

Culturally-Competent School Counseling With Asian American Adolescents

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Abstract

Asian American adolescents are frequently overlooked as a population in need of counseling interventions. However, cultural issues such as refugee status or the pressure of high academic achievement can influence an Asian American student's mental health. As there is a dearth of school counseling literature written about what school counselors should be aware of when working with Asian American adolescents, the purpose of this paper is to provide school counselors with knowledge, awareness, and skills needed to work with Asian American youth and families in the schools. An historical overview of Asian immigration and common cultural beliefs are discussed. A model for working with Asian American adolescents in the schools is provided as well as suggestions for counseling with Asian American adolescents.

Culturally-Competent School Counseling With Asian American Adolescents

Asian American adolescents are a very diverse group who come from many different countries. They differ in methods and time of migration, language, social class, and religion. Asian Americans constitute one of the fastest growing population groups in the United States (Seráfica, 1999). The U.S. Census Bureau (2002a) reported that approximately 4.2% of the population is of Asian descent. Of this group, persons 19 years and under make up 8.6% of the Asian American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). Due to the growing number of Asian American adolescents, school counselors must be prepared to provide effective counseling interventions.

Much of what is published in the counseling literature on Asian American adolescents consists of attempts to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity of counselors by describing cultural variables and issues that are often found in the Asian American population (e.g., adolescent's ethnic identification, acculturation, filial piety; Seráfica, 1999). Other areas covered in the counseling literature have focused on academic achievement of Asian Americans (see Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990, for a review). However, there has been little attention given to Asian American adolescents' mental health issues.

To date, the counseling literature on treatment of mental health problems of Asian American adolescents has been limited to studies of characteristics of service facilities and counselors, and the impact of both on counseling outcomes. Little is written about what school counselors should be aware of when working with Asian American adolescents. The purpose of this paper is to provide school counselors with knowledge, awareness, and skills needed to work with Asian American youth and

families in the schools. First, historical and cultural perspectives on Asian Americans are examined. Second, some cultural issues school counselors should be aware of when working with Asian American students will be highlighted. Third, an overview of a counseling model for working with Asian American families in the school is provided.

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

Some people ascribe to the ideology that views the U.S. as a melting pot of individuals of different cultural backgrounds melding into one common culture. When viewed this way, the rich histories that make up each individual culture are often overlooked. Asian Americans are frequently and mistakenly viewed as a single sub-culture in the U.S. Although Asian American ethnic groups share similar cultural values (e.g. filial piety, the placement of the needs of the family before one's own, respect for elders, and the use of shame and guilt as a means of maintaining order and control), it would be unwise and detrimental to assume that all Asians Americans are alike. Since Asian Americans are from many different ethnic groups (Sue, 1998), school counselors working with Asian American adolescents are highly encouraged to become familiar with the historical background of their students' country of origin.

Various Asian American ethnic groups differ in the methods and time of migration to the U.S., both of which have considerable influence on life in the U.S. The first wave of Asian immigrants arrived from China in the beginning of the 1840s (Sue & Sue, 1999). Because of the high demand for cheap labor and overpopulation in China, many Chinese (primarily peasant males) immigrated to the U.S. Beginning in the 1890s, the second wave of Asian groups to migrate was the Japanese. Many Japanese immigrants had previously come from a farming class and thus gravitated to farming and gardening

work in the U. S. (Kitano, 1969). Over half a century later (1973 to 1993), the third and fourth waves of Asian immigrants came to the U.S. due to the leniency of immigration laws. The third wave of immigrants during this period consisted largely of highly educated and skilled professionals who held professional degrees from China, India, Korea, and the Philippines (Sandu, 1997). Conversely, the fourth wave of immigrants was much less educated and likely unskilled. During this same time period, refugees from Southeast Asia arrived in the U.S. as a result of the Vietnam War. The majority of whom were Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian from rural areas who were also undereducated and possessed few job skills (Chung, Bemak, & Okazaki, 1997).

