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Article 75

Counseling Asian International Students: Ethics, Issues, and Ideas

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Introduction

With the increase of globalization, a growing number of international students are coming to the U.S. in order to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees. A large portion of these students is from Asian countries. These students may have a different worldview and a disparate base of spiritual beliefs and values than that of the majority population in the U.S. While these differences may change over time while the students are living in the U.S., counselors still should be aware of these varying viewpoints, especially when the student is first acculturating to the country. Counselors should be aware of the ethical implications of working with this population, cultural considerations, challenges to working with this group, and possible solutions for outreach and positive counseling outcomes.

These differences can affect these students' success in different school environments. Students today may acculturate more rapidly to majority U.S. values and beliefs due to the explosion in the exportation of these values that has occurred in recent years. As such, Asian international students are on a journey of integrating old beliefs and value systems with the new ideas around them, and some may do this quite rapidly, though others may not. Either way, acculturation is not easy and these students could benefit from counseling. These students, however, may not be inclined to seek counseling. Counselors, in promoting healthy communities, should strive to reach out to all struggling students, including the Asian international student population, to help them with problems ranging from social adjustment and homesickness to more serious problems such as depression.

The literature shows that international students face a unique set of challenges when they matriculate in colleges and universities in the U.S. Studies have informed that international students encounter psychological distress at the same rate, or even higher, than the majority culture (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007). These students encounter a host of personal concerns including, but not limited to, racial/ethnic discrimination, academic

problems, language barriers, loss of social support, and financial difficulties (Dao et al., 2007; Leong & Chou, 1994; Mori, 2000). These issues may contribute to difficulty acclimating to the new culture, and possible psychological distress, such as depression.

When counselors assist these students, they should take care not to impose their value systems onto their clients. Multicultural counseling is important to maintaining healthy counselor-client relationships with clients who are of a gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, or religion that is different from the counselor. An effective counselor is competent in diversity. Appreciation of diversity assists a counselor in viewing the world through the client's eyes, and such a counselor is better able to assist clients with deficits. Counselors who are involved with minority events in the community actively engage this understanding of different viewpoints (Corey, 2009).

Even with the heightened awareness that counselors should be sensitive and consider the different cultural beliefs and backgrounds of clients, misunderstandings and inappropriate behavior may still occur. Well-meaning counselors may commit gaffes, such as assuming that all individuals of a certain ethnicity share a common belief, or counselors may decide to ignore any cultural differences whatsoever in an attempt to be color blind. The former may unintentionally insult the client or cause the client to believe that the counselor does not understand him/her as a person, which may erode trust in the relationship. The latter may also result in the client feeling misunderstood.

One of the difficulties with being culturally competent with Asian international students is the rich diversity of this group. In China alone, people have distinct racial identities, as heritage and race are important even in countries that some Western researchers deem as "homogenous." For example, while the majority of Chinese are Han Chinese, there are 56 native Chinese ethnicities in the country, all with their own histories and belief systems. As such, a Han Chinese or a minority native Chinese would come to the U.S. with a strong sense of racial identity, although not in relation to the established racial groups in the U.S.

It may be argued that one solution to these issues is for clients to seek out counselors of a certain ethnic or racial background. However, this is not feasible as this ethnic or racial preference may preclude the client from participating in counseling with a counselor that indeed would be the best fit for him/her despite their race or ethnicity. With the explosion of globalism, it is important that counselors be able to counsel people of many different racial and ethnic backgrounds and that the clients feel confident that the counselors can do so.

Ethical Considerations

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics includes multicultural considerations in many areas. These include, respecting client rights, boundaries of competence, assessment, supervision, the responsibilities of counselor educators, and counselor education and training programs (ACA, 2005). However, the ACA Code of Ethics falls short inasmuch as there are no concrete guidelines for how counselors should properly meet those goals of competency. There is a trove of information in the journals and in books about becoming multiculturally competent, but it may still be difficult for counselors to stay current with the literature.

Article A.2.c. of the ACA Code of Ethics deals with informed consent and ensuring that clients understand the limitations and nuances of such consent. It states that “[c]ounselors communicate information in ways that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate” (American Counseling Association, 2005). Understanding Asian culture may provide insight into possible misunderstandings in written informed consent and can prevent problems before they arise. Similarly, counselors are encouraged in article B.1.a to bear in mind cultural considerations in regards to privileged communication and confidentiality. Mental diagnoses and the appropriateness of assessment instruments also need to be further contemplated in working with a culturally diverse clientele, as noted in articles E.5.b. and E.6.c.

