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The Model Minority Stereotype as a Systematic Hermeneutical Injustice

by

A.C. Lindsley-Kim

Under the Direction of Christie Hartley, PhD

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue the Model Minority Stereotype (MMS) of Asian Americans is a *systematic hermeneutical injustice*, and I justify a previously unrecognized distinction within the literature: positive and negative hermeneutical injustices. To show that the MMS is a systematic hermeneutical injustice, I argue that: (1) the MMS renders a significant area of one's interests difficult to interpret by collective understanding (the hermeneutical disadvantage); (2) this hermeneutical disadvantage excludes Asian American's from equal hermeneutical participation (the hermeneutical marginalization and injustice); and (3) the resultant hermeneutical injustice contributes to continuing structural prejudice against Asian Americans and is part of a larger pattern of social powerlessness (the 'systematic' part of a systematic hermeneutical injustice). The distinction between a positive and negative systematic hermeneutical injustice is whether the hermeneutical disadvantage occurs because of the imposition of a hermeneutical resource or the lack of a hermeneutical resource.

INDEX WORDS: Miranda Fricker, Hermeneutical injustice, Model minority, Asian American, Social philosophy, Political philosophy, Philosophy of race, Social epistemology

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A.C. Lindsley-Kim

Committee Chair: Christie Hartley

Committee: Andrew I. Cohen

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Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

To my mother, without whom this wouldn't have been possible. To my siblings, Al and Amanda, my favorite people in the world. To Abby, for chatting with me about everything except philosophy. To Joshua, for being an invaluable support and lovely partner.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hahn Kim, the youngest of three boys, is born in Seoul in 1964. In the 1970s, his father – who moved to Los Angeles years earlier – has finally earned enough operating a liquor shop, whose backroom doubles as a bedroom, to move the entire family to California. Hahn grows up in East Los Angeles, earns a BA from Cal State East Bay, and starts a business with his older brother. In the 1990s, he marries a white woman from a well-off family and together they have three daughters. His brother, Keith, marries a Korean woman, and they have two sons and two daughters. They live in neighboring houses, their children go to well-established universities, and business goes well. They’ve achieved the American Dream.

Stories like this, like my father’s and uncle’s, are typical in the Asian American diaspora. They are often used to show how Asian Americans have reached the status of “honorary whites,” a racial group which has most of the rights and privileges of whites, in the American racial hierarchy.¹ Asian American assimilation is generally argued to be supported by high rates of interracial marriage, high rates of education, and upward socio-economic mobility.² However, these data are insensitive to the complexity of reality. Asian Americans are not a monolithic group. In fact, Asian Americans have the largest wealth disparity out of any racial group in the United States, with those in the 90th percentile earning 10.7 times as much as those in the 10th percentile, and their socio-economic success has more to do with immigration policies from the 1960s, than it does with any absence of racism.³ Additionally, it is not clear that we can herald interracial marriages as evidence of progress towards a post-racial society, given the influx of

¹ Bonilla-Silva, “From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial,” 932; Lee and Kye, “Racialized Assimilation of Asian Americans,” 254.

² Wallace, “Rooted in Japanese American Concentration Camps”; Bonilla-Silva, “From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial,” 932.

³ Kim et al, “Overcoming Constraints of the Model Minority Stereotype,” 613; Lee and Kye, “Racialized Assimilation of Asian Americans,” 254-255; Kochhar et al, “Income Inequality in the U.S.”

Korean refugees as “war brides” during the 1950s and continuing fetishization of Asian and Asian American women.⁴

While it may have seemed that Asian Americans could fully assimilate and achieve a near-white social status, this has likely always been a myth. The recent surge of reports of anti-Asian racism and hate crimes is not an emergent racism, but an unveiled one situated in a pattern that has stretched back centuries.⁵ There has historically been immense discrimination against Asian-Americans in the United States. It has been “enacted culturally, institutionally, and interpersonally since the first Asians settled.”⁶ Think of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese internment camps during World War II, or the large-scale lynchings of Chinese Americans in the 1800s.⁷

This thesis has two interconnected aims. The first is to establish that the Model Minority Stereotype (MMS) of Asian Americans is a *systematic hermeneutical injustice*, according to Miranda Fricker’s account. The second is, through this defense, to justify a previously unrecognized distinction within the literature: positive and negative hermeneutical injustices. The grounding phenomenon of a systematic hermeneutical injustice is the hermeneutical disadvantage that obscures collective hermeneutical resources related to a significant area of one’s interests.⁸ In the paradigmatic case, the hermeneutical disadvantage is a strict lack of resources – such as the lack of a concept – however, the MMS shows that hermeneutical disadvantages, and thus systematic hermeneutical injustices, can be perpetrated through the presence of specific resources. These fill the available interpretive space with a resource that

⁴ Zheng, “To Dismantle Anti-Asian Racism”; Hwang, “Demystifying and Addressing Internalized Racism,” 602.

⁵ NPR, “The Rise in Anti-Asian Attacks.”

⁶ Young, “Asian Americans’ Emerging Racial Identities,” 1.

⁷ Lee, “The Chinatown War”; Young, “Asian Americans’ Emerging Racial Identities;” Nguyen, “Asian Americans Are Still Caught.”

⁸ Fricker, “Social Powerlessness and Social Interpretation,” 97.

smothers the development and adoption of more nuanced and diverse interpretive resources. The distinction between a positive and negative systematic hermeneutical injustice is whether the hermeneutical disadvantage occurs because of the imposition of a hermeneutical resource or the lack of a hermeneutical resource.

In section I, I reconstruct Fricker's argument for what constitutes a systematic hermeneutical injustice. In section II, I focus on the content and history of the MMS, and why it is a myth. In section III, I propose a refinement of Fricker's account and justify the benefit of distinguishing between positive and negative systematic hermeneutical injustices. In section IV, I argue the MMS is a systematic hermeneutical injustice and I use this to motivate the distinction between positive and negative instances of it. In the conclusion, I note three further philosophical insights my view can generate.

