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Working with Asian American College Students

WORKING WITH ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

By Dr. Leena Batra

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The Asian American population is one of the fastest-growing racial groups in the United States and in higher education (Hune, 2002). Though a large and diverse group of individuals from differing ethnicities, the term "Asian American" originated in the 1960s as a panethnic identity to form political coalitions for equity and empowerment (Wei, 1993). In the last few decades, Asian Americans have been attending and graduating from college in dramatic numbers, well above their overall proportion in the total U.S. population (Hune, 2002). Popular images of Asian Americans affect the self-concept of students: as a "model minority," Asians are often expected to be thin, wealthy, and intelligent. However, the reality for many Asian American college students is different from the myth of the "model minority": While AA students are more likely than White students to attend and graduate from college, they are also more likely to go on medical leave in college and to experience college dissatisfaction (Wong, 2005). However, Asian American students report being subjected to expectations that they fulfill the model minority stereotype, both from non-Asians, as well as from within their Asian communities (Suzuki, 2002). The negative consequences of this positive image is that Asian American students are often believed to be "self-sufficient" and not in need of counseling services, when in fact their level of distress is quite high (Suzuki, 2002; Wong, 2005).

The Chickering (1969) model is typically the identity model used for examining college student psychosocial development. It indicates that students' identity development follows 7 stages, or 'vectors': development of competence, management of emotions, development of interdependence, forming relationships, forming identity, finding purpose, and development of integrity. However, when working with Asian/Asian American college students, such Western identity models are inadequate (Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2001).

The Chickering model is based on data from Harvard males in 1969/1993, and emphasizes the need for college students to explore their autonomy and individualism. The model assumes that college is seen as a time for self-exploration, and that there is a prescribed/healthy way to negotiate developmental tasks. Further, the model assumes that deviation from this pattern is not healthy or normal. One criticism of the Chickering model as applied to Asian Americans is that it does not take into account the effect of external influences (i.e., racism, stereotypes, and the effect of these on one's development).

In response, Kodama, et al. (2001) developed a model to explain the psychosocial development of Asian American students. The researchers believe that a theory for Asian American students needs to take into account the effect of traditional Asian values, family influence, and external factors on a student's development.

Two traditional Asian values which are central in the upbringing of many Asian students are those of collectivism and filial piety. Collectivism values the success and welfare of the group as more important than that of the individual, and is characterized by interdependence and group connectedness. Filial piety is the value for respect and obedience of a child to his/her parents; it is based on a system of hierarchy within the family and society. The influence of these depends on environmental and contextual factors (i.e., immigration experiences, generational status, level of acculturation, etc.). For example, a fourth generation AA student is more likely to identify with Western values than a 1st generation Asian American student. Conversely, an Asian American student growing up in a small Midwestern town may perceive identity differently than one growing up in an Asian community of Los Angeles.

Purpose and identity are core to the Asian American student's development, and both inform each other (Kodama, et al., 2001). This differs from the Chickering model which emphasizes identity and purpose as the outcome of successful negotiation of previous tasks. Identity is often based on the student's chosen sense of purpose (i.e., major, chosen career path, expectations about family/marriage). For many Asian Americans, the influence of family and society run through the core of identity and purpose. For example, external factors (racism, social expectations, model minority assumptions, etc.) as well as family influences (such as parental expectations) often strongly affect one's identity and chosen sense of purpose (Kodama, et al., 2001).

Implications for Clinical Services and Campus Outreach:

It is important not to automatically apply Western models of psychosocial theory (i.e., Chickering model) to a discussion regarding Asian American students' development. Data which were used to develop the Chickering model were not derived from an Asian American sample and do not adequately explain the experiences of this student group.

Further, it is important to consider the diversity within an Asian American student group. Consider students' differing immigration histories and levels of acculturation. Experiences of bicultural students and Asian American adoptees may pose challenges regarding identity and culture for some students. Traditional Asian values and culture are experienced differently by students, and not all Asian American students will have tradition emphasized in their families.

Consider students' experiences with stereotypes and racism. Clinicians and programmers should examine expectations and potential for stereotyping Asian American students (i.e., model minority myth, etc.)

It is important to remember that Asian American students generally report low satisfaction with their college experiences and may experience "achievement stress." Major and career choice is central to the concerns of many Asian American students; this should be emphasized in program development objectives with Asian American student groups.

Some campus outreach areas to consider when working with this population could include the following:

- Religion and spirituality as a coping source for Asian American students (Yeh & Wang, 2000). This is an area that has been underemphasized when working with Asian students, and is often ignored as a source of coping for students (Yeh & Wang, 2000).
- Body image concerns of Asian American students. The internalization of Western notions of beauty impact Asian American youth and have led to an increasing prevalence of eating disorders and body image disturbance (Wang, 2005). Eyelid surgery to create an upper eyelid for Asian Americans is the country's third most popular cosmetic surgery, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (Scheidnes, 2000).
- Relationship and sexual violence among Asian American students. 12.8% of Asian and Pacific Islander women reported experiencing physical assault by an intimate partner at least once during their lifetime; 3.8% reported having been raped (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).
- Sexuality and gender identity concerns and conflicts. Asian American students from traditional family structures may experience tension from families regarding dating and relationships, particularly as they relate to family identity and carrying on the family name (Kodama, et al.,

2001).

Conclusion

Individual barriers such as shame, stigma, and lack of credibility, combined with institutional barriers, such as the use of traditional developmental and psychological models may prevent Asian American students from seeking mental health services. Counselors can assist Asian Americans by helping them to examine traditional values for personal restraint and reservation (Kim, Atkinson, & Umemoto, 2001), and to make decisions about when silence is self-damaging rather than strength. In addition, clinicians and Student Affairs professionals can facilitate the utilization of counseling services by Asian American students by examining and challenging traditional models of helping. Professionals should consider the impact of racial/ethnic identity on other areas of Asian American students' development (Kodama, et al., 2001).

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