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# Building Awareness of the Mental Health Issues of Asian American College Women

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University of San Francisco

**Building Awareness of the Mental Health Issues of Asian  
American College Women**

A Field Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in International and Multicultural Education

by  
Julie S Baek  
December 2015

# **Building Awareness of the Mental Health Issues of Asian American College Women**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

by  
Julie S Baek  
December 2015

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:  
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Date

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### Statement of Problem

In a heartbreaking poem entitled “Suicide Note,” Janice Mirikitani (1987) expresses the thoughts of an imaginary woman of Asian descent who decides to commit suicide:

How many notes written. . .  
ink smeared like birdprints in snow.  
not good enough  
not pretty enough  
not smart enough  
dear mother and father.  
I apologize  
for disappointing you.

I’ve worked very hard,  
not good enough  
harder, perhaps to please you.  
If only I were a son, shoulders broad  
as the sunset threading through pine,  
I would see the light in my mother’s  
eyes, or the golden pride reflected  
in my father’s dream  
of my wide, male hands worthy of work  
and comfort.

I apologize.  
Tasks do not come easily.  
Each failure, a glacier.  
Each disapproval, a footprint.  
Each disappointment,  
ice above my river.  
So I have worked hard.  
not good enough

My sacrifice I will drop  
bone by bone, perched  
on the ledge of my womanhood,  
fragile as wings.  
not strong enough  
It is snowing steadily

surely not good weather  
 for flying—this sparrow  
 sillied and dizzied by the wind  
 on the edge.  
 not smart enough  
 I make this ledge my altar  
 to offer penance.  
 This air will not hold me,  
 the snow burdens my crippled wings,  
 the tears drop like bitter cloth  
 softly into the gutter below.  
 not good enough  
 not strong enough  
 not smart enough

Choices thin as shaved  
 ice. Notes shredded  
 drift like snow  
 on my broken body,  
 covers me like whispers  
 of sorries  
 sorries.  
 Perhaps when they find me  
 they will bury  
 my bird bones beneath  
 a sturdy pine  
 and scatter my feathers like  
 unspoken song  
 over this white and cold and silent  
 breast of earth.

This poem reveals the secret suffering and sense of guilt of a young Asian American female college student. Feeling she is not good enough and has disappointed her parents because of her perceived academic failures she ends her life by jumping to her death. Her inner thoughts, shared as a suicide note to her parents, reveal her struggle with academic and family pressures that ultimately led her to think suicide was the only option she had to escape her pain.

According to the Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA) (2012), referencing 2007 national suicide statistics, suicide is the 8<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death for

Asian Americans, a large and diverse group of various ethnicities, languages, etc., and the 11<sup>th</sup> leading cause for all racial groups combined. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Asian Americans 15 to 34 years old. Furthermore, U.S.-born Asian American women were found to have higher lifetime rates of suicidal thoughts (15.9%) compared to 13.5% for the general population.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports among all women between the ages of 15 to 24, Asian Americans have the second highest suicide rates across all racial or ethnic groups (as cited in Africa & Carrasco, 2011). Also, Asian American girls in puberty have the highest rates of depression across all racial and gender groups (Africa & Carrasco, 2011). In college, Asian American students experience a higher level of depression than Caucasian students (Africa & Carrasco, 2011; Young, Fang, & Zisook, 2010). This population also has a higher level of suicidal thoughts than Caucasians (Wong, Brownson, & Schwing, 2011). While many Asian American students suffer from mental health issues, only 27% of them seek professional care or treatment (Africa & Carrasco, 2011). The high rate of depression and underutilization of mental health services among Asian American students along with other risk factors like family conflict, viewing one's self as a burden to others, and experiences of discrimination are predictors of increased suicidal thoughts and attempts (AAPA, 2012; Africa & Carrasco, 2011).

However, little is known about what makes this population of students take their own lives at higher rates than their ethnic counterparts because of a paucity of empirical research on the issue (Africa & Carrasco, 2011; Noh, 2007). The model minority myth suggests Asian Americans are more academically, economically, and socially successful than any other racial groups because of unique Asian cultural values that emphasize hard

work, strong family values, and/or stronger belief in the idea of American meritocracy (Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2011). Additionally, it is appropriate to acknowledge high rates of distress associated with trauma from political and economic turmoil, in the case of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian and Hmong refugees and diversity in presentation and expression of psychological and psychiatric distress among Asian Americans (somatization of symptoms) can complicate mental health issues within this population (Africa & Carrasco, 2011).

Particularly, the failure to more fully examine the intersectional identities of Asian American women is a contributing factor that makes their experiences, especially related to mental health, unheard and unacknowledged. The compounding effects of racial and gender discrimination and cultural and family pressures against Asian American women marginalize and situate them as the *other*. Therefore, their experiences and issues are rendered invisible (Foo, 2002).

