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## Identity formation of Asian American teenagers and the role of the school counselor

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## Identity formation of Asian American teenagers and the role of the school counselor

### Abstract

Teachers and counselors who work with young people know that adolescence is a time of physical, mental, emotional, and social change. Adolescence is a time when teenagers are trying to form an identity for themselves and as they go through this process, many factors will help form who they are and who they become. Most teenagers are able to navigate these years with little conflict, on the other hand, some struggle with different issues. Adolescents have to deal with issues related to sexuality, peer pressure, and development to name a few. However, adolescents belonging to ethnic/racial underrepresented groups have to deal with all the aforementioned factors and with their ethnic/racial identity. This paper will focus on the challenges and opportunities ethnicity and race have on a person's identity formation, specifically Asian American teenagers.

IDENTITY FORMATION OF ASIAN AMERICAN TEENAGERS AND THE ROLE  
OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

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## Identity Formation of Asian American Teenagers

Teachers and counselors who work with young people know that adolescence is a time of physical, mental, emotional, and social change. Adolescence is a time when teenagers are trying to form an identity for themselves and as they go through this process, many factors will help form who they are and who they become. Most teenagers are able to navigate these years with little conflict, on the other hand, some struggle with different issues. Adolescents have to deal with issues related to sexuality, peer pressure, and development to name a few. However, adolescents belonging to ethnic/racial underrepresented groups have to deal with all the aforementioned factors and with their ethnic/racial identity. This paper will focus on the challenges and opportunities ethnicity and race have on a person's identity formation, specifically Asian American teenagers.

As the United States enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many changes are taking place, for example, one of the most obvious is that of the changing racial and ethnic make-up of the country. As the country is changing, so too are the schools. Often it is the schools that find themselves in a position of helping to bring people of diverse cultures together. As the schools become more diverse, often it is the counselor who is responsible for helping students adjust.

## Asia

Asia is a large continent with many different nationalities and ethnicities. Asian Americans are a diverse group and the term Asian American covers more than 20 nationalities (Kitano & Maki, 1996). According to the U. S. Census Bureau, the term Asian refers to people of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. This paper will look at the people from Eastern Asia, specifically students of Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian descent.

## Multiculturalism in Counseling

Ethnic minorities are defined as people which because of race, language, religion, and/or cultural values differ from the majority culture in which they live (Nugent, 1994). According to Sue and Morishima, (1982), multicultural counseling is “any counseling relationship in which two or more participants differ with respect to cultural background, values and life style” (p. 47). Pedersen (1988) defined multicultural counseling as a “situation in which two or more persons with different ways of perceiving their social environment are brought together in a helping relationship” (p. viii); (Nugent, 1994). Members of these groups have faced discrimination within their lives and often the everyday stresses they face are magnified. If they do see a counselor, the counselor is often from the white middle class (Nugent, 1994). Successful counseling of students

from ethnic and/or racial backgrounds different than the counselor's requires cultural empathy.

Cultural empathy is the ability of counselors to "accurately gain an understanding of the self-experience of clients from other cultures-an understanding informed by counselors' interpretations of cultural data" (Ridley & Lingle, 1996, p. 32). This empathy involves the ability of counselors to communicate this with an attitude of concern for his or her clients (Ridley & Lingle, 1996).

According to Ridley and Lingle, as cited in Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, and Trimble, (1996), cultural empathy has the following characteristics: (1) is multidimensional, (2) an interpersonal process, (3) cultural similarity is not necessary for achieving empathy, (4) doesn't depend on cultural neutrality, and (5) can be learned. As schools become more diverse, it is important for counselors to develop these skills in order to help students achieve their full potential.

### Asian Americans

In 1997, the Asian and Pacific Islander population was estimated to be 10.1 million people and represented 3.8% of the total population (Hooper & Bennett, 1997). Of those living in the United States, 29% are under the age of 18 while 7% are under the age of 65. Asian families are larger than the U.S. average, 23% contain five or more members (Humes & McKinnon, 1999).

Asian American students have been described as the “model minority”, “whiz kids”, and “problem free” (Brand, 1987; Smith, 1985; Sue, 1980; Sue & Sue, 1983) as cited in Hartman and Askounis (1989). The pressure to succeed in school is very strong for Asian students because it is a source of family pride (Hartman & Askounis, 1989).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Report, March 1999, among Asians and Pacific Islanders 25 years or older, 42% held bachelor’s degrees, 85% had completed high school, and 8% had less than a ninth grade education.

