

## Guide to Asian American Psychology

### I. Introduction to Asian American Psychology

(Loosely based on a Chapter by Benjamin R. Tong “Asian American Psychology: A Critical Introduction”)

#### A. The Scientific Perspective of Asian American Psychology : Universal or Unique?

##### 1. Typical Western Science Dichotomy = Universalism vs. Uniqueness

Universalism = Asian Americans = White Americans

Uniqueness = Asian American Psychology totally unlike Psychology of any other culture

##### 2. Tong proposes that Asian American Psychology is both Unique and Universal.

- “basic symptom picture” of trauma is same for U.S. and Cambodia (universal).

PTSD - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Anxiety, Depression, Sleep Disturbance, Reliving the Experience, Dissociation, Panic Attacks, Avoidance, Substance Abuse.

- Depression in Cambodians looks like psychosis to western mental health workers (e.g. visitations from a dead relative) (uniqueness)

- Individuals of Asian descent tend to be more sensitive to many Psychopharmacological Agents (e.g., antidepressants)

##### 3. There is no Universal Asian Culture (inter-ethnic differences)

- There is a tremendous amount of diversity in Asian Cultures.

-India alone has 1000 + different distinct ethnic groups.

-China has 5 major ethnic areas, and 8 different distinct languages, with hundreds of distinct dialects

#### B. Defining and Describing Asian Americans

- Politically Correct Terms = Asian Americans or Asian/Pacific Islander Americans

- coined during 1968-1969 Student-Faculty Strike at San Francisco State University, for the first Ethnic Studies program in U.S.

- Oriental = Any area away from the center of Europe.

Ethnocentric. Assumes that Europe is center of universe.

- Asia = Far East

- Middle East

- According to this definition, Jesus was Oriental

- (Hall & Barongan) at least 29 culturally distinct Asian American communities: e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Burmese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Kampuchean (Cambodian), Mien, Miao, Asian Indian, Malaysian, Thai, Indonesian, Hawaiian, Fijian, Samoan, Guamanian, Okinawan, and Indian.

- 1960 : fewer than 1 million Asian Americans in US (.5%)

- 1990 : 7,272,662 Asian Americans in US (2.9%)

- 43% live below the poverty line.

- 2000 : 11.9 million Asian Americans in US Pop (4.2% of US population: 2000 Census Report -- <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf> )

-3.6% report only Asian/ Asian Am. Parentage

-.6% report multiple ethnicities.

- 2050 : 9% of U.S. pop = Asian Americans (Assuming no new immigration)

### C. Asian American Cultural Identity : The “Either-Or” Perspective

- Asian Americans often find that their ethnicity is either completely disregarded (they are viewed as “American”) by others or they are treated as foreign immigrants (regardless of how many generations have lived in the U.S.)
- Focus on Korean and Southeast Asian Immigrants has led to 3 Questionable assumptions.
  1. Asian and Asian American means the same thing (interchangeable categories).
  2. Asian Americans are essentially foreigners in their own country.
  3. Asian immigrant’s culture clashes with the mainstream white culture resulting in issues of acculturation and assimilation and resultant identity problems.
- Chin & Chan (1972) - essay “Racist Love”
  - Asian Americans have 2 options for answering questions of identity
    1. Asians = Perpetual Aliens
    2. Americans = Imitation Whites
  - assumes that Asian Americans are foreigners that don’t belong in US.
  - assumes that “real” Americans are white
  - assumes that Asian Americans do not have a viable culture of their own.
- Asian Americans viewed as the “Model Minority”
  - ideal racial pets that should be imitated by other minorities.
  - passive, industrious, non-complaining, meek and mild servants, compliant, and generally invisible.
  - Model Minority, ornamental oriental, token Asian, yellow house n\*\*\*\*r.
- A disparity exists between educational achievements of Asian Americans and their SES and workplace status.

### D. Racism and Psychology of Asian America

1. Collectivist Racist Trauma - shared trauma of dif. Asian American groups resulting from racism
  - U.S. Gov. History of Racism
    - 1790 U.S. Law - Only whites can become Naturalized Citizens
      - Repealed in 1952!!!
    - Chinese exclusion acts
    - 1913 - Alien Land Law- Non Citizens can not own land
  - Chinese Americans = Anti-Chinese Movement (1785-1943) e.g. Chinese Exclusion Acts - initiated in 1882
    - Chines males can’t vote
    - Can’t own property
    - Can’t testify in court on own behalf
    - Wives can’t immigrate
  - Canada had similar laws
  - Filipino Americans = 1900, brutal colonialization of Philippines.
  - Japanese Americans = Japanese internment of WWII.
    - WWII, feared that anyone of Japanese descent could be a potential terrorist/spy. 120,000 men, women, children sent to inland concentration camps away from costal areas.
    - 60% of the Internees were U.S. citizens