I SYSTEMATIC HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

Fricker begins by recounting the story of Carmita Wood in Susan Brownmiller's memoir. Wood experienced what is now called sexual harassment at her workplace in Cornell's department of nuclear physics. A prominent professor in the department would "jiggle his crotch... deliberately brush against her breasts" and, in one instance, cornered her in an elevator and kissed her without her consent.⁹ Wood did her best to avoid the professor after that incident, but the intense stress of these encounters led her to develop chronic pains and to, ultimately, request a transfer to a different department. When this request was denied, she quit. On a form for unemployment insurance, she was prompted to list her reasons for quitting; not knowing what else to put, she described them as personal. She was denied.

This is the paradigmatic case of a hermeneutical injustice. There was a gap in social understanding that resulted in a lack of a concept to describe sexual harassment. What Wood "suffered (among other things) [was] an acute cognitive disadvantage from a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource."¹⁰ Both her and her harasser shared the same cognitive disadvantage insofar as they shared the same epistemic gap. However, while they both suffered a lack of "proper understanding of how he is treating her,"¹¹ only Wood was disadvantaged by this lack of understanding. Her harasser was not. She suffered psychological and physical damages, in addition to professional and economic damages as a result of this cognitive disadvantage. Her harasser suffered nothing of the sort.

The cognitive disadvantage – the lack of a concept, in this case – is *the hermeneutical disadvantage*. For Wood "a patch of experience which it is strongly in her interests to

⁹ Fricker 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

understand” was obscured, which resulted in her being “left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment.”¹² Her hermeneutical disadvantage rendered her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn made it difficult for her to protest her mistreatment or secure effective means of stopping it.¹³

For Fricker, this hermeneutical disadvantage is particularly disadvantageous for Wood, which makes it not only harmful but wrongful. However, to understand why this hermeneutical disadvantage is an epistemic *injustice*, she argues we need to dig deeper.¹⁴ We need to look at the social structures surrounding this gap in interpretive resources and how they lent themselves to the perpetuation of the hermeneutical disadvantage.¹⁵ Women at the time – and arguably still – were in positions of diminished social power relative to men. The most relevant powerlessness was found in the sites where “collective social meanings are generated.”¹⁶ Fricker notes professions such as “journalism, politics, academia, and law”¹⁷ are especially hermeneutically important because it is within these professions that significant meaningful hermeneutical resources are generated and proliferated. Extant power structures worked to keep women from full participation in these sites, denying them access to areas where they could remedy the disadvantages that resulted from a lack of hermeneutical resources. Thus, women’s epistemic inequality is the background condition for the elevation of a hermeneutical disadvantage to the status of *hermeneutical marginalization*.¹⁸

Hermeneutical marginalization is an essential component for when a mere hermeneutical disadvantage turns into a hermeneutical injustice. A hermeneutical disadvantage rises to the level

¹² Ibid., 97.

¹³ Ibid., 97.

¹⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸ Ibid., 98-99.

of hermeneutical marginalization when it occurs within a context of unequal hermeneutical participation.¹⁹ The concept of marginalization is a moral-political term denoting a form of powerlessness. It always indicates some kind of “subordination and exclusion from some practice that would have value for the participant.”²⁰ Though, by definition, it occurs within a significant area of the subjects’ interests; it is also contextual. One can be hermeneutically marginalized within one aspect of one’s life, and not within another. Since one exists with complicated intersectional identities, one can be hermeneutically marginalized in contexts where the racial aspect of one’s identity is most relevant, and not hermeneutically marginalized in contexts where one’s gender is most relevant.²¹ It “may afflict them *qua* one social type, but not another.”²²

Based on this, Fricker clarifies her account. What is wrong, from an epistemic point of view, about hermeneutical marginalization is that it “renders the collective hermeneutical resource structurally prejudiced.” It is structurally prejudiced for the same reasons that those suffering it are *marginalized*: the hermeneutical resources are disproportionately influenced by groups that have more hermeneutical power. Thus, Fricker finalizes her account of a systematic hermeneutical injustice – precisely the phrase used to describe what occurred in Wood’s case: it is “*the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.*”²³

¹⁹ Ibid., 99.

²⁰ Ibid., 99.

²¹ Ibid., 99.

²² Ibid., 99.

²³ Ibid., 100.

This injustice is systematic instead of incidental because it contributes to a continuing structural prejudice against the relevant group and because it is part of a larger pattern of this group's susceptibility to all kinds of injustice.²⁴ In Wood's case, what occurred was a *systematic* hermeneutical injustice for two reasons: first, because the hermeneutical marginalization she experienced helped maintain a hermeneutical prejudice against women by pushing her and women like her out of professions where they would have hermeneutical power; and, second, because it was one kind of injustice in a broader pattern of social powerlessness where women were susceptible to many other kinds of injustice and social marginalization.

Thus, a fuller story of a systematic hermeneutical injustice emerges. A lack of collective hermeneutical resources regarding an area of social experience that it is in the agent's interests to understand results in a *hermeneutical disadvantage*. When this hermeneutical disadvantage disproportionately excludes members of a socially disadvantaged group from equal hermeneutical participation, it becomes *hermeneutical marginalization*. This is also the moment when it becomes a *hermeneutical injustice*. Finally, a hermeneutical injustice rises to the level of a *systematic hermeneutical injustice* when the injustice is a result of a broader pattern of social powerlessness – when it comes from a “structural inequality of power”²⁵ and when it “is caused and maintained by a wide-ranging and persistent hermeneutical marginalization.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 100, 102.

²⁵ Ibid., 100.

²⁶ Ibid., 102.

