

# Asian Americans' Diverse Experiences

## Provide Context for Counseling

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### Abstract

Counseling with any specific ethnic group requires the willingness to understand and a foundation of knowledge of the individuals within that group. These two areas of competency create a framework for working with clients who are diverse, especially if there is a difference between the client's and counselor's ethnicity. This is especially true for counselors working with Asian Americans because of the variety of educational, economic, religious, and cultural norms that this ethnic group embodies. There are many differences among Asian American groups in educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and perceived value of acculturation. A discussion of some of these facets in relation to culture of origin for Asian Americans is shared. These aspects of diversity offer a basis for implications and recommendations for counselors who work with this dynamic group of individuals. In addition, specific counseling techniques are discussed.

The term "Asian American" comprises a large group of individuals residing within the United States with a wide variety of racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. According to Sue and Sue (2008), this multifaceted group includes people with ancestry from China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, and India as well as immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and those from the Pacific Islands such as from Hawaii, Guam, and Samoa. There was a 50% increase in the number of Asian Americans living within the United States from 1990 to 2000, with approximately 12 million total Asian Americans accounted for in the 2000 U.S. Census (Liang & Sedlacek, 2003). This group as a whole is difficult to describe adequately as there are many differences within its sub-groups. Religious practices, language, education, assimilation, and connection to country of origin are all areas that may differ among those who identify as Asian Americans (Sue & Sue, 2008).

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Asian Americans comprise 6% of the total enrollment in higher education and they comprise 4% of the total U.S. population, according to the 2000 U.S. Census (Liang & Sedlacek, 2003). Of those Asian American individuals over the age of 25, 44% had obtained a bachelor's degree in comparison to a similar level of attainment by 24% of their Euro-American peers (Sue & Sue, 2008). This creates a picture of a high-achieving segment of society. However there are many within-group differences among Asian Americans that are important to take into account in a counseling setting.

### **Differences in Educational Attainment Among Asian American Groups**

Sue and Sue (2008) have indicated that there are discrepancies between the completion of higher education degrees by some Asian American groups in comparison to other Asian American groups. Hmongs living in America exemplify this difference with only 40% having obtained a high school diploma. Fewer than 14% of some Asian immigrant groups have a bachelor's degree. On the other hand in many West Coast universities, Asian Pacific Americans comprise 20% to 50% of the total undergraduate population (Inkelas, 2004). This student population rose rapidly in the two decades from the mid-1970's to the mid-1990's, comprising as much as a 400% increase, according to Inkelas (2004).

Those students who identify as Cambodian American are often underrepresented in higher education. Their rate of completion of the four year undergraduate degree was at 6.9% in 2004. This is in comparison to the national average of college graduation which was at 24% the same year (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). In addition many Cambodians live below the federal poverty level with approximately 29.3% of Cambodian Americans earning a per capita annual income of \$10,215 or less. Cambodian Americans are also more likely to live in single-parent households and in urban areas with a high population living in poverty (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008).

### **Immigrant Populations**

Filipino Americans comprise the most rapidly increasing group among United States immigrants. An estimated 2.3 million Filipinos resided in the United States in

2003. This number represents the second largest number of immigrants to the U.S. besides immigrants from Mexico since the 1960's (Maramba, 2008). Although this population is rapidly increasing, there has been little research on Filipinos' needs for community counseling or school resources. In spite of a stereotype of being a "model minority", studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that abnormally high percentage of Filipina teens report suicidal ideation (45.6%) and suicidal attempts (23.3%) (Maramba, 2008). This contradictory information provides evidence that Asian Pacific Islanders, and Filipino Americans' in particular, mental health needs should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis with the understanding that some Asian groups may have specialized counseling support needs that are not consistent with the "model minority" stereotype.

