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* ‘Asia Pacific region’ as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.
Asian American Mental Health Issues

by Michael Menaster, M.D.

Abstract
Asian Americans issues are becoming more and more relevant particularly given this populations increasing numbers in American society. Issues American Americans must face include the “model minority myth,” discrimination, standards of attractiveness and self-esteem, and challenges coping with medical and mental illness. The “model minority” myth affects the demographics of HIV transmission and discussion of safer sex activities within the Asian American community. Asian Americans also tend to seek Eastern Medicine treatments with or without Western Medicine services. Although mental illness is considered a stigma, psychiatric disorders such as major depression may be more prevalent among Asian Americans. Explanations for this higher prevalence are offered. Non Asian Americans may misinterpret health-seeking behaviors adversely, while Asian Americans may misinterpret health care providers’ interventions. Asian Americans may also respond to lower dosages of medications yet be more sensitive to medication side effects.

Introduction
Asian Americans are becoming an increasingly large minority in the US (Bureau of the Census 1996). This article addresses mental health issues facing Asian Americans, including the model minority myth, psychosocial factors, and diagnostic and treatment challenges.

The Model Minority Myth
Since the 1960s Asian Americans have been considered the model minority. Asian American students are believed to outperform their peers, while Asian American workers seemingly surpass co-workers in productivity (Au 2000, Sy 1998, Takaki 1998, Zia 2000). A 1993 survey found that most American voters perceived Asian Americans as receiving “special advantages” rather than enduring discrimination (Polner 1999).

Several journal articles reinforce these stereotypes. Compared to Caucasians, Chinese American parents and students have more positive attitudes toward the sciences, while these parents help their children learn science (Chen 2001). Perhaps due to more stable families and less peer and family pressure, as a group they tend to smoke fewer cigarettes and use alcohol and drugs less frequently than Caucasian Americans (Au 1997, Harachi 2001, Lew 2001, Thridandham 1998). Among adolescents, Asian Americans have the lowest alcohol use rates; this may be due in part to biochemical differences in Asian Americans (Edwards 1995). Asian Americans tend to have an alcohol dehydrogenase variant associated with lower rates of alcohol consumption and alcohol dependence (Luczak 2002).

In Los Angeles County, Asian American adolescents were diagnosed with mental illness less frequently than Caucasian Americans (Kim 1993). The “model minority” myth may explain this diagnostic bias. Among adolescent groups, Asian Americans have the lowest rate of insomnia (Roberts 2000).

The model minority myth impacts Asian Americans in other ways. Whereas intravenous drug use is the most common risk factor for HIV in Caucasians, homosexual contact is the most common risk factor for HIV among Asian American men, with a 79% prevalence (Wortley 2000). Taboos over talking about sex preclude some Asian American women from discussing safer sexual activities with their partners (Chin 1999, Jemmott 1999). The rate of new AIDS cases among Asian Americans has increased from 1989 to 1995; the “model minority” myth resulted in denial of HIV vulnerability among Asian Americans (Sy 1998).

Other Psychosocial Issues
In contrast to the model minority myth, negative stereotypes of Asian Americans abound. Anti-Asian American attitudes (the so-called “Asian invasion”) and even hate crimes against Asian Americans are prevalent (Menaster 2001, Takaki 1998).


Discrimination in the workplace, even in academic medicine, reinforces job dissatisfaction (Fang 2000). Asian Americans tend to work in the secondary labor market, which has low wages and few prospects for promotions, or endure the “glass ceiling” as to career advancement (Takaki 1998). Other psychosocial issues include financial problems and role reversals with their parents (Lin 1999). In the Asian patriarchal family structure, parents remained influential in their children’s marriages and child-bearing (Eng 1999, Ngan 1991). Parents experience difficulty relinquishing their roles as nurturers (Eng 1999). Dissonance, conflicts in role expectations, and delayed individuation in children results (Ibid., Johnson 2000).

Caucasian standards of beauty and the poverty of positive Asian American role models in the mass media can negatively impact Asian Americans (Mok 1998, Mok 1998).

