American family, because the culture is not individualistic, it's more group-oriented. You're not doing something for yourself, you're doing something for the family.

Participants further discussed some of the harmful impacts of Asian culture's adherence to group norms and interdependence. Harrison stated:

If you go out of that bubble, so if you're not getting a job and getting poor, you're seen as breaking away from the chain that your culture holds you in, you're letting loose. It shows that our culture is holding us back from something.

In this cultural framework, when an individual fails to conform to the MMM image, it reflects negatively on the entire family or community, and the group shares in the same embarrassment and loss of face. Some participants specifically discussed how engagement in activism can violate cultural group norms and can lead to loss of face. Gabby described tensions between activism, the MMM, and collectivism:

There tends to be more gossiping like, "This person got a really bad grade" or "This person is suddenly identifying as something very not-normal." So activism in itself, those involved in it tend to have a different outlook on life. Activism brings you to the surface and helps

you stand out, and generally in a collectivistic culture you're going to try to conform to ideas. So it's kind of a revolution, that's what activism is, it's trying to change society for the better. So there are stigmas with that.

Several other participants spoke about the prevalence of gossiping within Asian collectivistic cultures, such as Xena who stated, "I think we get scared sometimes about how it might hurt our reputation if we take part in activism … because aunties gossip and say like, 'Oh she's going off the rails.'" Thus, gossiping appeared to be a culturally relevant mechanism that generated stigma for Asian Americans who violate cultural group norms, such as those who reject the MMM and engage in activism. Overall, the MMM can be linked to certain facets of Asian culture, such as fear of judgment and how one's actions reflect on the entire group, which may serve as barriers to engaging in activism.

Macrolevel Societal Contexts

Expanding to the broader societal context, some participants reflected on U.S. societal hierarchies and the MMM's origins in comparisons between Asian Americans and other People of Color, especially Black Americans. Some discussed how Asian Americans are used in society as an example of self-sufficiency, and their stereotype of success is used to blame other groups for their struggles. Rowan argued the MMM is a "constructed idea that you pull yourself by your bootstraps, by yourself, without federal funds, without assistance. But you can't work your way out of poverty." Rowan also explained how "Puerto Ricans used to the be the model minority":

The Puerto Rican government wanted Puerto Ricans to stay in the U.S. and to assimilate into white culture, and so to do that, they were like, "They're good workers, they have good family values, they don't riot in the streets, they are not loud, they don't drink." So they influenced U.S. companies and employers and people living in these neighborhoods that Puerto Ricans are living in to accept them. But that's changed recently because Puerto Ricans are now considered a problem because of the islands being in debt.

Thus, the MMM is subject to change and is just one example of how society positions certain minorities in the middle of power structures between dominant and marginalized groups.

A few participants also stressed the need to understand the MMM in the context of Asian Americans' immigration history. They emphasized the highly selective migration of well-educated Asian immigrants into the United States, which Sam recognized as the "brain drain, where Indians, for example, initially came to the United States to fill in certain jobs. It was like the very 'successful' Asian Americans that they focused on." Sam further described how this "ignored immigration that came after that, with Asian Americans who are refugees or less conventionally successful. So the model minority idea stems from this one group that people try to push all Asian Americans into." Participants not only noted the differences in migration history between Asian ethnic groups but also between racially minoritized groups, such as Willow who stated that Black people in particular "didn't immigrate here, they were forcefully brought. And that's a huge difference, and they need other people to advocate for them."

Moreover, some participants reflected on the role of white supremacy in creating the MMM and perpetuating the comparison

of Asian Americans and Black Americans. Sam described how the narrative around Asian Americans having "better cultures, better values, or inherent characteristics that other people should aspire to" is created by "whoever is dominant, in this case, White people in America placing Asian Americans in order to compete with other People of Color, for example, African Americans. It's kind of like competing to be the favorite child." Thus, the MMM serves to patronize People of Color and uses one group as a model of success to shame other groups. Participants also pointed out that the MMM is created and maintained by white supremacy because it benefits White Americans. Leah described:

> It's the people in power, a.k.a. the White people, who are the ones controlling with their puppet hands, "You're going higher, and you're staying down here because we want you there, it benefits us, so that we can exert our imperialism and everything onto you guys!" So Asian Americans, and South Asians are bit lower in that ladder that's been constructed by White people, are just in this whole system. And we're all trying to get on top, but it's not us, it's the people in charge.