Asians can be found in various occupations and income levels. The Current Population Report lists 37% of Asian and Pacific Islanders in managerial and professional specialty occupations, i.e. managers, executives, administrators, physicians, nurses, lawyers, architects, engineers, scientists, and teachers. Thirty-three percent of Asian and Pacific Islander families had incomes of \$75,000, and 21% had incomes under \$25,000. At the same time, 13% were living in poverty.

Of the 8.3 million Asians and Pacific Islanders 15 years old and older, 53% are married and 34% have never been married. Ninety-five percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders live in metropolitan areas, over 50% in the western part of the United States.

Some Asian groups have been in the United States since the 1800s while others are more recent arrivals. The first Chinese arrived in California in the



1850s to join the gold rush. These first arrivals were free laborers, many hoping to make their fortune and return to their homeland (Spring, 2001).

The Japanese immigrated later because a 1639 Japanese law forbade travel to foreign countries. Circumstances changed and by 1884, the Japanese government allowed their citizens to travel to Hawaii to work on the plantations. Eight thousand Koreans immigrated between 1903 and 1920. Between 1907 and 1917, when immigration from India was restricted, 6,400 Asian Indians came. By 1930, 110,000 Filipinos had settled in Hawaii and 40,000 on the mainland (Spring, 2001).

These immigration patterns help identify culture preservation, adaptation, and change (Kitano & Maki, 1996). Understanding these differences is important when counseling Asian American teenagers.

### Identity Formation

Erik Erikson's (1963) concept of identity formation is recognized as one of the central tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1984; Yeh & Hwang, 2000). Erikson believed that individuals face eight developmental issues throughout life, each issue is the focus of attention at specific periods of development (Liebert & Spiegler, 1994). This

indicates (1) that each item of the vital personality to be discussed is systematically related to all others, and that they all depend on the proper development in the proper sequence of each item; and (2) that each item

exists in some form before “its” decisive and critical time arrives (Erikson, 1968, p. 93 - 94).

What this means for the adolescent is that he or she is trying to form an identity and find his or her role within society among the physical, mental, and social changes that are occurring at this time. The question, who am I? or, who do others think I am? are problems encountered by adolescents at this time (Erikson, 1997). If the adolescent does not form an identity, then confusion results. This confusion might be characterized by the person’s lack of ability to “find” him or herself.

Adolescence is often a time when adults see teenagers as undecided and lost. In reality, adolescents are attempting to identify who they are and therefore, will experiment with various roles. Adolescence may be a confusing time for any teenager, but for the Asian American teenager, it may be even more stressful. Not only are they going through the “normal” developmental processes but for teenagers who are simultaneously members of two cultures, identity formation is more complex.

“At the individual level, identity formation involves the development of both personal identity and group identity”(Phinney, 2000, p. 28). Researchers in the West have focused mainly on individual or ego identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). Group identity is of

particular importance among members of minority groups within a multicultural society (Phinney, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Both individual and group identity formations are seen as taking place for the most part during adolescence and early adulthood, but the process builds on earlier development (Erikson, 1968). The foundations are established in the identifications children make with role models who provide them with a sense of what they can become (Phinney, 2000).

Research has shown that group identification of children is likely to be with groups that are dominant in their setting (Phinney, 2000). This may or may not cause problems for those adolescents who are trying to find their ethnic identity in a complex world.

### Ethnic Identity Formation

The formation of one's ethnic identity may be thought of as a process, similar to identity formation. It takes place over time as a person explores and makes decisions about the role of ethnicity in his or her life (Phinney, 1990).

Over the years several different theories have been established about ethnic identity formation.

### Minority Identity Development Model

The Minority Identity Development Model, as proposed by Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1998) is meant to be a plan to help counselors as they work with minority clients. The model defines five stages of development that oppressed

people may experience as they try to understand themselves. Within each stage there are four corresponding attitudes that are part of a minority person's identity or of how he or she views (a) self, (b) members of the same minority, (c) others of another minority, and (d) majority individuals. The five stages are as follows:

Stage One is referred to as Conformity. People in this stage tend to view themselves as deficient in the "desirable" characteristics held by the dominant culture.

Their attitude toward: (a) self is self-depreciating, (b) members of the same minority is also self-depreciating, (c) others of different minorities is discriminatory, (d) the dominant group is appreciative.

Stage Two is Dissonance; people in the dissonance stage begin to experience a breakdown in their denial system.

Their attitude toward: (a) self contains conflict between self-depreciation and self-appreciation, (b) members of their minority group is conflict between self-depreciation and self-appreciation, (c) others of different minorities is conflict between dominant-held views of the minority hierarchy and feelings of shared experience, (d) the dominant group is conflict between group-appreciation and group-depreciation.

