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An Exploratory Study of School Counselors' Experiences with and Perceptions of Asian-American Students' Concerns

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS' EXPERIENCES WITH AND PERCEPTIONS OF ASIAN-AMERICAN...

Of the 720,000 new immigrants who came to the United States in 1995, 268,000 originated from Asia and the Pacific Islands. From 1980 to 1990, the Asian-American population doubled, and it will double again between 1990 and 2020. In addition, the number of school-age Asian-Americans increased from 212,900 in 1980 to almost 1.3 million in 1990 (Lee, 1998). To date, "Asian-American" as a racial category represents 29 distinct ethnic groups (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993). Moreover, there is considerable social and economic variation between recent Asian immigrants in comparison to Asian-American communities that have been in the United States for generations (Lee, 1998). These demographic shifts have contributed to a significant influx of Asian-American students in many of the nation's public school systems, particularly on the East and West Coasts (Lee, 1998).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) position statement on Cross-Cultural and Multicultural Counseling (ASCA, 1999), included the statement that "School counselors take action to ensure students of culturally diverse backgrounds have access to appropriate services and opportunities promoting the individual's maximum development." Hence, this research seeks to help school counselors understand the counseling needs of Asian-American students.

Asian-American students are an important group to investigate for a number of reasons. In particular, although Asian-American students are characterized as the "Model Minority" (Lee, 1997, p. 442), they do have serious psychological, social, and developmental concerns that are often ignored by professionals (Morrissey, 1997; Uba, 1994). The Model Minority myth contributes to the perception that Asian-Americans perform well academically and emotionally and that they do not need help from a counselor. In contrast, numerous Asian-American students are vulnerable to many of the problems associated with adjusting to a new culture (Sodowsky & Lai, 1997).

Asian-American students may experience culture shock from trying to negotiate competing cultural value systems (Henderson, Millhouse, & Ling, 1994). Cultural differences may also contribute to depression (Flaskerud & Nguyen, 1988; Nicassio, Solomon, Guest, & McMullough, 1986), social isolation (Lin, 1986), anxiety (Kinzie, 1989; Lin, 1986), low self-concept (Timberlake & Cook, 1984), relationship problems (Sodowsky & Lai, 1997), and academic and career concerns (Sodowsky & Lai, 1997). However, since many Asian-Americans mask their psychological problems with physical manifestations or somatization (Moore & Boehnlein, 1991; Nicassio, 1985), many problems may be unnoticed by school counselors.

In addition, research has consistently shown that Asian-Americans severely underutilize mental health and counseling services (Atkinson, Lowe, & Matthews, 1995; Leong & Tracey, 1986;

Sue, Fujino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991). Although underuse could indicate a lack of need for these services among Asian-Americans, studies have demonstrated prevalence of psychological problems among Asian-American samples (e.g., Abe & Zane, 1990; Buchwald, Mansen, Dingas, Keane, & Kinzie, 1993; Loo, Tong, & True, 1989; Mollica, Wyshak, & Lavelle, 1987). In fact, research indicates that Asian-Americans are at increased risk for cultural adjustment problems in comparison to other ethnic minority populations (Leong, 1986).

Several factors have been identified as possible reasons for the underutilization of mental health services by Asian-Americans including: (a) lack of familiarity with, or misconceptions about, counseling; (b) cultural stigma and shame over mental health problems; (c) availability of alternative resources to traditional counseling; and (d) linguistic barriers (Uba, 1994). Moreover, a dearth of culturally sensitive personnel has been observed as a factor in underutilization (Atkinson & Matsushita, 1991; Atkinson, Poston, Furlong, & Mercado, 1989; Uba, 1994). Hence, teachers and other school personnel may be unaware of how to recognize Asian-American mental health problems to facilitate appropriate referrals. These factors do not point to a lack of need for mental health care among Asian-American students; rather, they highlight the unique barriers to the use of mental health services among this population. It remains to be established how Asian-American students cope with such difficulties.