- No formal charges were filed and no one was afforded a trial.
  - Given one weeks notice, had to sell all property and possessions for pennies on the dollar.
  - Many were first sent to local horse race tracks and fair grounds with animal stalls as temporary assembly centers.
  - Average of 2-3 years in internment.
  - Japanese-Americans in other parts of the country not incarcerated, nor were Americans of German or Italian descent (Countries we were also at war with)
    - Suggests that Internment was really the result of pressure by California's white agriculturalist finding it difficult to compete with highly successful Japanese farmers
  - See the section below "Transgenerational Impact of Japanese Internment" for issues of long and short term impacts.
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- Vietnamese Americans = French and US interference in civil war (from 50's to mid 70's).
  - Asian American hate motivated violence has increased in recent times (from whites and other minorities, e.g. LA riots).
  - Only nuclear bombs dropped on people were dropped on Asians.
    - Impact on Japanese culture is clearly represented in Japanese Pop Culture
      - Godzilla and other Radioactive monster movies
      - Akira and other Japanimation Art.

## II Asian - American Cultural Values

### A. Individualistic Vs. Collectivist Cultures (P. 14, L&M)

- **Individualistic Cultures:** Rugged Individualism (e.g. U.S. , Western Europe). The critical task in life is to become self sufficient and independent of society and family.

1. Social Skills: Self promotion, being interesting, putting others at ease, having good conversation skills.

2. Distribution of Rewards for group effort: Reward are distributed equitably (each according to their inputs).

- **Collectivist Cultures:** Group orientation is emphasized. The need of the group come before one's own needs (e.g. Asia, Africa, Central & South America, Pacific Islands).

Identity is largely in terms of the group (family, village, organization).

1. Social Skills: Group loyalty, cooperation, contributing to the group w/o expecting rewards, public modesty about abilities, deference to higher status individuals, distribution of resources to low status individuals who defer.

2. Distribution of rewards for group effort: Equality (all get equal share). Group effort is rewarded not individual effort.

### B. Other Values (H & B, p 206 - 210)

Patience, Gentleness, Being well-mannered, Cooperation,  
 Being Accomodating, Conciliatory, and Cooperative rather than confrontational  
 Blending in with the group rather than distinguishing oneself for either good or bad behavior  
 Humility and Modesty  
 Withholding free expression of feelings

Suppression of conflict  
Avoiding potentially divisive arguments and debates  
Communicating indirectly  
Refraining from openly challenging other's perspectives  
Nonverbal Communication  
Conformity to Conventional Behavior

### III *Tam Giao* : The Three Religions of Vietnam

(from Chuong Chung "Death and Dying: A Vietnamese Cultural Perspective")

#### A. Confucianism = Based on the writing of Kung Fu Tse.

- His writings addressed ideas of person, family and nation
- To establish universal harmony one must fulfil obligations to nation (Emperor), family (filial piety), and authority (teachers).
- The Authority of the Spiritual world (Heaven & Earth) are vested in the son of heaven (the Emperor).

##### 1) Basic Tenets:

- Man is basically good, but we have not always been able to develop our innate goodness.
- This failure caused disharmony in society and interpersonal relationships which affected the harmony of heaven and earth.
- Kung Fu Tse taught the moral virtues that would help individuals become righteous and moral.
- Foundation of harmony can be found in Filial Piety, a hierarchy of relationships: son and father, wife and husband, citizens and emperor.
- Subordinates express complete obedience to superior. Fulfilling these obligations is a personal achievement (e.g. self-esteem).

##### 2). Imperial Confucianism vs. Traditional Confucianism

a. Imperial = the modified "some would say 'distorted' or 'maligned'" version of Confucianism instituted by ruling elites in following the passage of Master Kung. Effective for social control.

- Focuses on social control suited to a hierarchical state.
- emphasizes respect, humility, docility, obedience, submission, and subordination to elders and betters.

b. Traditional = original writings of Master Kung Fu Tse.

- in addition to deference, demeanor, and kindness, emphasis was put on individual independence and integrity.