The third stage of this model is Resistance and Immersion. A person in this stage completely endorses minority-held views and rejects the dominant

society and culture. Individuals begin to resolve the conflicts of earlier stages and begin to ask him or herself, "Why should I feel ashamed of who I am?"

Their attitude toward: (a) self is self-appreciating, (b) members of their minority group is appreciative, (c) others of different minorities is conflict between empathy and culturocentrism, (d) the dominant group is group depreciating.

Stage Four is known as Introspection; it is during this stage that a person experiences feelings of discontent and discomfort with group views rigidly held in the prior stage. Individuals in this stage begin to feel progressively more comfortable with his or her own sense of identity. This stage is characterized by greater individual autonomy.

Their attitude toward: (a) self is concern with conflicts of self-appreciation, (b) members of their minority group is one of concern with the unequivocal nature of group appreciation, (c) others of different minorities contains concerns with ethnocentric basis for judging others, (d) the dominant group contains concerns of group depreciation.

Stage Five is Synergistic; individuals in this stage experience a sense of self-fulfillment with regard to cultural identity. Conflicts and discomfort found in earlier stages have been resolved.

Their attitude toward: (a) self is self-appreciating, (b) members of their minority group is appreciative, (c) others of different minorities is appreciative, (d) the dominant group is one of selective appreciation (Atkinson, et al., 1998).

When working with minority members, it is important to remember that each person is an individual, not all will go through each stage, nor is this process irreversible. Additionally, counselors need to be aware that ethnic identity development involves beliefs, feelings, and behaviors, which may evolve at different rates (Atkinson et al., 1998).

#### Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

Another model for ethnic identity formation is phenomenological and emphasizes the meaning-making experiences of developing youth. In keeping with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the Spencer model (in press) places those meaning-making processes in a larger ecological context (Markstrom-Adams & Spencer, 1994).

Each step in this model takes into account minority youths' active meaning-making processes: (a) self-appraisal processes with respect to stereotypes and biases (Step 1), (b) perceptions of environmental stress (Step 2), (c) strategic use of coping methods (Step 3), (d) creative development of emergent identities (Step 4), and (e) self-appraisal process with regard to life-stage outcomes (from Step 5 back to Step 1) (Markstrom-Adams & Spencer, 1994, p. 92).

This model of identity formation looks at risk contributors such as socioeconomic status (SES), race, and gender. Stress engagement is concerned with intermediate experiences such as neighborhood dangers and daily struggles. The coping methods include problem-solving strategies that a person possesses. From here the person's identity(s) emerge and evolve into life-stage outcomes, both positive and negative ones (Markstrom-Adams & Spencer, 1994).

### Acculturation Theory

A third theory of identity formation is that of acculturation. Acculturation theories focus on how an individual relates to the dominant or host society. According to Sue and Sue (1971), individuals of Asian descent may fall into one of three categories: traditionalists, marginal, and Asian American. Traditionalists typically are foreign born, accept parental cultural values and often socialize only with members of their own ethnic group. A marginal person is one who rejects Asian values, wants to assimilate into American culture and tend to socialize with Caucasian Americans. People in this category tend to have little ethnic identity that is associated with Asian culture. Finally, Asian Americans achieve a balance and pride in their ethnic identity by combining different aspects of traditional Asian values and Western influences (Yeh & Huang, 1996).

### Obstacles

Regardless of which model is used, when working with minority students, one must remember that each person is unique and faces various challenges

differently. Society provides external limitations that each person must face. Some that are identified by society include but are not limited to include: geography, childhood socioeconomic status, parental authority, educational opportunities, physical limitations, political restrictions, ethnicity, gender, age, and religion (Yoder, 1999). Not every person who faces one or more of these stressors will develop problems, but the chances increase with these obstacles.

Knowledge of English or lack of is another obstacle many minority students face. This is a particularly sensitive issue since language is closely related to ethnicity and culture. It not only provides a “means of communication but also a “cognitive structuring of the world which is linked to one’s world view, identity, self-concept, and self-esteem” (Hillard, 1983, p.27). Language can also prove a source of cultural conflict and controversy” (Canino & Spurlock, 1994, p. 9-10).

Another area of stress for many ethnic minorities is the process of acculturation. This is especially true when a person is not fully rooted in either culture. As individuals struggle over appropriate behavior and values they are sometimes faced with conflicting standards, i.e. Asian emphasis on group identity and Western emphasis on individualism (Canino & Spurlock, 1994).

