OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Beyond Silence: Cultural Stigma and Mental Health Help-Seeking in East Asian American Families

Julia Park
parkjulia7335@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Mental health stigma can vastly influence the likelihood of East Asian American (EAA) young adults' perception and approaches to professional mental health support. This study examines how intergenerational beliefs, expectations growing up, and adult pressure as an East Asian American could potentially shape mindsets towards seeking and openness to professional mental support.

This study was intended to identify coping strategies that could be effectively used, and to discover how external beliefs from non-East Asian American individuals could contribute to internalized stigma.

A correlational research design was used. Participants were aged 18-22 and descended from an East Asian background. The survey used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1-5 with 10 questions. The questions contained information about perceived stigma, familial attitudes, and openness to professional support. Participants were found via word-of-mouth, East Asian organizations, and social media. Participation was voluntary and all responses were anonymous. Informed consent was also implemented before the questionnaire began.

Data revealed that many participants grew up with neglected or limited mental health discussion, with cultural expectations often discouraging help-seeking. Responses revealed that the participants were commonly hesitant to seek professional help, and very few individuals had families that encouraged professional support.

This revealed not only how there is a strong intergenerational stigma, but also how deep of a role familial beliefs could play towards mental help support. Intergenerational stigma is a powerful barrier to utilization of professional support in East Asian American young adult communities. The study revealed how if family promotes healthier coping behaviors, it would increase acceptance and utilization of mental health services

INTRODUCTION

East Asian Americans (EAA) become victims to persistent ethnic and racial boundaries that limit them with the most persisting one being stigma. Stigma most directly influences and measures the likelihood of mental health being combatted within EAA communities. Furthermore, stigma shapes how individuals of these communities perceive emotional struggles. To add, these communities often discourage seeking mental health professional treatment. Most EAA immigrants, especially on the West Coast of the U.S, grew up in cultures and communities where having mental illnesses was perceived as "weak" or shameful to their family name, leading to people belonging to these communities to avoid seeking help (Park, 2025). Having this built up and internalized stigma, specifically passed down through family beliefs and ideologies (Lauderdale, 2003), creates cycles of repeated silence across generations. To elaborate, the likelihood that an East Asian American teen is to ask for professional counseling is heavily dependent on how their role models treat the concept of seeking professional help. For instance, Jang (2018) found that nearly 25% Asian Americans experience unmet mental health needs. Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino individuals were most directly affected. Additionally, these groups reported higher levels of depression and anxiety compared to other racial groups in their responses.

There is a gap in what we know about the effect of the intergenerational stigma that shapes East Asian American communities. Namely with young adults, they tend to carry these habits with them into the next generations. Having more inclusive studies that involve more generational related information not only provides more context, but also allows members within EAA communities to feel more comfortable with their ethnic background by exploring details about themselves that may reveal more about their character.

The aim of this study is to measure the likelihood of East Asian American communities to seek external support, or for them to explore if their willingness to seek help could be influenced or possibly disregarded. One of the most crucial things is to fully understand these generational habits that get passed down over time. Understanding this could lead to better coping and stress related habits. By applying certain models and theories, such as the Model Minority Myth, Andersen's Behavioral Model of Health Services, and others. These models help show how these stigma-based ideologies could severely influence help-seeking behaviors, including external factors such as socioeconomic status or factors in their environment (Alkhawaldeh, 2023).

The purpose of this study was to help influence better coping strategies within these communities, to fully analyze the effects of transmission in ideologies within families, and explore how external factors can change generations to come. Additionally, to effectively, positively, and indirectly push these communities to utilize professional services, such as counseling or support groups. As well as to analyze external factors, such as how people who don't belong to East Asian American communities view them, and how it could be turned into internalized racism, or similarly, the internal need for self-efficacy. To close, my hypothesis is that having higher levels of internalized cultural stigma will align with a lower willingness to seek professional help.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Model Minority Myth (MMM) reinforces the perception that Asian Americans are self-reliant and emotionally resilient, creating a false sense of independence that discourages many within these subgroups from seeking professional mental health support (Lee, 2009; Chen, 2024). It is the idea that Asian Americans are successful due to self-reliance. This stereotype, fostered by people not in East Asian American communities, not only overlooks the real psychological trauma, stigma, and struggles faced in the East Asian American community, but also creates external stigma to reinforce the internal stigma. Goldstein (2018) emphasizes that the Model Minority Myth (MMM) contributes to stress among second-generational Asian Americans, where they are met with unrealistic expectations to achieve success in academics from their culture. This contributes to the mental timidness of these individuals, who succumb to the ideology that success in academics should be the first and foremost priority. The MMM helps define the gap of the mental burden of carrying cultural expectations which discourages the category of help-seeking altogether (Mohammadifirouze, 2023).