- "Love your father, love your teacher, love your emperor, but love the truth even more.
- "The authentic person is not an implement"
- "The mature individual can see a question from all sides without bias. The small man is biased and see a question only from one side."
- "Good people can stand alone without fear and can leave society without distress"

- The Heroic Tradition = fierce, arrogant, independent sense of self. Si hah "high risk, adventurous" = e.g. Ngok Fei, warrior general; Fah Muk Laan, the woman warrior (Disney's Mu Lahn).

3) Imperial Model is dominant in Chinese American ideology at present. Reinforced by the

Racist Love model.

B. Taoism = based on writings of Lao Tsu and Chang Tsu.

- The search for Tao (the way: the eternal nature: mystical supreme universal principle) begins with an examination of nature.
- Do not try to improve self through social legislation. Seek to achieve harmony with nature.

C. Buddhism = Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (560-480 bc). Indian prince who would be king, but did not desire it. Ran away and fell asleep under a tree for several years. Discovered the Four Noble Truths.

- The Four Noble Truths

1. Life is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by insatiable desires (food, sex, pleasure, materialism).
3. To end suffering, desires must be suppressed.
4. To achieve this one must follow the 8 fold path.
  - right views, right aims, right speech, right action, right livelihood, self-discipline, self-mastery, and contemplation.

IV. Donna K. Nagata “The Transgenerational Impact of the Japanese American Internment: Clinical Issues in Working with the Children of Former Internees”

A. The Internment

WWII, feared that anyone of Japanese descent could be a potential terrorist/spy. 120,000 men, women, children sent to concentration camps in central US (Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Utah, Colorado).

-60% of the Internees were U.S. citizens

-No formal charges were filed and no one was afforded a trial.

-First sent to local horse race tracks and fair grounds with animal stalls as temporary assembly centers.

-Given one weeks notice, had to sell all property and possessions.

-Average of 2-3 years in internment.

B. Impact:

Issei - first generation Japanese-Americans (immigrants)

Nisei - second generation Japanese-Americans (born in america)

Sansei - third generation Japanese-Americans (not interned, many are children of internees)

1. Short term impact

- All internees - economic loss, loss of dignity (living in communal conditions/harsh).
- Nisei - feel victimized and rejected by their own country of birth. Feel that citizenship is conditional and can be taken away. They lost all civil rights.

2. Long term impact

- Comparable to the transgenerational effects studied with holocaust victims.
- Sever trauma serves as an “unconscious organizing principle for future generations” where “subsequent generations may construct inner psychic representations which are reflective of this external massive trauma.”
- Similar effects found in Sansei Generation.
- Sansei Research Project = 700 Sansei participants and 40 Sansei giving in depth

interviews.

- Report that parents maintain silence about experiences in camps.
- Instills a sense of foreboding and secrecy about internment.
- Children of internees report feelings of vulnerability, the belief that future internment is possible, and the belief that one's civil rights could be violated by the government. Not seen in Sansei with parents who were not interned.
- Also Children of internees show greater group preferences for Japanese Americans compared with Caucasian Americans.

## A. The role of internment in therapy

### 1. Presenting Problems

- Marital problems, job conflicts, depression, low self-esteem, and child management problems.

### 2. Family Communication

- Parent are evasive, cryptic, and non-communicative about internment experiences.
- The more profound the silence the more pervasive the inner impact of the events.
- Sansei develop sense of foreboding, like a "skeleton in the closet"
- Sansei reluctant to push the interned parent to talk about experiences for fear of causing the parent pain.
- Sansei confused by parents willingness to discuss experiences with others but not with their children.
  - e.g. individual first heard father talk about internment experiences at his High School assembly.
- Sansei may interpret parents reluctance as a deliberate rejection rather than as a coping mechanism (e.g. repression).
  - Results in feelings of anger, exclusion, confusion, and sorrow over barrier of silence.

### 3. Self-esteem

- Nisei's internment experiences threatened their identity and self-worth. Develop a strong drive to prove their self-worth to self and others (e.g. the looking-glass self:: defining the self through how we think other perceive us) both through their own actions and the accomplishments of their children.
- Sansei often report feelings of low self-esteem for never living up to the expectations of their interned parents.
- the felt obligated to become "super-Americans' worthy of their citizenship"

### 4. Vocational Issues

- Sansei often choose careers that will help resolve their interned parents' unfinished dreams
- Others choose careers that are directed at preventing future injustices to Asian-Americans and other individuals.

### 5. Issues of Assertiveness -

- Internment created feelings of disempowerment in Nisei.
- Attempted to "blend into" mainstream, keep low profile, and avoid further Japanese American antagonism.
- Results into a non-assertive & reserved interpersonal style.

