
Asians Americans Living In the United States of America

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Abstract

Many Asian Americans come to the United States of America searching for a better life and for better opportunities that were not available in their native countries. However, this is not always the case for many Asian Americans who travel to America especially early Chinese immigrants during the California Gold Rush. They encountered mistreatment, deportation, discrimination and government laws that were enacted to prevent them from coming or returning to America. Soon after the United States and China became allies after the Second World War, older Asian Americans who immigrated back to the United States held on to their traditional lifestyles; while younger generations are more in line with American popular culture. All the culture shock they had to endure, learning a new language while maintaining old traditional lifestyles caused them frustration and mental health issues. For that reason, a social worker working with this diverse population needs to be culturally competent. He or she needs to have knowledge about Asian American culture in order to help them meet their challenges

Introduction

We are living in a world that is full of different people, from different cultures representing so many different ways of living. It seems that every country one may visit, a person will find a diverse population. People seem to be moving around, diversifying themselves in other cultures. The United States represents a very clear picture on how people from other countries and from other cultures immigrate here and formulate a melting pot of cultures. In essence, the large number of immigrants coming to America is the total beauty of what makes her who she is. Seeking political freedom, refuge, higher education, or a better economic opportunity for themselves, people from all around the world come to the United States to make a new start for themselves. According Devore & Schlesinger (1996), "When people migrate, they do so for many reasons, whether it be economic distress, political or religious persecution, or hope for a better life" (p. 33). Born and raised in Sierra Leone, West Africa, all of these cultures are very new to me. However, the focus of this paper will be about Asian Americans as one of many immigrants groups that immigrated to the United States and settled on the East and West coasts. Furthermore, this paper will examine the data and information on the values held by Asian American culture with respect to age, gender, sexuality, marriage, and family structure. The paper will also include Asian American religions, social roles, or film and other cultural practices that are important for a social worker to know when working with Asian American clients seeking mental health and social welfare services.

Asian Americans in the United States

Asian American is used in this paper to refers to a diverse group composed of individuals who trace their ethnic origins to East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, etc.), South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc.), or Southeast Asia (Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, etc.). Asian Americans in the United States are a heterogeneous group of many ethnicities, including Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Asian East Indians, and Southeast Asians. They migrated from countries such as the Far East, Southeast Asia, Burma, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand and the Indian subcontinent. According Barck (2004),

Asian Americans are residents or citizens of the United States whose racial background and sometime ethnic identification is with the people of Pacific-Asian areas, including Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Koreans, Filipinos, Thais, Hmong, Laotians, migrants from Indian subcontinent, and other. (p.29)

Before, the term Asian American was used by civil rights activist in the 1960s, Oriental was the term widely used to describe Asian-Americans. However, Asian activist argued that the word Oriental was use to insult, oppress, discriminate against and control Asian culture. Soon after, Oriental became extremely outdated and Asian American became the formal acceptable term in Asian American communities. When compared with other immigrants coming to the United States, Asian Americans shared diverse subgroups among the overall Asian American community. According to Zane et al (2004),

Chinese Americans are 2.7 million, Filipino American are 2.4 million, Asian Indians are 1.9 million, Vietnamese Americans are 1.5 million, Korean Americans at 1.2 million, Japanese Americans at 1.1 million. Smaller subgroups together represent 1.3 million additional Asian Americans. (as cited in Smith, 2004, p. 191)

First generation Asian Americans who arrived first in the United States experienced hardship especially for the men who came from southern China for the Gold Rush in California in the late 1800s. The mistreatments that they received by white ethnic majority to this day in the eyes of many Asian Americans is mark as one of the darker aspects of nineteenth-century American history. The Chinese men came to California seeking gold and cheap labor working in farms and sugar plantations. However, their mission ended when Americans started to attack them and other foreigners out of California. Bergman (2005) wrote in her poem “The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,” “How to escape exclusion, keep one step ahead of the tiger’s teeth snapping at your heel” (p. 19). It was a bad time for Chinese immigrants indeed. According to Heriot (2006),