An extensive literature search yielded no articles concerning school counselors' experiences with, or perceptions of, Asian-American students. In addition, there were no studies regarding school counseling techniques and strategies for working with students with Asian-American cultural backgrounds. Due to the paucity of research in this important area, this study sought to explore school counselors' perceptions of counseling Asian-American students. In addition, I was interested in examining how school counseling techniques vary with Asian-American versus White-American students. Although this is not a study comparing school counselors' experiences with White-Americans and Asian-Americans, understanding differences in specific counseling strategies across the racial groups will help to identify current counseling techniques that are culturally based and unique to Asian-Americans. In particular, the following research questions were addressed:

- 1.** How are Asian-American students referred to school counselors?
- 2.** What are school counselors' perceptions of Asian-American students' presenting counseling concerns?
- 3.** What are the most common techniques school counselors use when counseling Asian-American students? How do these differ from common techniques school counselors use when counseling White-American students?
- 4.** What challenges do school counselors encounter when counseling Asian-American students?
- 5.** What are school counselors' perceptions of Asian-American students' coping strategies used when dealing with problems?
- 6.** What adjectives do school counselors use to describe Asian-American students?

Method Participants

The convenience sample consisted of 154 school counselors from 113 schools on the East Coast. There were 114 females (74%) and 40 males (26%) in the sample. The mean age was 40.1 (SD = 11.4) years and the ages ranged from 21 to 65 years old. The racial backgrounds of the counselors were as follows: 67.5% (n = 104) were White-American, 14.3% were Asian-American (n = 22), 7.1% were Hispanic (n = 11), 6.5% were African American (n = 10), 1.3% were American Indian (n = 2), and 1.9% (n = 3) of the counselors were mixed race. On average, Asian-American students comprised 18.5% of the participants' school and 14.5% of their caseloads. In contrast, the average percents of White students in the school counselors' schools and caseloads were 40% and 33.5%, respectively.

In terms of counseling experience, the mean number of years of participants' counseling experience was 10.5 (SD = 8.6) years. Participants also reported previous multicultural counselor training. Counselors in the sample had earned a mean of 7.4 credit hours in multicultural counseling and had attended an average of 4.4 workshops focusing on multicultural issues. School counselors in the sample reported the grade level at which they worked as follows: 60.4% (n = 93) were from high school, 29.2% (n = 45) were from junior high, 9.7% (n = 15) were from elementary school and one person did not report grade level.

The percent and frequency of school counselors working with students from specific Asian-American ethnic groups were as follows (they could select more than one ethnic group): (a) 79.2% (n = 122) counseled Chinese students, (b) 61% (n = 94) counseled Korean, (c) 37% (n = 57) counseled Japanese, (d) 25.3% (n = 39) counseled Vietnamese, (e) 24.7% (n = 38) counseled Filipino, (f) 23.4% (n = 36) counseled Indian, (g) 11.7% (n = 18) counseled Pakistan. In addition, less than 10% of the participants were working with the following Asian-American ethnic groups: Thai, Cambodian, Taiwanese, Laotian, Malaysian, and "mixed" Asian-American students.

Instruments

Demographic Information Sheet. On the demographic information sheet, participants provided their gender, age, race, years of counseling experience, multicultural training, and grade level at which they worked. In addition, participants estimated the racial compositions of their schools and their individual caseloads.

Perceptions of Asian-American Students Questionnaire (PASQ). Since there has been no previous research in this area of inquiry, a questionnaire assessing the perceptions and experiences of school counselors' work with Asian-American students was developed. The PASQ is a 24-item questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first section included questions about Asian-American ethnic groups at the counselors' school and Asian-American ethnic groups that the participant had previously counseled. This section also included questions about how Asian-American students are typically referred to counseling at the participant's school.

