

Understanding Asian International College Students' Values and Beliefs, their Acculturative Stress and Coping Strategies

Chi-Sing Li¹ & Yu-Fen Lin²

Abstract

Asian international students face a lot of adjustment issues while pursuing a college degree in the United States. Although they are confronted with different challenges and stress, they underutilize the mental health services. Even if they are willing to come to counseling, there is a tendency for Asian international students to prematurely terminate the service. This paper explores the values and beliefs, acculturative stress and coping strategies of Asian international students. Recommendations to college counselors and faculty advisors to support Asian international students are provided in the paper.

Keywords: Asian, international students, counseling, acculturative stress, college students

Introduction

Asian international college students are one of the largest groups of international students in the United States (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser & Kumer, 2014), yet they appear to experience more problems than American students in general (Dipeolu, Kang & Cooper, 2007). Asian International students encounter many adjustment issues including acculturative stress, language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, racial discrimination, and loss of social support (Yakunina, 2011). Despite the challenges and stress, international students underutilize mental health services.

Although mental health and counseling services are free and accessible in most colleges, and most college counselors working with diverse populations are sensitive to multicultural issues, Asian international students do not seek services to the same extent as American students (Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper & Feigon, 2014). Even when international students do seek mental health services, they have a tendency to terminate prematurely (Chen & Lewis, 2011; Nan, Yeung & Nguyen, 2007).

Thus, understanding Asian international students' needs, their perceptions about counseling, and their behaviors when seeking help become critically important for counseling professionals in order to effectively and efficiently help international students. This article explores Asian international students' values and beliefs, their acculturative stress and coping strategies. It is our hope that greater understanding will bring new insight to working with this unique group.

¹Ph.D, Associate Professor, Counselor Education, Sam Houston State University, P. O. Box 2119, Huntsville Texas 77341.
Email: chisingli@shsu.edu, Phone number: 936-294-1935, Fax number: 936-294-4277

²Ph.D, Assistant Professor, Counseling and Human Services, University of North Texas Dallas. Email: yu-fen.lin@untdallas.edu

Adjustment and Acculturative Stress

Coming to the U.S. and leaving behind friends, family and countries can be a challenging experience for Asian international students as they attempt to adjust to the American cultural norms and academic environment. The process of adapting to a new social and cultural setting is called acculturation (Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko & Lu, 2008). Asian international students undergo cultural shock in this new sociocultural environment as they make necessary adjustments and deal with conflicts; there may even be a threat to their sense of self and identity (Li, Wong & Toth, 2013).

Liao and Wei (2014) reported that Asian international students suffer more acculturative stress as compared to European international students. Their acculturative stressors come from issues with the language barrier, the academic stress brought about by the desire to make good grades, education stressors such as a new and different education system, sociocultural stressors, discrimination, and practical stressors, including issues with accommodation and transportation (Liao & Wei; Tung, 2011). Han, Han, Luo, Jacobs, and Jean-Baptiste (2013) added stressors such as homesickness, financial difficulties, immigration requirements, and strenuous academics. Li et al. (2013) added loneliness and alienation resulting from adjustment problems in socio-cultural, cognitive, behavioral or psychological dimensions.

Tung (2011) suggested that the U.S. educational culture which focuses on classroom participation, expression of opinions, and questioning of authority may cause social adjustment and psychological distress for Asian international students who come from a different education culture. Some students may experience unequal treatment from American students because of a lack of understanding and acceptance of their cultural differences. This negative experience also attribute to Asian international students' distress. Due to a lack of social support system and the distance from their homeland, international students also endure the tensions from being alone (Li et al., 2013).

In their research on Chinese international students, Han et al. (2013) discovered that this group encounter additional developmental tasks. Since most international students from China are the single offspring of their families, this may cause problems in personality maturity. The decreased availability of social and family support and a greater family expectation of success and accomplishment for the only child add more personal challenges to their overseas experience. Because of the constant need to make cultural adjustment, Asian international students are at risk for sociocultural and psychological stress and distress (Han et al., 2013).

Asian International Students' Cultural Beliefs

Asian international students express more negative attitude toward seeking psychological help (Lee et al., 2014; Nan et al., 2007), and they perceive problems differently than their American peers (Li et al., 2013). In addition, Asian international students as a group seek psychological help less often than American students especially for issues such as substance abuse, stress, and depression (Lee et al., 2014). Research indicated that Asian international students suffer higher levels of depression and anxiety as compared to American students (Rice, Choi, Zhang, Morero & Anderson, 2012). According to Nan et al. (2007), the percentage of Asian individuals with mental illnesses was as high as 13%; because, in general, the Asians lack understanding of mental health services. Their negative attitude toward seeking counseling and their help seeking behavior may have to do with their Asian values and worldviews (Chen & Lewis, 2011; Lee et al., 2014; Li et al., 2013; Nan et al., 2007). Asian worldviews may emphasize an individual as a relational being and the relatedness of one person to others (Li et al., 2013).