Limited Access to Health
The presence of health insurance and language barriers affect Asian American health seeking behaviors (Ray-Mazumder 2001, Ryu 2001). Asian Americans have high rates of being uninsured and having difficulty affording health care (Bolen 2000). Asian Americans, particularly men, are less likely to visit doctors and use preventive medical services (Lee 2000, Ray-Mazumder 2001). For Korean Americans, a lack of knowledge, fear, denial, and Confucian thinking were significant psychosocial factors in their failure to receive cervical cancer screening (Lee 2000). Asian Americans tend to be particularly reluctant to seek treatment for depression, in part because it is seen as a dangerous, out-of-control behavior, a sign of weakness, and a source of shame and embarrassment to their families (Estin 1999, Okazaki 2000, Whaley 2000).
Prevalence of Mental Illness

In contrast to the model minority myth, several studies have indicated significant mental health problems among Asian Americans. Some Asian American immigrants were refugees, endured trauma, such as concentration camp internment, and racism and discrimination in their countries of origin and domestically (Lin 1999). Depression and isolation are common among new immigrants, especially Vietnamese (Nemoto 1999). Studies of Indochinese refugees revealed high prevalences of PTSD, anxiety, dissociation, and depression (Carlson 1993, Kinzie 1990). One study found higher scale 9 (mania) on the MMPI-2 of Asian Americans that may be due to cultural biases in the test (Isai 2000). Although substance abuse appears lower among Asian Americans, marijuana is the most common drug for abuse, followed by cocaine and crack cocaine (Nemoto 1999). A study of undergraduates found that Asian Americans were second in prevalence only to Caucasian Americans in heavy binge drinking (McCabe 2002).

Because Asian culture is family-oriented, health care becomes a family venture. Family members play an important role patient’s mental health; they can support or undermine treatment. For instance, family members may accompany patients for doctor visits or call physicians with questions and concerns about patients. However, Western medicine downplays the role of the family (Lin 1999). American health providers unfamiliar with Asian culture may perceive this family support as intrusive and enmeshed. Moreover, doctor-patient confidentiality may be an issue under these circumstances (ibid.). Among Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, the lifetime prevalence of a major depressive episode is 6.9%, dysthymia 5.2% (Takeuchi 1998). Mental illness in Asian Americans appear more severe and chronic in duration, perhaps due to delays in seeking treatment and only the most severely ill seeking treatment (Durvasala 1996, Lin 1999). My clinical experience with Asian American psychiatric patients supports this finding, particularly in that my patients multiple, comorbid diagnoses, such as panic disorder and major depression. For instance, compared to Caucasian Americans, depression has a higher prevalence among Chinese Americans (Tabora 1994).

Diagnostic and Treatment Challenges

Assessing Asian American patients can be challenging for health care providers. Because Asian philosophy professes the unity of mind and body, some Asian Americans emphasize physical symptoms over emotional symptoms, and physical disorders over mental disorders (Lin 1999, Torsch 2000). Some Asian Americans view depression as a stigma and may minimize their symptoms. Out of deference to the physician-authority figure, Asian Americans may respond, yes when they do not really understand a question.

Mental health providers may interpret Asian American decreased eye contact or silence as signs of depression or lying, rather than cultural deference to authority figures (Estin 1999). Determining an Asian American patients’ mood and affect can be challenging for non-Asian American clinicians. In patients who do not speak English, assessing for abnormalities in fluency, rate, and volume of speech is difficult. A skilled interpreter is essential in these situations. Countertransference issues surrounding the model minority myth may lead clinicians to underrecognize and underdiagnose Asian American mental illness, particularly eating disorders, mood disorders, and substance abuse.

Diversity exists within and between different sub-groups of Asian Americans and can impact diagnosis and treatment. Compared to Asian Americans, Asian immigrants feel less adjusted to American culture and maintain strong family ties (Handal 1999). Peer pressure is the most common motive for Chinese Americans to abuse drugs, curiosity and boredom for Filipinos Americans, and depression and stress among Vietnamese Americans (Nemoto 1999). Filipino American drug users, in contrast to Chinese and Vietnamese Americans, inject drugs, have sex while on drugs, and have sex with IV drug users more frequently (Nemoto 2000). Filipino breast and prostate cancer survivors in Hawaii reported the worst quality of life among ethnic groups surveyed (Gotay 2002).