These comments point to systems of white supremacy at the root of the MMM, whereby Asian Americans are used to uphold the dominance of White Americans.

In our emerging theory, the MMM operates within and through micro- and macrolevel contexts of family, culture, and society. These contexts are illustrated in Figure 1 as boxing in and enveloping the individual. Participants viewed family and Asian culture as significant sources of the MMM, where conformity around academic and economic expectations served as a barrier for Asian American activism. They also reflected on the MMM's roots in U.S. societal hierarchies of anti-Black racism and white supremacy. They demonstrated critical consciousness as they emphasized the need to examine historical and contemporary structures that pit People of Color against each other. The final section describes the consequences of the MMM on Asian American activism that either reinforce or challenge the status quo, which are depicted in Figure 1 as the individual's hands that either hammer down or break out of the box.

Consequences of the MMM

Reinforcing the Status Quo

Several participants reflected on how the MMM reinforces the status quo by denying the impact of oppression in the lives of Asian Americans, as well as rejecting the need for activism. Quinn, who facilitates social justice education programs on campus, described how being perceived as a problem-free minority group hinders her activism:

> There's this assumption that I'm not qualified to teach social justice, or I don't understand the struggle as much because I'm Asian American. That bothers me a lot, because I feel like what I've gone through has been a struggle, as an Asian woman, as a brown woman … but it's really easy for students to perceive me as a privileged person.

Similarly, Alex stated that the MMM "prevents me from the being the activist that I want to be" because it silences their experiences with discrimination based on their marginalized identities:

> I can easily be a target for homophobia, transphobia, racism, and I already have been a target for those things. But I'm pushed or pigeonholed into being a placid, gay, trans, Filipino person, so I can just

get through the day and not have to talk about the racism that I see or whatever I see.

A few participants reflected how the status quo is reinforced by Asian Americans who internalize the MMM. Participants noted how other members of their racial group, such as their family and peers, may adopt the MMM, which has consequences for activism. Olivia stated:

> I feel like a lot of Asians don't even acknowledge the fact that we deserve something like [activism] … they'll be like, "I've never really experienced too much racism in my life … because this hasn't happened to me, I don't feel the need to do anything."

Furthermore, some participants themselves internalized the MMM and minimized the struggles that their own racial group faces. For example, Miranda explained she does not engage in activism and "prefers not to fight unless it's something I feel really really strongly for, but I feel as if now the laws aren't bad towards Asian Americans." Gabby expressed feeling conflicted about engaging in activism for Asian American issues: "If I do get involved in Asian American activism, then am I putting my time towards something that isn't necessarily a bigger problem than everything else? Am I even rooting for the right cause?" Thus, internalization of the MMM consequently led Asian Americans to view their racial group as less worthy of activism.

Several participants discussed how the MMM spurs competition among People of Color, particularly between Black Americans and Asian Americans, and thus maintains racial inequality. Quinn noted that there is an "Oppression Olympics" that occurs:

> Seeing who's the most oppressed, you faced this, I faced this more … instead of looking at how all of us have these problems, all can come together and talk. But it becomes more of like, "I'm not going to collaborate with you guys, because you don't understand the struggle."

Thus, the MMM serves as an obstacle to building racial solidarity, and participants discussed how Asian Americans and Black Americans' internalization of the MMM further creates distance between the racial groups. Rowan emphasized that Asian Americans or Black Americans are "not at fault for buying into the myth, because it helps the powers that be to continue believing in these ideas." Participants observed that the divisions perpetuated by the MMM are advantageous for White Americans; it hinders unity among People of Color to collectively challenge white supremacy.

Challenging the Status Quo

Yet, Asian American college students demonstrated resistance against the MMM and engaged in efforts to challenge injustice through activism. Despite feeling constrained by the MMM, many participants engaged in a wide array of actions to challenge the status quo. For example, Ian described:

> I don't attend protests or rallies, which might be due to the model minority enforcement. I am not really outspoken, but I am more of a person who will write and submit petitions and have an outspoken voice in terms of how I write and act.

Participants considered their personal strengths and characteristics as guides to differential types of activism, such as Florence, who noted:

People are sometimes surprised that I'm so outspoken. I'm loud, and I think that sometimes I'll act that way even more to just crush that stereotype around being quiet … because if you really want to change something, you have to be able to step out of that stereotype and really get your ideas out there.

