Acculturation Conflicts Among Asian Americans: Implications for Practice

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This article is an overview of issues that Asian Americans encounter as they acculturate into American society. Counselors who develop knowledge and understanding about the experiences of Asian Americans may improve the overall delivery of counseling services to this population. Topics discussed herein include: (a) negotiating Asian family socialization processes, (b) dealing with the cultural value of shame, (c) exploring one’s ethnic identity, and (d) dealing with the myth of the “model minority.” As individuals negotiate and explore issues related to cultural transitions, they may arrive at one of four acculturation outcomes: separated, marginal, integrated, or assimilated. Implications for counseling are discussed.

Asian Americans may experience a number of acculturation conflicts as they become more exposed to the traditions, values, and norms of majority society. These individuals are faced with the challenge of resolving primary issues related to the existence of two differing worldviews—those of their own culture and those of the dominant culture—which may impact individuals to varying degrees. Currently, there are at least two theoretical perspectives of acculturation (Abe-Kim, Okazaki, & Goto, 2001; Liu, Pope-Davis, Nevitt, & Toporek, 1999). In one view, acculturation is identified on a continuum of low to high assimilation (Suinn, Khoo, & Ahuna, 1995), whereas the other is based upon a complex and nonlinear model, emphasizing ethnic pluralism (Laroche, Kim, Hui, & Joy, 1996). Given the complexity associated with negotiating between two differing cultures, the perspective of the second model seems more appropriate for a discussion of the cultural conflicts that Asian Americans experience.

According to this two-dimensional framework, acculturation refers to the transitions that occur as a function of continuous contact between two different cultures (Berry, 1991, 1998). The two important issues to negotiate are the importance that the individual assigns to identifying with the minority culture and the importance that he or she assigns to identifying with majority culture.

Upon negotiating these issues, the ethnic minority individual may interact within a multicultural society in one of four ways (Berry, 1991, 1998; Kitano, 1989; Kitano & Maki, 1996). Type A (assimilation) is the outcome when an individual chooses to identify with mainstream culture and to reject the minority culture. Type B (integration) characterizes the individual who seeks to retain her or his own ethnic culture and concomitantly incorporate and adapt to the dominant culture. Type C (separation) involves the identification with the ethnic culture while rejecting majority society norms and values. Last, type D (marginality) is the lack of involvement and identification with one’s ethnic culture as well as dominant society.

As Asian Americans explore and resolve issues related to cultural conflicts, they may deal with issues related to traditional Asian socialization processes (Kim, 1994; Yee, Huang, & Lew, 1998), the salience of shame in Asian culture (D. Sue, 1998; Wang & Marsh, 1992), ethnic identity development (Iwamasa & Yamada, 2001; Sodowsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995; Min

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and conflicts related to the “model minority” label (Lee, 1996; D. W. Sue, 1994). Counselors who gain a deeper understanding of how Asian Americans deal with acculturation conflicts may be better equipped to offer counseling services to clients from this population.

**FAMILY SYSTEM, SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES, AND THE SCHOOL**

Child-rearing strategies differ across cultures (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992). Yet, many mental health professionals and social policy advocates continue to espouse the view that “models of child rearing developed on majorities [should be] used as standards in evaluating minority parenting practices” (Kelley et al., 1992, p. 573). This approach is problematic because such culturally different parenting styles have been interpreted as deficits.

The collective nature of Asian cultural values fosters interdependence among family members. Within these families, the needs and goals of the individual are sacrificed for the attainment of collective interests. Child-rearing strategies are geared toward emphasizing limited psychological boundaries between mother and child. Whereas conventional theories of development suggest that separation is imperative for psychological health (Mahler, 1968), Asian culture and tradition have taught that the interrelatedness between people promotes psychological well-being. Indeed, parents develop close bonds with their children in early childhood and maintain their attachments throughout adolescence. Kim (1994) contended that Asian American parents often consider their children as extensions of themselves. This notion was well illustrated in *The Joy Luck Club*, where Tan (1989) portrayed a mother as sharing credit for her daughter’s special talent in chess. She wrote,

> And my mother loved to show me off, like one of my many trophies she polished. She used to discuss my games as if she had devised the strategies. I hated the way she tried to take all the credit. (p. 170)

This type of behavior is common among Asian parents because they “fulfill their own dreams and goals vicariously through their children” (Kim, p. 35). Attaining this gratification through their offspring is an important aspect of parenthood in Asian cultures.

