



Exploring Disparities and the Development of Mental Health in Asian Communities

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The population of Asians has drastically increased over the years in the U.S.. According to the Pew Research Center, there are a record 22 million Asian Americans who trace their roots back to more than 20 Asian countries, and the Asian American population is expected to surpass 46 million by 2060 (Budiman and Ruiz, 2021). Mental health has become a more prominent issue in the past decade and is extremely common in the United States. In 2021, it was estimated that one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness which totals about 57.8 million people (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). These statistics are important to the topics covered in this paper because with Asians being such a large community in the U.S., it is concerning how overlooked mental health in these populations is. There are stereotypes revolving around Asians including being mentally smarter, more competent, and hardworking, which are very much applicable, but despite people having their pre-established opinions of Asian people, mental health is still highly detrimental to them, and the discrepancy between reports and treatment should be discussed more. Throughout recent years, the topic of mental health has become slightly more normalized, however, there is still much progress to be made regarding access to treatment of mental health issues overall. Overcoming these mental health disparities such as cultural and structural barriers may increase the accessibility of resources to Asians to address their mental health issues. The main contributors to these disparities are the inaccessibility of quality healthcare services, existing cultural stigma, discrimination, and lack of awareness. This informs the focus of this study which explores the reluctance of Asians to seek assistance and treatment for mental health illnesses, and how this lack of action ultimately affects their way of living.

Considering the prevalence of mental health disparities among Asian populations, it is important to discuss how to address this issue. If mental health goes untreated, it could greatly decrease an individual's way of living and disrupt society as a whole. Approximately more than 90 percent of suicides result from untreated mental illnesses, and in order to lower this number, the root of the problem should be addressed rather than focusing on the individual (Dao, 2022). The long-term effects may vary but there are trends in which it can lead to long-term issues with emotional stability, behavior regulation, relationship difficulties, substance abuse, and physical illness. The mental long-term effects include exacerbated mental health problems, leading to a dampening of abilities to experience pleasure, and setting off a cycle of reactions of victimization. Physical side effects include a weakened immune system, chronic physical conditions, unhealthy habits, and self-harm and suicide. All of these lead to disruptions in one's everyday life and functions, and with both of these mental and physical side effects combined, this could lead to a plethora of other problems in an individual's personal life such as relationship or family problems, social isolation, poor performances in work or school, poverty and homelessness, and substance abuse (Turnbridge). These long-term effects on one's life stress the importance of why mental health in Asian populations should be studied more as their issues are most likely going unnoticed and they are suffering quietly. These mental health illnesses go so easily unnoticed despite the intensifying feelings of pain, loneliness, and sadness due to a lack of intervention and professional help.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has increased the overall stress of the Asian communities and severely impacted lives, especially in the racially discriminated context, making this topic all the more relevant. Asian populations experience negative mental health outcomes associated with the increased stress, social isolation, and anti-Asian racism resulting from the pandemic. According to a study done on the mental health impact of COVID-19 on Asian Americans, higher rates of psychological distress among Asian Americans were found during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic (Palmer et al., 2023). Additionally, Asian Americans have the lowest mental health treatment rate of any other large population in the U.S. as reported by SAMHSA (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). Research also indicates that suicide is the fifth most common cause of death overall among Asian Americans as opposed to suicide being the ninth most common cause of death among White Americans. What is even more serious is that Asian Americans are the least likely race in the U.S. to seek mental health treatment and are three times less likely to seek therapy or assistance than any other population in the U.S. (Dao, 2022). Assessing the mental health services offered in the U.S. that are lacking in their overall accessibility to Asian Americans may be crucial to increasing treatment rates of mental health. The main barrier deterring Asian Americans from seeking health services is a language barrier that is reflective of a lack of diversity in the mental health provider workforce and the lack of effort made to provide culturally accessible treatment options. According to a study by Samantha Artiga and Nirmita Fanchal, assessing gaps in the mental health care system, one in four Asians is a non-citizen, and one in three speaks very little English (Artiga and Panchal, 2023). What this means for Asian Americans is that they are fearful of seeking medical attention for fear of being misunderstood and would rather turn to more unconventional methods of treatment. There are also higher uninsured rates for some Asian groups, so even if they were to seek proper treatment, this would impose on them numerous social and economic challenges that may be financially detrimental to them (Artiga and Panchal, 2023). Even if they come to seek proper attention, it is usually when their illness has significantly progressed to where their symptoms are more severe and chronic compared to people of other cultural backgrounds. Due to them reaching service systems late, this results in them requiring more intensive treatment and longer hospitalization and outpatient care which is also much more costly (Lin and Cheung, 1999). With a general lack of healthcare providers in general to suit the needs of Asian Americans, there is further distrust and weakening of the relationship between the patient and provider which could deter others from seeking help. As Asian Americans may feel a lack of trust, they may not disclose everything to their healthcare provider and therefore not listen to their recommendations. As a result, healthcare providers should be more inclined to become more culturally competent to treat Asian Americans properly and with the utmost care. Further education for healthcare providers on cultural stigmas about mental health and the complicated circumstances that may arise when treating Asian Americans can lead to more accurate diagnoses.

