


Project Intercultural Connection: Meeting Asian Americans' Mental Health Needs

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Executive Summary

Despite the pervasive stereotype that Asian Americans are relatively well-adjusted individuals who encounter few psychological difficulties, mental illnesses among Asian Americans are actually common and this group has a rate of psychopathology, including depression and psychotic disorders, equal to or higher than European Americans. Yet in the Houston area, there are few mental health providers educated in working with this community and there are only a handful of Asian American clinicians. Through Project Intercultural Connection, the Asian American Family Counseling Center (AAFCC) proposed implementing and developing a cultural competency training curriculum for mental health professionals coming into contact with the Asian American population in the greater Houston area.

Project Goals

- To assess the cultural competency needs of area service providers.
- To develop a cultural competency training curriculum for area service providers.
- To provide cultural competency training to area service providers.

Introduction

There seems to be a pervasive view that Asian Americans are relatively well-adjusted individuals who encounter few psychological difficulties. Stereotypic notions still prevail that family systems and strong community ties insulate Asian Americans from psychological concerns.

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The reality, however, is that mental illness among Asian Americans is common and Asian Americans have a rate of psychopathology, including depression and psychotic disorders, equal to or higher than European Americans. Unfortunately, though, very few Asian Americans become mental health practitioners since psychology and counseling are indigenous to Western culture and are unfamiliar disciplines warranting little respect and attention in Asian cultures at this time.

In Houston, specifically, only a handful of Asian American individuals are licensed to practice mental health and most of these individuals are of Chinese and Asian Indian descent. Additionally, AAFCC has discovered, through research undertaken to develop its Asian American resource directory, that most mental health agencies in Houston do not feel that they are familiar enough with Asian cultures to provide culturally competent services.

This makes it very difficult for Asian Americans, particularly non-Chinese Asian Americans, to access culturally and linguistically competent mental health services in Houston.

Even more disturbing is the lack of culturally competent service providers in agencies offering services for clients who cannot afford to pay. The results are poor quality care for indigent and low-income Asian Americans, such as Southeast Asian refugees, who are often forced to accept culturally incompetent services.

For Asian Americans who obtain services from Western mental health practitioners, such as counselors, social workers, or psychologists, Western therapeutic treatment goals and strategies may be both inappropriate and unsuccessful if not reevaluated and tailored to the individual's specific cultural background. Western therapeutic approaches, for example, tend to be oriented towards the importance of the individual. This approach is in direct contrast with traditional Asian cultural views which place the good of the family before that of the individual.

Traditional resources have not been successful in meeting the mental health needs posed by the Asian American community in Houston.

The largest non-Asian provider of services responding to the Asian American needs in the public sector in Houston is the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County (MHMRA). Their records indicate that a total of 385 Asian Americans were served in fiscal year 1995. This represents 1.2 percent of

MHMRA's total clientele and less than three-tenths of one percent of the Asian community in Houston. Clearly, traditional resources have not been successful in meeting the mental health needs posed by the Asian American community in Houston.

Moreover, the Asian American population in the Houston area has continued to grow in recent years. The 1990 census indicated that Asian Americans made up four percent of Houston's population with a growth rate of 96 percent. Recent estimates from the Asian Chamber of Commerce (1995) count 352,000 Asian Americans residing in the Houston area, including 125,000 Vietnamese, 120,000 Chinese, 45,000 Asian Indians, 20,000 Pakistanis, 20,000 Koreans, 14,500 Filipinos and 7,500 Japanese.

Program Plan

To assist local mental health providers in offering more culturally competent services to Houston's Asian Americans, AAFCC proposed Project Intercultural Connection, an ambitious plan to assess local providers' cultural competency needs, to develop a curriculum based upon these needs, and to conduct cultural competency trainings.



Organizational Overview

In 1994, a group of Asian American professionals, including many in the mental health field, came together to voice their concerns about the mental health of the Asian American community in Houston, Texas. These individuals discussed strategies to address the unmet mental healthcare needs of Asian Americans in Houston. These discussions led to the creation of AAFCC, which was formally chartered in May of that year.

AAFCC's overall mission is to enhance the mental health of the Asian American community in greater Houston by: educating the Asian American public and professionals regarding Asian American psychological, social and multi-cultural issues; increasing the competency of mental health professionals in addressing Asian American psychological, social and multi-cultural issues; advocating for mental health resources for the Asian American community; and providing early intervention and mental health treatment through integrated Eastern and Western approaches.

AAFCC staff and board members have conducted training sessions on Asian American mental health issues at such organizations as Houston Area Community Services, the Alliance for Multicultural Services, Houston Area Women's Center, the Alzheimer's Association, the University of Texas Medical Branch Psychiatry Department, the Chinese Community Center, M.D. Anderson Hospital's Department of Social Work, and Fort Bend County Women's Center, among others. AAFCC also produces a quarterly educational newsletter which is disseminated to over 500 individuals and agencies in the Houston area who are interested in cross-cultural mental health issues.

AAFCC staff and volunteers are able to assist clients in ten languages including Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, Hindi and Urdu.

A cultural competency survey can assess a practitioner's understanding of...

