

Understanding the Influences of Asian-American Parenting on Adolescents' Mental Health and Help-Seeking Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Asian-American parents and children are less likely to be diagnosed with mental health disorders and pursue mental health treatment compared to their white counterparts, which highlights racial disparities in mental healthcare access or reporting in Asian-American populations. One of the contributing factors may be due to lower rates of mental health literacy among parents. As parents often are figures who seek mental health support for their children, the mental health literacy of all parents is understood to have a significant impact on their children's access to mental health treatment. Due to parental consent required for children to receive mental health treatment, parents must be a cooperative figure to not only allow their children to have access to the help they need, but also an encouraging figure in the event they discover that their child may be in need of help. The scope of this review aims to understand cultural and societal origins of mental health stigma. These include types of mental health conceptualization within Asian-American households. This review also aims to evaluate the impact of mental health attitudes, perception, and literacy of Asian-American parents on youths' access and youths' self-stigmatization rates across multiple studies. The findings of this review will help institutions, providers and educators become more culturally competent and benefit adolescents in Asian-American households restrictive to their mental health care needs.

Introduction

Mental health literacy has been defined as the understanding, knowledge, and belief of mental health conditions, which can enhance their recognition, management, or prevention. Further components of mental health literacy include the recognition of mental illnesses; knowledge and belief of risk factors or causes, self-help options, and professional help options; having attitudes that facilitate help-seeking behavior; and awareness of how to seek mental health information (Sampaio, et al., 2022).

Enhancing mental health literacy in the general public may be beneficial for reducing mental health stigma and to increase the likelihood of ill individuals to seek treatment. Asian-Americans are the racial group that have been found to have the lowest scores and rates of mental health literacy (Tambling et al., 2021). These statistics are evidence of a public health and health education issue of mental health disparities within this particular racial group.

The conceptualization of mental health disorders can be an influencing factor for the stigma that surrounds it. For example, empathy for people dealing with mental illness can be increased or decreased depending on an individual's understanding of the disorder. This is especially imperative to understand in terms of parental education of mental health disorders. The stigma of parents towards mental health disorders can prevent adolescents from accessing the treatment they may need. Depression literacy, for example, can mediate the relationship between personal stigma and attitudes towards mental health care service use in Korean Americans, thus increasing likelihood for adolescent treatment access. (Jeong et al., 2018) It should be noted, however, that mental health literacy can vary depending on the condition; depression literacy alone may not necessarily impact stigma of other types of mental health disorders.

Because mental illness may be understood through one's consciousness, giving the assumption that people have their own agency when it comes to their mental health, the way it manifests can alter stigmas surrounding the topic. For example, parents may perceive mental health disorders as something that can be controlled by the individual, rather than something that cannot be dealt with, which can influence stigma levels in Asian-American parents (Li and Seidman, 2010).

There is disproportionately low research focused on Asian-American healthcare and mental health. Uncovering bases of mental health stigma in Asian-Americans can help identify areas for education and lead to a greater understanding of mental health factors within this group. The scope of this review is to culminate research papers that reveal mental health stigma within Asian-American parents through lenses specific to Asian Americans and understand how stigma or preconceived beliefs intersect with their culture.

Compared to other racial groups, Asian-Americans have the lowest mental health literacy (Tambling et al., 2021). In addition, Asian-American ethnicity can also be a predictor for reduced help-seeking attitudes and behaviors (Cheng et al., 2018). These racial disparities among demographics for mental health literacy and education may possibly be bound to cultural factors and also self-stigmatization. Consequently, outcomes of poor mental health literacy can lead to decreased help-seeking behavior and underdiagnosis of and untreated mental health disorders.

Conceptualization or characterization of mental health disorders in parents can elucidate their perception of both mentally ill individuals and the treatability of mental illnesses. Part of a lack of mental illness concept breadth can explain underdiagnosis, as mental illness within adolescents go unnoticed by both the adolescent and the parents. Chinese American parents, for example, may express beliefs that various mental health disorders including depression, social anxiety, psychosis, and schizophrenia stem from "peer relationships and academics" (Liu, C. et al., 2020). Family stressors and expectations were also understood to be a potential influence across the mentioned disorders. Underlining these possible causes are environmental factors, rather than as a result of forces of nature.

Addressing adolescent mental health is commonly done at home or in school. As a result, Asian-American parents' understanding of the help-seeking process is vital for the support of their youth in the household setting. This is imperative because Asian-American adolescents tend to utilize mental health services at school at a lower rate and frequently do not receive services that they need. From the Asian-American parent perspective, they believe in four general themes to address youth mental health: providing social support, seeking and educating about mental health, seeking professional help, and identifying the problem and root of cause (Wang, C. et al., 2020a). Understanding these themes can help educators, institutions, and care providers with parent mental health education intervention programs and improve their relationship with their children.

