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Chapter 10

ISSUES IN COUNSELING 1.5 GENERATION KOREAN AMERICANS

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Korean Americans share many of the same cultural values as other Asian American groups (e.g., Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans) in the United States, but they encounter different adjustment problems because of their unique immigration pattern to the United States. One particular subgroup, the 1.5 generation, is especially vulnerable to the difficulties of immigration transitions. Known also as the transgeneration or knee-high generation (Yu, 1988), the 1.5 generation consists of bicultural, bilingual Korean Americans who are foreign-born, but have spent the majority of their developmental years in the United States.

The 1.5 generation faces the inherent challenges of adjustment and the demands of two conflicting cultures (Cheung, 1980; Abe & Zane, in press). Unlike their immigrant parents, they are young and mobile, and quick in adapting to American cultural values, attitudes, and lifestyle. Differences in the rate of acculturation between parent and child can be a source of great distress. What is uniquely disturbing and of concern for this group is that these pressures are amplified by their young age.

The majority are adolescents who experience the normal difficulties of teenage years. The confusion of physical and emotional changes, the desire to be independent and mobile, and the questions of identity are all too common for young Korean Americans. It is imperative that mental health professionals identify the implications of their particular experiences for their psychological well-being.

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Profile of Korean Immigrants

Demographic Characteristics

Between 1970 and 1986, the population of Korean Americans rose from 75,000 to 535,000, a percentage increase of over 600%. Park in 1970 estimated that 2 million Korean Americans would live in the United States by the year 2000. The actual number was 2.3 million in 1980, slightly over the target. The next decade was estimated to have 3.6 million Korean Americans. In 1988, 82% of these were over the age of 15, with only 18% being below the age of 15. According to the 1980 U.S. Census, 83% were born in Korea, 8% in China, and 3% in Japan. In 1988, 7% of Koreans were considered bilingual, which is higher than the average for Asian Americans in the United States. About 10% of Koreans were proficient in English, while 90% were proficient in Korean. Most Koreans had lived in the United States for more than 10 years. In 1980, 41% of all Korean immigrants had been in the United States for more than 10 years. In 1982, the average income in the larger Los Angeles area was $8,000. In 1988, the average income was $22,000. In 1980, 80% of all Korean immigrants were living in the larger Los Angeles area. In 1988, 50% of all Korean immigrants in New York City were reported to be "well educated," defined as having a college degree or equivalent. In 1988, 80% of all Korean immigrants were reported to be "well educated," defined as having a college degree or equivalent. In 1988, 80% of all Korean immigrants were reported to be "well educated," defined as having a college degree or equivalent.

Cultural Values

The cultural values of Korean immigrants are often seen as being very traditional and conforming. The family is considered the most important institution in Korean society. The father is seen as the authority figure, and the mother is responsible for maintaining the family's traditions. The eldest son is expected to inherit the family business and property. The eldest daughter is expected to care for the parents in their old age. The younger siblings are expected to obey the eldest son. This structure is based on Confucian values, which emphasize filial piety and respect for authority. Korean culture also values education and hard work. Koreans are known for their diligence and work ethic. The Korean language is a complex system of hanja, which are Chinese characters, and hangul, which is a Korean alphabet. The Korean alphabet is considered one of the most efficient writing systems in the world. The Korean language is also unique in that it has a system of honorifics, which is used to show respect to elders and authority figures. The Korean language is a tonal language, which means that the meaning of a word can change depending on the tone in which it is spoken.
Issues of the 1.5 Generation Korean American

Pressures to Succeed

Because Korean American parents are determined to provide for their children economically, they have high expectations that their children will succeed. These expectations are often above and beyond the 1.5's capabilities or desires. In a study of 564 preadolescent and adolescent Korean Americans by Pae et al. (1987), 71% of the youths interviewed reported school performance as their primary concern. 88.3% considered making parents proud as "quite important" to "top of my list," and 90.1% reported doing well in school. These youths also had a tendency to have very high expectations and goals for their future. Although high aspirations can be viewed in a positive light, counselors must regard this with caution. Korean American children see their parents as having unreasonable high expectations for them. The 1.5 generation Korean Americans may be at risk for setting unrealistic goals and expectations for themselves. Afraid that they will be unable to perform to the standards laid out for them, many 1.5 generation Korean Americans suffer significant levels of achievement anxiety.

Also, with respect to pressure to succeed, this particular generation often find themselves in a "no-win" situation. This situation reflects the contradictory expectations of family and social context. Their families strongly encourage success and support the hard work ethic. Yet, recently many Korean Americans have been criticized for being too extreme in their ambitious nature. Thus, as adolescent Korean Americans, they must handle the difficult choice of siding with the expectations of either the social context (for example, peers) or those of family.