While the lack of accessible healthcare has been a particularly important factor as to why Asian Americans are less likely to seek mental health treatment, a very important factor to consider is the cultural stigma revolving around mental health in Asian culture. According to a study by Elizabeth Kramer and colleagues, focusing specifically on the cultural factors influencing mental health highlighted: language, level of acculturation, age, gender, occupational issues, family structure, religious beliefs and spirituality, and traditional beliefs about mental health (Kramer et al., 2002). These cultural factors are very relevant to Asian American families



and are directly correlated with their willingness to seek treatment or acknowledge their mental illnesses. In a study done to model the risk of Asian minors' needs for mental health treatment, they found that common stressors for these Asian American young adults were pressure to meet parental expectations, balancing two different cultures, family obligations based on strong family values, and discrimination or isolation due to racial or cultural background (Lee et al., 2009). These factors to consider are very important as they could lead to the development of a mental health illness, as well as prevent the treatment of that illness. There are stigmas and assumptions about mental health in Asian cultures that have been passed down by older generations which may discourage young people from receiving treatment. For example, a common misconception is that individuals are able to cure their mental health issues with the power of the mind and do not need other influences or outside help (Mangubat, 2021). This misconception places a high level of stress on the individual as they may feel the need to handle their mental health concerns independently rather than seek help. A person may also feel isolated and have no one to ask for help. Asian cultures also place very low value on mental health and prioritize education or more tangible things. This could easily cause individuals to visibly ignore their mental health and excuse it to focus on something else they prioritize not realizing the full extent of the damage their dismissive habits could be causing. A study found that Asian Americans have the tendency to somaticize psychological distress as physical symptoms including indigestion, poor appetite, and heart palpitations more than other ethnic groups (Yang et al., 2019). As a result, with Asian Americans and health care providers not recognizing the true cause of these symptoms, mental health illness may go unnoticed. Not only may this point to the lack of awareness in health care providers, but the lack of awareness for Asian Americans, and because so little attention is placed on mental health, they may not realize that it can have a significant impact on their physical health and not just their mental. In addition to this, people are more likely to assume that their mental health is due to a parental or genetic flaw which deters people from seeking help as they do not want to affect their image. In Asian cultures, there is this common practice of respecting and obeying your ancestors which has led to younger generations leading by the example of always showing strength and never showing weakness. While this may be applicable to other aspects of everyday life, this may negatively impact young adults' perceptions of how to handle mental health illnesses as there is an association between seeking treatment and shame (Mangubat, 2021). These negative perspectives result in people avoiding treatment to avoid receiving shame from family, friends, or community members as there is a certain standard of quality to uphold and achieve, and by acknowledging mental health, you are tainting that. Other cultural factors involving the stigma of mental health include avoiding being too "emotional," being shamed for "complaining" as your ancestors suffered more trauma, mental health does not exist, avoiding being ungrateful, and having the need to be the head of the family to name a few.