### Cultural Identity

Many Asian Americans are seen as one group, although the term Asian American is often used to refer to more than 20 nationality groups. This term also



covers a wide variety of identities, languages, and cultures (Kitano & Maki, 1996). For teenagers who are in the process of finding who they are, this can be a very difficult time. Not only are they trying to assert themselves individually, they must also contend with identifying their place in society. Their diversity can be obscured by Asian stereotypes. The most common, because Asians look alike, they must be alike (Kitano & Maki, 1996). This is important to remember for those who work with adolescents who are members of more than one cultural group. There may be conflict if the person's culture of origin is non-Western, where group identity is placed before that of the individual.

### Cultural Values

Although Asian Americans are a diverse group, Man Keung Ho (1992) has identified seven cultural values that are found throughout Asian groups. They include:

1. Filial Piety, the respectful love of parent is the cornerstone of morality and is expressed in a variety of forms. Oya-KoKo, a Japanese version of filial piety to parents, requires a child's sensitivity, obligation, and unquestionable loyalty to lineage and parents. An Asian child is expected to comply with filial and social authority even to the point of sacrificing his or her personal desires and ambitions.

2. Shame as a Behavioral Influence, shame and shaming are used traditionally to help reinforce familial expectations and proper behavior within and outside the family. If an individual behaves improperly, he/she will “lose face” and may cause the family, community, or society to withdraw confidence and support. In Asian social structures, interdependence is very important; the actual or threatened withdrawal of support may shake a person’s basic trust and cause him or her considerable anxiety at the thought of facing life alone.

3. Self-Control, self-discipline is another concept highly valued by Asian Americans. The value *enryo* requires a Japanese individual to maintain modesty in behavior, be humble in expectations, and show appropriate hesitation and unwillingness to intrude on another’s time, energy, or resources. To Yin-Nor for a Chinese is to evince stoicism, patience, and an uncomplaining attitude in the face of adversity and to display tolerance for life’s painful moments.

4. Middle-Position Virtue, most Asian parents emphasize a social norm in which an individual should feel neither haughty nor unworthy. The Asian American emphasis on middle position brings an individual in step with others instead of ahead or behind others. Thus, it fosters the individual’s sense of belonging and togetherness.

5. Awareness of Social Milieu, an Asian’s concern for the welfare of the group also is related to his or her acute awareness of social milieu, characterized by social and economic limitations and immobility. The individual is very

sensitive to the opinions of peers and allows the social nexus to define his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions. In the interest of social solidarity, one subordinates oneself to the group, suppressing and restraining any disruptive emotions and opinions. Compliance with social norms, which provides social esteem and self-respect, is strictly observed.

6. Fatalism, a belief that life's events are predetermined. Many Asians accept their fate with equanimity. This pragmatic adaptability sometimes causes Asian Americans to fall further behind in a culture in which aggressiveness and outspoken individualism is prized.

7. Inconspicuousness, fear of attracting attention is/has been very strong among immigrants. This silence and inconspicuousness tend to make Asian Americans verbally passive members within society.

One must remember that not all individuals will follow these nor should others expect all Asian Americans to follow them. As identity formation progresses, adolescents make choices within the constraints that exist. Identity research has shown that there are individual differences among each adolescent as he or she explores and tries out new possibilities (Phinney, 2000). Counselors must remember that each person is an individual and his or her approach to identity formation is unique to them. Just as identity formation is unique to each individual, so is the level of acculturation each experiences.

### Acculturation Levels

Acculturation is the process of acquiring a culture. To prevent social isolation and gain a feeling of belonging, an Asian American teen will find reference groups within the United States. He or she may identify entirely with traditional Asian culture; reject Asian culture or find an in between position. Regardless, there is potential for adjustment problems (Ho, 1992).

A. Lee (1982) as cited in Ho (1992), has suggested four criteria to determine a child's degree of acculturation: (a) years in the United States; (b) age at the time of immigration; (c) country of origin, political, economic, and educational background; and (d) professional background of parents. For each individual, the degree of acculturation will vary and it is the responsibility of the school counselor to be aware of these criteria. Other variables as identified by Ho (1992) include: physical appearance, degree of fluency in English, affective behavior, interpersonal relations, attitude toward self, levels of anxiety, and issues of sexuality. Each of these areas may or may not be stressful for a teenager but when that teenager is a member of a minority group, these can be the cause of added stress. School counselors need to be aware of these stressors as he or she prepares to help students.

### Role of the School Counselor

As the country and schools become more diverse, guidance counselors are in a position to help students succeed. Depending on the student, their age, and

their needs there are many areas in which counselors can assist students as they navigate the teenage years. When school counselors work with Asian American students, awareness of the differences between Western and non-Western societies is important although one must be careful not to apply cultural information in a stereotypic manner (Sue & Sue, 1999). Some of the areas of need include but are not limited to: adjustment issues, family roles, English proficiency, ethnic identity, parental involvement/expectations, prejudice, stereotypes, and acculturation levels.