A common pattern for Asian Indians within the first generation of residing within the United States is to reinvent aspects of their original culture within the constraints of their new country. At times Asian Indian immigrants can portray a more traditional value system than is commonly adhered to within their previous communities (Farver et al., 2007). A major difference between Indian American and Euro-American belief system involves perception of the concept of self. Asian Indians tend to characterize their individuality in terms of family and family loyalty (Farver et al., 2007). Individuals of Asian backgrounds are more often expected to make sacrifices to support the family's best interest. This is in contrast to the more individualistic emphasis of Euro-American philosophy. Indian Americans may be expected to reside at home until they are married and follow parental advice when making personal decisions about career or marriage options (Farver et al., 2007).

Asian Indian parents tend to view their child's autonomous behavior and ability to make independent decisions in a negative way. Differences in parental attitudes towards their teens' freedom to make independent decisions may cause additional anxiety for Asian Indian adolescents, during a time when the experience of some anxiety is common among their peer age group. Parental conflict is common around

issues of acculturation of children to American mainstream values (Farver et al., 2007). These issues are common for many Asian Americans (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Farver et al. (2007) found that conflict among Asian Indian Americans may have increased due to cultural values and expectations for behavior. How well Asian Indians mediate their dual cultural experiences (American and Asian) may contribute to their positive mental health. However, family discord was determined to have a negative correlation with Asian Indian adolescents' school achievement and a positive correlation with their anxiety levels (Farver et al., 2007).

### **Implications for Educational Involvement and Employment**

Lucas and Berkel (2005) reported that Asian American students had difficulty in formation of their career goals, personality, and talents. These students reported having less access to job information and training in comparison to Euro-American students. Many Asian American students' values are driven by what will preserve family interests. Their parents may promote career goals that are similar to their own occupational interests or more prominent occupations that will bring respect to the family (Lucas & Berkel, 2005). This may in part be prompted by Asian American parents' acquired knowledge of the type of discrimination and difficulties involved in that specific career choice. Parents' experiences of racism and discrimination may provide Asian American students with a negative perception of the obstacles they will face in a working environment. Students may feel pulled by parents who place expectations on them to excel and succeed in a competitive environment and a school system that promotes individualism (Lucas & Berkel, 2005).

In one study by Maramba (2008), Filipina women were determined to frequently reinterpret their ability to preserve their identities as college students and as Filipinas. The immigrant students surveyed indicated that their family was most important and a mirror of whom they themselves were. They often expressed a desire to support or care for their families once they obtained their college degrees. Participants felt that the pressure to succeed in school was driven in part by their parents' hardships (Maramba, 2008). Parental expectation to succeed in school is commonly reported among Asian

Americans (Sue & Sue, 2008). Simultaneously they were expected to continue to contribute to the home in a way not expected of their male siblings. Male siblings were also allowed more lenience with curfew times and rules in Filipino families (Maramba, 2008).

Asian Americans are concerned about issues of safety when diversity increases on a college campus. They may be concerned with whether regulations and policies will be enforced and whether they will experience more racism (Liang & Sedlacek, 2003). Female Asian Pacific American's (APA's) are more likely to be sensitive to U.S. racial inequalities and are more likely to promote and identify with their racial identity as Asian Pacific Americans than are male undergraduate students (Inkelas, 2004). The educational attainments of APA parents are related to APA gains in ethnic identity and awareness. Mothers' educational attainments have a negative relationship with higher racial awareness and fathers' educational attainments have a positive relationship with increased racial awareness (Inkelas, 2004).

There is a relationship between students becoming involved in ethnic clubs and sponsored activities and their sense of activism in the school community and later in their community of origin (Inkelas, 2004). Students who feel that they belong socially in their school environment are more likely to achieve academic success in that environment. In contrast, students who feel more disengaged socially are more likely to drop out of college prior to finishing their programs (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). Cambodian students at one Californian university indicated that although there was a predominant population of Asian American students on campus, there were few Cambodian American students, which contributed to their feelings of isolation initially. Membership in an on-campus Cambodian association which provided opportunities for interaction with other Cambodians was seen as an effective means of socializing. Difficulties with transitioning to the university setting were mediated by the students' ability to maintain communication with their family and friends from home and by their Cambodian association membership (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008).