In investigating possible effects on the development of mental health in Asian Americans, the term "generational trauma" has come to be more commonly used in younger generations. This term refers to trauma spanning multiple generations, in which the people affected begin experiencing physical or psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, heart disease, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Gillespie, 2023). This term is not exclusive to Asian populations but is highly applicable in this scenario when talking about mental health. Many Asian Americans have gone through extremely traumatic including immigrating from their home country due to war and political upheaval. For example, the focus has previously been placed



on refugees fleeing southeast Asia at the time of the U.S. wars and the experiences of Japanese Americans during the time of World War II. According to a study by Jieyi Cai and Richard M. Lee about historical trauma in Asian Americans, research the effects of older generations experiencing these effects on their children. Survivors tend to be reserved in their communication about their experiences which has a strain on the relationship between the survivors and their children. The children are only left to speculate about the occurring which was found to lead to a lack of knowledge about their family history, and children being unable to form a coherent and positive sense of their identity (Cai and Lee, 2022). Overall, the full effects and causes of generational trauma are still severely underresearched, but to further prevent this loss of direction and the continuous spread of these generational effects, families must make a conscious effort to improve their communication about this historical trauma which could only be beneficial for both parties as it facilitates healing and prevents development of resentment from the children towards their parents. Addressing the further effects of this generational trauma, a study by Christina Kamis found that parental mental health during children's formative years is a significant predictor of life course distress and that it is related to the development of mental health as they are developing. If parents leave their mental health issues untreated, this could have a negative impact on their parenting abilities as it can lead to negative parenting abilities, a lack of attentiveness, or increased dysfunction within the home (Kamis, 2020). While a child or young adult's mental health can be influenced by other factors, their parent's mental health plays a large factor as it could lead to the worsening or development of mental health issues and a prevalence of more behavioral issues. The root of the problem circles back to bringing more awareness around the treatment of mental health and how it not only is detrimental to the single individual but also to their children. If solutions are not implemented, these issues of mental health can carry on for many more generations as the parenting abilities continue to be passed on as well as the psychological issues.

These findings demonstrate a need for mental health care professionals to be more well-suited to treat people from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds including individuals who do not speak fluently in English, as they are more susceptible to suffering from an untreated mental health illness. Allowing accessibility in health care professionals, would create incentives on both sides to one, treat and cater to a larger audience and two, seek help. Despite a language barrier being the largest obstacle for Asian Americans to seek treatment, a large part is how inaccessible healthcare and insurance are in general. Not only can many not afford to treat their physical detriments, but they would definitely be at a loss in seeking care for mental health. This calls for increasing availability and accessibility of health insurance which also covers mental health treatments as well as lowering health care costs. Asians have a lower prevalence of perceived need compared to the white and Latino populations in terms of a need for mental health treatment. This is due to a difference in cultural understandings of mental illness as it is a taboo subject in Asian cultures, and it is viewed as being untreatable and solely the fault of the individual. Remedying these preconceived notions of mental health in Asian communities is crucial to helping treat mental health illnesses before they progress to the point where they become severely detrimental. Addressing the larger issues at fault for the disparities present in Asian American mental health is crucial to improve their overall quality of life as so many people's sufferings are going unnoticed or ignored which presents other ethical issues along with it. Starting to initiate more research on the Asian American population and the causes of mental health addressed earlier is just the first step in improving treatment and diagnosis rates.



There should be more education for both younger and older generations when seeking treatment as well as negating any behaviors that could lead to the development of some mental disorders. While these are only just a few steps, it would make all the difference to make some progress in making sure healthcare is accessible to everyone.



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