Most studies of race during this period of American history focus on slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the failure of the federal government to promote and protect the civil rights of recently emancipated African Americans. In Chinese American history, the growth of the anti-Chinese movement which included labour disputes, violence, local state and federal laws enacted against the Chinese, and finally, the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 which prohibited the immigration of Chinese labourers for a period of ten years. (p. 716)

As a result, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was used to ban further Chinese migration to the United States. Although U.S. immigration policies historically limited entry of Asians into the United States, today, Asians with the proper documentation or visa can enter the U.S. freely. To promote more family unification, the U.S. allowed children of U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam War and their Indochinese mothers to move to the U.S. The Gold Rush crisis in California, to this day remains in the minds of Asian Americans. Their struggles to find success in foreign land reminded the world about the blood diamond civil war crisis that took place in Sierra Leone, West Africa, country ten years ago. The presence of diamonds in Sierra Leone brought bad news and bad people with bad intentions. They came to destroy once a peaceful, sober and easygoing country. The Chinese men who left their country to find gold in California

had good reasons to migrate to the U.S. and they were peaceful; however, Sierra Leoneans could not say the same for the diamond seekers who moved into Sierra Leone.

A large number of Asian Americans seems to flock to the metropolitan areas. Take for example area around Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City. These areas have the largest number of Asian Americans living proudly in the world's most culturally diverse cities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006),

Asian American population estimated there are currently 15,000,000 million Asian Americans living in the United States. They account for 5 percent of the over all population. Asian Americans population increases to 63 percent when compared to 1990, which makes this diverse ethnic group the fastest major racial/ethnic group. (<http://www.omhrc.gov>)

Asian American literature and film production were not popular once upon a time in the United States. This changed when non-Asian authors such as Pearl Buck shed light on this rich culture and brave Japanese American men and women who were living in the U.S. concentration camps. Many wrote autobiographies about their own lives and the suffering they endured. In 1955, C.Y. Lee, became the first Chinese to publish a book in Asian culture called *The Flower Drum Songs*. Today, Chinese and Japanese literatures can be located anywhere in the U.S. Take for example Amy Tan the author of *The Joy Luck Club*. She is a second generation Chinese from California who graduated from San Jose City College. She received national awards and notable books awards. Reading her book and watching the film helped me learn new information about Asian Americans.

A small number of Koreans migrated to the United States in the early years of the twentieth century to work in Hawaiian sugar plantations just like the Chinese. Like many immigrants, they came to the U.S. searching for freedom and the hope for a better life. Koreans and Japanese people encountered similar restrictions living in the United States. During World War II, the United States government declared Japanese American a risk to national security. It was a bad time because Japanese Americans were forced to relocate into concentration camps and many lost their personal pride, belongings and assets. In addition, in 1924, the Oriental Exclusion Act also played a major role in preventing almost all-Korean migration to this country. Today the U.S. and Korea have good immigration policies.

Early Asian groups were voluntary immigrants, but after the Vietnam War, many Southeast Asians were refugees. The circumstances that refugees endured before they arrived in America are different from voluntary immigrants. While immigrants choose to depart from their countries, refugees are forced to abandon their countries and families. As a group, refugees are more likely to be stressed with mental health issues, homesickness, culture shock, and fewer resources than voluntary immigrants.

Chinese Americans Family Dynamics

Chinese American family dynamics such as child rearing practices are very different when compared to other cultures. First generation Chinese Americans stick to their traditional ways of raising their children. Some have resided in the U.S. for many years and refuse to assimilate into American mainstream culture. They hold on to their customs, values, and behaviors instead of interacting freely and become more Americans. Chinese Americans view childrearing, as a mother's responsibility and the responsibility of close relatives. According to

Chan (2004), children are treasured, protected within a very loving, and predictable social environment involving both immediate and extended members (p.1-2).