Some participants also reflected on how their personal engagement in activism is in itself a rejection of the MMM. Sam elaborated:

People are shocked to see me as an activist. Being an activist, you have to be assertive, you have to stand for your values. As an Asian American, I almost have that spite of disproving [the MMM], which makes me more assertive. The model minority has kind of empowered me in that way, by making me try to disprove it.

Florence further explained that "being perceived as the model minority pushed me to be an activist, because it shows that we are not one-dimensional, showing that there are different sides of what being a minority is." Thus, the MMM served as a motivation for activism, where participants were determined to demonstrate to society that Asian Americans are sociopolitically active and do not all conform to the MMM.

Some participants were also motivated to challenge the MMM through educating others about its role in perpetuating stereotypes and maintaining racial inequality. For example, Eva described her involvement in an Asian American pan-ethnic campus organization's project called "Minority Models," which aimed to challenge the MMM by celebrating the diversity within the Asian American community:

We find students who have experiences they want to tell that go against [the MMM], we talk to them, help them develop their story, and we feature those on social media. We're trying get more diverse Asian representation out there.

Rowan, who like Quinn serves as a social justice educator for undergraduate students, also discussed how he unpacks the MMM through educational efforts on campus:

It's a part of my role to try to myth-bust [the MMM], to bring attention to how it's constructed and how it's being used to the advantage of people in power as the reason why change doesn't need to happen.

Furthermore, several participants emphasized the importance of engaging in activism in solidarity with other People of Color and were determined to dismantle unjust racial hierarchies. Leah reflected on advocating for other marginalized communities as an Asian American:

It's important to me for Asian Americans to stand together and fight for these causes and challenge the status quo. Asian Americans should not be passive or complicit in this. Like, "It's fine, who cares about how Black people and undocumented people are going through so much?" No, we need to stand for those who don't have the same opportunities as us, we need to fight for something more, not just sit where we're at because we're comfortable, we can pass off in American society, we're functioning.

Through their activism, participants worked to address internalized MMM beliefs, which hinder understanding structural inequality, particularly anti-Black racism. Florence explained that she engaged in activism through challenging racial biases among her Asian family and friends:

Even if it's me telling my parents, "I'm having a Black friend come over tonight. Can you guys not act so weird and get yourself accustomed to

the diversity of our country?" or if it's telling my friends, "Hey, what you said was really offensive, that's not okay to say." It starts out small in your own life, and it creates a sort of ripple effect.

Participants viewed their activism as a step toward tearing down the U.S. racial system that pits minorities against each other.

Finally, findings from member-checking participants interviewed in 2021 revealed how COVID-19 impacted the MMM and its relation to activism. Many participants reflected on how Asian Americans were blamed for COVID-19 and experienced increased discrimination. This rise in anti-Asian racism has spread greater awareness about structural inequalities faced by Asian Americans, which contradicts the MMM. Una stated,

This year has really shifted the way that I view discrimination. Very subconsciously, I felt like a lot of these stereotypes are somewhat not harmful. But these ideas of Asians as dangerous, that we're infected, we caused the virus … I can see how Asian Americans are being weaponized and demonized.

Una further discussed how this year felt like a "tipping point, because we can't just not do anything. I think we're more politically active than previously. Because people in our community, people that could be our moms, our grandmothers, could be killed or harmed at any point." This emphasis on family and community well-being exemplifies Asian collectivistic cultural values, which may have facilitated greater engagement in activism to fight for Asian American issues. Leah also clarified:

The general trend of thinking of us as highly educated, highly overachieving, rich … those have persisted, but with the rise in hate crimes, it helped humanize that Asian Americans also have their struggles, they're also suffering. We can't just group them together with White Americans, they're also People of Color.

Thus, participants believed that COVID-19 has shifted the status quo toward dismantling the MMM and mobilizing activism among Asian Americans.

Member-checking participants also revealed the impact of the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 on the MMM and Asian American activism. Some participants perceived growing solidarity between Asian Americans and Black Americans due to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and society's racial reckoning. Una stated:

A lot of Asian people I know were very active in BLM, and I've also seen a lot of people involved in that movement who are very outspoken for supporting Asian Americans during this time right now. Because of the recent hate crimes, Asian Americans really now understand the struggles that Black Americans go through. It has made us resonate with other minority groups even more, because now we really feel what they have felt.