Methods

Literature cited in this review were acquired using Google Scholar, PubMed, and APA PsycInfo as search engines. Keywords include "Asian-American" + "parents" OR "adolescents" AND "mental health" AND "literacy" OR "stigma" OR "education" OR "conceptualization" OR "culture" OR "Perceptions" OR "attitudes." While most papers utilized were original research, some literature reviews were included.

Discussion

Asian American Cultural Influences

With demographic racial disparities for mental health literacy and stigma centered on Asian-Americans, examining cultural factors that influence mental health may elucidate possible explanations. Traditional Asian-American families that adhere to more native values may place a greater weight for the importance of family and collectivist ideals. Different genders, age ranges, and social classes possess different hierarchies that attribute to one's role within the

family. For children and adolescents, family values emphasize conformity to expectations and discourage emotional outbursts. In some family situations, positive reinforcement is not given to children and parents rarely show affection or praise. Family immigrant status may pose a difficulty for youth who become accustomed to both American and their Asian cultural values, finding a balance between conflicting interests of the two. For instance, while individuation carries little value in traditional Asian-American households, American society and culture is seen to reward individualism and independence to maintain self-esteem (Kramer et al., 2002). Asian-American parents that have cultural values of independence also mediate links of cultural adaptation and adaptive behavior, indicating that individualist cultural beliefs can promote children's mental health. (Huang et al., 2017) Adaptation and cultural flexibility, especially within immigrant status, are especially important in the cross-identity status of immigrants.

Regarding the aforementioned discouragement of emotional outbursts, Chinese American parents have been studied to respond to youth distress in culturally-aligned manners. One example includes encouraging coping methods specific to their culture, such as maintaining secrecy about the illness (Chung & Wong, 2004). Others include dismissing the distress of youth or responding with silence. As for youth interpretation of their parents' messages, they may utilize notions of their American and Chinese cultures by combining both the messages of their parents with more mainstream ideas of help-seeking behaviors for mental health (Yasui et al., 2023).

Chinese American adolescents have reported perceiving their parents to have very high expectations for their academic performance and moral values, as well as stricter family rules for their choice of friends. Parent-child relationship distress, conflict, and miscommunication may also be attributed to cultural, generational, and linguistic barriers (Yuwen & Chen, 2013). These barriers may be what influence Chinese American families' intergenerational discrepancies of perceived parental control over adolescents, which in turn can be a cause for conflict that arises into adolescent depressive symptoms (Juang et al., 2007). Some Asian-American adolescents have reported being subject to disempowering parenting that involves abuse, burden, cultural disjointment, disengagement, and gender prescriptiveness. These traits can be better understood to clarify patterns of parenting harmful for children's mental health (Choi et al., 2020).

Improving parent-child relationships can be more effective than changing the values and expectations of parents in terms of youth mental health outcomes (Warikoo et al., 2020). Such conflicts in the Asian-American racial group as a whole can be prevented with parent-child bonding that overcomes cultural dissonances between Asian and American values. These parent-child bonds that are helped by acculturation also may mediate adolescent substance abuse (Wang, M. et al., 2012). Vietnamese and Cambodian adolescents also have alcohol use that is influenced by intergenerational cultural factors (Kane et al., 2016). Notably, Indian American and Asian Indian parents possess similar attitudes and levels of stigma towards mental health, but also at greater levels than European American and Latino American parents (Turner & Mohan, 2016). It may be inferred that Asian-American immigrants maintaining culture that dichotomizes from American culture in terms of mental health stigma can contribute to the cross-cultural struggles of their adolescents.

Additionally, influences of parents regarding help-seeking and treatment access may still exist even for East Asian-American adults. While mental illness treatment access is not dependent on parents as adolescents and minors are, parents still play a role through family-centered decision making, which are often preferable within East Asian and Asian-American families. In family-centered decision making, the patient and their parents are both informed by pros and cons of certain treatment interventions, and the decision would be made by parents (Corrigan & Lee, 2021). Collectivist cultural factors can continue to influence children of East Asian-Americans even through adulthood, thus illustrating the heightened importance of parents' mental health literacy. Ill-informed decisions, especially concerning mental health care, bolster barriers that prevent necessary treatment.

The model minority stereotype is another cultural factor that contributes to reduced help-seeking behavior in Asian-American adolescents. When dealing with mental health struggles, Asian-Americans are more likely to confide in parents or peers rather than therapists and school counselors but are also less likely to confide in adults in comparison to White counterparts (Chiang et al., 2022).

Treatment Access: Perceived Barriers and Opposition

A general lack of mental health literacy in Asian-American parents, may be caused by additional factors that can factor into adolescents' access to treatment, including religion/spirituality and concept breadth of mental illness.