I experienced psychological struggle firsthand when I came to the U.S. as an exchange student from South Korea. During that time, I was unaware that my change in eating habits had something to do with my mental health. I had to study hard since I came all the way from my home country at great expense. Also, I had to contend with stress related to cultural and language differences while maintaining good grades. Loneliness resulted from being away from family and friends. In addition, the pressure to study hard to fulfill family expectations eventually caused me to be abnormally preoccupied with food. Studying and living abroad was indeed a great opportunity to make friends from different countries and explore new languages and cultures. However, I did not know what I was experiencing was common. I was not aware I needed to take care mental of



my health instead of ignoring what was happening to me. It was also hard to tell other people what my problems were. I was unsure how to broach the subject and was embarrassed to share my mental health struggles. Also, I did not know what resources were available. My personal experiences, along with the statistical realities of Asian American women and suicide, highlight the importance of educating Asian American women college students at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) in order to increase awareness of their needs to manage their mental health as stridently as they manage their academic studies, helping them to obtain tools to stay healthy both mentally and physically, as well as informing them about available campus resources.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project is to develop a video presentation to highlight campus and community resources that could help Asian American women college students struggling with mental health issues and promote their mental wellness. This project attempts to address the factors impacting Asian American women college student's mental health issues and examine what kind of resources UC Berkeley provides to support this group.

The presentation could be embedded on an Asian American student organization website where Asian American women college students would be able to easily access them. Another purpose of this project is to increase campus awareness of the unique needs of this population of students. Ultimately, this project is to inform students that they are supported and inviting them to become more empowered in addressing their mental health.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This project adopts critical race theory (CRT) and Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit) as the theoretical framework. CRT provides a critical lens to understand how dominant ideology has perpetuated and maintained racism and shaped the experiences of people of color in the US. AsianCrit, building on CRT, focuses on Asian Americans and the unique ways they have been marginalized. In particular, I focus on the tenet of intersectionality as it gives a deeper understanding of how racial and other social identities, including gender, intersect to shape the experiences of Asian American women. CRT and AsianCrit with a focus on intersectionality are critical tools for interpreting Asian American women students' experiences in college.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Before looking into AsianCrit, it is important to understand the origins and tenets of CRT as AsianCrit is built upon CRT. CRT first appeared in the field of legal studies in opposition to the dominant legal system of racial oppression during the post-Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s. The discontent with a failure of racial reform spawned CRT movement among legal scholars (Rimando, 2011). Derrick Bell, African American professor at Harvard Law School and one of the first CRT scholars, quoted the Biblical verse from the Jeremiah who lamented over hopeless salvation for his people saying, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 115). Bell believes that this verse describe racialized experiences of people of color, especially African Americans (Ladson-Billings, 2005). After Bell resigned, students at Harvard Law School took over the CRT movement, demanding to hire a scholar of color and add a course that addresses race and racism, which contributed

to the student-led “Alternative Course” (Rimando, 2011). This course inspired other scholars and influenced further movements. Critical legal studies (CLS) conferences held in the 1980s were critical events for the development of CRT as scholars who attended the conferences brought the issue of traditional legal studies into the discourse to unveil the hegemony (Rimando, 2011). Some scholars of color, however, were disappointed at the existence of racial power relations “within CLS itself” and established their own community, which resulted in an emergence of CRT (p.13). In contrast to the CLS movement that failed to explain how race and racism influence legal studies in the US, CRT theorized race and analyzed the racism that results in social inequities of the minority groups (Hiraldo, 2010).

Even though CRT emerged in the legal field, the scholars of higher education adopted CRT “as a tool to challenge colorblindness and analyze the ways that race and racism function to oppress people of color in postsecondary education system” (Museus, 2013, p. 20). A deliberate work on identifying the key tenets of CRT by various scholars in higher education resulted in the following: (1) the centrality and intersectionality race and racism; (2) counter-storytelling; (3) interest convergence; (4) Whiteness as property rights; and (5) challenging the dominant ideology (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Even though researchers from various field areas have brought CRT into their researches with different key tenets depending on their focus, as Rimando (2011) stating, “they are all aimed in the same direction of critical thought and research around race” (p.13). As the purpose of CRT is to uncover the “patterns of exclusion that exist in the U.S. society,” it provides a critical perspective to see the struggles and obstacles of the underrepresented

students of color in higher education (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). One of the major tenets in CRT is the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism (Buena Vista & Chen, 2013).

Having the centrality of race as a major tenet, CRT also considers the intersectionality that challenges a single identity. The CRT framework acknowledges the diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives that influence the lives of people of color (Rimando, 2011). Therefore, it provides a critical lens not only to see the reality of racism rampant in our society but also to understand the experiences of ethnic or racial groups that have been masked by the dominant ideology. Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, and Parker (2009) articulated how CRT challenges the destructive myth that has constructed racial stereotypes to students by stating:

CRT has been particularly useful for the critique of deficit thinking—the framing of racial inequities as a result of individual deficiencies—by providing alternative pedagogies and methodologies through which scholars and students can “unlearn” stereotypical thinking about race. (p. 58)

The hidden motive of projecting an image of the model minority to Asian Americans is, as Chang (1993) highlights, to mask the historical realities of discrimination and violence as well as the contemporary problems of Asian Americans, thus sustaining white privilege. Rimando (2011) draws upon the CRT framework to examine the model minority stereotype, explaining:

The CRT framework has been very effective to examine the stereotypes and other negative experiences that have contributed to Asian American and Pacific Islander student achievement gaps. (p. 6)

CRT creates a space to bring inequity existed in the higher education system into discussion to develop institutions and students affairs services that reflect the cultural diversity and the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, CRT would be useful to unearth and challenge the educational inequalities of students of color.

