WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT FAMILIES
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR COUNSELORS

EDITED BY
Adam Zagelbaum and Jon Carlson
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Working With Asian Immigrant Families, Part I: Far East, Southeast Asia, and Pacific Islands

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The term *Asian* refers to those having origins of the native people of the Far East, Southeast Asia, and Indian subcontinent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b). The U.S. Census Bureau (2004b) included Cambodia, China, Bangladesh, Burma (now known as Myanmar), India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Another common term used is *Pacific Islander*, which refers to those having origins in any original people of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands such as Fiji or Tahiti. Within the
United States, it is common for these two groups to be lumped together, as the term often appears *Asian and Pacific Islander*. For the purpose of this chapter, we are referring to those immigrants whose ancestors or origins come from both the Asian continent and the Pacific Islands as Asian immigrants. The term *Oriental* is outdated, and many Asian American clients may perceive it as an insult or insensitive. They may in return view the counselors using the term as culturally uninformed, which jeopardizes the counselors’ own rapport-building efforts. A more acceptable term, *Asian American*, is represented by some 43 different ethnic groups of people originated from a large geographic area. As a group, Asian Americans lack homogeneity, and there are large within-group differences as exemplified by the very concept of diversity (Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

**Demographic Description**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in March 2002, there were about 12.5 million Asian and Pacific Islanders who lived in the United States. This represents some 4.4% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In the United States, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipinos, Korean, and Vietnamese together made up about 80% of the Asian American population. Chinese was the largest group, representing some 24% of the Asian American population, followed by Filipinos, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Korean. In terms of the location in which Asian Americans lived in the United States, the U.S. Census Bureau (2004b) stated that 51% of them lived in the West, 19% lived in the South, 12% lived in the Midwest, and 19% lived in the Northeast. Nearly 95% of all Asians lived in metropolitan areas, and some 76% of Asian Americans are foreign born. Asian Americans alone constitute more than a quarter of the foreign-born population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

The Chinese were among the first Asians who came to the United States in the 1850s to build the transcontinental railroad or work in the gold mines, mainly in California. About at the same time period, Japanese came to work in the sugar plantations of Hawaii, and some moved on to California. They were followed by Koreans and Filipinos. Asian Indians started coming to the United States in the early 1900s. Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians came in the late 1970s; many of them had to flee their countries in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Asian Americans, whether they are immigrants, refugees, or American born and have been in the United States for generations, are still struggling with racism and discrimination issues. As an extreme example, this author was fortunate
to run into Dr. Ronald Takaki, a renowned professor of multicultural education and best-selling author. He shared his personal experience of how some in his audience of public lectures came backstage to commend him on his ability to speak English with no foreign accent and the shock they had when he informed them that he is a sixth-generation American (R. Takaki, personal communication, April 14, 1999). Perhaps it was because his physical appearance, look, and demeanor were exemplified as “Oriental.” The issues of having the feeling or perception of not being accepted as “full Americans” and continuing to be regarded as “foreigners” by society at large continue to play into the psychic of many Asian Americans to this day. Sue and Sue (2008) revealed the result of a survey of a representative sample of some 1,000 adults undertaken by the Committee of 100 to determine their attitudes toward Asian Americans. The dominant perception of adult Americans, as revealed by the survey about Chinese Americans, is that Chinese Americans would be more loyal to China than to the United States, with the examples of over half of the people surveyed believing that Chinese Americans would pass secret information to China, a quarter of the sample would disapprove someone in their family to marry an Asian American, and some 17% would be upset if Asian Americans moved into their neighborhood. Recognizing the institutional racism, the California legislature approved a bill on July 17, 2009, to apologize to the state’s Chinese American community for racist laws enacted as far back as 1849 (Liu, 2009).