The second section consists of six open-ended questions covering the following topics: primary or most frequent presenting concerns of Asian-American students, most common techniques

used when counseling Asian-American students, most common techniques used when counseling White-American students, and top challenges encountered when counseling Asian-American students. In addition, participants were asked about the most frequent coping strategies that Asian-American students used when dealing with problems and adjectives school counselors used to describe Asian-American students at their school setting. For each question, participants could list up to five responses.

The initial items for the PASQ were developed based on numerous conversations with a group of eight school counselors. Moreover, the author is also experienced in the area of Asian-American counseling and mental health. The PASQ was then reviewed by four experts in the areas of multicultural counseling and Asian-American counseling, and revisions were made based on their feedback. Next, the questionnaire was reviewed by 10 school counselors, and the feedback and editing process was repeated before the questionnaire was distributed.

Separate sets of coding categories were generated for the following areas of the PASQ: Asian-American students' presenting concerns, Asian-American/ White-American counseling techniques, challenges encountered when counseling Asian-American students, Asian-American students' coping strategies, and adjectives used to describe Asian-American students.

Procedure

Questionnaires were disseminated to school counselors by a research assistant at the "Guidance Exposition," a conference sponsored by the New York Counseling Association, and at several local meetings of school counselors in New York City. Three master's- and two doctoral-level research assistants (two White-American and three Asian-American) distributed questionnaires from a table in the conference exhibition hall. Participants who approached the table were asked if they would be interested in participating in the study. Research assistants then explained the purpose of the study and responded to any questions. Two master's-level and one doctoral-level research assistant also attended the local meetings of school counselors in the New York City Metropolitan area. At these meetings, research assistants made an announcement describing the study and inquired if anyone was interested in participating. Counselors attending the meeting could then decide to participate. If they approached the research assistants, they were offered a description of the study and could ask questions about the research. The questions took about 20 minutes to complete and were completed at the time of distribution. In total, 193 surveys were distributed and 154 (81%) of the surveys distributed were returned.

Due to the exploratory nature of the PASQ, the questionnaire produced a wealth of qualitative data. For each of the open-ended questions of the PASQ, the raw data were read several times by a team of three research assistants and coded for main themes and patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An interrater reliability of .89 was assessed for three raters using Cohen's Kappa.

Results How are Asian-American students referred to school counselors?

School counselors in the sample reported the people who had referred Asian-American clients to them. Teachers had made the most referrals (57.1%, $n = 88$) of Asian-American students. Next, 47.4% ($n = 73$) were self-referred, 27.2% ($n = 42$) were referred by a parent, 21.4% ($n = 33$)

were referred by another school counselor, 15.6% (n = 24) were referred by the principal, and 12.3% (n = 19) were referred by a friend of the students. Less than 10% of the referrals were made by nurses, coaches, students' siblings, and other sources.

[What are school counselors' perceptions of Asian-American students' presenting counseling concerns?](#)

In total, there were 10 categories that participants used to describe Asian-American students' presenting concerns. The most common concerns were as follows: (a) 90.9% (n = 140) listed academic pressure/expectations, (b) 51.3% (n = 79) mentioned family concerns, (c) 42.2% (n = 65) listed social concerns, and (d) 40.2% (n = 62) cultural customs/barriers. Less common concerns of Asian-American clients were (e) mental health concerns (23.4%, n = 36), (f) language/communication problems (18.2%, n = 28), (g) school functioning/logistics issues (18.2%, n = 28), (h) problems with isolation (11.7%, n = 18), (i) a lack of knowledge about mental health services (5.8%, n = 9), and (j) financial difficulty (5.2%, n = 8).

[What are the most common techniques/strategies school counselors use when counseling Asian-American students? How do these differ from common techniques/strategies school counselors use when counseling White-American students?](#)

Participants reported counseling techniques and strategies used with Asian-American versus White-American students in their caseloads. Nine different techniques and strategies were determined in response to this particular inquiry (see Table). The counseling techniques and strategies utilized for Asian-Americans versus White-American students were compared using chi-square analyses. Chi-square analyses indicated significant differences between counseling techniques and strategies used for Asian-American students versus White-American students.