## **Asian Critical Race Theory**

Despite of dichotomous characteristic of CRT that focused “the lens of race on either issues of black or white” when it first came out, it has evolved into a theoretical perspective that encompasses various ethnic groups and identities (Rimando, 2011).

Scholars who study Asian Americans have recognized a need for an analytical framework that focuses on this population to understand how race and racism has influenced their experiences in the U.S. society, which resulted in AsianCrit (Museus, 2013). AsianCrit provides, as Museus (2013) explains, “a refined set of uniquely tailored tenets that can further advance critical analyses of racism and Asian American lives” (p. 23). Museus (2013) identifies seven tenets of AsianCrit as follows:

*Asianization:* The U.S. society has racialized Asian Americans by lumping them into a single Asian category and stereotyping them as yellow perils in the past and a model minority at present. Such racialization was an effective means to oppress Asian Americans and change laws and policies against this population, which have given a huge impact on their lives;

*Transnational Contexts:* AsianCrit highlights both the past and present national and international contexts that help us to understand how racism has shaped the experiences of Asian Americans;

*(Re)Constructive History:* AsianCrit emphasizes the process of re-analyzing history to reveal racism that has prevailed in the U.S. society towards Asian Americans. Museus (2013) highlights that “an analysis of Asian American history can inform understandings of the current conditions of Asian American communities and help comprehend how education can be (re)shaped to better

engage and foster success among Asian American students in higher education” (p. 25);

*Strategic (Anti)Essentialism*: Building on the notion that race is socially constructed phenomenon (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), strategic (anti)essentialism recognizes that dominant ideology promotes racialization of Asian Americans. However, it also believes that Asian Americans can engage activities against the oppression (Museus, 2013);

*Intersectionality*: This tenet stems from the notion that racism intersects with other systems of oppression including sexism, classism, and heterosexism, which influence the lives of Asian Americans. Museus (2013) stressed that “intersectionality can help facilitate deeper and more complex multilayered analyses of the ways in which social structures, political processes, and identities intersect to create certain conditions, realities, and experiences than what already exists” (p. 27);

*Story, Theory, and Praxis*: AsianCrit emphasizes the importance of these three interconnected elements for a critical analysis of Asian American experiences. The belief of AsianCrit is that the stories of Asian Americans affect theory, theory directs practice, and practice brings their voices (Museus, 2013); and

*Commitment to Social Justice*: The ultimate purpose of AsianCrit is to end all types of oppression.

AsianCrit can be a useful theoretical framework for this research as it gives a critical lens to analyze the experiences of Asian American female students in college. AsianCrit is telling in this project not only unveils the reality of Asian American college students but

also encourages them to engage in the student-lead activities to improve the current conditions.

### **Significance of the Project**

This project aims to increase awareness of Asian American college women's mental health issue. The primary audience of this project is Asian American college women, helping them to increase self-awareness in their mental health and encourage them to pay more attention to their mindfulness. The stigma associated with mental illness and mental health services and internalized gender expectations of women have forced them to be silent, which does not allow them to take care of their mental health. This project hopes to inform Asian American college women that their mental health matters and that their mental struggles do not result from their fault. This process could help them to have more positive attitude towards talking about their mental health and seeking psychology services. Ultimately, I hope that Asian American women students in college discuss their own issue and be active in bringing more campus and community resources for themselves.

In addition, this project addresses the changes at all levels including individual, family, campus, and community. The mental health issue among Asian American college women has been invisible, and limited resources have been provided due to the paucity of attention, and empirical and interpretive researches. Recently, UC Berkeley has lost a psychology counselor who focused on Asian American students and no plan in the near future to hire a psychologist who is responsive to Asian cultures. This project hopes to break internalized model minority stereotype on Asian American students in general and women in particular and draw more attention to the issues of Asian American women to

develop the school environment, student affairs services, and mental health care services that reflect diverse experiences of this demographic group, thus creating more safe space for all students regardless of their race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.

### **Definition of Terms**

- 1) **Acculturative Stress:** The stress that directly results from the difficulties and stressors that arise during acculturation. The term is often used interchangeably with acculturative stress; however, the latter more emphasizes the struggles and stress (Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012).
- 2) **Depression:** A mental disorder marked by a lack of interest and pleasure in daily activities, inability to focus, lack of energy, insomnia, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, or suicidal ideation (American Psychological Association, n.d.).
- 3) **Mental health:** Successful performance of mental function throughout the life cycle, resulting in productivity activity, fulfilling relationships, and ability to adapt to change and cope with stress (American Psychiatric Association, 2009).
- 4) **Mental illness:** Mental disorders marked by changes in thinking, mood, and behavior or combination (American Psychiatric Association, 2009).
- 5) **Video presentation:** In this field project, it refers to a series of slides that contain Asian American college women's mental health issues and resources available on campus and community.



## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

According to Chan (2003),

Although Asian Americans in general are vulnerable to psychosocial stresses because of their cultural differences and minority group status, psychological problems appear to be more prevalent among foreign-born immigrants (particularly refugees) than among people of Asian descent born in this country. However, despite the need for mental health services within both groups, research has shown that Asian Americans have generally not used such services in proportion to their numbers in the population. Asian cultural values, which emphasize stoicism and discourage expression of feelings, contribute to this underutilization. In addition, the absence of linguistically and culturally appropriate services in many areas limits outreach to Asian American communities. (p. 189)

In an effort to augment Chan's perspective, this chapter highlights literature that addresses the psychosocial issues many Asian American college students contend with. Despite a paucity of empirical studies on this topic, efforts to illuminate Asian American college students' mental struggles have continued.

In spite of the diversity within Asian American groups, statistical data has aggregated their different experiences, showing higher academic achievement among Asian American students (Lew, 2006). This results in seemingly positive stereotypes about Asian American, labeling them as a *model* among minority groups in the U.S. (Chan, 2003). Such positive conception of a model minority, however, has long had deleterious effects on Asian American college students. It not only results in a great deal of pressure on them but also obscure their academic and mental health struggles. The literature that addresses Asian American college students and mental health reveals this population has a higher suicide rate and reports depressive symptoms more than other ethnic or racial groups (Chu & Sue, 2011). However, Asian American college students

show the lowest utilization of mental health services and high dropout rates during mental health treatment. In particular, Asian American women aged 15 to 24 have the highest suicide rates among all racial or ethnic groups but only 27 percent of them seek a professional assistance (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2009).

The high academic expectations on Asian American college students are also forced by their parents at home. Moreover, Asian American college students have difficulty developing their own identity, experiencing value conflicts between Asian and Western cultures. Even though Asian American college students are very likely to be mentally distressed, these students are less likely to seek professional help than other ethnic groups due to the stigma on mental health illness and counseling and psychological services (Africa & Carrasco, 2011).

While reviewing the research about Asian American college students' mental health, four themes emerged. Therefore, this review of literature focuses on: (1) Asian Americans and the model minority myth; (2) lack of study of the mental health struggles of Asian American women; (3) family pressures and obligations; and (4) underutilization of mental health service. In addition, I examined what suggestions researchers have for better supporting Asian American students suffering from depression in college.

### **Asian Americans and the Model Minority Myth**

The notion of a model minority first appeared in a 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article written by UC Berkeley Professor William Peterson to describe Japanese Americans who, through their efforts, were increasing their social status financially and educationally (Victoria, 2007). Since then, the idea has been perpetuated in mainstream publications and programs such as *Time*, *The New York Times*, *The New*

*York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Fortune Magazine*, books like *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua and *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers- and How You Can Too* by Dr. Soo Kim Abboud, and television shows like *Glee*, *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*. The U.S. Department of Education has aggregated data of Asian students under the single category, Asian, which fails to reflect diversity and complexity in groups (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2013). Students from Asian cultural backgrounds have been categorized as a single group, however, there are more than 50 different subgroups including Indian, Bangladeshi, Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, Laotian, Pakistani, Thai, Vietnamese, etc. (Islam et al., 2010). The problem with aggregated data is it masks the inequalities and struggles that Asian American college students experience. For example, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (2013) notes that current educational data conceals the experiences of Southeast Asian American students. The existing educational data overlooks the needs of Asian American students at risk.

The model minority stereotype has also exacerbated the problem of lumping Asian Americans into a single category and perpetuates the marginalization of this population. The model minority myth, a subtle form of racism, suggests Asian Americans excel economically, academically, professionally, and personally compared to other minority groups because they possess cultural values that stress hard work, mental fortitude, personal responsibility, familial connections, etc. (Chan, 2003; Rimando, 2011; Victoria, 2007).

Consequently, Asian American students study hard and perform well at school. Nevertheless, this obscures their diverse experiences and struggles. While some Asian American ethnic groups, particularly Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese, have a strong

record of academic achievement, there are others who have far lower levels of achievement than their non-Asian peers. Moreover, even when educational achievement has led to occupational success, many Asian Americans encounter a glass ceiling that prevents them from being promoted or perceived as leaders (Chan, 2003).