Valerie argued that Asian Americans are still positioned above Black Americans in the U.S. racial hierarchy, such that "we don't experience police brutality like Black people, and we weren't enslaved in this country," as well as older Asian American generations continue to adopt anti-Black attitudes amidst the recent Black Lives Matter protests. Valerie stated:

My Asian friends still had their parents who got very, "It's the Black people who are looting our stores." So they tried to teach their parents. It's so hard to change that mindset because it's something they've had set in stone for 60 plus years, it's what their parents told them. But there's always our responsibility to keep trying.

Overall, participants reflected on the significant impact of the twin pandemics in challenging the MMM and argued further activism was needed among Asian Americans to continue to change the status quo and create a more racially just society.

Discussion

This study used a constructivist grounded theory approach in conversation with previous literature on the MMM, legitimizing ideologies, and ecological contexts, to develop a theory grounded in the lived experiences of an Asian American college student sample. Foundational to this theory is that Asian American activism needs to be understood in relation to the MMM. Furthermore, this theory proposes that ecological contexts of family, culture, and society uphold the MMM, which further shapes the contours of Asian American activism, as well as demonstrates the interconnections among the sources, experiences, and consequences of the MMM for Asian American activism. Thus, we extend the existing research on the psychological harm of the MMM and address its sociopolitical implications, particularly around how the MMM maintains racial inequality and hinders activism. Overall, this study sheds light on the diverse perspectives and varied engagement in activism among Asian American students under the MMM.

First, study findings demonstrated that Asian American college students experienced the MMM primarily as a set of stereotypes that "boxes them in," and as a sociopolitical device that perpetuates inequality in society. This study gave voice to Asian Americans' experiences of living within unjust racial and ethnic hierarchies, which created tensions with other People of Color and within the Asian American community. Participants made sense of significant differences in socioeconomic status and educational attainment across Asian ethnic groups that contribute to an ethnic-based hierarchy, where East Asian Americans are seen as the most advantaged. The challenges some participants described with being labeled as "terrorists" are in line with previous literature on ethnic disparities based on skin tone and religion for South Asian Americans (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007), thus highlighting the MMM's inaccurate portrayal of Asian Americans as a homogeneous group that does not experience discrimination. Supporting this study's conceptualization of the MMM as a legitimizing ideology that maintains the status quo, participants also discussed how their racial group is perceived to be almost equal to White Americans under the MMM, but ultimately they are viewed as unassimilable foreigners who cannot be fully American. These findings provide evidence for the racial triangulation of Asian Americans (C. J. Kim, 1999) and show that such comparisons among racial and ethnic groups are experienced and felt in the lives of Asian American college students today.

Second, drawing from theories of how individuals make sense of and interact with ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer, 2006), we found family, Asian cultural processes, and U.S. societal hierarchies to be key sources of the MMM that shaped how participants perceive and engage in activism. Parents were a particularly impactful context for Asian American college students. Many participants were discouraged to engage in activism by their parents; some parents minimized the existence of anti-Asian racism and believed that activism was superfluous, whereas other parents acknowledged unjust treatment but advised their children to endure it and not rock the boat. More broadly, participants discussed how

the U.S. societal context perpetuates anti-Blackness through the MMM, which participants noted also shows up in their family contexts through their parents' adoption of anti-Black attitudes. These findings address our lack of understanding on how Asian American parents shape their children's perceptions and engagement in activism. More research is needed to further investigate the nuances through which the MMM and familial and societal contexts influence each other and shape activism for Asian Americans. A recent study by Atkin and Ahn (2022) found that some Asian parents reject the MMM and socialize their children to be aware of structural racism, which could potentially shape more positive perceptions of and engagement in activism. Future scholarship would benefit from exploring such aspects of Asian American students' ecological environments that are related to the MMM and motivate activism.