This worldview is different from the Western worldview which emphasizes an individual as an independent and autonomous entity. Asian international students, therefore, perceive their problems or failure not as that of an individual, but as have implications for their families (Rice et al., 2012).

Asian values encourage the individual to sacrifice themselves, endure distress and put others' needs first. As such, Asian international students may be unwilling to share personal problems with others to avoid creating interpersonal conflicts or cause others to worry about them (Chen & Lewis, 2011). They may also have difficulties asking for support from others because they do not want to put a burden on their social networks. They are obligated to be sensitive to others and put others' needs first. They may be waiting for their friends and family to sense their needs instead of expressing it as people do in individualistic culture (Chen & Lewis, 2011). Forbearance coping, a common Asian coping strategy, refers to minimizing or concealing problems in order to maintain social harmony (Wei, Liao, Hepper, Chao, & Ku, 2012). Asian international students may have a tendency to internalize problems or conflicts to keep peace with others. The fear of losing face and denial of one's own suffering affect Asian international students' help seeking behavior (Lee et al., 2014).

Asian international students view seeking counseling and talking about their problems with someone outside of their family as shameful and embarrassing (Lee et al., 2014). This can be easily understood from the view of their collectivist culture and the respect for their family. As a result, they are reluctant to obtain professional psychological assistance even if it is needed. Lee et al. (2014) reported Asian international students have high tolerance or suppression of personal emotions. This is associated with their belief about self-control and maturity. This cultural stigma associated with emotional expression and the emphasis of self-control discourage individuals from seeking psychological assistance because it can be viewed as a sign of immaturity and weakness (Chen & Lewis, 2011).

Family recognition through achievement is another core Asian value. (Liao & Wei, 2014). It is important for the individual to bring honor to the family by academic achievement or career success. The Asian culture of collectivism mandates that the pursuit of group goals is more important than personal goals. When Asian international students are faced with difficulties in their studies, it is not perceived just as personal problems but problems to the family; students are not able to bring honor but shame to their family if they fail academically (Nan et al., 2007).

Perfectionism is another cultural value recognized in the Asian culture (Rice et al., 2012). Perfectionism not only prompts the individual that to have high standards that are set for the self but serves a constant reminder if those standards are not met. When faced with stressful conditions, perfectionism makes the situation more difficult for Asian international students to manage. Perfectionism is also heavily associated with maladjustment and psychological dysfunction (Rice et al., 2012).

Nan et al. (2007) asserted that mental health problems, according to the Asian religious beliefs, may be viewed as an indication of past wrong-doing by the person or his ancestors or a punishment by God for sins. This religious belief instills a sense of helplessness and an external locus of control on Asian international students who hold true to these beliefs. Consequently, it discourages Asian international students from seeking help when mental health problems are beyond their ability to cope.

The negative social stigma associated with mental health can decrease the likelihood of someone seeking psychological services even though not getting help cause severe consequences (Lee et al., 2014). This negative public perception of mental health can adversely affect the Asian international student's sense of self if seeking psychological help is socially unacceptable (Nan et al., 2007).

Coping Strategies of Asian International Students

Tung (2014) stated that coping behaviors of international students can be divided into two types, informal and formal. Discussing problems with one's support network such as family members, friends, roommates, and academic advisors is considered informal coping behavior; professors and local church organizations are also part of the support network (Bertram et al., 2014; Tung, 2014).

International students can easily build support network with other international students and their academic advisors (Tung, 2014). Bertram et al. (2014) stated that social support and network are critical to adjustment especially for those who are challenged by their cross-cultural experience. Khawaja and Stallman (2011) reported that sharing their problems with fellow students of their own country is a common strategy of international students. A majority of Chinese international students consider their parents, friends from home, and Chinese friends in United States as their major resources when experiencing problems (Bertram et al., 2014).

Asian international students were not familiar with the social and support network in their U.S. campus, and therefore they are unlikely to seek out social support actively to cope with their difficulties (Bertram et al., 2014). They do not consider their professors or U.S. students as their primary source of support (Bertram et al., 2014; Tung, 2014). Most Asian international students, however, have an open attitude to receive help when their professors or their U.S. classmates offered this support. (Bertram et al., 2014).

