A Graduate Student’s Perspective of Asian American Psychology

By Michi Fu, Ph.D.

Asian American psychology is a relatively new concept, offering promise for one of America’s fastest growing ethnic minority groups (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000). The Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA) is only now honoring its thirtieth year of existence, while the American Psychological Association (APA) will be celebrating over a century of establishment this year.

There is need for cultural differences to be recognized in research and practice among Asian Americans as a whole. Asian Americans were often compared with groups such as Americans of African, Latino, or European descent. More recently, scholars and practitioners have acknowledged the need to move beyond between group differences and examine within group differences among various ethnic groups (Moran, Fleming, Somervell, and Manson, 1999). The challenges facing those interested in working with Asian Americans living in California are multifold:

- There are language barriers that providers often face, especially with recent immigration patterns over the past few decades. Although providers may have cultural sensitivity, they often use paraprofessionals or even family members of the client for translation services. This poses as a potential therapeutic barrier in therapy and in research. This is especially important since Gim, Atkinson, and Kim (1991) found that Asian Americans seeking mental health treatment perceived ethnically similar counselors as being more credible and culturally competent than counselors who were ethnically dissimilar.
- The myth of the “model minority stereotype” continues to be an obstacle for Asian Americans receiving mental health treatment (Cocking & Greenfield, 1994; Markowitz, 1994). This myth holds that Asians are the prototypical immigrant population of America by accumulating wealth, becoming entrepreneurs and occupying a presence in various professional fields in future generations. They also have the highest percentage of college attendees among any other ethnic group. (This stereotype is perpetuated by the percentage of Asian Americans in the University of California system.) These statistics often mislead the public to perceive Asian households as being more educated and wealthy, and therefore in less need of mental health services while the contrary may actually be true.
- A third challenge that Asian Americans face is the continued stigma or lack awareness of mental health services. Often Asian Americans are referred for mental health services by their primary health care physicians due to psychosomatic symptoms. Recurring headaches or stomach aches are a more acceptable illness to share with health care practitioners than relationship issues, symptoms of depression, etc. Educating Asian Americans through aggressive and culturally sensitive outreach is necessary to help reduce the stigma of mental health care.

With these and other barriers to Asian Americans acquiring appropriate mental health services, what can the field of psychology do to help support this population? Recommendations for the future development of Asian American psychology should include:

- Increased research responding to the rapidly changing composition of Asian Americans that are more discerning of within group differences.
- Creating more training opportunities for graduate students to focus on providing clinical services to Asian Americans.
- Increased funding for essential clinical services, psycho-education and culturally sensitive research, particularly to bridge language barriers (e.g., hiring more interpreters and training more paraprofessionals to aide in service delivery).
- Recruitment and retention of Asian American mental health professionals in higher education, administration, public policy, and other professional arenas.
- Mentoring of emerging Asian American mental health professionals, such as the AAPA Online Mentoring Forum.
• Services for Asian Americans in California should include outreach to communities beyond ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Little Saigon, etc. Asian American communities have expanded to suburbs of major cities including Milpitas, Saratoga, Diamond Bar, Rowland Heights, San Marino, Irvine, etc.

These are only a few of the issues that I have observed during my graduate school years. I am confident that, as opportunities develop, there will be changes in the way that we view the ever-evolving field of Asian American psychology. I am grateful to be one of the professionals serving the Asian American community in this millennium.

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