The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Arredondo et al., 1996), a 31-point protocol for assisting counselors in meeting the needs of their culturally diverse clients, lays out a thorough guideline for acting in the best interest of multicultural clients but is not specific to any single cultural group. It expands upon the basic tenets delineated in the ACA Code of Ethics regarding multicultural clients, including the counselors being aware of their own heritage and worldview, counselors understanding the worldview of their clients, and using strategies that are appropriate to the culture of their clients. Among the ideas presented in this protocol are counselors engaging in “educational, consultative, and training experiences” about different cultures and counselors interacting with minority populations in community events and social relationships (Arredondo et al., 1996). With regards to Asian international students, it is the counselor’s responsibility to be aware of the difficulties present for this population and to make efforts to reach out to students who are struggling with those difficulties.

Despite multiculturalism’s influence as the “fourth force” in counseling (Pedersen, 1991) the history, theories, and diagnoses widespread in counseling are rooted in the European-American modalities of thinking (Sadeghi, Fischer, & House, 2003). Even basic codes of ethics in counseling are rooted in European-American ideals and mostly on theories of European-American ethicists. As such, diagnostic tools and the counselor deeming that a client is in need of further counseling could be unintentionally biased. The AMCD Multicultural Counseling Competencies suggest that counselors consider “potential bias in assessment instruments” and determine results in the frame of the client’s cultural experience (Arredondo et al., 1996). The competencies also strongly suggest that counselors be aware of their own racial and cultural identity and explore how that has affected their lives. In doing this, counselors may be more aware of how the cultural identity of their clients affects their daily lives (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). This includes counselors being cognizant of their own possible prejudices or negative thoughts towards other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

The competencies further state that an understanding of sociopolitical issues is important to assisting multicultural clients. Pressures from an oppressive or unjust environment may negatively impact the client and can add to the issues the client is already experiencing (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004). However, the counselor must be careful not to place the blame for all the client’s problems on society, as that could obscure the actual reason for the client’s troubles (Ridley, 1989, as cited by Remley & Herlihy, 2010). This balance is crucial to providing the client with the best possible care.

Cultural Differences and Issues

In the case of Asian international students, misunderstandings between the dominant Western culture of the U.S. and the culture of their countries of origin can be a cause of significant stress. Many problems may occur for the international student – language barriers, not being able to navigate through the customs of the host country, and the threat of having to change worldviews (Chen, 1999). This increases the amount of stress the student has to face on top of the stress already experienced by the collegiate experience (Chen, 1999).

One of the core values of the U.S. is individualism. U.S.-born and raised counselors, or those who are fully acculturated into the U.S. value system, should be careful not to push their perception of individualism onto their Asian international student clientele, as they come from a society that more highly esteems collectivism (Sadeghi et al., 2003). While this may not apply to every student in this population, it is a concern to be aware of in the course of the counseling relationship, since it is unethical for counselors to foist their beliefs onto their clients (ACA, 2005).

Counselor understanding of the importance of peer groups in assisting with the ease of transition to the U.S. is crucial (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003). In fact, an Asian international student support group specifically for women was introduced at Western Michigan University and was successful enough to be suggested as a model for other colleges (Carr et al., 2003). This understanding of the importance of the community and family hierarchy has been proven effective and is endorsed by the AMCD Multicultural Competencies which states, “Culturally skilled counselors respect indigenous helping practices and respect help-giving networks among communities of color” (Arredondo et al., 1996).

Creativity is not highly valued in Asian educational systems, but is a touchstone of the U.S. classroom experience. As such, Asian international students tend to struggle in the U.S. classroom (Chen, 1999). Students are not used to actively participating in informal discussions, having pop quizzes, and writing creative essays (Mori, 2000) which can lower their grades. Students who once excelled in a more structured classroom environment may be befuddled by their lack of success in the less-structured U.S. classroom and are at risk of depression and low self-esteem. It is imperative for counselors to understand the relationship between teaching styles, grades, and self-image amongst individuals in this population in order to accurately pinpoint the root of the difficulties and offer the best assistance to the student.

Second language anxiety is another significant source of anxiety for international students. Problems with communication can hamper daily routines (Chen, 1999). There may be a link between language confidence and overall confidence in facing the changes in living life as an international student. More confidence in language may mean more confidence in dealing with the challenges of daily life, which will mean less stress for the international student (Chen, 1999). In one study, Taiwanese international students who perceived that they possessed lower levels of fluency in English were at higher risk for depression than their peers (Dao et al., 2007). Counselors should consider this lack of confidence even when seeing students who appear to have a firm grasp of the English language. International students are not always aware that they are communicating well, and may fear that they are coming across poorly.