However, on the flip side of the coin, Asian Americans are also hailed as a “model minority” in affirming and realizing the widely held concept of achieving the “American dream.” Kluger (2009) reported a presentation at the annual convention of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco of research by Jeffrey Timberlake of the University of Cincinnati and Rhys Williams of Loyola University Chicago who surveyed 2,100 Ohioans to gauge the overall public perception of immigrants. The results indicated that Asians were uniformly ranked first in the wealth, intelligence, and self-sufficiency categories relative to Europeans, Middle Easterners, and Latinos. On average, Asian Americans when compared to any other ethnic group in the United States attain more education and have a higher proportion (45%) concentrated in managerial and professional specialty occupations, relative to 34% of the total population. The U.S. Census Bureau (2004b) stated that in 2000, 44% of Asian Americans aged 25 and older had a college or professional degree, compared to only 28% of the White population and 24% of the total population that had achieved that level of education. The census data in 1997 revealed that 58% of Americans who descended from natives of the Indian subcontinent had undergraduate, graduate, or professional degrees (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Asian Americans are much more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree (51% compared to 32% of non-Hispanic Whites), and the U.S. Census Bureau (2003) reported
that in 2002, 87% of the 7.9 million Asian Americans aged 25 and older have earned at least a high school diploma. The average family income for Asian Americans tends to be higher than the national average. The median income of Asian families was over $9,000 higher than the median income for all families ($59,000 compared to $50,000) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b). Asian Indian and Japanese families’ median income were more than $10,000 higher than that of all Asian families, with Cambodian, Hmong, Korean, Laotian, Pakistanis, Thai, and Vietnamese family incomes substantially lower than the median for all Asian families. However, some subgroups of Asian Americans, namely, Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotians, did not have high educational attainment, and the poverty rates for Asians is similar to those of total population, with Hmong having the highest individual poverty rates, followed by Cambodians (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b). Therefore, as we look behind the success myth, there exists a wide variation in the economic attainment of Asian Americans as a group (Takaki, 1989; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). This is a prime example of the danger of stereotyping, because 17% of Asian and Pacific Islander families had incomes of less than $25,000 compared to 15% of non-Hispanic Whites families, which in turn means that Asian and Pacific Islanders are more likely to live in poverty than non-Hispanic Whites.

**Immigration Experience**

Counselors working with Asian immigrants need to be mindful that individual Asian immigrants may have different migration experiences. Chung, Bemak, Ortiz, and Sandoval-Perez (2008) stated that the immigration process itself is filled with a series of complex stressors that affect the mental health and quality of life of immigrant populations. Not all immigrants migrate voluntarily. The factors affecting their migration experiences may range from escaping the tyranny of a brutal regime for social and political security to seeking more freedom and economic and educational opportunities in the United States. The immigrants’ experiences of coming to the United States can also be diverse. They range from immigrants having suffered a complete loss of all their possessions or a loss of close family members, to having to risk their life and witness their fellow refugees die in their attempts to escape oppressive regimes, to dealing with other horrific events. The traumatic journey can take its toll on the immigrants and their families, especially those without a social network of support. Regardless of their migration circumstances, they must adapt to survive and prosper in the new land. This adaptation process is often gradual and slow, and it forces the immigrants to cope with a set of different beliefs and behaviors in every facet.
of their lives such as child rearing, family structure, gender roles, religious practices, and others. These beliefs, behaviors, and lifestyles are often in sharp contrast with their familiar cultural beliefs and behaviors. The adaptation process requires the immigrants to learn, understand, and internalize the new culture to the extent that it becomes familiar, controllable, and supportive.

Migrating from one country to another and learning how to adapt to the new place is much like being on a continuum with two extremes: enculturation and acculturation. Enculturation is a process of retaining one’s indigenous cultural values, behaviors, knowledge, and identity. Thus, those who are closer to this end of the continuum, that is, enculturation, are perceived to adhere more to Asian cultural values such as collectivism, conformity to the norms, deference to authority figures, emotional restraint, filial piety, hierarchical family structure, and humility (Chung et al., 2008; Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999; Sue & Sue 2008). The opposite or contrasting end of the spectrum is acculturation, which is a process of adaptation to the dominant U.S. cultural norms. Thus, we see some Asian immigrants who completely identify with mainstream American culture, whereas others may develop adaptive bicultural identification that enables them to feel comfortable and functional within mainstream American culture as well as their culture of origin. Still there are those who continue to feel uncomfortable with life in the United States and instead choose to live and work exclusively within the confines of an ethnic enclave (Hong & Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2008). For the immigrant families, this transgenerational process takes each successive generation one step further toward acculturation, with the second generation usually being more acculturated than the first, and the third generation one step more acculturated than the previous two (Chung et al., 2008; Hong & Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2001). Kim and Omizo (2003) suggested that Asian Americans who strongly adhere to Asian cultural values tend to have less positive attitudes about seeking help and are less willing to see a counselor relative to those who do not adhere strongly to Asian cultural values. Kim, Ng, and Ahn (2009), however, concluded in their study of 61 Asian American clients at a counseling center at a large university on the West Coast that client adherence to Asian cultural values was not a significant predictor of counseling session outcome.