II THE HISTORY AND CONTENT OF THE MMS

The MMS is a so-called positive stereotype, one with favorable content, according to which Asian Americans are intelligent, diligent, hardworking, “whiz kids,” conformist, quiet, and financially advantaged.²⁷ As a result, Asian Americans are the “the desirable classmate, the favored neighbor, the nonthreatening kind of person of color.”²⁸ It often involves the idea that one is good at math and that has demanding or strict parents with high academic standards.²⁹ One scholar characterizes it as a stereotype that views Asian Americans as “one monolithic racial group that has achieved economic, educational, and social success through hard work and perseverance, without turning to assistance from the government or racial preferences.”³⁰ The MMS is pervasive. Studies have shown that Asian Americans are consistently believed to be “exceptional in terms of motivation, college preparedness, and career success.”³¹ This reputation has framed them as a classic American success story, showing that the United States truly is a place where anyone can succeed if they put their head down and work hard enough.³²

The phrase “model minority” was introduced in the 1960s. The New York Times Magazine ran an article in 1966 titled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style.”³³ In this article, sociologist William Pettersen compares Japanese Americans to other “problem minorities.” “The Japanese-Americans,”³⁴ he states, “are better than any other group in our

²⁷ Ball, “America’s ‘Whiz Kids’?” 116.

²⁸ Ngyuen, “Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype. And It Creates Inequality for All.”

²⁹ Wong, “The Very Model of a Model Ethnic Minority.”

³⁰ Gee quoted in Ball, “America’s ‘Whiz Kids’?” 117.

³¹ Ball, “America’s ‘Whiz Kids’?” 117.

³² *Ibid.*, 117.

³³ Pettersen, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style.”

³⁴ The hyphenated version of “Japanese American” is used here to reflect Pettersen’s usage. However, it should be noted that convention now dictates it be written without the hyphen, as it can further a sense of racial and ethnic otherness. For more history or information on this, see Fuhrman, Perlman, Wang, Yim, and Xiao.

society, including native-born whites.”³⁵ Statistics on education, crime, and life expectancy show how they pulled themselves up, away from the damages of racial exclusion and internment camps, to an exalted place in American society. This is a success story, he argues – the story of a racial minority excelling “by their own almost totally unaided effort.”³⁶ That same year, Chinese Americans were lauded in an issue of the *U.S. News & World Report*. “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities...one such minority, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work...not a welfare check.”³⁷

The groundwork for the MMS discourse began much earlier than these articles. Asian immigrants broadly were deemed “unassimilable,” and as such denied the right to immigrate. This standard was one that defined immigrant “success” as being intimately connected to one’s ability to shed their home culture to become “fully American.”³⁸ However, there are many different histories I could trace. The story of Japanese immigration and discrimination differs from that of Chinese immigration and discrimination, and those will differ from the stories of Korean, Vietnamese, Indian, Hmong, and other groups that are part of the Asian American diaspora. There is no singular, unifying history.

Here lies the first issue with which I must contend. The MMS is a stereotype about Asian Americans as a group, and its motivating idea – that Asian Americans have elevated themselves socially and economically through hard work and conformity – ignores how Asian Americans have been, and continue to be, differently affected by their material conditions. It overlooks structural barriers to advancement and erases racial, cultural, historical, and socio-economic

³⁵ Pettersen, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style.”

³⁶ Pettersen, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style”; Kurashige, “Model Minority.”

³⁷ Quoted in Zheng, “To Dismantle Anti-Asian Racism”.

³⁸ Kurashige, “Model Minority.”

differences amongst groups within that diaspora. It may then seem that I cannot appropriately discuss the MMS as something which affects all Asian Americans, and which constitutes a systematic hermeneutical injustice against them as a group.

This is not reason to think the project is flawed – in fact, it bolsters its salience. The very erasure of dissimilarity, a cornerstone of the stereotype, is part of why it is an injustice. It provides a distinct interpretive resource, homogenizing the Asian American experience and preventing them from making full sense of an integral part of their lives. I can discuss many of the effects of the MMS on Asian Americans as a monolithic group, insofar as the MMS paints them as such. Though it is true that the effects it has on different groups under the Asian American umbrella will be different depending on cultural, ethnic, social, and economic factors.

Additionally, it will be helpful to remember the original purpose of the term “Asian American.” Then-students Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee coined it in 1968 with the explicit goal of creating a pan-Asian identity to unify Asian Americans against racism and imperialism. It was meant to subvert an “Oriental” identity forced on Asian Americans by white Americans who were “unable (and unwilling) to differentiate between them.”³⁹ Remembering this purpose, it is appropriate to discuss Asian Americans as a group in this instance. There is a benefit in using a term to refer to all Asian Americans when the goal is unification against an issue that affects all Asian Americans – even if it does not affect them equally.

The rise in popularity of the MMS can be explained, at least in part, as backlash to the Civil Rights Movement. The socio-economic success of Japanese and Chinese Americans was heralded as proof that any minority could succeed in the United States. While it lauded Asian Americans, it simultaneously cast other minorities as failing to pull themselves up because of

³⁹ Wallace, “Rooted in Japanese American Concentration Camps.”

“laziness and inherent criminality, rather than racist government policy.”⁴⁰ Black and brown Americans were seen as “problem minorities” who were failing because of some fact about their race, versus the Asian Americans who were succeeding *because* of some fact about their race.⁴¹ The MMS at its core is anti-Black, a weapon to be used against communities who endanger the status quo of racist systems.⁴² It also continues to perpetuate the idea that there is no structural racism impeding the progress of minorities; rather it is merely their own unwillingness to work hard and behave correctly which keep them from social and economic advancement.

The historical roots – however racist and problematic – may not sway anyone into believing the MMS can be understood as an injustice. Despite historical oppression of and discrimination against Asian Americans, and despite the MMS being explicitly used to pit Asian Americans against other minorities, there does seem to be empirical evidence to back it up. Asian Americans as a group are often said to be approaching “near white” status, designating them as “honorary whites.”⁴³ This is empirically supported with statistics about high educational and socio-economic indicators, low crime rates, and some of the highest rates of interracial dating and marriage.⁴⁴ These metrics are used to support the argument that they have culturally assimilated and surpassed racialized social barriers.⁴⁵

However, a focus on these metrics is misguided. The MMS erases the diversity of ethnic groups that fall under the umbrella term;⁴⁶ ignores that the Asian Americans have the largest

⁴⁰ Kurashige, “Model Minority.”