Religious Factors

Religious methods of explanation for mental health disorders may signify preconceived beliefs and the extent of a parent's mental health literacy. Asian backgrounds encompass a variety of beliefs, often influenced by religion or spirituality. One of them, for example, is Karma— an Eastern spiritual belief where every action leads to a consequence. Mental illness in adolescents in this instance might be blamed on some unforgivable sin committed by someone in the family's lineage. In rural areas of China, supernatural and societal beliefs may be blamed on mental illness. Different models for interpretation of mental illness can suppress families' awareness of the illness leading to an avoidance of treatment. Furthermore, Asian-American parents' stigma against mental health care providers may stem from a belief that they are unable to help their child based on their personal methods of conceptualizing mental illness (Li and Seidman, 2010). A lack of mental health literacy in Asian-American parents as a result of cultural spiritual beliefs can misattribute the causes of mental illness and prevent adolescent care access.

Conceptualization of Mental Illness

Methodology or ability of conceptualizing mental health disorders can be an indicator of mental health literacy and knowledge, thus influencing help-seeking behaviors. Concept breadth, which is the range of understanding in which mental health disorders may manifest, or the inclusiveness psychological phenomena identified as mental disorders by an individual, may also influence help-seeking behavior. Concept breadth differs from stigma as it refers to a range of knowledge as opposed to certain attitudes towards people with mental illnesses. While Asian-Americans have been found to have lower concept breadth than White Americans, help-seeking behaviors in Asian-Americans as a whole have been found to be highly correlated with concept breadth (Tse & Haslam, 2021).

In tandem with mental illness conceptualization, knowledge and attitudes are two major types of barriers that prevent Asian-American parents from seeking school-based mental health services for their children (Wang, C. et al., 2019). Knowledge and attitudes are also barriers that prevent Asian-American adolescents from seeking help at school, which potentially be maintained by their parents (Wang, C. et al., 2020b).

Treatment Access: Logistical Barriers

It is important to note that not all barriers to mental health treatment for Asian-American adolescents are necessarily due to cultural influences of parents' attitudes or stigma. There are additional logistical barriers that can factor into whether Asian-American parents decide to pursue mental health treatment for their children. Economically disadvantaged communities, for instance, have higher perceived barriers to mental health services (Chow et al., 2003). South-east Asian-Americans are also disproportionately affected by poverty, which may impact their access to mental health treatment, and actually experience higher rates of mental health challenges— due to displacement and refugee status resulting from war and genocide (Wong et al., 2015). Another logistical barrier for pursuing child therapy is geographical access to mental health clinics, which may be in inconvenient locations (Kazdin et al., 2017). However, this logistical barrier for Asian-Americans in rural communities, may be offset by the increasing availability of telemedicine, or online therapy (Palmer et al., 2022). Linguistic barriers and lack of culturally competent care providers may also influence accessibility of mental health treatment for Asian-American adolescents. Although children of Asian-

American immigrants are likely to have greater English proficiency than their parents, the tendency of Asian-Americans to engage in family-centered decision making may cause some Asian-American parents with a lack of English language proficiency to perceive less control and involvement and thus greater barriers to mental health care services. Certain subgroups of smaller populations within the Asian-American diaspora, including Southeast Asian-Americans, may be particularly vulnerable to these logistical barriers, which may possibly be more influential than perceived barriers in these populations. This may especially be likely due to higher prevalence of mental health disorders within this group.

Mental Health Literacy Education Programs

Parents

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) is a training program for adults to recognize signs of substance abuse and mental health challenges within youth. It is a sub-program of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) aimed specifically at adults to train them to understand warning signs in youth. YMHFA not only improves literacy and decreases stigma, but also increases supportive behavior in parents (Hadlaczky et al., 2014). This program is standardized and does not have any particular variants targeting specific groups outside of age level. One study performed a culturally adaptive variant of YMHFA for Asian American parents and youth workers and found benefits from an increased cultural sensitivity, such as through positive parent reception (Wang, C. et al., 2022). This study is just one of more to come of culturally-tailored educational programs to reduce stigma, especially as stigma may be heavily rooted in racial or ethnic cultures.

Another major approach to educating Asian-American parents about mental health is through school-based parent training programs. Culturally responsive and sensitive programs may lead to increases in positive parenting styles, including reasoning, and autonomy granting, as well as an increased sense of competence and connection to children in parents (Wang, C. et al., 2021). School psychologists in particular are a focus figure who can help provide training for parents while also supporting marginalized groups. School mental health resources may be useful to connect both parent and children, not only because school psychologists often specialize in adolescent psychology but also because they tend to be the middleman in explaining mental health challenges in youth to their parents. By supporting school psychologists with cultural sensitivity and awareness programs, parent mental health literacy may be subsequently increased.