Asian international students tend to use their willpower to internalize their stress and keep it under control (Bertram et al., 2014). In their study, Yakunina et al. (2011) reported a negative correlation between personal and multicultural strengths and acculturative stress; international students who possess strong personal growth initiative and are open to diverse cultures cope with stress more effectively. However, there is a tendency for international students to withdraw or to avoid dealing with their emotional problems. These coping strategies only resulted in an increase in mental issues such as depression, anxiety, and other psychosomatic problems (Bertram et al., 2014). Asian international students are more likely to seek help from physicians since their internationalized emotional problems can be manifested with physical symptoms (Tung, 2014).

As a result of their lack of understanding of the counseling services and their struggle with the English language, international students may choose not to use formal coping behaviors such as counseling services, and counseling services are often undesirable for them (Tung, 2014). Koyama and Belli (2011) reported that many college students, international students included, use alcohol to cope with their difficulties. However, the level of alcohol consumption by international students did not present itself as a major problem.

Implications to College Counselors and Faculty Advisors

Tung (2014) and Khawaja and Stallman (2011) suggested early intervention to prepare international students for their challenges even before they come to the United States. The preparation includes an understanding of the education system, the college and the culture of the U.S., and independent living. Khawaja and Stallman (2011) suggested that international students join social organizations and activities on campus and learn about the interest of their new acquaintances to establish friendships.

Lee et al. (2014) recommended that counseling centers should provide testimonies of previous clients for Asian international students to reduce the negative stigma of counseling. Using a support group format can minimize shame and provide validation by others from similar cultures. There may also be a need to increase the number of Asian counselors who share similar values and backgrounds. Developing culturally sensitive strategies for Asian groups is another suggestion.

Since Asian students are more open to seek help for academic problems, counseling centers may promote services to focus on academic issues (Li et al., 2013). A group format and psycho-educational information in a lecture form can be more appropriate ways to motivate interest and reduce stigma. Counselors can also focus on peak periods during a semester to provide assistance, for example, at the beginning of a semester or mid-term exam week when services are more needed (Li et al., 2013).

Faculty, staff, domestic students, and spiritual leaders are culturally acceptable resources for Asian international students (Li et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2012). Academic advisors can also offer valuable amount of social support to Asian students (Wang et al., 2012). It is important to help Asian students to gain an understanding of the college environment and the available resources on campus. Social networking opportunities among international students and between international students and American students are necessary (Rice et al., 2012).

Compared with their counterpart American students, international students have different preferences for counselors as well as their expectations of the counseling process (Mau & Jepsen, 1988). While American students perceive a counselor as a listener, Asian international students perceive the counselor as an expert. Furthermore, in regard to the expectations for a counselor, it is worth noting that Asian international students expect their counselors to provide services in a more directive approach in terms of providing direct and immediate answers (Mau & Jepsen, 1988).

When helping international students, the effectiveness is vested in the counselor's cultural sensitivity and competence (Yakunina et al., 2011). However, most cross-cultural counseling textbooks and training do not include how best to address issues related to international students (Yoon & Portman, 2004). There is a need for international student to deal with daily challenges in regard to adjusting to the U.S. campus culture. Um-Perez (2011) urged that it is time for mental health institutions to take ownership for providing a multi-culturally sensitive counseling service to international students.

Yan and Berliner (2009) suggested promoting availability of counseling services to international students during student orientation or collaborating with faculty members by encouraging them to mention counseling services in the class at the beginning of the semester. Yakunina (2011) suggested using both oral and written forms of informed consent when working with international students, for some may experience language issues. In a group counseling setting, it is recommended to have an ice breaker during the first meeting to establish trust as well as allow the members to propose topics of discussions related to their concerns, such as cross-cultural communication, discrimination, academic issues, and immigration (Yakunina, 2011).

Counselors should be mindful of several considerations when reaching out to and working with Asian international students (Chen, 1999). These include (a) helping students keep a sense of their cultural identity; (b) not making complete assimilation a goal; (c) not generalizing the experience of the students; and (d) understanding that cultural beliefs of the country of origin may not be embraced by the individual student. Counselors can do something to assist Asian international students with the transition to living and studying in the U.S. by (a) using an initial interview to determine a student's viewpoint; (b) providing workshops to help students adjust to U.S. educational and cultural norms; (c) staying away from giving advice and making suggestions, because students may not question the counselor and blindly follow advice; (d) creating a support group for Asian international students; and (e) seeking out at-risk populations, since they may not seek assistance for themselves (Chen, 1999).