⁴¹ “Inventing the ‘Model Minority.’”

⁴² “Inventing the Model Minority.”

⁴³ Bonilla-Silva, “From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial,” 932.

⁴⁴ Wallace, “Rooted in Japanese American Concentration Camps”; Bonilla-Silva, “From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial,” 932.

⁴⁵ Bonilla-Silva, “From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial,” 932.

⁴⁶ “Inventing the Model Minority”; Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 2; Jin, “6 Charts that Dismantle.”

wealth gap out of any racial group in the United States;⁴⁷ characterizes Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners no matter how many years or generations they have been in the United States;⁴⁸ renders structural racism, xenophobia, and oppression invisible;⁴⁹ fosters internalized racism within Asian American communities;⁵⁰ and obscures how underrepresented Asian Americans are in corporate leadership and political positions.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Kim et al, “Overcoming Constraints of the Model Minority Stereotype,” 613; Zhou and Bankston 242; Kochhar et al, “Income Inequality in the U.S.”

⁴⁸ Lee and Kye, “Racialized Assimilation of Asian Americans,” 254.

⁴⁹ Cheng et al, “A Tripartite Model of Collective Psychosocial Resistance,”; Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 3.

⁵⁰ Hwang, “Demystifying and Addressing Internalized Racism,” 596-597.

⁵¹ Jin, “6 Charts that Dismantle”; Zheng, “To Dismantle Anti-Asian Racism”; Liu, “How the Model Minority Myth.”

III POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE HERMENEUTICAL DISADVANTAGES AND INJUSTICES

Before defending the MMS as a systematic hermeneutical injustice, it will be prudent to expand on the second aim of this thesis. The distinction between positive and negative hermeneutical injustices deserves a complete defense; however, that would be a thesis unto itself. The primary aim of this thesis is to discuss an instance of systematic hermeneutical injustice that is especially relevant and for which awareness should be raised. As I will note in my conclusion, there are important implications for this view, and the categorization of the MMS as an epistemic injustice may give us specific tools with which to combat it. In order to defend it as a systematic hermeneutical injustice, I must first address an objection. One could object that the MMS cannot be the same kind of injustice as the paradigmatic case that Fricker describes. It functions in a different way.

In the paradigmatic case, Wood and women in similar positions experienced a hermeneutical disadvantage because there was no concept of sexual harassment. Without this key concept, a significant area of their lives was obscured, preventing them from reaching full understanding about what was happening to them and preventing them from being able to effectively combat their abuse. The systematic hermeneutical injustice, in this case, arose from a strict lack of resources. There was an epistemic gap. Though sexual harassment occurred, no one had a cohesive idea of what it was. This is how collective hermeneutical resources were obscured.

The parallel with the MMS, however, is not immediately apparent. The MMS has content. It is not the lack of a concept or term to describe a phenomenon. It is a specific epistemic resource that dictates a specific narrative about a group. This may make it seem as

though the MMS cannot be a systematic hermeneutical injustice and that it must be a different kind of injustice or disadvantage. I argue, however, that I can capture this difference by distinguishing between positive and negative hermeneutical disadvantages. Remember that a hermeneutical disadvantage is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a phenomenon to be a systematic hermeneutical injustice. Though I could talk about the positive/negative distinction at the level of the injustice, it is easier to begin at the starting phenomenon: the hermeneutical disadvantage. This positive/negative distinction will follow the hermeneutical disadvantage as it becomes a systematic hermeneutical injustice.

To fully illustrate these two kinds of hermeneutical disadvantage, I must first do some textual exegesis. Fricker uses the term “obscure” ambiguously. Compare the two excerpts below (the bolded text below indicates the section of text that defines hermeneutical disadvantage):

1. A systematic hermeneutical injustice is “...the injustice of **having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding** owing to hermeneutical marginalization” (emphasis mine).⁵²
2. The hermeneutical disadvantage in Wood’s case occurred “**by having [her] experience left obscure owing to a lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resource**, where the lacuna is caused and maintained by a wide-ranging and persistent hermeneutical marginalization” (emphasis mine).⁵³

The first excerpt, with its use of “obscure *from*” (emphasis mine), implies that something is being obscured by something else. If I were to apply this generic definition to Wood’s case, as Fricker does, then it says a significant area of Wood’s social experience – plausibly her sexual and bodily autonomy in the workplace, and the basic human respect she is owed – are hidden

⁵² Fricker, 102.

⁵³ Fricker, 102.

from her by the lack of a concept of sexual harassment. This definition implies the covering of one thing (the reality of her social experience) by another thing (the lack of a concept of sexual harassment). The second excerpt, however, uses “obscure” as an adjective. This communicates that a significant area of Wood’s social experience is left unknown to her and others, because of the lack of a concept of sexual harassment. On this picture, the hermeneutical disadvantage is not the concealment of a phenomenon, but rather the lack of knowledge of a phenomenon.

The first way to read this may be to say that Fricker’s account is incorrect. Her paradigmatic case does not seem to fit the account she herself has provided. From an epistemic point of view, it seems odd to say that Wood’s social experience was concealed by the absence of knowledge of the concept “sexual harassment.” That might more accurately be described as a mere lack of knowledge. On this reading, Fricker’s account is incorrect, or the paradigmatic case is improperly categorized. This response would be uncharitable. Wood’s case, even if it is not an active obfuscation, is a phenomenon that one might want to be captured with a term such as “hermeneutical disadvantage” because it is clear that what she suffered *was* in fact a real disadvantage – in the form of psychological, physiological, and economic harms – resulting from the lack of collective hermeneutical resources.