Communication Barriers

Language and communication difficulties often create a generational gap between members of the 1.5 generation and their parents. These young people often come from bilingual settings in which English is spoken outside the home, and Korean is predominantly used inside the home. It has been suggested that many Koreans, especially members of the 1.5 generation, lack fluency in both languages (Yu, 1988). The language barrier is a primary obstacle in the communication between members of this generation and their parents. Establishing and maintaining open communication is difficult for the Korean-speaking parent and English-speaking child. Outside the home, the individual may experience language difficulties at school, and thus be unable to compete academically at expected levels. The individual may be ostracized by peers due to his or her limited English skills, and thus lose interest in school. Because of the inability to communicate effectively with both parents and friends, 1.5 generation Korean Americans often experience feelings of alienation. They are unable to seek support from and identify positively with any of their social networks. As a result, these youth people may isolate themselves from the family and the general social context.

Communication barriers are not limited to language skills for the immigrant family. Parental warmth (acceptance-rejection) and parental control (permissiveness-stringency) are two major dimensions of parenting styles that exist in all human societies (Rohner & Rother, 1981). Rohner and Pettingill (1985) assessed the parenting style of Korean parents in Korea and that of Korean American parents. Results showed a sharp contrast between Korean American and Korean perceptions of parents. Korean youths associated both paternal and maternal control with parental warmth and low neglect, whereas Korean American youths viewed strict parental control as hostility and rejection. Yu and Kim (1983) argued that Korean American parents, especially recent immigrants, raise their children according to traditional Korean child-rearing practices based on their own upbringing and desire for their children to maintain the Korean cultural heritage. These findings imply that as Korean American youths become more acculturated while parents remain traditional in child-rearing practices, they may begin to misinterpret their parents' strictness as overall rejection and hostility, thus becoming emotionally distressed.

Ethnic Identity Development Conflicts

For the 1.5 generation, Korean American high parental expectations and communication difficulties can be compounded by ethnic identity problems. Spencer and Markstorm-Adams (1990) suggested that "the complexity of identity formation may increase as a function of cultural, behavioral distinction, language difference, physical features, and longstanding, although frequently unaddressed, social stereotypes." Because Korean immigrants come from a highly collectivistic culture (Gudykunst et al., 1987), they may insist on a collectivistic approach in the United States. Hurh (1980) argued that the United States is a nation in which race is still one of the most powerful factors "limiting structural assimilation;" thus, remaining collectivistic may be a strategy for these immigrants to maintain a sense of belonging to community.

Fearful their children will lose touch with the Korean heritage, Korean parents and families in the United States will insist that the younger generation maintain ties with Korea. However, it is sometimes
difficult for members of the 1.5 generation to share their parents’ attachment to Korea. Some may experience guilt and a tremendous sense of obligation to feel and to acknowledge Korea as part of their identity. The 1.5 generation member recognizes the importance of a Korean identity, but may express feelings of ambiguity toward Korea or being Korean (Pai et al., 1987). During adolescent development, defining a self-identity may be the single most important task at hand (Rosenfeld, 1987), but with the absence of a sense of belonging to a vital and nourishing milieu of contemporary American society, and a sense of disconnectedness with their own original ethnic heritage (Yu & Kim, 1983), members of this generation are at risk for psychological distress and maladjustment.

Culturally Responsive Counseling

Acculturation

The 1.5 generation Korean American is expected to succeed without compromising any of the traditional Korean values. Leong (1986) defined this process of adaptation (acculturation) as the degree to which an individual has identified with and integrated into the dominant mainstream culture. The primary challenge for the 1.5 generation is somehow to integrate the contradictory values of the two cultures into a unified identity.

Hurt (1980) outlined a typological scheme of acculturation for Korean Americans: a “traditionalist” is one who is more Korean than American; the “integrationist” is one who is still Korean but tries to become more American; the “isolationist” is one who is neither American nor Korean; and, the “pluralist” is one who is both Korean and American. Hurt’s concepts of integrationist and isolationist are similar to Sue and Sue’s (1971) marginal individual. Described as ambivalent, insecure, self-conscious, isolated, lonely, and frustrated (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935), the marginal individuals’ dysfunctional aspects receive more attention than their positive attributes. But, Hurt (1980) suggested that marginality may be a necessary developmental stage in becoming a pluralist/biculturalist/American American. “Americanism” and “Koreanism” are not mutually exclusive, and a synthesis of both cultures results in a new Korean American identity via successful resolution of marginality (Hurt).