Specifically, school counselors in the sample were more likely to report using group counseling, $\chi^2(4, N = 154) = 99.51, p < .0001$; family counseling, $\chi^2(4, N = 154) = 128.57, p < .0001$; and creative arts activities, $\chi^2(4, N = 154) = 101.17, p < .0001$, when working with Asian-American versus White-American clients. In addition, school counselors reported utilizing counseling techniques and strategies that demonstrated an awareness of cultural issues more when working with Asian-American clients, $\chi^2(4, N = 154) = 96.2, p < .0001$.

[What challenges do school counselors encounter when counseling Asian-American students?](#)

School counselors' most frequent challenges when working with Asian-American were as follows: (a) 38.9% (n = 60) reported a lack of family involvement in counseling, (b) 37.6% (n = 58) reported student stigmatization of counseling, (c) 35.1% (n = 54) mentioned overcoming cultural barriers, (d) 33.1% (n = 51) reported students' lack of self-disclosure, (e) 26.6% (n = 41) mentioned overcoming language barriers, and (f) 11.0% (n = 17) reported a student lack of direct communication in counseling. Less than 10% of the school counselors reported the following challenges with counseling Asian-American students: dealing with student perfectionism, helping students address social concerns/pressures, understanding student mental health concerns, and helping students manage school logistics.

What are school counselors' perceptions of Asian-American students' coping strategies used when dealing with problems?

Nine coding categories were established based on the counselors' perceptions of Asian-American coping strategies. Participants in the study responded that Asian-American students cope using the following strategies: (a) 67.5% (n = 104) internalize/avoid the problem, (b) 49.3% (n = 76) seek social support, (c) 25.9% (n = 40) act out, (d) 20.1% (n = 31) see a school counselor, (e) 18.8% (n = 29) focus on academics, (f) 14.2% (n = 22) involve parents, and (g) 11.6% (n = 18) engage in impulsive/injurious behavior. Less than 10% of the participants reported that Asian-American students' coping strategies included mental health concerns developing into a health problem, engaging in creative arts, and seeking religious resources.

What adjectives do school counselors use to describe Asian-American students?

Finally, the PASQ inquired about adjectives counselors used to describe Asian-American students. Results indicated that the following adjectives were used most frequently to characterize Asian-American students: (a) 76.6% (n = 118), hardworking/academic; (b) 46.8% (n = 72), quiet/guarded; (c) 31.2% (n = 48), family/other-oriented; (d) 27.9% (n = 43), compliant/obedient; (e) 25.9% (n = 40), intelligent; (f) 13.6% (n = 21), responsible; and 13.6% (n = 21), sociable. Less than 10% of the participants reported the following adjectives: depressed, angry, independent, involved, and culturally cliquish.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to explore school counselors' perceptions of Asian-American students and their mental health concerns. Moreover, this study sought to understand commonly used counseling techniques and strategies for Asian-American and White-American students as well as school counselors' challenges working with Asian-American students. Since this is the first study to explore these important areas, a questionnaire was developed to answer the research questions.

The results suggest that Asian-American students tend to seek help for concerns relating to academics, family issues, social concerns, and cultural conflicts. These presenting concerns are reflective of Asian-American cultural values emphasizing academic achievement (Chia, 1989; Lin & Fu, 1990), family cohesion (Morris, 1990; Tsui & Schultz, 1988), and collectivism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Specifically, the interdependent nature of Asian-American identity mandates a self that values interpersonal harmony and strong family ties. Such goals are achieved when Asian-American children maintain "face" and positive relations in the family. Asian-American students may "lose face" and disrupt interpersonal harmony at home when they fail to thrive academically (Hess, Chang, & McDevitt, 1987). Hence, Asian-American students are socialized to achieve and focus academically as well as interact socially. When these important agendas are interrupted, mental health concerns may arise.