Another response one could have would be to simply ditch the requirement of “obscure.” I could formulate Fricker’s account without using “obscure” at all. I could say a hermeneutical disadvantage is having a significant area of one’s experience *rendered difficult to interpret* by collective understanding – where “by” indicates that collective understanding is prevented from interpreting the experience. This is a better response. It preserves Wood’s case as stemming from a hermeneutical disadvantage, and it removes an unnecessary procedural element from the account. After I eliminate “obscure,” it does not matter whether the hermeneutical disadvantage

comes from the concealment of social experience by something else or from an epistemic gap in collective hermeneutical resources.

However, there may be a benefit to preserving the procedural element in some capacity. Returning to the excerpts above, Wood's case is clearly aligned with the use of "obscure" in the second excerpt, while the MMS is aligned with the first excerpt. Under the revision in the previous paragraph, where I replaced "obscured from" with the broader "rendered difficult to interpret," both Wood's case and the MMS become identical. They are both cases where a significant area of one's experience is rendered difficult to interpret due to a lack of collective hermeneutical resources. In Wood's case this occurs because of an epistemic gap, and in the MMS case this occurs because of the presence of a specific kind of hermeneutical resource.

In the following sections, I provide a full defense of the MMS as a systematic hermeneutical injustice, which begins with how the MMS results in a hermeneutical disadvantage by rendering a significant area of one's interests difficult to interpret. As such, I omit a full defense of it here. However, assuming my conclusion about the hermeneutical disadvantage the MMS creates – which is that it disadvantages Asian Americans by imposing a distinct hermeneutical resource that smothers other more nuanced and accurate resources – there is a benefit to distinguishing it from Wood's case. The MMS functions through the pervasive presence of a stereotype. This is potentially importantly different than the strict lack of a concept. At minimum, this difference likely means they will require different solutions. Both the paradigmatic case and the MMS case would likely require some form of consciousness-raising about their respective issues and the creation of more accurate interpretive resources. However, in the MMS case, work will first need to be done to disprove the hermeneutical resource that is currently occupying the interpretive space.

To track this difference, I propose a distinction between types of hermeneutical disadvantages: positive and negative hermeneutical disadvantages. Positive hermeneutical disadvantages are those that render an experience difficult to interpret by *imposing* a hermeneutical resource. The MMS is an example of this. The available interpretive space – which may otherwise be filled with resources that acknowledge racial, cultural, and socio-economic differences and the reality of structural racism and prejudice – is filled by a specific hermeneutical resource whose presence hides significant parts of Asian Americans racialized experiences. It impedes the growth of more nuanced interpretive resources and, in this way, it obscures and renders difficult to interpret. Wood’s case is an example of a negative hermeneutical disadvantage. It was mediated by a strict lack of resources. Wood’s social experiences were rendered difficult to interpret because of an epistemic gap that made her unable to make sense of sexual harassment. This distinction will follow hermeneutical disadvantages as they turn into systematic hermeneutical injustices. Positive hermeneutical disadvantages will become positive systematic hermeneutical injustices, provided they meet the other criteria, and the same holds for negative hermeneutical disadvantages.

I will not argue this point further. There is much more to be said about this distinction, but there is no space to do it well here. The primary aim of this thesis is to provide a picture of the MMS and how it fits with an existing – albeit slightly edited – account of systematic hermeneutical injustice. However, in dealing with a potential objection to my view, I hope I have motivated two points. First, the following sections will be using a slightly edited version of hermeneutical disadvantage and thus of systematic hermeneutical injustice. In this version, “obscured from” or “obscures” will mostly be replaced with “rendered difficult to interpret” for the reasons given above. Second, the MMS will be referred to as a positive systematic

hermeneutical injustice to track the way it differs from Wood's case. This will be important in the conclusion when I note philosophical upshots of my view and possible ways to fix the issue.

IV THE MMS AS A POSITIVE SYSTEMATIC HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

In order for the MMS to constitute a systematic hermeneutical injustice, it must be an *“injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.”*⁵⁴

Recalling the breakdown provided at the end of section I and the refinement provided in section III, it must be the case that: (1) the MMS renders a significant area of one’s interests difficult to interpret by collective understanding; (2) this hermeneutical disadvantage excludes Asian Americans from equal hermeneutical participation; and (3) the resultant hermeneutical injustice contributes to continuing structural prejudice against Asian Americans and is part of a larger pattern of social powerlessness. (1) is the hermeneutical disadvantage, (2) is how it rises to the level of hermeneutical marginalization and injustice, and (3) is why it is accurately described as systematic. In the following three sub-sections, I defend each claim in turn.

IV.1 The Hermeneutical Disadvantage

To show that the MMS is a positive systematic hermeneutical injustice, I must first show that it results in a positive systematic hermeneutical disadvantage: it must render certain experiences that it is in Asian Americans’ interests to understand difficult to interpret and it must do this by imposing a specific hermeneutical resource. In this section, I argue that the MMS results in a positive hermeneutical disadvantage because it imposes a specific kind of interpretive resource that fills the interpretive space, impeding the growth of more nuanced or more accurate resources. This results in internalized racism, poor mental health outcomes, understudying and underfunding of physical health outcomes, and a lack of hermeneutical resources to make sense of continuing racism and oppression.

⁵⁴ Fricker, “Powerlessness and Social Interpretation,” 100.