- differences in symptom expression
- differences in communication styles
- mental health terms that do not translate well
- religious beliefs about mental illness
- differences in what is considered "normal" behavior
- differences in help-seeking behavior
- effective, culturally specific counseling skills
- various subcultures within ethnic groups

At the time of this proposal, AAFCC was staffed by an experienced administrator, two licensed clinicians, a cultural diversity educator, and a multi-lingual case manager. In addition to these positions, AAFCC also offered student internships for graduate students in the mental health field, and recruited a number of volunteers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to assist staff and interns in various capacities. Through a combined effort, AAFCC staff and volunteers were able to assist clients in a total of ten languages including Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, Hindi and Urdu.

Implementation

At the outset of this project, Project Intercultural Connection developed a concise, four-page questionnaire to assess service providers' cultural competency based upon the Cultural Competency Standards in Managed Care (2000) and the Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale (MCAS) developed by Ponteretto, et al (1996). (See Appendix A.)

The survey was sent out to various agencies and organizations in the Houston area that provided counseling and assessment services to clients from different cultural backgrounds, including, among others, the Houston Independent School District's Psychology Department and the Houston Area Women's Center.

Houston practitioners seem to be more knowledgeable about African American and Hispanic minorities than about Asian Americans.

Based upon this survey, Project International Connection gathered some interesting information about clinicians in the Houston area's understanding of diversity issues. Deborah Sorensen, project co-director, comments that "people seemed more knowledgeable" about cultural competency than AAFCC expected. At the same time, she attributes this

knowledge to some extent to a built-in bias in the survey. "The people who responded to the survey were most likely those who are interested in cultural issues," she explains.

Yet even those individuals most aware of cultural differences seemed to be more knowledgeable about Houston's African American and Hispanic minorities than about the area's Asian American minorities. And in particular, survey respondents exhibited "little knowledge about 'between group' differences. They were not aware that there are many different cultural groups within the Asian American community," says Sorensen.

AAFCC's Brown Bag Lunch Series

- Intergenerational Conflicts in Asian Families
- Stress and Stress Management in Asian Families
- Cultural Factors Contributing to Psychopathology in Asian Americans
- The Interaction between Cultural Adaptation and Identity Formation
- The Impact of Culture on the Manifestation of Individual Psychopathology

Survey results helped AAFCC to determine what materials should be covered by their cultural competency trainings. In addition, Sorensen and project co-director, Kim Szeto, also considered some of the typical issues that they encountered among the center's client population. The problem that presented itself most was the question of intergenerational conflict, hence the subject of the first brown bag lunch.

From March, 2000 through January, 2001 Project Intercultural Connection sponsored a series of brown bag luncheons providing information on Asian American mental health issues to professionals. Local Asian American clinicians designed and presented these talks.



To recruit participants, Sorensen and Szeto sent invitations to various mental health and community organizations including the Houston Independent School District's Psychology Department, the Chinese Community Center, the MHA of Greater Houston, and the University of Houston's counseling center. They also combed through local directories and attempted exhaustively to contact counselors in the Houston area.



Houston practitioners attend the first brown bag luncheon.

Attendance at the luncheons varied, with the smallest group including 14 people and the largest group including 25. At the end of each brown bag, participants were given evaluation forms to fill out, and the brown bags consistently received high marks.

Discussion

America's Asian American population is actually comprised of a vast array of different nationalities and cultures. In the Houston area alone, AAFCC reports the presence of over twenty different Asian ethnicities—each with its own history, language and customs. Therefore, any project that attempts to reach out to Asian Americans must carefully research exactly who the target audience is. And consumer supporter organizations wishing to serve this heterogeneous body of Asian Americans must be prepared to offer services in an array of languages—or at least to have some cultural understanding of the various groups involved.

There are many different Asian ethnicities—each with its own history, language and customs. Project managers must know who their target audience is.

Another factor to consider when developing programs for Asian Americans is the amount of time a particular group has spent in the United States. Sorensen reports that “most of our Asian population here in Houston are immigrants.” This, she says, is in contrast to Asian Americans on the West Coast, most of whom have been living in the United States for several generations. With immigrant populations, where the younger generation is growing up American while the older generation has immigrated from another country and is now

adapting to a new American culture, intergenerational conflict may be particularly prevalent.

With immigrant populations, intergenerational conflict may be particularly prevalent.

Conclusion

AFCC will continue to offer Project Intercultural Connection in the years to come, and Sorensen even plans to expand upon the program. For example, she says that “we have had requests to offer longer sessions—people feel that an hour just isn’t enough.” In the future, consequently, the project might offer longer, evening trainings.

Sorensen also wishes to expand her current pool of trainers and to draw upon all available Asian American practitioners in the Houston area. She acknowledges that “there are not many clinicians to choose from in Houston, and I am constantly on the look-out for new people.” Recently, she recruited a researcher who is completing an internship in Houston. His area of specialty is trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Sorensen encourages consumer supporter organizations wishing to launch programs such as Project Intercultural Connection to “be flexible.” It is important to learn to answer to the educational needs of the provider community while drawing upon the talents and specialties of the existing pool of trainers.

Additional Resources

Publications

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little, Brown. 1998.

Tuan, Mia. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 1998.

Uba, Laura. *Asian Americans: Personality Patterns, Identity, and Mental Health*. New York: Guilford Press. 1994.

Zia, Helen. *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2000.

Organization

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