Academic performance is also a major stressor for international students. Students who are academically successful will adapt better to new environments than students who are unsuccessful (Chen, 1999). Stress is closely associated with acculturation, and when an immigrant's values do not align with the majority values of the new country, psychological stress may occur (Padilla, Wagatsuma, & Lindholm, 1985). Immigrants' role in their native culture may differ from the roles expected of them in the U.S., so they must choose one role over the other or find a middle ground (Padilla et al., 1985). This may be applied more specifically to Asian international students who may find that the expectations of their actions and behavior are different in the U.S. than in their home countries. Counselors should bear in mind these potential causes of stress when assisting students in lowering their stress levels. These differing expectations may be examined so that students can find the path that is best for them.

Another challenge is that international students are often the racial majority in their country of origin, and have never faced being a minority before. As such, many international students have not yet developed coping mechanisms for being a member of a minority group (Yang, Maddux, & Smaby, 2006). Additionally, some international students have not developed a distinct racial identity since many come from homogenous societies. For those who come to the U.S. with a strong sense of ethnic or racial identity, they may find that they are not identified that way by the majority population in the U.S. There may be members of the majority population who view Asian international students in a certain way, while Asian international students may view themselves quite differently. In addition, international students have legal restrictions placed upon them regarding work and school opportunities, which may further differentiate them from their collegiate peers (Yang et al., 2006). Counselors should be aware of these potential differences while refraining from judgment of the students, and bearing in mind an understanding that every student has a unique story and may not agree with all of the values and beliefs of the cultures of their home countries.

Worldviews of students from particular geographic regions might be quite similar, though not always. Three studies of Chinese international students in the 1990s have shown common aspects in their worldviews. These include a focus on the future, participating in activities that are externally measured, and a desire to control nature (Yang et al., 2006). While it is important to recognize these similarities in worldview, it is necessary to realize that not all Chinese international students will share these exact worldviews, nor can all Asian international students be expected to have the same views and approaches on every topic. As such, the counselor should avoid generalizing (Gladding, 2009).

As Asian international students acclimate to their new surroundings, they may embrace some ideas that are seemingly at odds with the culture of their country of origin. For example, Yang et al. (2006) found that Chinese international students tended to have a focus on the future, which is in contradiction to traditional Chinese values. This may be attributed to the fact that the students in their study moved to the U.S. in order to attain a better future. This could also have been reinforced to the Chinese international students by the middle-class American value system. This also shows that not all individuals deriving from a specific culture will agree with every aspect of that culture.

Due to the risk of depression, elevated stress, and anxiety, counselors should seek out these at-risk populations (Chen, 1999), as they may not be inclined to seek assistance

themselves. Due to perceived language and cultural barriers, some Asian international students who would benefit from the counseling relationship refrain from seeking that experience. Students may not be aware that counselors strive to make counseling culturally relevant, and that counselors work to have culturally specific knowledge and skills.

By not being culturally aware of clients' backgrounds, the counselor risks doing harm, even inadvertently, to the client. Likewise, counselors are tasked with adding positivity to society, which should encourage them to grow and learn as much as possible about helping their clients. As such, multicultural competency, especially as it applies to Asian international students, is ethically important for not only college counselors, but for any counselor in the community. The growth of articles that explore different cultural beliefs and value systems may be useful to counselors who are trying to serve their clients better by further understanding their cultures.

Challenges

There may also be challenges in assessments on the experience of acculturation, and even on the experience of counseling for this population. For example, some Chinese international students, due to cultural differences including an emphasis on the Confucian model of teaching, may view questionnaires by a researcher as an examination, with right and wrong answers, rather than an anonymous and voluntary activity with no right answer. This makes it possible for some volunteers to give answers that they deem the "correct" answer, or the answer they think the researchers or assessor is looking for, rather than an answer regarding their experience and their feelings that might be perceived as negative, or a "wrong" answer.

In addition, assessment and research questions should be looked at for cultural and linguistic bias. As stated above, Chinese international students might be looking for the right answer, since mainland Chinese schools have a tendency to teach that there is only one answer to a question that the teacher wishes to hear. Aside from the Confucian model, this may also be attributed to the precision of Mandarin, where the slightest variation to a syllable completely changes the meaning of the word. Additionally, some words and concepts in English simply do not translate well from Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese and other Asian languages, so even Asian students who are fluent in English may have a different understanding of the word or concept in a question than a U.S.-born native English speaker would, which would influence the answer given. While these issues should not dissuade researchers and assessors working with the Asian international student population, they should be kept in mind so that the most accurate results can be attained.