The MMM suggests how East Asian Americans could possibly have built up internalized racism in themselves, and how it could further influence their openness to participating in professional help-seeking services (Wang, 2009). The pressure to uphold the idea that they are a “perfect” culture or individual leads to an eventual suppression of emotional vulnerability that drags on for generations, setting the path for children to follow, generationally. This idea additionally is passed down, transmitted through the same teachings that their elders, parents, or other important figures in their lives have reinforced in East Asian American subgroups.

METHODOLOGY

This study was a descriptive quantitative survey, where specifically, I observed numerous variables and identified patterns between responses. The direct positives of using correlational investigations is that it directly identifies patterns between answers when they conflict (Price et al., 2017). This would allow my results to be generalizable, effectively helping East Asian American cultures understand the statistical value behind my research. Furthermore, this allows for the answers to be then formed into hypotheses and for future events to be predicted. In the case of my research, it expands for possible solutions to the rising issue of East Asians' lack of participation in help-seeking resources, or coping strategies. In addition, the data collection aspect was done with anonymous surveys, where participants were free to withdraw from the study at any moment by not submitting the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was an online survey on the site Google Forms. A survey is a research method used to collect, analyze, and interpret data from a specific group of people during a study (Ball, 2019). To reiterate, the particular advantage to utilizing surveys for my research is that it allows for the generalization of my findings (Alkhawaldeh, 2023). The survey was given through Google Forms, containing 10 questions. The responses for all 10 questions were done using a Likert-type scale of 1-5. A Likert-type scale is a tool used in surveys to measure attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (León-Mantero,

2020). The benefits of Likert-type scales is that it allows for easy numerical data collection and analysis. Likewise, using a Likert-scale allows for further generalization and statistical power (Alkhawaldeh, 2023).

The participation selection were individuals aged 18-22 with familial ties to East Asian heritage. This primarily includes individuals who are Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, South Korean, Taiwanese, and other East Asian Americans who have lived in the United States since a young age of 0-11. The study emphasized the youth experiences that the participants had experienced, which furthermore highlights the importance of having the participants being young adults. To further elaborate, since young adults were evaluated instead of high schoolers or adults, the supports. With them being at the age that is entering adulthood, the participants are experiencing the common dilemma of figuring out what type of adult they would like to be. Likewise, this includes how they ask for help and cope with their mental health problems—including the conundrum of attempting to reach out for professional help—or not. Participants were pulled from East Asian American communities, such as Korean churches, Asian organizations, and more. I looked into social media Asian organizations that colleges had. Additionally, the participants were mainly from Southwestern United States. The questionnaire was advertised through word of mouth and social media encouraging East Asian American young adults to take the survey. Social media such as Discord, Tiktok, and Instagram were utilized to get the survey distributed.

Participants were informed of the risks involved, being emotional distress. The questions on the survey included personal, stressful questions. Therefore, all participants were informed of the contents of the survey prior to starting the questionnaire. They were told that they were allowed to stop answering questions at any time without consequence. The data was collected from various regions in the Southwestern parts of the United States. Participants were primarily from California and Nevada, heavily Asian condensed states. The survey was electronically distributed, which meant that the participants were free to participate in the study on their own account.