School counselors in the sample tended to address Asian-American students' presenting concerns by utilizing Rogerian therapy techniques, directive counseling, group counseling; involving social and family networks; having an awareness of pertinent cultural issues; and engaging the

clients in creative arts activities. Although there is a wealth of literature describing the unique culturally specific needs of Asian-Americans in a counseling context (e.g., Chin, 1998; Tang, 1997; Tsui, 1997; Ying, 1997), school counselors reported using similar counseling techniques when working with White-American clients. However, the results suggest that school counselors are significantly more likely to use counseling techniques involving social and family networks, being aware of cultural issues, and engaging in creative arts activities when working with Asian-American as compared to White-American clients.

Due to the strong importance Asian-American students place on social and family relations, it seems essential that counselors' techniques with Asian-American students would tend to involve interpersonal networks (Mau & Jepsen, 1988; Yeh & Wang, 2000). In fact, utilizing significant relationships should be a central focus of helping Asian-American clients. Moreover, since Asian-American values de-emphasizing self-disclosure and emotional expression are contrary to the traditional counseling process (Sue & Sue, 1993), it seems critical that counselors be more aware of cultural issues that impact the therapeutic alliance and process.

The findings also suggest that school counselors used more creative arts techniques when working with Asian-American versus White-American clients. Due to the strong focus on aesthetics and arts as well as the de-emphasis on direct verbal communication (Sue & Sue, 1993; Yeh, 1996) in many Asian-American cultures, counselors should consider nonverbal means of emotional expression that may seem less threatening to Asian-American students. Such interventions may include journal writing, drawing, poetry therapy, and music therapy (Alexander & Sussman, 1995; Hendersen & Gladding, 1998). However, there are also many individual differences when it comes to preferences for creative interventions and personality factors should also be considered when considering the use of creative arts techniques.

The results suggest that school counselors have challenges with counseling Asian-American students such as overcoming student stigmatization of counseling, dealing with a lack of parental involvement in counseling, overcoming cultural barriers in counseling, and dealing with students' lack of self-disclosure about emotional concerns. These challenges to counseling Asian-Americans are integrally related to Asian-American cultural contradictions with current models of counseling. In particular, many Asian-Americans stigmatize the counseling process because of their discomfort with self-disclosure (Lee, 1996) and because of a fear of losing face (Uba, 1994). Similarly, Asian-American parents may be reluctant to connect with a counselor or encourage counseling since having a child in counseling may be shameful and embarrassing in Asian-American circles (Kim, 1996). Research has shown that Asian-American clients often present to counseling with academic, or nonemotional, concerns in order to save face (Tracey; Leong, & Glidden, 1986).

Participants in this study reported Asian-American coping strategies that involved seeking social support, internalizing/avoiding problems, and acting out more frequently than seeing a counselor. These coping strategies may be related to strong cultural stigmas that contribute to Asian-American underutilization of mental health services (Atkinson & Gim, 1989). Since Asian culture emphasizes restraining emotional expression (Cheung, 1985), Asian-American students may be inclined to find more culturally consonant methods for dealing with problems. Asian-American student preferences for seeking help from social ties is consistent with previous

research indicating that Asian-Americans tend to seek relational or familial rather than professional sources of help (Atkinson, Whiteley, & Gim, 1990; Root, 1985; Suan & Tyler, 1990; Yeh & Wang, 2000). Such tendencies for social as opposed to professional intervention may be reflective of an Asian-American cultural emphasis on collectivism and interpersonal ties (Yeh & Wang, 2000).

Finally, this research assessed adjectives school counselors' used to describe Asian-American students. The most frequently used adjectives included hardworking/academic, quiet/guarded, compliant/obedient, and intelligent. In many ways, these descriptions reflect many common stereotypes of Asian-American students as Model Minorities. In particular, since many Asian-American students are seen as compliant and quiet, it may be difficult for school counselors and teachers to identify their mental health problems. Such positive characterizations of Asian-Americans, coupled with an Asian-American cultural reluctance to seek help, may contribute to a general lack of sensitivity to, and identification of, Asian-American mental health concerns.