One study found lesbian and bisexual Asian American women having higher rates of behavioral risks and lower rates of preventive care than heterosexual Asian American women (Mays 2002). Among adolescents, steroid use was more common among Hmong; associated features were participation in sports emphasizing weight and shape, disordered eating, substance abuse, depressed mood, and suicide attempts (Irving 2002). As compared to other Asian Americans, Japanese American college students reported fewer conflicts in dating, marriage, and family expectations (Chung 2001). Between and even among Asian American groups, controversies and conflicts exist (Menaster 2000).

Mental health professionals must therefore be conversant in cross cultural issues and correctly assess these conditions, e.g. koro, an anxiety disorder that can be confused as a delusion. Lay press periodicals, such as San Francisco’s Asian Week, are addressing Asian American health issues (Menaster 2000). Asian American clinicians preferentially treat other Asian Americans and Asians, although clinicians’ bilingual skills do not completely account for this preference (Murray-Garcia 2001). Laboratory test results may differ between Asian Americans and Caucasian Americans (Korotzer 2000).

Concerning treatment, Asian Americans tend to respond...
better to structured interventions, such as cognitive psychotherapy, than less structured modalities, such as psychodynamic psychotherapy (Lin 1999). In fact, they may interpret psychodynamic psychotherapists' neutrality as rejection (Lin 1999).

Regarding medications, Asian Americans tend to be more sensitive yet more responsive to lower dosages of medications (Frankewicz 1997). They may experience more frequent and more intense side effects from standard dosages of medications. This underscores the need for a thorough informed consent for medications, particularly in disclosing the poverty of studies in Asian Americans and risk for more frequent and intense side effects. Theories of this sensitivity surround differences between Caucasian Americans and Asian Americans in liver enzymes, such as the Cytochrome P-450 (Lin 1999). Asian Americans may also need lower than normal doses of lithium for manic-depressive illness (ibid.). Asian Americans face numerous psychosocial and mental health challenges, including dealing with model minority myth, discrimination, and diagnostic and treatment problems.

**Case Illustration**

Ms. A is a 25-year-old Chinese American, second-year medical student who presented with a long history of anxiety in interpersonal interactions. Her father was excessively critical and controlling of Ms. A throughout her childhood and adolescence. After Ms. A saw me driving on the freeway, she became fearful that I would label her as “a typical Asian driver.” She met DSM-IV criteria for avoidant personality disorder and social phobia. When SSRIs were discussed as a part of her treatment plan, Ms. A became anxious, expressed concerns as to whether she was “really crazy,” and declined medications. Two years of weekly cognitive psychotherapy, which addressed her irrational thoughts and issues with scrutiny, shame, and self-expectations, improved her ability to socialize without disabling anxiety.

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While Asian Americans report fewer mental health conditions than their white counterparts, they are more likely to consider and attempt suicide. “Especially when you talk about the invisibility of some of their issues, in a sense, it’s almost a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Richelle Concepcion, president of the Asian American Psychological Association, told NBC Asian America. A woman walks out with to-go food from a restaurant in Chinatown in New York on Nov. But for Asian Americans, mental health issues “tend to be under-diagnosed and under-discussed,” said Dr. Tung Nguyen, a professor of medicine at University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Asian American Research Center on Health. “When you get a number where they look like the rest of the population, it actually makes me think that it’s a bigger problem than you’d think,” he said. An uptick in anti-Asian racism could also be contributing to the increase in mental health issues during the pandemic, Nguyen said, fueled both by federal messaging and “some latent anti-Asian rac alence of mental health problems among Asian Americans. We review ï¬ ndings from these and other studies and pro-. vide a critique of attempts to determine prevalence rates. National Latino and Asian American Study. The National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) was the ï¬ rst national epidemiological survey ofÂ state of Asian American mental health. Studies on major depressive disorder have found ele-. vated rates in some settings and that factors such as accul-. turation and immigration affect the prevalence of depres-. sion. For example, Yeung et al. (2004) studied the.