

Effects of Mental Health Among Vietnamese Americans

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Abstract

The Vietnamese American community is at risk for many mental health issues. Many Vietnamese Americans immigrated to the United States as a result of the Vietnam War, putting them at risk for war-related and immigrational trauma. This exposure to trauma can be intergenerationally transmitted, whether it be epigenetically or through affected family dynamics. However, research on this community has been minimal, and mental health within this community is not often discussed, allowing for mental health issues among this ethnic group to fester. With this in mind, we asked the following questions: What are the long-term effects of traumatic experiences on the brain, primarily among Vietnamese American immigrants and refugees, and how do these traumatic experiences affect following generations? We searched two databases for articles related to Vietnamese American mental health and trauma, as well as war-related, immigrational, and intergenerational trauma. After being screened with inclusion criteria, 12 articles were included. In these articles, we found that, although mental health issues are prominent in this community, mental health resources are underutilized. This is the result of cultural stigmas surrounding the idea of mental health, as well as a lack of understanding regarding mental health issues. Members of this community are reluctant to discuss their issues and seek help, resulting in many not getting the help they need. This has led to the continual rise of mental health issues within this ethnic group. Thus, it is important to raise awareness in order to combat the stigma of mental health in this community and lower the rise of mental health issues.

Introduction

As of 2019, 44.5 million immigrants resided in the United States. Of that population, Vietnamese American immigrants made up three percent, with over a million Vietnamese American citizens (Harjanto & Batalova, 2021). Refugees and immigrants are at increased risk of experiencing traumatic events, whether it be pre-migration or post-migration. For example, Kormendi & Brown (2021) found that exposure to war-related violence and relocation struggles are potential sources of trauma for this community, yet trauma-based research on this ethnic group has been minimal. In addition, intergenerational trauma is often passed down among Vietnamese Americans. Thus, it is important to understand how trauma affects Vietnamese American immigrant communities, and how these effects may trickle down into future generations, and so forth. This is especially imperative as trauma increases the likelihood of an individual developing psychiatric disorders such as depression (Alhassan et al., 2021).

Many Vietnamese Americans immigrated as a result of the ending of the Vietnam War, most of whom had faced traumatic war-related experiences that would go on to negatively impact them and their families. Traumatic events that may have arisen as a result of this exposure to war can include witnessing death and/or combative violence. In addition to war-related trauma, Vietnamese Americans were also affected by other factors. Trauma responses among Vietnamese Americans were triggered by the struggles of assimilation, such as economic hardship and cultural differences. Vietnamese Americans may also be affected by encountering racial prejudice and discrimination, a potential traumatic event.

Furthermore, second-generation Vietnamese Americans and subsequent generations are at risk for experiencing intergenerational trauma, as many Vietnamese immigrants were refugees from the Vietnam War. Intergenerational trauma occurs when traumatic stress is transmitted from one generation to the next, even if the latter generations are not exposed to the initial traumatic event.

Additionally, the mental health of Vietnamese Americans is also often placed under duress. For example, the stress of relocating to a new country and potential exposure to racism negatively impacts immigrant mental health in first-generation immigrants. In addition, war-related trauma is related to a high risk of developing PTSD (Castro-Vale et al., 2019). Many first-generation immigrants in the United States were refugees of the Vietnam War, putting them at risk for exposure to these traumatic events. In addition, second-generation Vietnamese immigrants commonly face diaspora-related stressors. Such stressors may include a fear of not living up to expectations as a result of increased pressure from immigrant parents, which stems from a wish for stability for their children. The effects of traumatic events and intergenerational trauma can also negatively impact familial relationships (Sangalang et al., 2017). Research has shown that in immigrant families, a lack of communication and greater family conflict can arise as a result of PTSD; a parent's experience with PTSD has been shown to affect family dynamics, indirectly affecting children's health (Sangalang et al., 2017; Patel & Nagata, 2021).

Growing up with an American influence of individuality in juxtaposition with the Asian culture of familial ties also creates stress among immigrant parents and children growing up in the United States. Familial relationships may suffer as a result of conflicting cultural values (Fishbane, 2019).

With this in mind, we will ask the following questions: What are the long-term effects of traumatic experiences on the brain, primarily among Vietnamese American immigrants and refugees, and how do these traumatic experiences affect following generations?

Background

Traumatic events may often lead to symptoms of mental illnesses, such as acute stress disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. As defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), PTSD and acute stress disorder are characterized by the development of various fear-based behaviors following exposure to a traumatic event.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, a survey found that nine percent of Asian adults had experienced serious psychological distress in 2019. Meanwhile, a 2018 survey screening participants for feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness found that of Asian adults, 1.6% felt feelings of sadness, 1.4% had feelings of hopelessness, and 1.9% had feelings of worthlessness. Additionally, 6.7% of Asian adults felt that performing daily tasks required significant effort. These feelings can be indicators of mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety.