Researchers concurred that Asian socialization techniques promote an interdependent relationship between the mother and child beyond the pre-oedipal years (Azuma, 1986; Ho, 1986; Kim & Chun, 1994; Yee et al., 1998). According to Azuma, Japanese mothers may foster symbiotic relationships with their children to prepare the child for adult life, where she or he can transfer that trust and dependence onto others in the community, particularly teachers (Kim & Chun). Kim and Chun noted that, “In East Asian cultures, the relationship between teachers and their students is seen as an extension of the mother-child relationship” (p. 331). As in the home environment, where children please and obey their mothers, students may be motivated to please and obey their teachers. The Asian school environment is nurturing and maternal, but it also pressures students to achieve academic excellence. As Asians immigrate to the United States, they may assume that the American educational system will take on a similar role as their Asian counterparts.

Unknowledgeable about American schools, Asian parents may bestow the educational responsibilities to the school and their authorities. Consequently, they may devote little time and energy to their children’s education. Huang (1994) noted that high school teachers and staff members have criticized many Asian parents because they appeared to lack interest in their children’s education. Indeed, the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (1988) has voiced their concerns about the cultural conflicts that evolved with Asian parents and the school system. They noted that schools often labeled Asian parents as apathetic and uninvolved. Conversely, Asian parents also expressed their disappointment because they viewed the American school system as unconcerned and unresponsive. Huang suggested that these cultural situations point to the need for schools to reach out and become accountable to culturally different students and families.

Park (1997) described the cultural conflicts that often exist between first-generation Asians, their second-generation children, and the school system. She pointed out that many Asian immigrants have difficulty speaking English and therefore may be unable to effectively communicate with those in the dominant culture, such as school administrators. At home, children are expected to speak in their native tongue and demonstrate obedience to their parents. However, at school they are expected to be assertive and independent. In some cases, frustrations over these contradictory expectations, combined with difficulties with blending in at school, can cause adolescents to feel alienat-
ed and marginalized at home and in school (Chae, 2001). One 19-year-old male expressed his feelings of not belonging to either the Chinese or American culture:

I am not Chinese. I looked Chinese but I wasn’t really. Starting in elementary school, I began to feel the obvious difference between myself and the other students, who were . . . mostly White. It was then I began to feel very lonely; [with] my classmates because I didn’t look like them; [with] my own race, because I was not what I looked like. (Ying & Lee, 1999, p. 200)

CULTURAL VALUE OF SHAME

Traditional Asian families place considerable emphasis on bringing honor to the family name and avoiding shame. A personal achievement brings honor not only to the individual but also to the family and generations beyond (Hsu, 1981; D. Sue, 1998). According to Wang and Marsh (1992), “Differing profoundly from the Western tradition, the Asian family exists as an extended unit connecting the family with present, past, and future generations” (p. 84). Because the family name is so important, Asians may feel compelled to avoid any behavior that could potentially bring shame to their family. This cultural value is deeply infused within Asian socialization techniques. For example, Toupin (1980) suggested that the language often used with children supports the importance of avoiding shame. The term ha zu ka ski, in Japanese, means “others will laugh at you.” The word others is emphasized to denote that their perceptions can bring shame to the entire family. Likewise, Pye (1968) stated, “A child is made hypersensitive to the judgment of ethics, to look to social situations for cues to guide his own actions and to be cautious about initiatives and innovations” (p. 82). Children are reared to behave appropriately and tactfully for every situation. They are encouraged to blend in with the group and discouraged from standing out in any way (Chae, 2001). This sentiment is echoed in an ancient Japanese proverb: “The nail that stands out gets pounded down” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 224).