This model provides a developmental framework and does not imply that all 1.5 generation Korean Americans go through these stages in sequence. Various factors, such as age at immigration, parental values, and geographical location of residence will influence the pattern of identity development. Nevertheless, the last stage of 1.5 generation will provide a wider repertoire of behaviors and options for the 1.5 generation and relieve the pressures to choose one culture over the other.

Acculturation-Consistent Strategies

Because many 1.5 generation Korean American families are unfamiliar with the concepts of Western “talk therapy” and medical approaches, mental health paraprofessionals must use treatment that is culturally appropriate. Sue and Zane (1987) cited various strategies to establish cultural competence in psychotherapy and counseling. For example, credibility can be increased by striving to have a clear understanding of how the client and the counselor identify and conceptualize presenting problems and the means for their solution (Sue & Zane, Sue, 1981). It is not prescribed that counselors attempt to match clients on these dimensions, but that they be aware of incongruencies, which can lead to reducing a counselor’s credibility (Sue & Zane).

In striving to attain credibility, in the eyes of the Korean family, one counseling strategy may be to define and to respect the family members’ roles. A democratic counseling approach may undermine the parental authority over the children. The counselor may choose to handle the initial sessions primarily by addressing and deferring to the father as a sign of respect, while also being cautious not to compromise the credibility of the counselor as the expert. It is likely that the mother will be more involved in counseling, thus the counselor should always allow the father to make the final decisions by letting the mother consult her husband before making any counseling commitments.

The second strategy is the concept of “gift giving.” It is advised that the client’s immediate perception of benefits from counseling will prevent early termination, demonstrate credibility, and address skepticism of Western methods of counseling (Sue & Zane, 1987). For many Korean Americans, the normalization of family problems as a typical acculturation process may be the most valuable gift possible. Normalization gives the client an opportunity to ease the magnitude of the problem by the counselor’s suggestion of how common the presenting issues are (Sue & Zane; Sue & Morishima, 1982). Also, this allows the family to save face and to limit the shame the family has endured for seeking help, thus encouraging the family to have a positive outlook on counseling. The intricacies of how to counsel a culturally diverse population are not limited simply to acknowledging culture. When the treatment is concerned with the client’s intrapsychic processes, the counselor must account for the role of culture above and beyond superficial considerations. A counselor’s cultural sensitivity remains distal to treatment outcome when cultural responsiveness is not taken beyond the point of “concrete
operations and strategies" (Sue & Zane). The single most important method to implement in providing culturally responsive counseling is to develop acculturation-consistent treatment strategies. This is the most effective technique of addressing what and how culture is contributing to the client's presenting issues. The counselor must be actively aware of the client's position on the continuum of acculturation and stage of ethnic identity development. If a culturally responsive strategy of treatment is being implemented, and the client is very acculturated, culturally responsive counseling may become culturally nonresponsive treatment.

The following is a composite description of several possible cases that highlight the relevant issues of family expectations, communication barriers, and conflicts of ethnic identity development that were introduced above. The purpose of the discussion that follows the case study is to illustrate a therapeutic process that may be helpful in counseling the 1.5 generation Korean American. It is important to note that this is only an example intended to emphasize the more pressing issues for members of this generation; counselors must always individualize any of the strategies suggested in this chapter.

The Case of Jack

Jack is a 17-year-old male Korean American. He is the eldest of three children. Jack's parents made the decision to immigrate to the United States 9 years ago in hopes of providing their children with better opportunities and better lives in the new country. Both of Jack's parents are college educated. Due to their limited English skills, the parents could not find jobs commensurate with their education. After finding economic stability, Jack and his family moved to a small middle-class suburban city. Jack is now a high school senior. There are only a handful of ethnic minorities in his school and Jack is the only Korean American. Jack has developed a close-knit circle of friends, all of whom are Caucasian.

Jack's parents are very strict and maintain control over the children's daily school and homework schedules. The children must receive permission from their father if they wish to do any nonacademic activities. The parents choose all of the children's school courses. They have begun to choose the colleges that Jack will apply to for next year. His parents want him to apply only to schools with competitive premedical programs. Yet, Jack is not sure what he would like to be. His parents tell him he will be a successful doctor, and make him proud. Jack initially accepts these expectations because he is afraid to express his aspirations about medicine, and does not want to make any waves. Recently, Jack has become very anxious about his college applications because he is afraid he will be unable to live up to his parents' expectations. He feels that his parents do not really care about him but only about how well he does in school. He finds it difficult to concentrate and has no drive to do his schoolwork.