There is evidence that education in mental health literacy is not only important for parents, but adolescents too. One study detailed that parents who believe that there is no specific cause for their child's emotional and behavioral problems are more likely to seek help from a mental health professional, believing that they are out of their control or influence. Implications from these findings include creating education initiatives within communities to teach both children and families about mental health. In schools, for instance, it may be beneficial to have education programs for children that utilize parent involvement or educational material sent home (Sangoi, 2022). It should be noted that parents must not be confronted during both mental health intervention and parent education training programs, as shifting blame to parents for their child's mental health turns it into something that they believe they have control over, deterring them from seeking services. General mental health literacy programs for parents may not be the type of intervention that would necessarily reduce parents' direct stigma towards people with mental illness, but rather a foundation that improves knowledge and parents' confidence in their ability to help children with mental health problems (Sakurako et al., 2022). These types of programs may strengthen parent-child connections but not necessarily change attitudes about mental illness as a whole—culturally tailored programs can especially improve outcomes.

Adolescents

Conceptualization of mental illness and its causes are important for predicting help-seeking behavior. Research has shown that Asian-American adolescents may not be able to identify mental health problems and instead label them as everyday stress that should be dealt with independently. Because parent mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors can only be within the scope of the parents' judgment and observation, adolescent mental health education programs can be just as vital as parent education programs. While this review focuses on mental health stigma and attitudes within Asian-American parents, it is key to note the limitations of an outside source or perspective, especially when there is evidence that Asian-American adolescents may hide signs of mental illness, or even suicide ideation (Chu, 2018). Furthermore, although youth suppressing or hiding symptoms of mental illness or even suicide ideation may be attributed to some Asian-American parents' cultural beliefs of hiding mental illness within families, there are limitations of exclusively relying on culturally tailored parent mental health education to alleviate these issues. Improving mental health literacy within youth is an additional necessity for their wellbeing.

Asian-American adolescents' comparatively lower rates of mental health service usage is frequently cited to bolster the model minority myth, as lower service usage may be equated to lower rates of psychopathology. However, Asian-Americans (alongside African Americans) are the racial group with highest rates of stigma, perceiving people with mental illness as more dangerous (Rao et al., 2007). Given that stigma may often exist within Asian-American households, treatment access in Asian-American adolescents can be compromised. As mental health literacy and family empowerment have been found to be imperative for buffering the effects of stigma on help seeking behaviors, it is vital to improve mental health literacy in Asian-American adolescents (Kosyluk et al., 2022). Combining both parent mental health education intervention programs while also improving mental health literacy in youth contributes to family empowerment, which is something that schools and other institutions can adopt.

Understanding mental health literacy in Asian-American adolescents can be supplemented with a clarification of mental health risk factors in Asian-American youth. Culturally-specific examples include the internalization of the model minority stereotype, high academic pressure, and sociocultural beauty standards (Liu, J. et al., 2022). Institutional involvement, such as through school mental health professionals, may be a key resource to improving Asian-American adolescent mental health literacy and improve help seeking behavior. By addressing culturally specific risk factors and involving parents in educational programs, Asian-American adolescent mental health needs may be supported.

Summarized Findings

Parents are a vital resource and a possible mediator for adolescents to get the mental health support that they need. In Asian-Americans, different cultural, religious, environmental, and educational factors within both parents and youth can influence adolescents' access to treatment. The intersections within the Asian and American identity, culture, and values especially make members of this group subject to facing crossroads and beliefs that pose risk to developing mental health issues that also go untreated. In adolescent children of immigrants, generational, linguistic, and cultural differences are especially more pronounced. While reducing stigma and providing educational content for parents may provide benefits, the underlying important factor of reduced mental health risk and increased likelihood of help-seeking behavior is the parent-child relationship. Promoting transparent, open, and trusting communication between parents and youth in Asian-American communities can increase understanding between both groups and improve mental health outcomes in youth. The creation of culturally sensitive programs that involve both parents and youth to improve sociocultural relationships may be beneficial to amend help seeking within Asian American adolescents.

Limitations

Most research cited in this paper had larger concentrations of East Asian-American data, thus influencing some generalized statements about the racial group as a whole. However, given the diversity of the Asian-American diaspora, it is important for mental health attitudes and service access to be evaluated within certain ethnic subgroups and other intersecting identities. Further directions for mental health research with Asian-American parents include meta-analyses and scoped subject populations focused particularly understudied Asian ethnic groups, as experiences may differentiate significantly. General conclusions and sentiments made about Asian-American parents, adolescents, and treatment access as a whole were created using population-representative data. To ensure true cultural competence that would benefit all Asian-American subgroups, however, examination and further research into certain subcultures and their interaction or attitudes towards mental health, illness, and care to help providers and educators deliver effective, personalized treatment and information.

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