Working Towards Solutions

Perception of one's situation is important to how international students cope with the stresses of living and studying in the U.S. Taiwanese international students who perceived that they had little social support and possessed lower levels of fluency in English were at higher risk for depression than their peers (Dao et al., 2007). Additionally, students who perceived prejudice were more likely to experience stress,

even when acculturation and other factors were considered (Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008). This is especially important, as many Asian international students may be unaccustomed to handling racism or ethnic prejudice and may not have the tools to deal with this adequately. As such, the way international students process their experiences in the U.S. is crucial to their personal and academic success and to keeping psychological distress to a minimum.

Research suggests that international students with more social ties adjust better to their new living environment, and that those international students who had social support from other international students adjusted the best psychologically (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Additionally, international students with a plethora of local social ties had better knowledge of the host culture than their peers with fewer local social connections (Kashima & Loh, 2006). It is beneficial to Asian international students to create social ties with other international students of different backgrounds as well as domestic students and people in the community in order to adjust in a healthy way to living in the U.S.

Another factor prevalent in Asian cultures that creates acculturation difficulties is perfectionism. In one study, the combination of acculturation and the need for perfectionism accurately predicted stress levels in Asian international students (Nilsson et al., 2008). Despite the difficulties and individual differences in acculturation, Asian international students may be more reluctant to seek counseling compared to the majority population. One reason for this is that self-concealment is more prevalent and valued in Asian cultures than in the dominant culture of the U.S. (Liao, Rounds, & Klein, 2005), so that students would be quite hesitant to share their intimate thoughts and feelings with a perceived stranger, such as a counselor. Instead, Asian international students may utilize their friends and family during difficult times rather than seeking professional assistance (Yeh & Wang, 2000, as cited in Liao et al., 2005). While reliance on friends and family is a healthy coping strategy, it may not be enough in light of depression and elevated levels of stress and anxiety where a professional counselor may be of better assistance.

Due to the reluctance of many Asian international students to attend counseling, it is important for counseling professionals to recognize the issues faced by this group and help create programs that will ease the transition as well as prevent serious problems such as depression (Dao et al., 2007). Counselors are encouraged to create programs outside of traditional counseling in order to reach this population. Nilsson et al. (2008) suggest that counselors offer workshops for international students that deal with common issues such as acculturation, stress, and perfectionism. These workshops could impart information to the students regarding methods to handle these issues in a healthy way. Counselors could also give students information on life in the U.S., including customs and academic expectations, to assist students in transitioning. Such information could include classroom expectations of offering answers in class and actively participating in class discussions, being prepared to work spontaneously in the classroom with partners, and being made aware that pop quizzes and creative activities may be expected of them. When working with the Asian international student population, however, it is important to bear in mind that the words of the counselor may carry a heavier weight than expected. Yang et al. (2006) found that Chinese international students tended to see human relationships as more lineal-hierarchical than the European American students did and retained a very high regard for authority, irrespective of their acculturation. As such, what a counselor views

as a suggestion may be seen by some Asian international students as more strong advice to be heeded.

Additionally, it is suggested that counseling be more culturally sensitive and bear in mind the importance of self-concealment to Asian cultures (Liao et al., 2005). How acculturated a student is has been found to impact whether or not that student believes that counseling would be beneficial (Sue & Sue, 1999, as cited in Liao et al., 2005). This, however, means that students who are less acculturated, who may be having a difficult time adjusting to the U.S., would be less likely to seek help even though they may be in more need of assistance than their peers. Ideally, counselors reaching out to Asian international students and being culturally aware could help this population to view counseling as more of a beneficial practice that may assist them in acculturating to the U.S.

What Counselors Can Do

In summation, counselors should be mindful of several considerations when reaching out to and working with Asian international students. These include:

- Helping students keep a sense of their cultural identity
- Not making complete assimilation a goal
- Not generalizing the experience of the student
- Understanding that cultural beliefs of the country of origin may not be embraced by the individual student

Counselors can do some of the things below to assist Asian international students with the transition to living and studying in the U.S.:

- Utilize an initial interview to determine a student's viewpoint
- Devise workshops to help students adjust to U.S. educational and cultural norms
- Stay away from giving advice and making suggestions, as students may not question the counselor and blindly follow advice
- Create a support group for Asian international students
- Seek out at-risk populations, as they may not seek assistance themselves (Chen, 1999)

With the continued explosion of cross-cultural exchange, being able to counsel 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.

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