Although in Asian cultures avoiding shame is an important aspect of everyday living, the notion of avoiding shame may be considered weakness of character or psychological immaturity from the lens of U.S. cultural patterns (D. W. Sue & Sue, 1999). Western thought emphasizes the importance of being one’s own person or not caring about what others think. However, in Asian cultures, harmony with the collective is important, and therefore, how “others” view a person is central to that person’s identity.

To avoid bringing shame upon the family, Asians may refrain from being overly expressive or talkative. Speaking too much in a social context is considered shameful because it disrupts group harmony by drawing too much attention to oneself. Being unassertive and inexpressive is considered ideal and is rewarded as such (Wang & Marsh, 1992). For instance, in Japanese schools, one of the most respected achievements is to be named Most Quiet Worker. Lung and Sue (1997) contended that Chinese parents encourage and praise their children for being shy, quiet, and docile. Indeed, silence is considered a sign of wisdom and respect in Asian cultures. The Korean and Japanese terms, cha ma and enryo, respectively, are often used in child rearing; both mean, “holding back or being patient” (Toupin, 1980, p. 83). Lung and Sue (1997) pointed out that Chinese parents may perceive extroverted or autonomous behavior as abnormal. They noted that an adolescent who states his or her opinion about an issue may be perceived by parents as talking back, which is a sign of disobedience. Evidently for members of Asian groups, the concept of openly expressing feelings and possibly drawing attention to oneself may be culturally inconsistent and confusing (Leong, Wagner, & Kim, 1995; S. Sue & Morishima, 1982).

The underutilization of mental health services may be attributed to the desire to avoid shame (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998; Lung & Sue, 1997). Indeed, many Asians believe that having a psychological problem is disgraceful. As such, Asian Americans may avoid mental health agencies because use of these services is an implicit acknowledgement of the existence of mental health issues. Such issues reflect poorly not only upon the individual, but more importantly upon the entire family (Lung & Sue). To avoid such shame, the family may seek support from indigenous healers, such as spiritualists, shamans, or acupuncturists. These traditional healers often have no formal mental health training. Mainstream services are considered only as a last resort if symptoms have become very pronounced.

Interracial marriage can be a source of shame for a traditional Asian family. Chai (1998) noted that when Koreans marry outside of the ethnic group, elders in the community view that marriage as unsuccessful and the parents experience shame. In one case, the oldest son of a first-generation Korean family decided to marry a White woman of German descent. The parents
expressed their feelings that the marriage brought shame upon the whole family. In addition, the family severed ties with the son and his wife. The son expressed in counseling following marriage that he rejected his Korean background and identified solely with American culture. He had become assimilated.

**ETHNIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

Traditional theories of identity concentrate on the importance of subjective continuity and sameness in adolescence that provides a model for adult personality development (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Erikson noted that identity is based on internal psychological development as a function of childhood identifications, influence of family figures, and one’s progressive struggle to synthesize these identifications. However, this theoretical view may not be relevant for Asian Americans because of an added dimension to their identity development. Asian American youth are faced with the challenge of integrating their identity as an ethnic minority group member with their identity as an American. Dubois (1903/1969) echoed this sentiment: “One ever feels his two-ness . . . two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one . . . body” (p. 5).

In recognition of the complexity of minority identity development, a number of scholars have developed racial and ethnic identity models (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1992). However, most models have been developed and validated for specific populations such as African Americans, and then later applied to other ethnic groups (e.g., Cross). Few models have been developed with Asian conceptions of self in mind (Yeh & Huang, 1996). Moreover, the proliferation of stage-like models presumes that all ethnic minority group members conveniently progress in the same linear fashion. Such an assumption fails to consider within-group and between-group differences among ethnic groups.