Depression is characterized by decreased levels of serotonin and norepinephrine activity, as well as dysregulated levels of dopamine. Depressive symptoms, such as a lack of interest in doing things, decreased or increased appetite, and/or sleep disturbances, last over two or more

weeks. Anxiety is characterized by imbalances in serotonin and norepinephrine, as well as decreased levels of Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid (GABA) activity. General Anxiety Disorder symptoms, such as a feeling of general worry, last 6 months or more (DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The trauma affecting Vietnamese Americans may lead to long-term traumatic stress, which can adversely affect brain functions, such as the regulation of social and emotional responses (Jawaid et al., 2018). Stress negatively affects the nervous system, and PTSD can put individuals at high levels of social, occupational, and physical disability (DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These disorders also affect individuals' behaviors and social relationships.

Methods

We searched the PubMed and Dimensions databases for articles related to intergenerational trauma and trauma among Vietnamese Americans. Articles were eligible for inclusion if they discussed war-related, immigrational, or intergenerational trauma, Vietnamese American mental health, or Vietnamese American trauma. Articles were excluded if they focused on the trauma of Vietnamese communities outside of America in order to focus on the specific community in the United States.

Articles were screened for inclusion by title and abstract using these criteria. Ineligible articles were discarded. Full text articles were then screened for inclusion.

Results

After full text screening with the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned above, we identified 12 relevant articles that are discussed below.

Research has found that stress and traumatic events can be transmitted genetically (Jawaid et al., 2018), and that trauma can be indirectly passed on to future generations through the actions and behaviors of parents. As a result, second-generation immigrants and beyond are at risk for mental health issues due to the influence of intergenerational trauma.

Vietnamese Americans are prone to underutilizing mental health resources due to cultural stigma surrounding the concept of mental illness (Do et al., 2014). Among Vietnamese communities, it is commonly believed that having mental health issues is bad karma from a past life, thus putting individuals with mental illnesses in a bad light. The act of seeking mental health services also risks damaging one's reputation within the community (Do et al., 2020). Additionally, a lack of shared experiences and representation among mental health professionals further prevents immigrants and Vietnamese Americans from seeking help.

This is further exacerbated by the fact that Vietnamese people tend to not discuss their trauma, instead choosing to endure it (Do et al., 2014). As Vietnamese culture also takes pride in perseverance and self-competency, it may be difficult for individuals to reach out regarding mental health issues (Do et al., 2020). The emphasis on being able to solve problems alone results in a lack of discussion about mental health resources and getting the proper help.

Discussion

From this research, we found that Vietnamese Americans are often at an increased risk for mental health issues. These stem from war-related experiences, immigration, and intergenerational trauma. However, despite this increased risk, many do not utilize mental health resources due to a community stigma regarding mental illness. In addition, mental health is not often talked about within this community, further promoting the negative stigmatization of mental health issues.

The transmission of intergenerational trauma through the social relationships between generations is a major factor in the rise of mental health issues within the community. A common theme among immigrants coming to America is their hopes for a better life for their children, away from the traumatic experiences they faced. However, first-generation immigrants who experienced war-related trauma from the Vietnam War are at high risk for mental health issues such as PTSD, and the process of immigration is a risk for many other traumatic events. In spite of this, the cultural stigma around mental health and asking for help keeps affected individuals from the resources they need. The effects of their trauma both epigenetically and socially affect their offspring, as well as their offspring's offspring, thus perpetrating the cycle of immigrational trauma.

It is important to recognize these barriers within the Vietnamese American community regarding mental health resources. An inability to get the necessary help can cause existing mental health issues to become worse, further exacerbating poor mental health within this ethnic group. It is therefore important to discuss these issues and raise awareness of them. By encouraging conversations about mental health, existing stigmas can be deconstructed and mental help may become more readily available to the people of this community.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Research on the Vietnamese American community thus far has been minimal, and there is still much to discuss regarding this ethnic group. Future research should further explore mental health in this community in order to raise further awareness and discussion regarding those issues.

In addition, while the largest concentration of Vietnamese Americans is in Orange County, California, most research papers focused on the Vietnamese community in New Orleans, Louisiana. Though there is still a large Vietnamese community in New Orleans, future research should focus on communities in different states as well in order to better represent the Vietnamese American community.

Conclusions

Due to a lack of awareness within the Vietnamese American community about mental health and the effects of traumatic experiences, negative stigmas surround these topics. As a result, disorders often go untreated, and when left to fester, often get worse. This can lead to a variety of health issues, in addition to the transmission of intergenerational trauma. The Vietnamese American community's large at-risk population further makes this a prevalent issue. It is essential to do more research and learn more about this ethnic group in order to prevent the continued rise of mental health issues affecting this community.

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