Living in the U.S. provides Americans the chance to study with Asian American students, learn about how much they care about their education, respect for their elders, and authority figures. Like in many West African cultures, Chinese children often do not talk back to their parents rudely or look their elders in the eyes when communicating as a sign of respect and loyalty. Many stated that their parents pressure them to accomplish educational goals they could not accomplish in China. Some who are successful want their children to follow their footsteps and some are highly educated though language and cultural barriers have prevented them the chances to work in the fields in which they were trained. According to Louie (2004), interviewed with one second-generation Chinese American college student,

My mom and dad kind of want me and my brother to become doctors to carry on the family business. My brother and I would say that the only professions in my mother's eyes that were worthy were either a doctor or a lawyer...Growing up, parents keep on saying, what are you going to do, doctor or lawyer? And when I was in high school, it was pharmacy school in particular. Parents push for something more practical, or applicable. (as cited in Kasinitz et al., p. 79)

First Generation Asian Americans

First generation Asian Americans who arrived in the U.S. in the 1960s were highly educated with little experience living in large urban areas. They carried their core family values with them when they moved to the U.S. such as work ethic, and higher academic achievement are highly honored in Asian Americans culture. Poor academic achievement is considered as bringing shame, embarrassment, and dishonor to the family. As a result, parents urge their children to work hard, they look over their shoulders, and they check on their academic progress. The parents feel highly obligated and responsible for their children's behaviors. Chinese, Koreans, Japanese Americans value family lineage with strong beliefs that the behavior of one person reflects upon and impacts both previous and future generations of the family. Chinese parents emphasize family support, authoritative parenting, conformity, and unique personal qualities. Nowadays, Asian Americans especially Chinese, Koreans, Indians and Japanese have highlighted themselves in the U.S. as the model minority in American society. Chan (2004) explains that the majority of Asian values focuses on family, harmony, education, and selected qualities as the basic rule for living. The family, for example, is the basic unit of society. (p. 1)

Asian American adolescents and young adults living in the U.S. are often facing cultural challenges growing up such as establishing their own identity, careers, and choosing a partner. Some do not speak their parents' native language or hang out in Asian American communities in order to assimilate in American culture. The fear of Asian youth losing their ethnic culture, language and having a good career is a serious concern among Asian American parents. A career in medicine or engineering is favored for most parents.

Generational differences and regional differences both contribute to the increase of out-marrying among young Asian Americans. Young adults' attitudes toward marriage and relationships also illustrate cultural differences towards their parents. Asian Americans with more traditional values believe in family pride, hard work, and family unity. They see marriage as a union between families instead of an individual decision that is based on love. Parents want their children to marry other Asians. For that reason, interracial marriages are not encouraged. An Indian friend from Bangladesh told the author of this paper that, more children of Indian-

American heritage are born to interracial couples than same-race couples. In addition, higher cross-cultural marriages for Japanese or Indian American women may be the result of preference for a more honest marriage over the traditional Japanese or Indian patriarchal family, and the importance of family continuity pressuring Japanese men to marry within their race and ethnic group. Young Asians with American values may have to overcome these challenges to find their individuality and identity.

Asian Family Structures and Gender Roles

The vertical family structure of patriarchal lineage and hierarchal relationships view the father as the head of the family and the men have power over women and children; this tradition continues to dominate Asian culture. Far East Asian societies such as those found in China, Korea and Japan often nurture men and women to hold different responsibilities and to abide by rules of conduct that stress social stability over individual rights. Household responsibility moves from father to son, elder brother to younger brother, and husband to wife. Women are expected to be passive and nurture the well-being of the family. Older men often lose their traditional social roles as elders who solved problems, adjudicated quarrels, and made important decisions due to language barriers and understanding of Western culture. Proper behavior for each sex is honor and respect. Boys are favorable over the girls because boys especially the oldest son may have the privilege to carry on their family name and perform family rituals.