Our results also highlight nuances in how macrolevel Asian cultural contexts served as another source of the MMM that further shaped activism engagement. Several study participants articulated how certain values and practices common across many Asian cultures (e.g., respect for authority, conformity to group norms, gossiping) may link to further upholding the MMM, which in turn can hinder activism. However, our findings also showed how some Asian American college students interpreted their collectivistic values to motivate their engagement in activism and protect their communities during the pandemic. Thus, certain Asian cultural processes, such as interdependence, respect for elders, and promoting community well-being, may facilitate greater activism engagement and connection to social justice causes for Asian American issues (Batson et al., 2002; Stamps et al., 2021). It is possible that some of our participants' views of how Asian culture is "holding us back" from activism reflect where they were in their racial identity development, perhaps experiencing dissonance about identifying as Asian and idealizing whiteness (Alvarez & Helms, 2001). It is critical to consider how the U.S. societal context pathologizes Asian collectivistic values as "backwards, anti-Western, and antimodern," which serves to reinforce white supremacy and further marginalize Asian Americans (Millner et al., 2021, p. 334). More research is needed from critically conscious frameworks that further explores how reclaiming Asian cultural processes that were dismissed due to oppressive conditions can in turn promote communal resilience and resistance among Asian Americans.

The present study also illustrated two significant consequences of the MMM. First, on the one hand, the MMM reinforces the status quo, as participants discussed how it denies the existence of anti-Asian discrimination and justifies unjust racial hierarchies. In line with conceptualizing the MMM as a legitimizing ideology, Figure 1 depicts this consequence as a hand that uses a hammer to keep the box intact, or as the tool that upholds structural inequality. Participants who engaged in activism to advance social justice for Asian Americans and build coalitions with other People of Color discussed how the MMM prevents them from being the activists they want to be. They reflected on how the MMM maintains distance between Asian Americans and other People of Color, particularly Black Americans, and Asian Americans experience structural advantages by distancing themselves from Blackness and aligning with white supremacy (C. J. Kim, 2023). Additionally, this study offered unique perspectives on the consequences of the MMM because, unlike some previous qualitative investigations on Asian American college student activism (e.g., Chan, 2011; Museus et al.,

2021), participants in this sample displayed diverse viewpoints and levels of engagement in activism. Several participants never engaged in activism, may have internalized the MMM, and perceived Asian Americans as less worthy of own-group activism, compared to other People of Color. This echoes extant quantitative research demonstrating links between Asian Americans' greater internalized MMM and lower likelihood of engaging in intragroup and intergroup collective action (Ouch & Moradi, 2022; J. Tran & Curtin, 2017). Future qualitative work is needed to further explore Asian Americans' meaning-making around the MMM and its consequences on activism in depth.

Finally, on the other hand, the present study found that the MMM impacted Asian American college students to challenge the status quo through activism. In Figure 1, this consequence of the MMM is illustrated as a fist that breaks out of the box and dismantles the structural barriers that oppress Asian Americans. Rather than conforming to the MMM, participants wanted to shatter expectations of being silent, obedient, and apolitical. They felt empowered to engage in activism to disrupt the MMM, which had been conditioned into them through familial, cultural, and societal sources. Several participants engaged in campus-based activism through social justice education programs that worked to "myth-bust" the MMM, which supports previous research on how college environments can facilitate actions to challenge the status quo (Museus et al., 2021; Yi & Todd, 2020). Also, participants expressed hopefulness about the impacts of their activism on addressing societal inequality and the future directions of Asian American activism. They discussed how the increase in anti-Asian violence during COVID-19, while devastating, demonstrated to broader society that Asian Americans are not immune to systemic racism and inspired Asian Americans to take action. Participants also emphasized how anti-Asian hate occurring alongside the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests may have helped Asian Americans more deeply resonate with the struggles of other People of Color and become motivated to destabilize anti-Black racism. Overall, this trend is consistent with literature on Asian American activists mobilizing for Black Lives Matter during the pandemic and appreciating that racial unity fosters stronger resistance against white supremacy (Lee et al., 2020; Litam & Chan, 2021; Matriano et al., 2021).