Knowledge of historical information regarding how and when Asian American ethnic groups arrived in the U.S. enables school counselors to understand three important factors: level of acculturation, family social class, and educational background. Awareness of these factors is essential, because it informs the school counselor the extent to which the student and his or her family are familiar with the U.S. educational system and the amount of financial and emotional resources available to them. For example, the first two waves of Asian immigrants have had a longer time to acculturate to U.S. society than the third and fourth. This would suggest that members of Asian American ethnic groups such as Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans have a more extended history in the U.S. Thus, many Chinese American and Japanese American students and their families would likely be more acculturated than Vietnamese American and Laotian American families, who did not emerge in the U.S. until the fourth wave of immigration, years later. Differences in levels of acculturation would also imply that some Asian American families would vary in English proficiency, familiarity with the

U.S. culture, socioeconomic statuses (SES), and the level and type of involvement they have within the community (Nishio & Blimes, 1987).

The type of immigration, such as voluntary immigration or refugee status, also has a great impact on the differences between Asian American ethnic groups and is important for school counselors to take into account when working with Asian American students (Sue & Sue, 1999). In general, refugees arrive under more stress than immigrants. Voluntary immigrants are individuals who have had time to prepare to move to the U.S., whereas refugees often had no control of their fate (Bemak, Chung, & Bornemann, 1996). Because of traumatic experiences, refugees are at a high risk for developing major depressive disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder (Lin & Shon, 1991). Thus, school counselors should assess for these symptoms when working with Cambodian American and Laotian American families.

Although there are within group differences in the Asian American culture, there are general cultural beliefs and values that transcend specific ethnic groups. The philosophical bases for Asian American values are derived from religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (Chung et al., 1997). For example, filial piety is derived from Buddhist and Confucian thought that a love and respect for one's parents and ancestors is to be cultivated (Traylor, 1988). Filial piety is also highly valued in Asian and Asian American cultures (Sue, 1998). In general terms, filial piety means to take care of one's parents and show love, respect and support. Respect for one's parents is demonstrated by displaying courtesy, wisely advising them, concealing their mistakes, displaying sorrow for their sickness and death, and refraining from bringing shame to them.

Hierarchical relationships and obedience to authority are also highly valued in Asian American culture. Males and older individuals occupy a high status within the family. Family role prescription dictates that family decisions are usually made by the father. Sons are expected to carry on the family name and traditions. Even after sons are married, their primary allegiance is to the parents (Sue & Sue, 1999).

Embedded in the cultural values of filial piety and obedience to authority is collectivism. Collectivism refers to the perception of the self that is fixed between social roles and relationships whereby the self is de-emphasized and an orientation towards others and the welfare of the group or community is stressed (Le & Stockdale, 2005). In a collectivistic culture, the experiences of the individual influence the experiences of the group. Thus, at all costs, Asian Americans are socialized to follow family and group norms.

The concept of *face* is also highly valued in most, if not all, Asian cultures. This concept is known as "Haji" among Japanese, "Hiya" among Filipinos, "Mentz" among Chinese, and "Chaemyun" among the Koreans (Sue, 1994). Face is a multi-faceted term, and its meaning is linked with culture, honor, and shame. Although face is not exclusive to Asian American culture, *saving face* bears different levels of importance, depending on the culture or society with which one is dealing. The most familiar term for many cultural groups is "*saving face*," which is defined as refraining from public displays of disrespectful acts towards others, or taking preventive actions so that an individual will not appear to *lose face* in the eyes of others.

In Chinese culture, *face* refers to two separate but related concepts: *lien* and *mianzi*. *Lien* refers to the confidence of society in a person's moral character, whereas

mianzi refers to a reputation that is achieved through success (Bond & Hwang, 1986). A loss of *lien* would result in a loss of trust within a social network, while a loss of *mianzi* would likely result in a loss of social influence. For example, a student gossiping about someone cheating on a test would cause a loss of *lien* but not *mianzi*. Repeatedly interrupting the teacher as she is trying to speak may cause a loss of the student's *mianzi* but not *lien*.

In order to avoid loss of face for the family, parents resort to shame and guilt-arousing techniques to control adolescent behaviors. The concept of face can help to explain cultural differences between White American and Asian American communication styles. For example, Asian cultures' value of indirect communication results as a concern for the other person's face, while direct speech reflects a concern for one's own face (Yum, 1988). According to Yum, indirect communication helps prevent any potential conflicts among the partners, which leaves the relationship and the face of both parties in tact.