Because North American culture is so different from the Asian culture some of the more significant life-style changes for Asian immigrants are: diminishing family cohesiveness, employment roles are often changed, for some, women are heads of households, and traditional placement/value in families is challenged since North American culture doesn't value males over females. Essentially, the parent-child relationship is changed as a result of Western influences (Yao, 1985).

### Family Relationships

The family is the primary socializing influence in Asian culture as parents are responsible for interpreting what is considered appropriate or inappropriate behaviors (Hartman & Askounis, 1989). As teens become more accustomed to Western influence, this relationship changes which may cause tension between parents and children.

Children who are older than 14 or who have had prolonged separation from their parents seem to have more problems (Bagley, 1972). Children who live in predominantly ethnically segregated areas and whose parents are less educated seem to encounter more difficulties (Kopala, Esquivel, & Baptiste, 1994). Helping a student transition is one role for the school counselor.

Counselors can work with students to help them cognitively understand new social customs and norms. New students will also need to learn appropriate verbal and nonverbal skills as well as develop a sense of belonging (Kopala, et al., 1994).

### English Proficiency

Another area of concern for students is language and the barriers that not knowing English can cause. Depending on the reason for a student's move to the United States, some language issues may be more complicated than others. For many refugee immigrants, they have lived in camps and have not been able to go to school. Others are illiterate in their own language, making the learning of English even more difficult (Gougeon, 1993).

It is up to the counselor to help students and teachers adjust as both learn how to communicate with one another. In schools where there is a restricted ESL program, the process of scheduling classes is magnified. When ESL classes are limited, a student's chance for success in the classroom decreases. Therefore, it is

important for the counselor to be available for the student, to help him or her get through classes and meet teachers and other students (Keyes, 1989).

Even in schools where there is a strong ESL program, often there is minimal contact between school counselors and ESL teachers. Often school counselors see ESL teachers and programs as independent entities within the educational system. Issues regarding academic performance and partial preparation of schedule of classes are left to the discretion of the ESL teachers. Therefore, it is important for counselors to establish communication and collaborate with ESL teachers (Clemente & Collison, 2000).

### Parental Expectations

Education and academic success is a source of pride for Asian families and the pressure to succeed is strong. "Parental educational expectation is another motivational/cultural factor that has a direct relationship with students' school performance" (Mau, 1997). This may be another source of tension within families. The counselor can help in easing these tensions but before counseling these students, it is important to assess the situation and have some background about the student, his or her family situation, and how long the family has been in the United States (Hartman & Askounis, 1989).

Counselors need to be aware of new students and realize that when they encounter a new country, culture, school system, and new teachers and students, it may be difficult for them to manage their feelings. Assessing a student's level of

comfort in social situations, their communication, coping and social skills will help the school counselor assist students. Counselors should use a variety of methods, including small group and individual counseling (Kopala et al., 1994).

Asian American adolescents are a diverse group, originating from different countries and social classes, speaking different languages with varying degrees of fluency, practicing different religions and cultural values, and establishing unique patterns of being “Asian Americans.” When counseling Asian teenagers, “normalizing the problem,” must be adapted to the individual and his or her culture (Huang, 1994).

#### Implications for the Profession

More research is needed in the area of ethnic identity formation. Current research has shown that identity formation and ethnic identity are not the same and counselors need to be aware of the differences. School counselors who work with a diverse population need to stay current. In addition, counselors need to examine, understand, and deal with their own biases and assumptions so that they may assist others (Whitledge, 1994).

Working with teachers and students, it is important for the counselor to emphasize that school is a positive place and that an education will help students succeed in life. Counselors will need to become advocates for the student within the school system.



## Conclusion

As the United States becomes more diverse there has been more research on ethnic identity and its relationship to the counseling process (Ruiz, 1990). Ethnic identity is complex and since most Asian American teenagers spend a large part of their day in school, the counselor is in a unique position to be able to help these students succeed. To facilitate this process, it is important for the counselor to be culturally aware. Identity formation and ethnic identity formation are not the same and counselors need to be aware of the differences between the two.

It is not realistic for each school to have same-culture counselors for each of the different groups that may be in the school; therefore cultural empathy by the counselor is needed (Whitledge, 1994). Knowledge about an individual student's culture helps counselors build a relationship with the student and the student's family. This in turn increases the odds of success for Asian American teenagers.

School counselors need to stay current with the research and be willing to look at his or her own prejudices and stereotypes. Not all Asian Americans are the same and knowing this will help counselors as they work with these students.

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