Limitations

There are several limitations of the current research investigation that should be mentioned. First of all, the convenience sample only included school counselors who attended particular meetings and were predominantly from the East Coast, so generalizability of the results is limited. Since there were no research questionnaires in the area investigated, an exploratory instrument was developed for the specific purposes of this study. In addition, the study was limited in that school counselors were asked primarily about their experiences with and perceptions of Asian-American students. Future research could explore more in-depth accounts of school counselors' experiences with a range of culturally diverse students and offer comparisons with White students. Methodologies employed could include interviews, narrative accounts, ethnographic approaches, and scale development.

Implications

Research has failed to keep up with dramatic increases in the Asian-American student school population and the vast ethnic and socioeconomic heterogeneity within this racial group. As a result, I believe that school counselor training programs may be unequipped to prepare counselors to work with vulnerable populations within the Asian-American community. The current study offers information that may be useful to school counselors in their future work with Asian-American students.

Specifically, from these research findings, school counselors can learn to recognize common presenting concerns of Asian-American students. Learning to identify Asian-American students' psychological concerns is especially important since many Asian-American students keep their emotional difficulties to themselves and are often reluctant to seek help from a counselor. In addition, school counselors can become familiar with culturally based coping methods among Asian-American students and help teach them new and more adaptive ways of addressing mental health problems.

Understanding school counselors' techniques with Asian-American as compared to White-American students will help to identify and highlight alternative counseling methods that may increase mental health utilization by Asian-American students. Specifically, while current methods of school counseling heavily rely on individual counseling, alternative techniques may integrate Asian-American coping styles that emphasize family and social group ties (i.e., peer groups, parent/student workshops, community outreach). Education and prevention programs can also be informed by research that clarifies the relationship between acculturation, self-concept, and mental health utilization attitudes, behaviors, and patterns among Asian-American students. Such strategies may in fact decrease Asian-American stigmatization of counseling and may, in turn, increase counseling utilization rates.

An additional contribution of this research is the identification of top challenges that school counselors experience with Asian-American students. For example, school counselors reported that Asian-American students had a lack of family involvement in counseling, tended to stigmatize counseling, and were uncomfortable with self-disclosure and direct communication in counseling. It is important for future school counselors to be aware of such challenges so they do not misinterpret these behaviors as a lack of interest in, or need for, counseling.

School counselors are part of a larger institutional setting where students can seek and receive help for mental health concerns. Sometimes, school counselors are the only option for students in need of intervention due to economic, social, and linguistic factors. However, Asian-American students may not be initially comfortable with asking for help for their concerns. Thus, school counselors offer a unique avenue to help Asian-American students become educated about, and comfortable with, coping strategies and resources.

By assessing school counselors' experiences with Asian-American youth, inaccurate stereotypes may be challenged and areas for improvement identified. Determining school counselors' current understanding of Asian-American students' psychological functioning will help highlight gaps in the training of counselors and teachers. In this present increasingly diverse society, knowledge and research concerning differing cultural mental health practices is critical. Researchers, school counselors, and counselor educators must be equipped to recognize, evaluate, and address student development in the broadest sense.

Number and Percent of School Counselors Using Specific Counseling Techniques/Strategies with Asian-American versus White-American Students (N = 154)

Legend for Chart:

- A - Counseling Technique
- B - Asian-American students: n
- C - Asian-American students: %
- D - White-American students: n
- E - White-American students: %

A

B

C

D

E

Rogerian therapy techniques

	94	61	90	58.4
Directive counseling				
	49	31.8	51	33.1
Family contact				
	52	33.7	43	27.9
Awareness of cultural issues				
	29	18.8	17	11.0
Group counseling				
	27	17.5	20	12.9
Creative arts activities				
	23	14.9	10	6.5
Information				
	22	14.7	23	14.9
Referral				
	10	6.5	9	5.8
Non-verbal behaviors				
	6	3.9	5	3.2

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