The mind and body are considered to be intertwined in Asian American culture; therefore complaints may be presented that are somatic in nature rather than psychological (Sue & Sue, 2008). Spiritual approaches may be used at home to treat a physical complaint. Because the term Asian American is such a broad category encompassing many different sub-groups, the role of spirituality in the client's worldview needs to be evaluated on an individual basis. Asian religions tend to focus on a more collectivistic orientation; however this can vary greatly from Taoist beliefs, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and many other religious affiliations. Those working with Asian Americans may need to identify their religious practices as a source of racial identity and social networking and utilize these community groups as a means of promotion of mental health (Liang & Sedlacek, 2003). Liang and Sedlacek (2003) found that in comparison to other ethnic groups who were provided with the same survey, Asian Americans regard religion as a means to form a social group that enables them to fully integrate their ethnic identity. It was also noted that Asian Americans have a tolerance for religions that may to other ethnic groups be labeled as "cults" (Liang & Sedlacek, 2003).

### **Implications for Counseling**

Based on the evidence that Asian American students are often dealing with issues not as typical for Euro-American students; it is imperative that counselors and advisors work with these students with an emphasis on being culturally sensitive to their specific needs. These students may be coming to terms with the expectations and pressures of two contradictory societal forces: parents and school/community (Lucas & Berkel, 2005). Some Asian American groups such as Asian Indians may be dealing with an increased level of conflict with parents as well as differing expectations of American and traditional values (Farver, et al., 2007).

Practitioners may also need to assess the level of stress that Asian Americans experience as a result of campus climate (Liang & Sedlacek, 2003). In order for campuses to be affective for Asian Americans, they should promote clubs and organizations that foster racial and ethnicity awareness and inclusion (Inkelas, 2004).

Asian Americans may also need to maintain consistent contact and communication with friends and family from their home communities in order to buffer them against perceived social isolation (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). Counselors may need to understand that some students derive from backgrounds of traditional male-dominated societal structure and may need to pursue less gender-neutral approaches to serving these clients. Filipina students may also benefit from having role models of similar backgrounds with whom they can relate (Maramba, 2008).

It is important to remember that students with varying degrees of acculturation into Euro-American culture may react differently to certain counseling strategies. In general, Asian Americans may anticipate a direct problem-solving and hierarchical approach from their counselors. They may react in a more positive manner to counseling strategies that include a less direct communication style which allows them to avoid shame and loss of self-control. Direct confrontation regarding a client's openness should be avoided. Instead, psycho-education, outreach programs, or online information may be more beneficial as they tend to be less intimidating strategies than traditional "talk therapy". Instead of expressing discontent with the counseling strategies used, Asian American clients may avoid tasks assigned during the session or may decide to discontinue their counseling altogether (Lucas & Berkel, 2005).

Recommended counseling techniques include client-counselor matching on etiology of presenting concern, which has been shown to correlate to positive session outcomes, as measured by client perception. When clients who are Asian American perceive that their counselors share a similar understanding about their problem of concern, they rate their counselor as having more credibility, empathetic understanding, and competency in cross-cultural considerations. They also report that they would recommend their counselor to others more often. A positive view of the client-counselor relationship may lead to more positive outcomes (Bryan, Ng, & Ahn, 2009).

In addition to client-counselor matching, client reluctance should generally be viewed as a measure of client acculturation instead of a demonstration of client resistance. Offering psycho-education about the value or relevance of counseling

techniques may be helpful to clients of Asian American descent. In addition, psycho-education may be combined with a demonstration of an awareness of the importance of preserving traditional values, and facilitating empowerment strategies. Counselors and other mental health professionals should consider transcultural psychotherapeutic approaches when working with clients who are Asian American (Sandhu, 1997). As with any counseling relationship, if counseling techniques specific to Asian Americans are applied thoughtfully and skillfully the relationship between client and counselor will likely be enhanced, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful outcomes for the client.

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