Iwamoto, Liu, and McCoy (2011) suggested that the model minority myth assumes “Asian Americans experience protective factors associated with genetics or culture that contribute to high achievement and low incidence of mental health problems in comparison with Whites and other ethnic and racial groups” (p. 296). Even though, on the surface, the myth of the model minority appears to be positive, it can have a deleterious impact on Asian Americans (Panelo, 2010). To illustrate, there is immense pressure for Asian American college students to excel academically, which can lead to psychological difficulties. Dharma (2011) examined “casualties” who suffered from high pressure to succeed and found out that many of them devoted “their emotional well-being, their passions, their identities; some give up on life” to achieve academic success (p. 2). As Asian Americans mature, they internalize the idea that self-esteem correlates to external factors like education and career.

Psychological distress from the internalized perception that academic success is the only way to validate their identities peaks during undergraduate years (Dharma, 2011). High pressure that results from the model minority myth not only causes mental distress but also causes many Asian Americans to suppress their own desires and personalities. Instead of developing strong self-identities, Asian American students attempt to live up to high standards and expectations, which in turn perpetuates the myth of the model minority.

The model minority myth implies introversion and passive characteristics of many Asian Americans is an indication they are satisfied with their lives in the U.S. (Arisaka, 2000). As a result, this can bring about devastating psychological issues including depression, anxiety, stress, eating disorders, and lack of self-esteem (Dang, 2013). Equally as significant, these misconceptions about Asian Americans mask their individual lived experiences and contribute to their reluctance to seek mental health services when needed.

### **Family Pressures and Obligations**

Family pressures are critical factors that lead to depression among Asian American college students (Yoon & Lau, 2008). Asian American students with immigrant parents often experience intergenerational conflicts resulting from language barriers, acculturation gaps, parents' lack of knowledge about U.S. higher education, and high expectations for academic success (Panelo, 2010). Wong, Brownson, and Schwing (2011) conducted a multi-campus, national study involving 1,377 Asian American college students' across 66 campuses. The results indicated living with a family member, gender, GPA, undergraduate status, religious affiliation, medication for mental health concerns, living with a partner, and active participation in student organizations were associated with suicidal ideation. Additionally, living with family, medication for mental health concerns, undergraduate status, and active participation in student organizations were related to serious consideration of suicide. The researchers also discovered among the participants who had seriously considered suicide in the previous 12 months, recent family, academic, and financial problems were the top three most frequently mentioned events.

Moreover, Lee and Liu (2001) discovered Asian American college students reported greater intergenerational family conflict compared to Latino/Latina and Caucasian students. On one hand, Asian immigrant parents may not fully understand or acculturate to mainstream American culture, and therefore, raise their children to maintain Asian cultures and values. On the other hand, many Asian American college students insist on assimilating into mainstream American culture in order to achieve social acceptance. Specifically, some Asian American women college students find balancing two different cultures difficult (Hahm, Gonyea, Chiao, & Koritsanszky, 2014). Hahm et al. (2014) explored the family experiences of 16 young Asian American women who were children of immigrants and reported a history of self-harm and/or suicidal behaviors. The participants reported experiencing various types of disempowering parenting styles that were characterized as: abusive, burdening, culturally disjointed, disengaged, and gender-prescriptive parenting. Also, the women indicated feeling paralyzed by divergent forces, trapped between a profound desire to satisfy their parents' expectations and societal expectations and simultaneously wanting to rebel against the image of the perfect Asian woman. The participants suffered in silence and engaged in self-harm and suicidal behaviors. Family conflict between generations and cultural value conflict among Asian American college students contribute to acculturative stress (Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012).

Castillo et al. (2012) studied the predictors of familial acculturative stress of 85 Asian American college students. The majority of participants were 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation U.S. citizens. Findings showed perceived acculturative family conflict and family intragroup marginalization were associated with higher levels of familial acculturative

stress for participants. Family intragroup marginalization accounted for a statistically significant proportion of the variance in familial acculturative stress after all variables were controlled. The findings accentuate the need to recognize culture-specific stressors of college students. Different generations acculturate at a different speed, which causes acculturation gaps.

Usually, children of immigrants acculturate and learn English faster than their parents. This results in them taking on roles such as “translators, cultural experts, and even family representatives to the outside world” (Chung, 2001, p. 377). These additional expectations become a burden to young Asian Americans. As they mature, the acculturation gap gradually widens, which results in lack of communication and connection. Chung (2001) found difference in acculturation levels negatively affected Asian Americans’ mental health and help-seeking behaviors. The high expectation on academic performance from Asian American parents has also been identified as a contributing factor on psychological struggles among Asian American college students. Panelo (2010) noted, “This idea of being the model minority student can be reinforced at home by family and parents’ high expectations” (p. 150). The issue is many parents do not see that their expectations result in unimaginable pressure that can contribute to the development of mental health issues. As Asian Americans came to the US to “search for a better life and a bright future for the family,” they expected their children to succeed academically in order to insure career and social mobility (Chung, 2001, p. 376). The idea of being a *good son or daughter* is perceived as academic and career success in Asian cultures (Hahm et al., 2014). The research on influences of perceived parental expectations has suggested Asian American college students more concerned about

school and family rather their developing sense of self-efficacy and identity separate from their families out of fear of not living up to their parents' expectations (Lee et al., 2009; Saw, Berenbaum, & Okazaki, 2013). In addition, many of Asian American students are likely to feel obligated to support their parents financially or physically as they get older, which results in additional pressure (Lee et al., 2009).