With the continued explosion of cross-cultural exchange, being able to counsel college students not only from all walks of life but from all over the world is becoming a necessity for counselors. As more research is collected, counselors will have more resources available for successfully accomplishing this task. The purpose of this manuscript is to provide more and a deeper understanding of the Asian international students' unique needs as well as the coping strategies related their cultural backgrounds. With greater understanding, Asian international students can be better served and achieve the academic or lifesuccess they intend to obtain when arriving to the United States.

References

- Bertram, D. M., Poulakis, M., Elsasser, B. S., & Kumar, E. (2014). Social support and acculturation in Chinese international students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development, 42*(2), 107-124. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2014.00048.x
- Chen, C. P. (1999). Common stressors among international college students: Research and counseling implications. *Journal of College Counseling, 2*, 49-62.
- Chen, H., & Lewis, D. D. (2011). Approaching the 'resistant': exploring east Asian international students' perceptions of therapy and help-seeking behavior before and after they arrived in the United States. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal, 33*(3), 310-323.
- Dipeolu, A., Kang, J., & Cooper, C. (2007). Support group for international students: A counseling center's experience. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 22*(1), 63-74.
- Han, X., Han, X., Luo, Q., Jacobs, S., & Jean-Baptiste, M. (2013). Report of a mental health survey among Chinese international students at Yale University. *Journal of American College Health, 61*(1), 1-8.
- Khawaja, N. G., & Stallman, H. M. (2011). Understanding the coping strategies of international students: A qualitative approach. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counseling, 21*(2), 203-224.
- Koyama, C., & Belli, G. (2011). Alcohol use, acculturative stress, and drinking motivation among international community college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 39*(4), 229-240.
- Lee, E., Ditchman, N., Fong, M. M., Piper, L., & Feigon, M. (2014). Mental health service seeking among Korean international students in the United States: A path analysis. *Journal of Community Psychology, 42*(6), 639-655. doi:10.1002/jcop.21643
- Li, P., Wong, Y., & Toth, P. (2013). Asian international students' willingness to seek counseling: A mixed-methods study. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 35*(1), 1-15.
- Liao, K., & Wei, M. (2014). Academic stress and positive affect: Asian value and self-worth contingency as moderators among Chinese international students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 20*(1), 107-115. doi:10.1037/a0034071
- Mau, W., & Jepsen, D. (1988). Attitudes toward counselors and counseling processes: A comparison of Chinese and American graduate students. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 67*(3), 189-192.
- Myers-Walls, J. A., Frias, L. V., Kwon, K., Ko, M. M., & Lu, T. (2011). Living life in two worlds: Acculturative stress among Asian international graduate student parents and spouses. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 42*(4), 455-478.
- Nan Z. H., Yeung, T., & Nguyen, C. H. (2007). Perceptions of mental illness and rehabilitation services in Chinese and Vietnamese Americans. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 38*(2), 14-23.
- Rice, K. G., Choi, C., Zhang, Y., Morero, Y. I., & Anderson, D. (2012). Self-critical perfectionism, acculturative stress, and depression among international students. *The Counseling Psychologist, 40*(4), 575-600.
- Tung, W. (2011). Acculturative stress and help-seeking behaviors among international students. *Home Health Care Management & Practice, 23*(5), 383-385. doi:10.1177/1084822311405454
- Um-Perez, S. (2011). Asian international students' non-seeking behavior and institutional shortcomings regarding mental health counseling. Retrieved from http://elp.utah.edu/_documents/programs/med/integrative-paper-perez.pdf
- Wang, K. T., Heppner, P., Fu, C., Zhao, R., Li, F., & Chuang, C. (2012). Profiles of acculturative adjustment patterns among Chinese international students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 59*(3), 424-436. doi:10.1037/a0028532
- Wei, M., Liao, K. Y., Hepper, P. P., Chao, R. C., & Ku, T. (2012). Forbearance coping, identification with heritage culture, acculturative stress, and psychological distress among Chinese international students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 59*(1), 97-106.
- Yakunina, E. S., Weigold, I. K., & McCarthy, A. S. (2011). Group counseling with international students: Practical, ethical, and cultural considerations. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 25*(1), 67-78.
- Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2009). Chinese international students' academic stressors in the United States. *College Student Journal, 43*, 939-960.
- Yoon, E., & Portman, T. A. A. (2004). Critical issues of literature on counseling international students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 32*, 33-44.