Jack's parents have always taught the children to be proud of their Korean heritage. Jack does not consider Korea his homeland, and at times feels guilty for such thoughts. Lately, he has become very resentful of his father and he lecturers on being Korean and knowing Korean culture. Jack is embarrassed by his parents' broken English and Korean ways. Jack was invited to several banquets honoring him as an outstanding high school achiever, but never told his parents of these events, afraid they would attend and embarrass him in front of his friends.

During the past month, Jack and his parents have been struggling with their relationship. Jack's relationship with his father has become especially strained. There have been many arguments between the two. Jack has made several remarks to his parents about how he wished he were not Korean. He has demanded that his parents let him live his own life. The last confrontation ended with Jack's father threatening to disown such a shameful son. His father suggests that Jack's disrespectful behavior is a sign of the bad influence his American friends have had on him.

Jack has withdrawn from his family and friends, unable to discuss his problems with anyone. He wishes his parents could be like his friends' parents. Jack presents a depressed mood, loss of appetite, and insomnia.

As a result, his schoolwork is suffering. The teacher observes the changes in behavior and requests to see Jack and his parents. Upon realizing the many issues that are present, she refers them to a counselor.

Complicated by different levels of acculturation of the adolescent and the parents, this case study highlights the 1.5 generation Korean American's struggle through normal adolescent development. Two major causes of Jack's depression are the conflicts of ethnic identity and the high parental expectations. Although family systems therapy may seem to be the desirable therapeutic technique, Jack's very traditional parents may not be open to this type of intervention at this time. It is important for counselors to recognize the parents' limitations of actively participating in counseling. The parents may find counseling a difficult process to understand, especially with their limited English skills. Under these circumstances, rapid and significant changes cannot be expected. It is likely that Jack, and especially his parents, will focus their goals of therapy on alleviating physiological symptoms of depression and addressing the decline in academic achievement. These goals must be addressed initially in therapy so that the counselor's credibility will not suffer and premature termination will not occur. Counselors need to be prepared to set a long-range goal and gradually work toward involving
the parents in family systems therapy. This may not happen before Jack leaves for college, but his younger siblings may benefit. For Jack, the most effective therapeutic method seems to be individual counseling with parental consultation.

The primary goal of parental consultation is to alleviate the tensions between Jack and his parents, as well as to provide educational information on the acculturation process and the causes of depression. For Jack, both problem-solving therapeutic and educational approaches can be beneficial. Because both of these strategies are more culturally congruent, they may be the most effective strategies to use in this particular case. One common goal of these two interventions is to introduce insight to Jack's problems at hand, not just to enable his self-growth. Because of the limited scope of this chapter, we will highlight only the individual approach with Jack. The following will outline the counseling process suggested for this case study.

The very first session should involve both Jack and his parents. This is an opportunity for them to come together on neutral ground, and it also allows the counselor to assess the dynamics of the family. For discussion purposes, “family” will refer to Jack and his parents from this point on. To prevent premature termination, it is essential that the family feel they have benefited from the very first session. Normalization of family problems and issues may be the most valuable “gift” possible during the first stage. This can accomplish two things. One is to save “face” and limit the shame the family has endured for seeking treatment. The second is to allow the family to realize that their problems are not so unusual and can be attributed to a normal process in immigration adjustment. This is particularly important because the family is geographically isolated from other Koreans.

Once the counselor has assessed the family dynamics and identified the actual problems and issues involved, he or she should inform the family of the depression diagnosis and outline the treatment plan with the family. Informing them that depression is a common reaction to pressures and that it has excellent prognosis will help to alleviate their anxieties and keep the diagnosis in perspective. Inform the family that there are many strategies that will counter depressive symptoms, and that Jack can learn them in individual sessions. Because most of the counseling sessions will be with Jack, the counselor should stress the importance of the family meeting periodically. It may be beneficial to reframe the request of family involvement by suggesting that the counselor will rely on the family's strength and support throughout Jack's therapy.

A primary goal in individual counseling is to alleviate Jack's depressive symptoms of withdrawal, appetite loss, and insomnia, after his suicidal potential has been assessed. This can be achieved by teaching him skills to deal with his external pressures. For example, progressive relaxation techniques can be introduced to counter anxiety and increase stress management skill. At the more internal level, the counselor should be prepared to address his personal conflicts of self-concept and ethnic identity. The counselor can further build credibility by acknowledging Jack's difficulties (high parental pressures and expectations) as the firstborn male child in a traditional Korean household. Let Jack know that such expectations may affect self-concept, and focus on building Jack's self-efficiency and self-reliance skills throughout the counseling process.