Limitations

A limitation of the present study is that the results may not apply to Asian American college students who do not share the experiences of the study participants. Utilizing constructivist grounded theory allowed for the representation of experiences from a specific sample of Asian American students, and more studies are needed to verify this theory of the MMM and activism with Asian Americans from various sociodemographic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. Of note, our sample was comprised of approximately 75% ciswomen and 63% East Asian Americans. Future research is needed with Asian Americans of diverse gender identities, ethnicities, and a variety of other identity dimensions, such as religion and ability statuses. It is also possible that there was a selection bias where students who were less interested in or had negative experiences around Asian American identity and activism were less likely to participate in a study on such topics. To gain a better understanding of how Asian American college students come to challenge or reinforce the status quo, future studies should include

participants who have not explored their identities or participated in activism. Finally, EST is limited in its theorization of racism, and future research on the MMM should consider drawing from other frameworks that illuminate the complexities of systemic racism and its central role in the ecological contexts of Asian Americans.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Despite these limitations, the present study provides a grounded theory that is useful for future research and practice with Asian American college students. Future scholarship should incorporate and expand upon this study's conceptualization of the MMM as a legitimizing ideology. Previous research on legitimizing ideologies demonstrates that marginalized group members who justify societal inequality may experience short-term benefits, such as feeling a sense of certainty and control, but long-term mental health consequences through internalizing a sense of inferiority and adopting victim-blaming narratives about themselves and their group (Jost, 2021). Future work could employ longitudinal methods to explore how internalization of the MMM, perhaps compared to rejection of the MMM and engagement in activism that aims to challenge the status quo, functions over time for Asian Americans.

Furthermore, Asian Americans are one of the most economically divided racial groups in the United States (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018), and perhaps the consequences of the MMM greatly differ for lower income, working-class Asian Americans, compared to this study's sample. More research is needed on how endorsement of the MMM may take on different meanings for Asian Americans with diverse privileged and marginalized identities. Relatedly, ethnic diversity across Asian Americans is critical to consider, given this study's findings on the ethnic-based hierarchy endorsed by Asian Americans themselves and reinforced by white supremacy. Future studies should examine how these different experiences may shape different barriers and motivations for activism, and future scholars should also solely focus on or intentionally sample more students from different Asian ethnic groups to allow for the investigation of potential differences. For example, Lee et al. (2020) found that low-income Hmong Americans experienced similar stereotypes as Black Americans, which helped foster their engagement in cross-racial solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. More studies are needed that utilize such in-depth approaches, such as ethnography, participatory action research, and other community-based methods, to give voice to and empower Asian American activists and challenge the MMM. Overall, future research must depict Asian Americans as a complex group and work to challenge the dominant narratives that homogenize and oppress these communities.

This study also has practical implications for counseling psychologists working with Asian American college students. In their roles as clinicians and educators, as well as given the field's values in addressing systemic racism (Miller et al., 2018), counseling psychologists are well positioned to support Asian American college students in challenging the MMM. For example, the present findings suggest how the MMM contributes to experiences of academic anxiety and hinders help-seeking, and clinicians can support Asian American clients in addressing such mental health consequences of the MMM (N. Tran et al., 2021). The present study also demonstrated how Asian Americans experience the MMM as a racial bind, where they feel caught in tensions between White Americans and other BIPOC in the broader U.S.

racial system. This points to the need for counseling psychologists to attend to Asian Americans' nuanced meaning-making and lived experiences of the MMM while considering their macrolevel ecological contexts. It is important to not extricate mental health concerns among Asian Americans from historical and contemporary contexts of racism, and clinicians could help their clients process the sociopolitical implications of living under the MMM, such as clients' perspectives and experiences of engaging in activism and navigating unjust racial–ethnic hierarchies in the U.S. Campus educators could support Asian American students by facilitating discussions, workshops, and classes within their college environments that offer opportunities to deconstruct legitimizing ideologies and challenge internalized racism. Such programs could draw from intervention frameworks such as Hwang's (2021) ecological model of Awareness of Stereotype Internalization on Asian Narratives and Preventing Racism and Identity Distancing through Empowerment, as well as community-based educational interventions for addressing internalized racism among Filipinx Americans through a Pinayist lens (David, 2014; Halagao, 2013). Finally, the present findings demonstrate that Asian American college students have navigated victim-blaming narratives about Black Americans amongst their families, but among their own generation, they have experienced growing solidarity between their racial group and Black Americans, particularly during the pandemic. This suggests that counseling psychologists must address anti-Blackness within Asian American communities and advocate for intergroup solidarity. Creating spaces for Asian American college students to cultivate greater awareness of the unique and interlocking realities of racially oppressed communities can help develop stronger interracial coalitions that ultimately work together to challenge the status quo.

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