Challenges and Techniques when Counseling Asian Americans: Implications for Classroom Teachers, School Administrators and Counselors: National Implications

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ABSTRACT

There are multiple barriers that Asian American face but the lack of mental health care in the form of counseling should not be one of them. This article will identify some of the challenges of obtaining counseling that Asian Americans face. Effective counseling of Asian Americans differs greatly from western methodologies. This is a major point of consideration in order to provide an effective service.

Introduction

Many large cities in America have specifically designated “Asian towns”, which are areas in which most of the businesses are Asian named and Asian owned businesses. I
many of the America’s strip malls on any side of town; it is relatively easy to locate an Asian owned and operated nail salon. In many of the nation’s most urban neighborhoods, there is always an Asian owned and operated black beauty supply and corner grocery store. With the large influx of Asians that are making America the beautiful their home, we must consider that there are emotional challenges that arise because of the expectations of assimilation by the American culture.

**Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to identify some of the challenges of obtaining counseling that Asian Americans experience. There are major challenges that need to be addressed in providing effective services.

**Population Growth – The Need for Professional Counseling Services**

Among the many cultural groups, Asian Americans are the second fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). When Asian Americans are grouped with Pacific Islanders, this population makes up the fastest growing ethnic community (Maki & Kitano, 2002). As of the year 2000, there were reportedly 10.2 million individuals of this cultural group living in the United States, representing an increase of 46% since 1990 (Kim & Omizo, 2003). Recent immigration levels suggest that this number will grow rapidly in the near future (Schoen, 2005).

Because of the high number of immigrants entering the United States, it is this country’s duty and responsibility to provide for the social and mental health needs of this population. A great need exists within the current and Asian community. The need of this community is to receive professional counseling services within the general population and school population.

**Different Needs within the Asian Population**

Much diversity exists within this population of Asian American/Pacific Islanders. There is a wide variety of identities, languages, and cultures. Even within each ethnicity, differences in values, behaviors, and attitudes will vary based on the generation, ethnic experience, socioeconomic status, acculturation, enculturation, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, visibility appearance, and history of discrimination. These factors will mold a person’s perspective of himself or herself as well as how life is viewed. Naturally, counselors working with Asian American/Pacific islander clients will need to complement their understanding of the basic information about the original culture with an exploration of these additional factors (Schoen, 2005). The demand for highly skilled counselors that are knowledgeable about the Asian American/Pacific Islanders’ culture and practices are needed to effectively meet the counseling needs of this population.

Two hundred school and three school counselors were surveyed online concerning their perceived competence when counseling Asian American students.
Although the counselors had limited interactions with the population, they reported a self-assured overall competency. Specifically, they felt competent about the awareness domain, somewhat competent about the skill domain, yet unsure about the knowledge domain. Recruiting counselors with Asian backgrounds and continuously providing pre-service training and professional development concerning Asian American counseling are recommended (Shen, 2007).

It is important for counselors, academic advisors, and educators who work with Asian Americans to look behind the success myth and to understand the historical and current experiences of Asians in America. The matter is even more pressing for counselors when we realize that Asian Americans underutilize counseling and other mental health facilities and are more likely to seek help at a counseling service rather than a psychiatric facility (Sue & Sue, p. 330, 2003).

**Case Studies of Missed Counseling Opportunities: Significant Factors**

The next two incidents describe the real situations in which professional counseling intervention was needed but not sought. If appropriate intervention by the right people would have occurred, the pain and suffering that occurred during each event could have be dealt with, and the outcomes in each situation could have been different.

When Mohammad Saleem Hamdani and Talat Hamdani lost their son in the terrorist attack of September 11, they, like many parents, grew bitter and angry and stayed in denial. Even after their son’s funeral in April 2002, they could not let go. For more than a year afterward, they slept on their living room floor, waiting for their oldest son to walk through the door. The Hamdanis did not turn to free counseling services. “I refused,” said Mrs. Hamdani, who came to America from Karachi with her family in the late 1970’s. “I didn’t want to hear people talk about him in the past tense”. According to a study be released today by the Asian American Federation of New York, the Hamdanis were among many Asian-Americans who rejected professional therapy after September 11. (Chan, 2003).

Cao K.O, executive director of the Asian American Federation, said that “Western” forms of therapy, like psychoanalysis, are alien to many of Asian decent. Carol Peng, assistant director of research for the federation, added that mental health services are needed to make existing programs more culturally and linguistically relevant. In retrospect, Mrs. Hamdani said, she thought that though she and her husband would have benefited from group therapy, they were content to have shared their experiences within their circle of family and close friends, where people knew their son (Chan, 2003).