Understanding Asian American cultural values are important for school counselors to know because culturally-based factors such as filial piety, collectivism, and loss of face can affect utilization and appropriateness of various counseling services. For example, many Asian American adolescents tend to avoid utilizing any type of counseling services for mental health or emotional problems because this is viewed as a tacit admission of the existence of these problems and may result in public shame (loss of face) to the adolescent's family. Because of shame and stigma, Asian American adolescents do not seek help from school counselors and as a consequence,

problems may be exacerbated. In order to help Asian American adolescents, the following suggestions for school counselors are offered.

Counseling Suggestions for School Counselors

Be Aware of the Model Minority Myth

The paucity of literature on counseling interventions for Asian American adolescents may be related to the perceptions of Asian Americans held by mainstream society, including the mental health and educational fields. This myth of the “model minority” suggests that Asian Americans have few psychological or educational problems (Kim, Omizo, & Salvador, 1996; Serafica, 1997, 1999). That is, they have adapted themselves well to their environment and do not experience adjustment problems. This fallacy may be paramount in the etiology of why troubled Asian American adolescents often go unnoticed (Yagi & Oh, 1995). For example, teachers are more likely to perceive passive Asian American students as being better adjusted to the classroom as compared to White American students (Kim, 1980) and are less likely to refer them to school-based psychoeducational services (Kim, 1983). As a cultural competent counselor, it is important to be aware of how the model minority myth impacts your assessment of Asian American adolescents need for counseling.

Recognize Somatic Symptoms as Signs of Distress

Because education and family honor are highly valued among Asian Americans, they are often plagued with immense pressure to achieve academic success to save face for their family and their cultural group. Asian American adolescents are also confronted with the task of maintaining their collectivistic values at home, while functioning successfully in an individualistic society. The burden placed on Asian

American adolescents is likely to evoke overwhelming stress that can be manifested in many ways. However, because the public display of emotion is customarily viewed as a sign of weakness in the Asian culture and disclosing one's problems to another may be experienced as a loss of face, stress experienced by Asian American adolescents can be somaticized (Chun, Enomoto, & Sue, 1996). Possible signs of distress can include complaints of sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and stomach pains (Yagi & Oh, 1995).

Yagi and Oh (1995) suggested that anxiety and stress may also be manifested in more obvious and destructive ways, such as drinking, engaging in illegal activities, failing classes, and dropping out of school. School counselors should be aware that although an Asian American student may appear to be doing academically well in school, the student may be quietly suffering and possibly considering suicide as an alternative. Periodically checking in with students establishes a connection that would likely encourage them to verbally communicate their frustrations, especially if they feel that the counselor or educator will be sensitive to their concerns.

Understand the Perception of Counseling

Because saving face is highly valued within the Asian culture, many Asian Americans seek counseling only in the most extreme situations. Interactions with individuals of the Western culture, including those in counseling, are often seen as business-like and are expected to be barren of emotion and personal issues (Nishio & Blimes, 1987). For help with personal matters, Southeast Asian clients, for instance, prefer to seek advice from family and members of their community before even considering other outside options. Nishio and Blimes (1987) recommended that counselors do not seek expression of emotions or push for deep understanding too

quickly in counseling. Unacculturated Asian American clients tend to view the mental health professional as a teacher and may seek advice and more concrete information at the outset of counseling. If this need is not met, early drop-out will likely occur.

Understand Intergenerational Family Issues

Filial piety may be a source of stress for many Asian American adolescents, especially sons, who bear most of the burden. Because Asian American adolescents are met with the burden of simultaneously balancing two cultures, conflict between parents and acculturating Asian American adolescents may occur, especially when American values are not congruent with the values of the family. A study of Korean American adolescents found that conflict with parents significantly contributed to the individual's low self-esteem, emotional problems, and destructive behaviors (Yagi & Oh, 1995). Unfortunately, counseling will likely be unsuccessful without the cooperation of parents, who often view counseling for their children as a failure on their part. When working with adolescents dealing with this issue, it would be wise to keep in mind that parents may be resistant to the idea of having their child in counseling. When parental involvement is not possible, students should be encouraged to find healthy outlets for their anger and frustration. Group work can be helpful because it provides a setting where students may talk about their struggles with individuals dealing with similar issues. This is advantageous in normalizing their struggles and thereby "reduc[ing] feelings of alienation" (Yagi & Oh, 1995, p. 73).