Sodowsky et al. (1995) proposed a model of Asian ethnic identity that considers the complex interaction between the individual and her or his social context. They contended that Asian ethnic identity development is not a linear process. Instead, it follows a bidirectional path whereby an individual’s ethnic identity orientation can change over time and across situations. Further, the nonlinear ethnic identity process “does not arise out of lability or stability. Rather, it arises out of the ethnic individual’s adaptive principle of flexibility and openness to possibilities” (Sodowsky et al., p. 145). Sodowsky et al.’s model is useful because it takes into consideration Asian conceptions of self. These characteristics include the fact that Asian Americans tend to be high self-monitors and respond to the expectations and judgments of the social context, such as parental expectations and social pressures (Yeh & Huang, 1996).

Min and Park (1999) contended that Asian ethnic identity is developed, in part, by negotiating between the pressure from parents to adhere to Asian cultural values and the expectations of the school system to incorporate Western cultural norms. For example, at home, parents may seek to preserve their Asian heritage by expecting their children to speak their native tongue and demonstrate obedience and respect. In school, however, children are encouraged to devote their time and energy toward becoming “Americanized.” Park (1997) contended that Asian Americans may feel caught between cultures, neither of which they completely understand. Frustration may emerge as they attempt to balance an Asian identity at home with an American identity at school (Liu, Yu, Chang, & Fernandez, 1990).

In some cases, following exploration and reflection about one’s commitments to a variety of domains (e.g., ideology, lifestyle), resolution of these conflicts can lead to the development of an integrated identity. One Chinese woman expressed the complexity of integrating two distinct cultures. She stated,

> I live the tension between a Chinese ideal of filial piety and the American way of self-assertion and independent thinking . . . I am both and I value both . . . I extinguish the conflict for today because I am Chinese American, and I do flow effortlessly between two worlds because in my world there is only one. (Ying & Lee, 1999; p. 201)

**THE MYTH OF THE MODEL MINORITY**

Asian Americans have been characterized as a model minority ethnic group (Peterson, 1966). Despite their heterogeneity, Asian Americans are often viewed as one homogeneous group. Asian Americans are described as diligent, good at math, and generally successful (Lee, 1996). However, D. W. Sue (1994) warned of the potential pitfalls that may accompany such a description. He suggested that such a label can result in one ethnic minority group being pitted against another. Chon (1995) contended, “Using the myth of the superhuman Asian, [majority society] drags [Asians] into the racialization of American politics, creating an Asian buffer between Black and White
America” (p. 240). The Los Angeles riots may be a case in point. Triggered by the acquittal of the four White police officers involved in the beating of an African American motorist, Rodney King, increasing reports of discrimination and hate crimes emerged between Koreans and African Americans (Sasao & Chun, 1994).

Interpreting these group dynamics, S. Sue (1995) suggested that majority society has created the myth of a model minority to ensure racial division and preservation of White privilege. Often, the Asian model minority image is used against other minority groups to silence their claims of social inequality. By acknowledging that one minority group can attain success, it can be argued that race is not a handicap within the United States. In the end, according to Lee (1996), the seemingly positive image of the Asian American only serves to perpetuate the White-dominated social structure.

Proponents of the model minority myth have claimed that Asians tend to achieve higher scores on standardized tests compared to other ethnic groups (Kim & Chun, 1994). They have concluded that Asians are more educated than other ethnic groups. Offering an opposing view, D. W. Sue and Sue (1990) concurred that on the average, Asians appear to attain high test scores. However, upon further analysis, they pointed out that a bimodal distribution appears to separate a portion of Asians with superior educational prowess from a highly undereducated mass. The average score seems to indicate Asian intellectual superiority, but further examination reveals that a large number of Asians are undereducated.

Another reason that Asian Americans have been depicted as a model minority is that they underutilize mental health services. Some have erroneously interpreted this to suggest that Asian Americans are psychologically healthier than other ethnic groups. However, research suggests that Asian Americans have underutilized traditional psychological treatment primarily because of cultural influences (Atkinson, Lowe, & Matthews, 1995; Cheng, Leong, & Geist, 1993; Leong et al., 1995). Indeed, Cheng et al. (1993) pointed out that the stigma that is associated with presenting emotional and interpersonal problems may potentially bring shame upon the family name. Hence, Asian Americans may be more likely to express their psychological conflicts somatically or circuitously under the guise of academic counseling. Compelling research has shown that Asian Americans have been found to have as many if not more problems than do the majority population (Vega & Rumbaut, 1991). Cheng et al. and S. Sue and Morishima (1982) found that Asian Americans scored higher on clinical and diagnostic tests compared to White Americans.