RESULTS

In total, the survey had 31 participants. All of them consented and agreed that they met the age requirement of 18-22 years old. The sample predominantly consisted of Korean (35.5%), Chinese (29%), and Mixed Heritage individuals (19.4%), with the remaining ethnic groups of Japanese, Mongolian, and Taiwanese distributing the remaining backgrounds. The majority of the participants (71%) aligned themselves with being generation 2+, individuals who were born in the United States but have parents who were born abroad (Ziyanak, 2015). There was a noteworthy amount of 19.4% individuals who identified themselves as generation 1.5 and the remaining 9.7% as first generation. The gender backgrounds of the survey were fairly equal, with 58.1% identifying as male and 41.9% as female. The question “what region are you residing in” resulted in the majority of the participants being from the West coast (83.9%) with limited representation in the Northeast, South, and no representation from the Midwest.

There was a question that asked the participant what region they were raised in for the majority of their childhood, however after further research, it was found that this question was irrelevant to my topic, and could be disregarded. It is important to note that many of the participants were raised in the Western United States though, where a few outliers were raised on the Northeast coast, or in their Asian country. The significance of background questions is to fully understand the participants, as while all participants are in fact considered East Asian American, different ethnic cultures still exist within their own ethnicity, meaning that having an overly general population would be hindering the study's results.

In the questions regarding the main section of the study, a 5-point likert scale was utilized. The likert scale ranged from "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree", "Neither Agree nor Disagree", "Agree", and "Strongly Agree". A likert scale allowed for a simple and powerful method to measure attitudes with surveys (Batterton, 2017). All questions were optional, however, it is important to note that all participants answered every question available throughout the questionnaire.

It is also important to note that the high number of second-generation participants (71%) suggests that many of the participants were raised in competitive environments due to their parents' being first-generation. This highlights that the familial influence on their children are significant, and that cultural beliefs will always prosper over societal changes (Shih, 1988). These often get cultivated and internalized, leading to a reinforced stigma that carries from such a vulnerably young age. This additionally correlates with the question involving the participants' parental figure encouraging the utilization of professional mental health services and/or counseling, where 29/31 participants (93.5%) agreed that their parent does not reinforce the idea of seeking professional help. This not only contributes to a repeated, perpetuated cycle of negative attitudes towards these services, but fortifies the idea that these services will be met by disappointment of their family.

CONCLUSION

The findings strongly support the original hypothesis, that having higher levels of internalized cultural stigma is associated with a lower willingness to seek professional mental health support. The data in the study furthermore revealed consistent patterns of limited openness towards vulnerability regarding mental health concerns, with a higher level of internalized stigma. This stigma was not only cultivated from the participants' family, but also non East Asian American individuals. Many participants reinforced the idea that stigma is pent up, then relayed generationally, perpetuating a repeating cycle of silence and avoidance; to the point that emotional suppression is normalized within these cultures.

There is a significant role of cultural expectations, along with external social pressures. The Model Minority Myth proves true, that individuals within these cultures are committed to appearing self-reliant and emotionally resilient, cultivating a negative stigma towards seeking help. These pressures that are upheld within East Asian American communities and external communities both contribute to internalized beliefs that negatively discourage individuals from appearing as "weak" (Park, 2025). However, the most important factor is parental influence. There was an overwhelming number of

participants within each question that reported having a high parental influence on negative viewpoints towards therapy or counseling. This emphasizes the importance of openness within family dynamics, suggesting that interventions must also target familial level attitudes, not just individuals of the culture themselves.

The study most directly proves that having open communication within East Asian American families can increase positive attitudes towards mental help-seeking. It could cultivate less stigma within these communities, and improve help-seeking behaviors for the better. This further means that breaking cycles of silence and avoidance could further improve future generations. Using effective communication, blocking out stigma, and allowing vulnerability and acceptance may further the advancement of positive mental help-seeking attitudes within the entirety of East Asian communities everywhere.

Future researchers should consider possible mixed-method research methods. The benefit for both quantitative and qualitative is that it allows for in depth information on personal experiences, while still having a numerical significance behind the results. It would allow for future researchers to look further into how attitudes and help-seeking behaviors can be shaped by different factors, such as parental and familial perspectives. Additionally, future researchers could spend more time into the significance of media portrayal in shaping stereotypes, influencing stereotypes such as the Model Minority Myth. It could provide further insight into how external factors, created by non East Asian American individuals, could shape internalized stigma. With this new information, it could allow for further information in regards to how East Asian American communities could effectively churn mental health disparities to a universal positive light in these communities.

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