A Counseling Model for Working with Asian American Adolescents

Given that seeking help from a school counselor may result in the loss of face for the client's family, school counselors can seek an alternative way to provide help to

Asian American adolescents. Asian American cultural values such as filial piety and educational success can be used to facilitate counseling with Asian American families. The Integrative model developed by Gibbs and Huang (1989) provides a framework for counseling with Asian American families in a culturally-responsive manner.

The Integrative model (Gibbs & Huang, 1989; Huang, 1994) incorporates Erikson's (1959) stage theory of psychosocial development, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective, and a cross-cultural perspective reflecting an anthropological influence on understanding minority mental health. This model proposes that the developmental, ecological, and cross-cultural perspectives can be conceptualized as three interactive dimensions of an Asian American adolescent's experience. In the integrative model, ethnicity is conceptualized as the main conduit that frames the adolescent's interaction with the environment, socialization in the family, and interaction within the community (e.g., peers and school).

The counseling sequence involves three phases: (a) finding common ground, (b) structuring family meetings, and (c) follow-up. In the *finding common ground* phase, the counselor explores ways to engage the parents in the intervention process. In order to do this, the parents must acknowledge that a problem or issue is personally or culturally valid to them. For example, presenting a depressed adolescent's problem using terms such as "depression" and "psychological adjustment" may do little to get the support of parents as these terms can be associated with the loss of face of their child as well as for their parental upbringing. The counselor must reframe the problem in a manner that is culturally congruent for the parents and draws upon their cultural values. For instance, if a parent highly values the academic achievement of their child, then the

problem could be phrased as the school counselor's need to have a meeting with the parents in order to help their child improve educational achievements and remove obstacles impeding this goal. Educational achievement is both a common ground in which the school counselor and parents can meet as well as a manner of saving face for the family.

The *structuring of family meetings* phase involves careful selection of those who will participate and in what order, based on cultural patterns of role relationships and communication within the family. In order for the counselor to determine this, the family's level of acculturation and language proficiency need to be taken into consideration. During this phase, the counselor attempts to convey respect for the parents' values and perspectives as well as to convey concern for their frustrations. Other techniques include educating the parents on the operations and expectations of the school system, normalizing the problem, and cultural brokering (Spiegel, 1983). Cultural brokering involves exploring: (a) the perceptions and values regarding the parents' and the adolescent's roles, (b) the adolescent's experience and behaviors in school, (c) the parents' experiences and concerns, and (d) the pressure of outside demands on both the parents and the adolescent. The sources of the problems are not attributed to the adolescent or the parent. Instead, alternative explanations for the problems are generated.

The final aspect of this counseling intervention is *follow-up*. At this phase, the school counselor suggests a follow-up meeting or phone contact several weeks after the last session. This meeting is used to add incentive for parents to consider the content of the counseling sessions and to provide incentive for change. Haung (1994)

proposed that the issue of face comes into play here. Because face represents a person's social position or prestige gained by performing social roles that are well recognized by others, an Asian American family will not want to lose face with the school counselor and may also be protective of the counselor's face. Thus, a follow-up meeting in conjunction with the motivation to avoid losing face may ensure that the parents and student will be motivated to consider some of the issues discussed in counseling.

Summary

Asian American adolescents have a reputation of being well-behaved and excelling academically. However, as shown in the literature, Asian Americans are faced with many stressors such as balancing school values with family values. School counselors may be unaware of these stressors, which may lead to emotional distress for Asian American students. Understanding the diversity within the Asian American culture as well as the culture's values and beliefs will help school counselors identify behaviors and somatic symptoms associated with student distress. Furthermore, utilizing Asian American cultural values will assist school counselors in providing culturally-sensitive and relevant counseling to a population that has historically underutilized counseling services.

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