Salient problems are associated with the model minority designation. First, Asian Americans may find that they are not eligible for minority benefits such as affirmative action. For instance, Feinberg (1988) found that to get into the elite schools Asian Americans had to score on average 30 points higher on the SAT than their White counterparts did. Another problem is that this model minority designation lowers research interests and institutional priorities related to Asian Americans’ mental and physical health. This designation implies that Asian Americans do not face any of the same problems that other ethnic minority groups experience, such as racism, marginalization, poverty, and alienation. In essence, the label of model minority masks the true social problems that Asian Americans experience (D. W. Sue, 1994).

Toupin and Son (1991) and Lee (1994) suggested that some Asian American students may internalize the pressures and expectations associated with the image of model minority. If internalized, this designation may encourage the individual to maintain a traditional Asian identity, thereby preventing further exploration of other identity domains. Lee (1994) identified a group of high school students who seemed to fit the acculturation status of separation. These adolescents spent much of their free time studying during and after school. They expressed that their parents pressured them to excel academically so that they could become engineers and doctors. These students also expressed that they experienced the feeling that they had to live up to inordinately high expectations from professors and classmates to sustain the image of the model minority student. Lee (1994) suggested that the label serves as a barrier to identity exploration and reinforces stereotypical images of Asian Americans.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING**

A knowledge and understanding of Asian cultural values and traditions may help counselors to help Asian American clients work through issues related to acculturation. Moreover, counselors should be aware that traditional theories of counseling and therapy may need to be modified to be effective with this population.
Some cultural practices such as child rearing must be viewed in light of the context of Asian culture. For example, a psychodynamic perspective may judge close attachments between mother and child beyond the first 3 years of the child’s life as maladaptive and pathological. A counselor, operating from a psychodynamic orientation, may need to consider that close attachments between child and mother are a normal part of life in Asian cultures (Locke, 1998).

Counselors should also recognize the role that shame plays in the lives of Asian Americans. Infused within the social and cultural fabric of Asian culture, the notion of shame is the most powerful motivating force in most social interactions and is ostensibly linked to maintaining group harmony. This is true even for assimilated Asian Americans, many of whom have been socialized with traditional Asian child-rearing strategies, which may have instilled the importance of avoidance of shame.

As Asian Americans grapple with their identification between Asian and American culture, they may feel confused and frustrated. Counselors may be effective in helping clients to negotiate between these worldviews and to offer ways in which they can become integrated. Exploration and identification of these cultural issues may lead to a deeper awareness and understanding of their ethnic group membership and the meaning it holds for them.

Last, counselors should be aware of the effects that the label of model minority has on Asian Americans. The review has shown that the label in many ways perpetuates the myth that Asian Americans are not hampered by discrimination, are highly educated, and are mentally healthier than other ethnic groups. These myths misrepresent Asian Americans and place inordinate pressure on them to fulfill these expectations. Counselors may need to encourage clients to discuss their views on the model minority myth and express how they have been influenced by it.

The purpose of this article was to present an overview of issues and concerns that may be relevant in the counseling process with Asian Americans. Despite the fact that Asian Americans are a heterogeneous group, research suggests that most Asian Americans must negotiate some common issues (Lee & Zane, 1998). These issues include socialization processes that differ from that of majority society, the cultural value of shame and its influence on behavior, the complex process of ethnic identity development, and dealing with the model minority myth. As individuals deal with these issues, they may arrive at one of four possible acculturation outcomes (i.e., separated, marginal, integrated, and assimilated). Counselors who are able to develop a knowledge and understanding of the struggles related to acculturation conflicts may improve the overall delivery of mental health services to clients from Asian populations.

REFERENCES