### **Underutilization of Mental Health Services by Asian Americans**

The high suicide and rates of depression have been a great mental health concern among Asian American college women because they have the lowest utilization rate of mental health services (Chu, Hsieh, & Tokars, 2011; Chu & Sue, 2011). Therefore, underutilization of mental health service may be associated with “a combination of institutional and sociocultural barriers” (Shea & Yeh, 2008, p. 158). Institutional barriers come from a lack of culturally responsive practitioners and services. Many of mental health services adopt Western counseling models that often contradict with students' cultural backgrounds (Shea & Yeh, 2008). As mentioned earlier, Asian Americans are highly diverse group, consisting of a number of subgroups. Each subgroup has a different culture and immigration history, which results in different leading influences on mental health. This requires different understanding and approaches to support their needs. However, the lack of studies and attention masks the heterogeneity of Asian American populations and their distinctive experiences and needs. Failure to reflect cultural aspects keeps Asian American college students, in part, from utilizing mental health services. Underutilization of mental health services perpetuates the invisibility of their struggles and needs. However, as Chu and Sue (2011) noted, “Lower service use is not indicative of lower need” (p. 10). Some of this can be attributed to social and cultural barriers.



Social and cultural barriers include “historical and cultural influences on coping with personal problems, linguistic issues, limited knowledge about available services, and a high level of social stigma attached to seeking psychological treatment for mental health issues in the Asian community” (Shea & Yeh, 2008, p. 158). Even though mental illness is commonly perceived negatively, it is much more stigmatized in Asian American communities (Kwok, 2013). In Asian cultures, mental illness is often attributed to a lack of willpower that stems from the individual’s inherent weakness (Lee et al., 2009). In the past, many Asians thought that mental illness is “a lack of harmony of emotions” caused by evil spirits and did not consider it as a disease (Kramer, Kwong, Lee, & Chung, 2002, p. 228). As a result, seeking professional mental health services is often perceived as shameful (Chu & Sue, 2011). Asian cultural values, which generally emphasize collectivism, family hierarchy, emotional self-control, and avoidance of shame stigmatize mental health problems, perpetuates negative thoughts about accessing mental health services. Asian American students adhering to traditional Asian culture values may seem more likely to underutilize mental health services. However, the research findings about acculturation and enculturation as a significant predictor of low help-seeking tendency among Asian American college students vary. Some researchers have suggested Asian American college students who are acculturated to mainstream American culture are more open to mental health services. In contrast, other studies indicate there is no significant correlation between acculturation and help-seeking behaviors (Ruzek, Nguyen, & Herzog, 2011). Even though it is not clear whether cultural values directly affect mental health services use, it is important to note that many current psychological counseling services are not appealing to the needs of Asian American students.

Because many of Asian American college students are least likely to seek professional help, it is imperative for institutions of higher education to learn about the cultural beliefs values, sources of anxiety and stress, and deterrents to help-seeking. Mental health related services or programs with appropriate approaches could destigmatize mental health services and encourage Asian American college women to seek professional help. Shea and Yeh (2008) claimed,

Mental health counselors may need to broaden outreach services to include culturally congruent forms of healing. Specifically, outreach efforts to Asian American communities may include collaborations with ethnic churches, ethnic organizations, and primary health care services; such sites could also act as referral sources for mental health care. (p. 169)

Workshops and support groups can make mental illness seen less shameful, which could help students to better understand their mental health and consider campus psychological counseling as an option (Shea & Yeh, 2008). Recent data has shown that underutilization of mental health services among Asian Americans results not only in “one’s decision to seek help but also earlier stages of help-seeking pathway process,” it is critical to examine barriers to mental health service utilization and help students to be more cautious about suicide risks (Chu et al., 2011, p. 35).

Lee et al. (2009) suggests various aspects for effective mental health programs for Asian American youth. Education programs could increase not only Asian American students’ self but also parents’ awareness about mental health (Lee et al., 2009). As mental health issues have long been taboo in Asian communities, they may not know much about mental health such as how to broach the subject or how to deal with it in families. In order to increase participation, programs should be designed for this specific population. Since Asian Americans tend to underutilize traditional psychotherapy or

psychological counseling, the mental health education component can be integrated into a sport event, which could decrease the negative attitude against mental health services (Lee et al., 2009). Also, providing more privacy can be another strategy such as an online community where Asian Americans could share their experiences and thoughts with other people anonymously (Lee et al., 2009). The study by Lee et al. (2009) also highlights school or community-based programs due to their accessibility. It could be helpful to have mental health professionals who have similar cultural backgrounds and understand experiences of Asian Americans (Lee et al., 2009). In addition, counseling needs to be “gradual process,” giving Asian American youths time to help them to be more open (Lee et al., 2009, p.150). Outreach for Asian American women college students should not only include counseling programs with culturally and linguistically competent counselors, but more importantly, education programs need to help this population maintain mental health and seek professional help as early as possible.