The severity of Jack's depression can increase because of decreased social support due to his withdrawal from friends and family. It will be important to emphasize that the problem he is facing is not unusual among his peers and that many have coped effectively. One of the first steps to help Jack overcome his depression is to explore various types of effective coping strategies. Different exercises can be incorporated to help him gain awareness of self and regain interest in his schoolwork. For example, Jack can keep a daily schedule. This will allow him to structure his day and gain interest and control over his activities. Another exercise may be to have him keep a diary of his daily thoughts and feelings, thus enabling him to identify and become aware of his feelings of self and feelings toward his parents. As Jack begins to come to terms with his problems, counseling can begin to relieve his symptoms.

To address the issues stemming from conflicts in self-concept, it is important for Jack to be able to accept that there are difficulties in developing an ethnic identity. He may need to be reminded that he may not be able to rely on his family or friends because they may not be able to empathize with him nor understand his conflicts. However, the counselor may point out that this can be a challenging process with rewarding outcomes. The counselor should be candid with Jack and encourage him to take responsibility for reaching a resolution.

A strategy to help resolve Jack's identity issue is to have him list what he feels are the positive and negative aspects of being very traditionally Korean, very American, and bilingual. At the same time, Jack should identify whose definition (e.g., self, family, or mainstream culture) of identity he is internalizing under different situations. These methods may help him to clarify the external and internal forces influencing his identity development. This provides Jack with the opportunity to choose and to define his own unique identity. Throughout the process, the counselor should help Jack to realize the importance of understanding both cultures without any value judgments attached to them.

The counselor should inform Jack that self-identity may change over time due to normal development; however, it is important that Jack feel comfortable with his current decisions. Also, suggest to Jack that if he does not feel comfortable doing so, he does not necessarily have to
choose one identity over the other. Explain to him that he may feel more comfortable in moving between different cultural roles depending on social context. For example, he can be very Korean or traditional in a family situation but not openly contradicting his parents; he can be very American in a school setting but wants to be assertive. The counselor may need to emphasize to Jack that he is empowered to make the final decision as long as he is aware of and prepared for the consequences of his decision. For example, it may be important to let Jack know that taking premed courses in the first couple of years of college does not necessarily mean that he has to go to medical school. Later, he can make the decision to do something else, as long as he knows that his decision is worth the negative reactions his parents may have toward his choice.

We will now turn to a brief discussion of giving educational information as a counseling strategy for Jack’s parents. Two goals for this component of counseling are to enlist Jack’s parents’ support for continuing therapy for Jack and to increase their confidence in therapy so that they will be more open to future interventions (e.g., family systems therapy). It would be helpful to provide educational information on Jack’s symptoms (e.g., depression, loss of appetite, insomnia) by informing the parents of the definition and the causes of depression. Emphasize the interaction between physiological (e.g., neurochemical) and psychological (e.g., depressive symptoms) stresses to counter the stigma they may hold about “mental disorders.” In addition, identifying the negative effects of stress and pressure on people may bring insight to how they may relieve some of Jack’s presenting difficulties. To decrease their fears that Jack is going to be “too Americanized” it is important to let them know that it is normal to swing from one extreme (e.g., traditionally Korean) to another (e.g., too American) before adolescents find a balance that will allow them to retain their Korean identity, but acculturate enough to succeed in the American culture. It may be necessary to praise the parents by pointing out how well Jack has done because of their efforts. However, let them know of the magnitude of the pressure that Jack is under and the countervailing nature of overwhelming stress, such as aspirational conflict. To enhance the possibilities of compromise, inform them of the availability of career advisors in exploring various career options. The decisions the family makes can be a collaborative effort in which the advisor acts as a mediator. This particular task may open the lines of communication between Jack and his parents and help to alleviate the existing conflicts.

It is important to note that this particular case study was only an example; therefore, the limitations of the recommendations given should be recognized. As previously stated, the strategies and techniques advised throughout the chapter should always be individualized for each client.
THE LATINO AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Latino is a generic term that identifies a culture shared by several ethnic groups in the United States—Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, as well as other ethnic groups with origins in Central and South America. Latino culture developed as a result of the fusion of Spanish culture (brought to the Americas by missionaries and conquistadors) with American Indian and African (the result of the slave trade) cultures in Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean Basin. Commonality among Latino American ethnic groups is found in the use of the Spanish language, the influence of Roman Catholic traditions, differential sex-role socialization, and strong kinship bonds between family members and friends. However, there is a wide variety within each Latino American group based on variables such as level of acculturation, socioeconomic status, language use, and generation in the United States.

Additional Resources