“Asian Americans wait until things are unmanageable and in crisis before they get treatment,” said Elizabeth Gong-Guy, director of student psychological services at UCLA. After the April 16, 2007 incident, police discovered that Virginia Tech senior Seung-Hui Cho had been referred for counseling services. Cho killed 32 students and staff members before fatally shooting himself. This stigma of mental health issues may prevent students from seeking help, she said, making Asian American proportionately the fewest users of psychological services. Nan Senzaki, another, panelist and clinical social worker at UC Davis counseling and psychological services, said she saw a decline in
Asian-American students seeking help when budget cuts eliminated staff trained to provide culturally sensitive counseling (Tran, 2007).

There are several factors that are important apart of the Asian American culture that affect the way they interact with American society. They must be considered when providing when counseling services. They are: prejudice, racism, discrimination, feminism, role of children and wives, public suppression of problems, and indirect versus direct forms of communication (Paniagua, p. 57-60, 1998). Additional factors for consideration are: collectivistic orientation, hierarchical relationships, emotionality, holistic view on mind and body, academic and occupational goals, identity issues, shame, psychotherapy is a foreign concept to many Asian Americans, expectations of counseling, counseling interventions and family therapy (Sue & Sue, p. 330-341, 2003).

Techniques for Effectively Counseling Asians: Effective Modifications

In working with Asian Americans and other diverse groups, the goal is to help clients achieve the ability to “formulate plans, act on many possibilities existing in a culture, and reflect on these actions” (Ivey et al., 1997, p.15). Although Asian culture dictates general principles and values, there is a range of responses in dealing with situations. Helping Asian American clients formulate different culturally acceptable practices for specific problems can improve their problem-solving abilities. Asian Americans also must develop skills to interact with the larger society and to achieve a balance when conflicting values are involved. The following guidelines are based on Asian American cultural values, but the therapist or counselor must be aware of the large differences in degree of acculturation in this population. Many of the counseling skills learned in traditional programs will be effective with modifications.

1. Be aware of cultural differences between the therapist and the client as regarding counseling, appropriate goals, and process. How would they affect work with Asian Americans who have a collectivistic, hierarchical, and patriarchal orientation?
2. Build rapport by discussing confidentiality and explaining the client role and the need to co-construct the problem definition and solutions.
3. Assess not just from an individual perspective but include family, community, and societal influences on the problem. Obtain the worldview and ethnic identity of the Asian American client.
4. Conduct a positive assets search. What strengths, skills, problem-solving abilities, and social supports are available to the individual or family?
5. Consider or reframe the problem when possible as one in which issues of culture conflict or acculturation are involved.
6. Determine whether somatic complaints are involved and assess their influence on mood and relationships.
7. Take an active role but allow Asian Americans to choose and evaluate suggested interventions.
8. Use problem-focused, time-limited approaches that have been modified to incorporate possible cultural factors.
9. With family therapy, the therapist should be aware that western based theories and techniques may not be appropriate for Asian families. Determine the structure and communication pattern among the members. It may be helpful to address the father first and to initially have statements by family members directed to the therapist. Focus on positive aspects of parenting such as modeling and teaching. Use a solution-focused model.

10. When counseling couples, assess for societal or acculturation conflicts. Determine the way that caring, support or affection is shown. Among traditional Asians, providing for the needs of the other is as or more important than verbalizations of affection. Obtain their perspective on the goals.

11. Asian children and adolescents have common problems involve acculturation conflicts with parents, feeling guilty or stressful over academic performance, negative self-image or identity issues, and struggle between interdependence and independence.

12. Assess for living situation, culture conflict and social or financial condition. Case management skills may be needed to obtain help in obtaining food and other community resources.

13. Consider the need to act as an advocate or engage in system-level intervention in cases of institutional racism or discrimination (Sue & Sue, p. 341-342, 1993).

**Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, this systematic approach to meeting the holistic counseling needs and concerns of Asian Americans presents a model of success to be obtained, when used effectively by highly skilled counselors. Classroom teachers and school administrators also benefit from this information because it provides insights and strategies on how to more effectively establish relationships with people of this decent and to provide guidance to them. The implications of this information should be enough to provide a direction of idealistic change for those practitioners that serve the Asian American community in the United States.

**References**