### **Lack of Study of the Mental Health Struggles of Asian American Women**

There is a lack of research on mental health issues among Asian American women. Foo (2002) suggested there is very little data on the health status in general of Asian women, and healthcare providers are guided instead by stereotypes and assumptions that can lead to misdiagnosis or worse. Despite the dearth of in-depth empirical studies on the mental health issues of Asian American women, some researchers have attempted to address this issue in order to increase awareness. For example, Noh (2007) conducted a study on depression and suicide among Asian American women. She interviewed 42 survivors of suicide and found that the majority of them attributed their mental illness to pressures related to the model minority myth. Dr.

Dung Ngo, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, studied how gender issues intersect with ethnic issues and how it affects young Asian American women (as cited in Nikolchev, 2010). He discovered women suffered from depression more than men, and younger women were more susceptible to internalizing family expectations than younger men. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) (2009) reported that women in general experience depression, an anxiety disorder, and stress at higher levels than men. According to Health Resources and Services Administration report, mental disorders are more common among women younger age (as cited in APA, 2009). As women in the U.S. are not a homogeneous population (APA, 2009), it is critical to identify diverse subgroups and examine cultural aspects of each group in order to better understand their distinctive patterns and needs. APA (2009) examined ethnically and racially diverse populations and found that ethnicity, race, and culture are significant factors impacting mental health in various ways including understanding the mental health illness, expressing symptoms, seeking help, and perceptions of mental health services. Asian Americans are diverse ethnic group comprised of more than 43 subgroups. However, Asian American students are often lumped under a single category and labeled as the model minority. This results in challenges balancing parental expectations of high academic achievement; difficulty balancing two different cultures and communicating with parents; addressing obligations based on family values; and processing discrimination or isolation due to racial or cultural background. (Iwamoto et al., 2011). In spite of alarming rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide among Asian American women between 15 and 24, their mental health issue has received limited attention.

## Summary

The model minority myth assumes Asian Americans achieve a higher degree of educational, social, and socioeconomic success in comparison to the larger population. However, aggregation of success indicators, in the case of immigrants from Asia, obscures the plight of recent first-generation immigrants under the high success rate of more established Asian communities. For example, Asian Americans who have been in the U.S. for three to four generations are largely wealthier. Nevertheless, many immigrant communities of Asian Americans experience poverty. Seemingly positive image projected onto Asian Americans has exacerbated inequalities they experience and masked their struggles. Also, Asian American college students internalize the model minority myth and attempt to live up to high standards that result in psychological distress. High expectation for academic success is reinforced by parents at home, which results in immense pressure for Asian American college students. Intergenerational acculturation gaps and value conflicts can impact communication as well. The combination of parental pressure and family conflict significantly correlates with suicidal ideation for this population, especially Asian American women college students.

Another critical issue related to the high suicide rate among Asian American women college students is an underutilization of mental health services. They face institutional and sociocultural barriers that result from a lack of culturally and linguistically responsive services and a stigma around mental illness and psychological treatment in Asian American communities. The higher likelihood of suffering from mental distress while deferring seeking professional help leads to the high suicide rate among this population.

A lack of attention and research on mental health issues of Asian Americans, in general, and women, in particular, exacerbates the problem. Statistical data about educational and career achievement has lumped Asian Americans into a single category, which ignores the diversity and complexity among Asian Americans and perpetuates the model minority myth. As a result, many of the universities do not recognize their mental struggles and need for support.

The reviewed literature provides a better understanding of the root causes of mental health problems that Asian American women college students face and why their issues have been largely ignored. The key themes in this literature review illuminated the need to create a culture of prevention, support, and responsibility within university communities. These results confirmed my desire to develop this project in order to raise awareness of mental health issues for Asian American women college students and invite other, including school staff, faculty, peers, and parents, to better support these women.

## CHAPTER III THE PROJECT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

### **Description of the Project**

This goal of this field project was to increase self-awareness of mental health for Asian American women college students. Even though the main audience of this project is Asian American women college students, the project focuses attention on understanding the unique mental health issues of this population. The secondary audience could include school staff, faculty, peers, parents, and community social workers. My experience, thoughts, and research will were integrated into a video presentation format, consisting of image slides with a voice competent. The development of the project consists of three parts. The first part involved developing the contents that will be specified in the development of the project section. The second and third parts included composing a script based on the contents and collecting appropriate images. The last part was constructing a video presentation using Office Mix, Microsoft program that allows storytelling through the integration of PowerPoint slides and voice.

### **Development of the Project**

The project was developed as a tool for Asian American women college students, focusing on their mental health. This started with discovering that this demographic group has the highest suicide rate while many of them do not seek professional help. Therefore, it was critical for me to bring more attention to this issue by providing a resource for Asian American women college students at UC Berkeley.