Many Asian Americans self-report that they do not experience racism or feel stereotyped as model minorities, and there is often an acceptance of the core ideas behind the MMS, even while Asian Americans simultaneously disavow the stereotype.⁵⁵ Interviews conducted by Inseo Son show that Korean Americans tend to deny or minimize the significant racism against them, and while they do not consider themselves a minority, they also do not consider themselves white.⁵⁶ Daisy Ball found that many Asian Americans reject the MMS and deny that race is a large issue for them; however, they also repeatedly reinforce ideas about the MMS.⁵⁷ Immigrant parents and second-generation Asian Americans parrot the core aspects of the MMS, often taking pride in the favorably-valenced stereotyping that accompanies it. This is all often done without collective acknowledgement that there are distinct harms that can emerge from the stereotype, as well as how it can be used to deny the existence of racism against Asian Americans and disparities in jobs and health.⁵⁸

The MMS imposes a particular interpretive resource that does not acknowledge the damage which it creates. Stereotypes have been shown to be detrimental to the stereotyped group. It robs them of individuality, reinforces prejudice and bias, and promotes the internalization of racist ideas about one's own group.⁵⁹ Additionally, the MMS has been shown to have dire mental health consequences for Asian Americans.⁶⁰ It creates intense pressure to succeed, and if that success is not achieved, then the failure is seen as a result of an individual problem, not a structural one.⁶¹ The MMS directly places high expectations on Asian Americans,

⁵⁵ Ball, "America's 'Whiz Kids'?" 116.

⁵⁶ Son, "Partly Colored or Almost White?" 767.

⁵⁷ Ball, "America's 'Whiz Kids'?" 116.

⁵⁸ Cheng et al, "A Tripartite Model of Collective Psychosocial Resistance," 630.

⁵⁹ Hwang, "Demystifying and Addressing Internalized Racism," 596-599.

⁶⁰ Cheng et al, "A Tripartite Model of Collective Psychosocial Resistance"; Cohut, "Affects Well-Being and Mental Health."

⁶¹ Ball, "America's 'Whiz Kids'?" 119.

which cause individuals to experience “imposter syndrome, or feelings of shame and guilt as they face a fear of letting others down,”⁶² in addition to “self-doubt, inadequacy, psychological problems, and suicidality.”⁶³ Asian Americans are “three times less likely than whites to seek mental health help...[and] they are more likely to consider and attempt suicide.”⁶⁴ Among Asian American youths, suicide is the second leading cause of death.⁶⁵

There may be other explanations for these issues, such as the impact of different Asian cultures and upbringings on Asian Americans. However, there is evidence that the internalization of the MMS is linked to a decreased likelihood to seek mental health services.⁶⁶ Asian Americans, because of the MMS, are also more likely to be perceived as having better mental health.⁶⁷ This creates barriers to seeking and obtaining effective care. The MMS paints Asian Americans as not needing help and being self-sufficient. In doing so, it creates individual psychological harms and imposes a racialized narrative around mental health – specifically that Asian American’s do not need help – that hinders their ability to seek effective mental health care.

This is not limited to mental health either. There are physical health ramifications to the MMS. From 1992-2018, only 0.17% of NIH expenditures were for research that included Asian Americans and only 0.005% were Asian American focused.⁶⁸ The MMS has directly negatively impacted “the knowledge base on Asian American health, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the MMS and obscuring an accurate portrait of Asian Americans’ health.”⁶⁹ It

⁶² Cohut, “Affects Well-Being and Mental Health.”

⁶³ Kim, “Too Well-Off to Seek Help?”

⁶⁴ Yam, “The Mental Health Toll.”

⁶⁵ Chua, “Prevents AAPI From Seeking Mental Health.”

⁶⁶ Kim, “Too Well-Off to Seek Help?”

⁶⁷ Kim, “Too Well-Off to Seek Help?”

⁶⁸ Kim et al, “Overcoming Constraints of the Model Minority Stereotype,” 615-616.

⁶⁹ Kim et al, “Overcoming Constraints of the Model Minority Stereotype,” 618.

has resulted in a tragic understudying of Asian American health, as it has perpetrated the idea that they are also model minorities in health.⁷⁰ This picture of Asian Americans as being healthy and accommodating – an idea intimately tied to the content of the MMS – can lead to fewer referrals to additional health screenings and missing diagnoses of alcohol use disorder when a clinical description merits one.⁷¹ Among cigarette smokers, Asian Americans are the least likely to receive advice from health care professionals about smoking cessation.⁷²

The MMS forces a certain interpretation of their own racial qualities on Asian Americans, and causes them to deny or minimize racist actions⁷³ and to conceive of their place in society as purely based upon their merit, instead of heavily impacted by structural racism and inequality.⁷⁴ This creates an insidious invisibility around the reality of Asian American struggles. It assumes that they are well positioned relative to even white Americans, which has been “used to deny racial discrimination and disparities encountered by Asian Americans.”⁷⁵ It robs Asian Americans of a framework within which they can understand instances of racism, telling them that failures are due to their failures as individuals or as “good Asians.” The positive hermeneutical disadvantage is the presence of a stereotype that enforces the idea that hard work, individual merit, and cultural assimilation can insulate Asian Americans from racism, and denies them the resources to identify and critically assess instances of oppression.

IV.2 The Hermeneutical Marginalization and Injustice

Hermeneutical marginalization and injustice occur when members of the hermeneutically disadvantaged group experience “unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some

⁷⁰ Kim et al, “Overcoming Constraints of the Model Minority Stereotype,” 611.

⁷¹ Ibid., 617.

⁷² Ibid., 617-618.

⁷³ Son, “Partly Colored or Almost White?” 767.

⁷⁴ Ball, “America’s ‘Whiz Kids’?” 119.

⁷⁵ Cheng et al, “A Tripartite Model of Collective Psychosocial Resistance,” 630.

significant area(s) of social experience.”⁷⁶ For the hermeneutical disadvantage described in the previous section to become hermeneutical marginalization and injustice, it must be the case that Asian Americans experience the hermeneutical disadvantage in a context where they are excluded from full and equal hermeneutical participation. This unequal hermeneutical power is especially important in sites where collective hermeneutical resources are created.⁷⁷

The MMS directly contributes to underrepresentation in hermeneutically important professions such as “journalism, politics, academia, and law.”⁷⁸ This is particularly salient because participation in these professions is precisely the kind of action that could aid Asian Americans in defining their own narratives, advocating for continued and significant representation, and combating the pervasiveness of the MMS. Without representative footholds in these sites, Asian Americans have reduced hermeneutical power and are subject to interpretive resources unduly influenced by more powerful groups who might have no interest in ensuring that the collective hermeneutical resources available to Asian Americans do not marginalize them. The MMS works to perpetuate hermeneutical disadvantages by keeping Asian Americans hermeneutically marginalized.