When the author of this paper asked a Korean female friend about Asian family structures and gender roles, she stated that Asian-American families historically included split-household families, transnational families, extended families, nuclear families, and multiple nuclear families household are governed by men. In addition, when the author of this paper asked her about the legacy of male favoritism in Asian culture last week, she stated that,

My older brother went to a private university in Boston and my father was so happy and proud of him. I had to go to a cheap community college in Brooklyn even though I had better grades than him. My father told me he did not have the money for both of us to go to a private school and I asked him why... Ok but you have the money for David not me right? I was so upset. In my family, this type of thing happens all the time so after few months I just get over it... When my younger sister got married last year to a Korean man, the husband's family wanted her to put aside her career that she worked so hard for to share the husband's family responsibility... include looking after the elderly in-laws especially when her husband was not around. She put up with it for few months with stress and anger after they married and then on her birthday, she ran away to another guy who was born in America. She hated it and advised me to be careful choosing a man.

As a group, Korean immigrants are highly educated though language and cultural barriers have stopped many to work in the fields in which they were specialized. Today, Koreans have their own small businesses such as fruits markets, grocery and beauty supply stores, dry-cleaning businesses, and liquor stores around neighborhood such as Flatbush, Canersie Brooklyn, and Flushing, a neighborhood in Queens. Some work long hours and take no vacations to sacrifice for a better future. As a result, today many Koreans own successful enterprises in New York and California.

Asians Americans Religions

Asian immigrants arrived in the United States with many religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Religion gave them a sense of hope and strength to overcome tough times. Going to church or mosques assisted them to feel comfortable communicating in their different languages, reunite with lost families and build meaningful friendships. The ethnic churches or mosques are a place Asians find emotional supports, rediscover their own culture, languages, ethnic identity, and meeting new people. Asians are already faithful Christians and Buddhists before they come to the U. S. and they see their lives as somewhat religious.

Social Workers Working with Asian Clients.

One of the joy of the social work profession among social workers is the chance to work with clients from different cultures. As a result, a social worker working with Asian American clients must be culturally competent, have good assessment and intervention skills to meet the client where he or she is at; he or she must have good knowledge about Asian people's way of life, and have the ability to incorporate social work values and ethics, and the impact of migration and immigration. An Asian American client with mental illness or HIV may seek traditional medicine instead of modern psychiatrists or HIV treatments. As a result working with such clients can be very challenging. Sometime not understanding what the client is saying may interpret as been disrespectful. In Japanese culture, a right hand shake is not encouraged while in other cultures it is accepted.

Moreover, the worker must acknowledge the under lying language barriers issues and traditional Asian rituals. Most of the elderly people have language barrier, English may be their second or third language. Therefore, they not only have unfamiliarity in dealing with the U.S. social and mental health services, and financial difficulties, they also cannot speak good English. Asking the client's family member to assist as an interpreter or translator can help the client greatly. Some mental health agencies have a staff with bilingual background to assist Asian clients with language barriers. Their cultural knowledge about America and view of social workers' roles are not the same as someone born and raised in Little Tokyo or Chinatown in New York City or California.

Many Asian American clients especially Chinese have mixed strategies for seeking social work services, such as receiving counseling from black market Chinese ancestor medicine after obtaining diagnosis from an American psychiatrist. Some stop case management services immediately after obtaining diagnosis and seek further help from other sources or black markets. A social worker providing services with this population should be able to see things from Asian Americans' perspectives, empathy with their shortcoming, encourage them with hope, and provide comfort within the therapeutic relationship to help them meet their needs of services. In addition, the worker do not have to be bi-culture to effectively serve Asian communities, however he or she must have what it takes to serve Asian families across language and cultural barriers.

Diversity in America nowadays is like a kingdom of heaven, it is wonderful and very important in American society. However, in the past American history have it painful memories especially for Asian Americans coming to the United States. Older Asian American generation may hold on to their old ways and travel from distance land, however, when a social worker value their tradition and cultural ways, they can find strength within themselves to trust the social

worker so that he or she can assist them overcome their challenges and reach their treatment goals.

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