As mentioned earlier, the first part of the project was developing content for the video presentation project. To decide on these topics, I had informational meetings with four people, including a former psychological counselor who focused specifically on

Asian American students at UC Berkeley, a director at Asian Pacific American Student Development (APASD), a community social worker who has been working with Asian American women, and a student advisor who works with international students. The meetings allowed me to find out their experiences and thoughts while working with Asian American college students, particularly mental health related issues. As a result of dialogue with people who interact with Asian American college students, I was able to identify five major themes: 1) model minority myth; 2) lack of awareness of mental health and resource; 3) lack of attention on the issue; 4) low help-seeking behavior; and 5) lack of culturally and linguistically responsive programs and counselors. These themes are reflected in my video presentation.

I collected appropriate images and wrote a video script. Some of graphics were created by one of my co-workers at Berkeley International Office. The video script went through multiple revisions based on feedback from different people. My co-worker, whom I interviewed, helped in finding and listing campus resources related to mental health. Community resources and organizational engagement ideas came from the dialogue that I had with a community social worker and the director of APASD. To highlight the importance of mental health, I referred to a video entitled *Mental Health Awareness for International Student* created by International Student Insurance (2015). It effectively defines mental health, how it can impact lives, how to recognize signs of mental changes, and how to maintain mental health. Even though these resources do not specifically target Asian American women college students, they were helpful in providing fundamentals of mental health. In terms of resources, I attempted to highlight various resources that could not only provide direct help but also highlight how to learn



to maintain mental health, and encourage Asian American women college students to disrupt the model minority stereotype.

### **The Project**

The project in its entirety can be found at (<https://vimeo.com/148195992>).

## CHAPTER IV CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Conclusions**

Asian Americans, representing a wide variety of ethnicities, religions, immigration histories and experiences, etc., are one of the fastest growing demographic groups in the US. In spite of their increasing numbers, their academic and/or personal struggles have been largely overlooked by scholars, educators, and others. In particular, this has been influenced by the model minority myth. The model minority myth assumes that Asian Americans acculturate into Western cultures and achieve a higher degree of socioeconomic and educational success than the population average because of inherent cultural traits (Chan, 2003). However, like other racial or ethnic groups, there are many Asian Americans with a myriad of backgrounds and experiences.

By extension, the model minority myth, a seemingly positive stereotype, obfuscates the mental health struggles of Asian Americans. Asian Americans experience a higher level of depression than Caucasian students (Africa & Carrasco, 2011; Young et al., 2010). This population also has a higher level of suicidal thoughts than Caucasians (Wong et al., 2011). Furthermore, many Asian American students who suffer from mental health issues do not seek professional care or treatment (Africa & Carrasco, 2011). Asian American women, particularly, have the highest suicide rate. However, their mental health struggles have not been explored through in-depth research (Chan, 2003). The high societal and parental expectations placed on Asian Americans and challenges of intergenerational communication contribute to a lack of focus on illuminating the mental health struggles of Asian American women. In universities, the model minority myth and

the low utilization of mental health services have concealed the mental struggles of Asian American women college students.

This project focused on creating a video presentation to focus attention on mental health issues among Asian American women college students at UC Berkeley. Providing Asian American women with information about various factors that may affect them mentally could help them to dismantle the effects of the model minority myth in their lives as well acknowledge the stigma of mental illness. In addition, increasing awareness of mental health could also help to recognize when they should seek support in managing mental health changes. There is a prodigious need to better understand the diversity and the commonalties among this population. However, until this is more readily acknowledged by mental health professionals and university administrators, the focus must be on increasing awareness. The project ultimately encourages Asian American women college students to be more active in accessing campus and community resources.

### **Recommendations**

One of the purposes of my field project was to provide an accessible resource list of mental health services and programs for Asian American women college students at UC Berkeley. I collected campus and community resources that students may get help for their psychological struggles. While completing this project, I could not help but think that providing the list of resources does not address the higher rates of mental illness and lower utilization of mental health services. Seligman (2015) highlighted that Asian students at UC Berkeley are preoccupied with their academic performance, which leads them to neglect their mental health. Psychological counseling services and programs aimed to promote mental health for Asian students were scrapped due to a lack of

participation (Seligman, 2015). Prior to promoting existing mental health services, it is critical to educate students about mental health and help them to break the model minority myth that affects them mentally and stigma of mental illness and mental health services.

In addition to increasing awareness of mental health, it is important to encourage Asian American women college students to play a more proactive role in bringing better resources. Underutilization of mental health services among Asian American college women reveals that existing services are not accessible for this group. Having them engage in mental health services and program development would increase more attention and participation as it ensures that their lived experiences and what they feel they need are reflected.

Lastly, the campus should initiate more research to ensure that underrepresented students at risk have access to campus resources. It is the university's responsibility to protect all students regardless of ethnicity, gender, social and economic status, religion, or sexual orientation. Making a safe space for all students is next to impossible without concern, participation, and cooperation of a wide variety of stakeholders who are concerned about supporting Asian American women college students.

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