One area where hermeneutical power is explicitly exercised is in politics. Income and education levels are generally the strongest predictors of “political participation among racial/ethnic groups,” however, Asian Americans – despite generally having high levels of both – lag in their rates of political participation.⁷⁹ The percentage of registered Asian American voters has been documented to be a low 28%.⁸⁰ Asian American youths are some of the most

⁷⁶ Fricker, “Powerlessness and Social Interpretation,” 99.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁷⁸ Fricker, “Powerlessness and Social Interpretation,” 98.

⁷⁹ Lee and Kye, “Racialized Assimilation of Asian Americans,” 261.

⁸⁰ Lee and Kye, “Racialized Assimilation of Asian Americans,” 261.

“‘civically alienated’ from multiple civic and political activities and have the lowest voter registration and turnout rates.”⁸¹ They are also underrepresented in political office, holding a mere 0.9% of elected office, despite comprising 7% of the population.⁸²

This political apathy can be partly traced back to the pressures placed on them. The exaltation of Asian Americans as model minorities encourages them to keep their heads down, work hard, and dismiss racism as a “‘prudent choice to attest to the validity of the American dream’ and to avoid accusations of being ‘un-American.’”⁸³ It reinforces an individualistic and meritocratic view of what it takes to succeed, further minimizing awareness of structural racism. However, there is evidence that a critical way to encourage political activism among Asian American youth is to encourage the formation of a group consciousness that reframes personal experiences to challenge dominant racial ideologies.⁸⁴ This challenge to the extant systems is directly contradicted by the content of what it takes to succeed as a model minority, where success is defined as being able to prove oneself through application of hard work.

There is further hermeneutical marginalization in the workplace and across professions. Asian Americans are underrepresented in federal government, where they constitute 9.5% of the workforce but only “4.4% of the workforce at the highest federal level.”⁸⁵ They make up a mere 6% of executive leaders, despite comprising 13% of working professionals.⁸⁶ In law, they have the lowest ratio of partners to associates, making up 11% of associates in U.S. law firms, but only 3% of partners.⁸⁷ In Silicon Valley, Asian Americans comprise 30% of tech employees, but

⁸¹ Lin, “From Alienated to Activists,” 1405.

⁸² Terrell, “AAPIs Are 6% of Population.”

⁸³ Lin, “From Alienated to Activists,” 1407.

⁸⁴ Lin, “From Alienated to Activists,” 1406.

⁸⁵ Gee and Peck, “Asian Americans Are the Least Likely Group.”

⁸⁶ Liu, “How the Model Minority Myth.”

⁸⁷ Nunes, Yale Law School.

make up only 12.5% of managers.⁸⁸ The problem is compounded for Asian American women, where only 1 in 285 is an executive – amongst Asian American men the ratio is 1 in 201 and amongst white men the ratio is 1 in 87.⁸⁹ An analysis by Buck Gee and Denise Peck found that in the United States, Asian Americans were “the least likely group to be promoted from individual contributor roles into management” – less likely than Blacks or Hispanics.⁹⁰

This is often attributed to a phenomenon controversially dubbed the bamboo ceiling.⁹¹ The phrase, a play on glass ceiling, has historically been used to “refer to the limitations and discrimination Asian Americans face in the workplace.”⁹² Gee, in an op-ed for the New York Times, directly blamed the MMS for the bamboo ceiling. The narrative it tells is one of the “hard-working model minority.” This narrative creates a bias that Asian Americans lack the assertiveness required to lead. While their quiet conformity and hard work makes them good workers, it does not make them good leaders.⁹³ The MMS, because of its wide and uncritical acceptance, hinders Asian Americans professional advancement. They continue to be denied equal opportunity in academic, political, and professional pursuits, which in turn prevents them from full participation in hermeneutically important sites. This is how the positive hermeneutical disadvantage rises to the level of hermeneutical marginalization and injustice.

IV.3 The ‘Systematic’ Part of a Systematic Hermeneutical Injustice

I have argued that the MMS constitutes a positive hermeneutical injustice because (1) it imposes a specific hermeneutical resource that prevents collective understanding of a significant area of Asian American’s experiences, and (2) it excludes Asian Americans from equal

⁸⁸ Fisher, “Piercing the ‘Bamboo Ceiling.’”

⁸⁹ NPR Staff, “Often Employees, Rarely CEOs”; Chu, “Shattering the Bamboo Ceiling.”

⁹⁰ Gee and Peck, “Asian Americans Are the Least Likely Group.”

⁹¹ Kubota, “What Is the ‘Bamboo Ceiling?’”

⁹² Kubota, “What Is the ‘Bamboo Ceiling?’”

⁹³ Gee, “A Bamboo Ceiling.”

hermeneutical participation. In this section, I argue the MMS is a positive *systematic* hermeneutical injustice because it contributes to continuing structural prejudice against Asian Americans and is part of a larger pattern of social powerlessness.

Much of this work has been shown in previous sections. The MMS covers up institutional racism against Asian Americans and renders their racialized experiences invisible,⁹⁴ hindering efforts to effectively combat the structures that continue to oppress them on the basis of their race, in addition to being a source of racism itself. Racial stratification, and the actual position of Asian Americans within it, are hidden underneath this stereotype, which works to maintain a hierarchy that disadvantages them and benefits those already in power.⁹⁵ The MMS – through a pervasive presence and smothering occupation of interpretive space – maintains a structural prejudicing of collective hermeneutical resources by preventing Asian Americans from the equal hermeneutical participation required to influence them.

One can see how the MMS is embedded in a larger pattern of social powerlessness by seeing the various barriers that Asian Americans face and the other forms of injustice and social marginalization they experience. As previously discussed, the MMS has racist origins and content. It perpetuates a myth of meritocracy and designates Asian Americans as good, honorary whites – as long as they keep their heads down, work hard, and continue to “prove” themselves. This covers up institutional racism against Asian Americans and renders their racialized experiences invisible,⁹⁶ hindering efforts to effectively combat the structures that continue to oppress them on the basis of their race.

⁹⁴ Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 2.

⁹⁵ Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 2.

⁹⁶ Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 2.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, there have been soaring rates of “verbal and physical attacks, harassment, and discrimination in the United States” against Asian Americans.⁹⁷ Hate crimes against Asian Americans have doubled or even tripled in major cities.⁹⁸ Many Asian Americans reported increased discrimination when they wore a mask in public – beyond that which the non-racially identifiable American experienced – and many Asian American owned businesses suffered disproportionate economic effects on account of racist misconceptions about cleanliness.⁹⁹ This surge of harassment and violence against Asian Americans shows that the MMS is not an isolated incident of marginalization, but is embedded in a larger context of racism.

Up to this point, I have primarily discussed the MMS as the cause or root of an injustice. It maintains a structural prejudice in collective hermeneutical resources by preventing the growth of more nuanced and accurate ones, and by keeping Asian Americans from full and equal participation in hermeneutically important sites. The MMS, through hermeneutical marginalization, does rob Asian Americans of the hermeneutical power required to create collective hermeneutical resources; however, to fully illuminate the systematic nature of the injustice the MMS creates, one must remember that it only gained the social traction it did because hermeneutical power was already structured against Asian Americans. The very fact that the MMS came to define Asian Americans in the United States is evidence that they exist in a context of social marginalization.

This fact is thrown into sharp relief when one looks at the function of stereotypical images of racial groups. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics*

⁹⁷ Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 2.

⁹⁸ Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 2.

⁹⁹ Walker and Anders, “A Critical Race Case Study,” 7.

of *Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses controlling images of Black women. She specifically notes portrayals of Black women as “stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas.”¹⁰⁰ These ideas about Black women are tools of power, created and manipulated by dominant social groups to mask the reality of social relations and to make social marginalization – such as “racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice” – seem natural and normal.¹⁰¹ They also function as ideological justifications for continuing oppression and subordination.¹⁰²

I do not bring up Collins’ work to engage in a comparison about the oppression of Black Americans versus Asian Americans. There are shared struggles and unique struggles. The parallel I wish to illuminate is how controlling images of both racial groups were borne of social marginalization. They were results of a larger context of social powerlessness, where the subjects of the stereotypes had limited – or no – hermeneutical power to define their own narratives and self-determine their own images. Even when the initial circumstances that birthed these stereotypes changed, the stereotypes had staying power because they were integral to maintaining key aspects of social marginalization. In the case of the MMS, it emerged from a context of intense anti-Asian racism to pit Asian Americans against other minorities and to keep them in subordinate social positions relative to white Americans. Its continuing ability to keep Asian Americans hermeneutically marginalized is evidence of their continuing social marginalization.

Though certain groups within the Asian American diaspora may be advantaged along certain metrics, the hermeneutical marginalization created by the MMS exists in a context of a

¹⁰⁰ Collins, 69.

¹⁰¹ Collins, 69.

¹⁰² Collins, 70, 72.

type of social powerlessness where Asian Americans are still perpetual foreigners and model minorities. The injustice created by the MMS is properly called systematic because it perpetuates a structural bias in the collective hermeneutical resource against Asian Americans and is embedded in a larger social context of historical and continuing injustice.

V CONCLUSION

The MMS obscures and pushes out important hermeneutical resources that would aid Asian Americans in making sense of an important area of their lives. Its effects are disproportionately borne by a marginalized group, which prevents them from meaningful access to hermeneutical spaces where they could seek to fix an extant lack of understanding about their racial experiences and where they could create resources to empower Asian Americans. Though this would require more philosophical examination, other stereotypes – such as the controlling images about Black women that Collins discusses – likely function in similar ways and could be defended as positive systematic hermeneutical injustices.

Additionally, these injustices hinder the autonomy of individuals who belong to marginalized groups by prescribing certain ways of being. In a public-facing summary of her argument in *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labor*, Gina Schouten argues that intrusive family policy can be justified because the socially-embedded assumption that sex will dictate work specialization infringes on one’s autonomy. It is objectionable on account of the “free” in “free and equal citizenship.”¹⁰³ Even though individuals are still able to make autonomous choices in the face of these powerful assumptions, the social arrangement creates social and material costs and as such is “an affront to autonomy because it is predicated on the institutionalized assumption that one’s sex will dictate the work that one does.”¹⁰⁴

Something similar happens in the case of the MMS. It assumes that Asian Americans will behave in ways aligned with the content of the MMS. It creates social and material costs both for being a member of this marginalized group and for acting contrary to the stereotyped expectations. Asian Americans are assumed to be submissive, obedient, good at math and STEM

¹⁰³ Schouten, “‘Flexible’ Family Leave is Lousy Feminism.”

¹⁰⁴ Schouten, “‘Flexible’ Family Leave is Lousy Feminism’.”

careers, and good workers but not good leaders. This results in psychological, economic, professional, and personal costs for being identifiably Asian American. Thus, the MMS may also be an affront to the autonomy of each Asian American because it assumes that they should and will act in stereotypical ways.

The autonomy implication of the MMS as positive systematic hermeneutical injustice also indicates a path for justifying race-conscious policies. The infringement of autonomy occurs because the MMS is an injustice, and the MMS is an injustice partly because of the hermeneutical marginalization which keeps Asian Americans from full and equal participation in hermeneutically important sites. Thus, ameliorating this injustice may require increased representation in the workplace, law, academia, and media. There is significant work left to be done, but establishing the MMS as a positive systematic hermeneutical injustice is a crucial start.

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