The Family

Generally, a dominant Asian cultural milieu is that of collectivism as opposed to individualism, a dominant cultural milieu in the United States. Collectivism emphasizes close family ties, hierarchy, and order as opposed to independence and autonomy of the individual. Asians’ concept of family and how they define
family may differ from that of counselors coming from mainstream American culture. The family relationships are often closer than those in mainstream American families. For instance, the concepts of being overly close or enmeshed or lacking boundaries may be interpreted differently by counselors from mainstream American culture than by their Asian immigrant families who come from an Asian cultural background. These two different frames of reference are what make it more challenging to counsel Asian immigrant families. For example, clients from Asian culture, especially those adhering very closely to Asian values, may exhibit interpersonal reliance and dependency. Although these may be considered healthy cultural norms in Asian culture, the same cannot be said in mainstream American culture. Counselors with a mainstream American cultural background who are not sufficiently knowledgeable of these cultural norms can easily and inadvertently diagnose Asian immigrants as having a dependent personality disorder (Chung et al., 2008). Another example of cultural norms is that first cousins are often viewed and presented as if they are siblings by Asian immigrants. It is a common experience or practice for cousins to grow up and be raised in the same household, typically cared for by the grandmother or eldest uncle or aunt. For some who are from a Muslim culture, the fact that two infants were breast-fed by the same woman makes them siblings for their entire lives. Thus, the worldview of Asian immigrants in terms of family relationships and whom they consider as members of their family may differ relative to mainstream Americans.

Asian immigrant families tend to be more hierarchical and patriarchal than mainstream American families (Hong & Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2008). Asian Americans are more likely to live in households that are composed exclusively of family members. In 2004, 76% of Asian Americans live in this family household arrangement compared to 67% of non-Hispanic White and African American households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004a). They place more emphasis on the authority of parents over children and of the older sibling over younger siblings. Other than the fact that communication flows downward, the tradition dictates deference to the elders. For instance, a married son’s primary allegiance (family loyalty) remains with his parents, as opposed to the circumstances in contemporary mainstream American culture. Sue and Sue (2008) also pointed to the roles of the mother in a family system among Asian Americans, among which is to serve and mediate communication within the unit. Troubled Asian Americans typically rely on their mothers to transmit messages to their fathers. Within this context, it is common to see adult Asian immigrants asking for and valuing the opinions of their parents or older siblings and relatives who are still overseas when making important decisions here in the United States.

Taking into account how culture shapes or influences the expression and recognition of various psychological distress, counselors take into account the
family’s worldview and level of acculturation. The case in point is a common dilemma Asian immigrants and their families are facing during family counseling sessions. Because of their hierarchical culture, Asian immigrants may feel uneasy about disclosing their issues in the presence of their children, and the children may feel it is improper to expose their parents’ problems in their presence (Hong & Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2001). Sue and Sue (2008) pointed out that public display of strong emotions are considered to be signs of weakness in terms of maturity or a lack of personal control. Thus, the father may appear peripheral to mainstream American counselors, whereas within the context of Asian cultural milieu, he is properly maintaining his role and position within the unit by remaining authoritative and distant and not appearing to be emotionally demonstrative or involved with his children. Sue and Sue (2008) cautioned counselors working with Asian Americans to be careful in using counseling microskills that focus directly on emotions, as it may be uncomfortable and a shame-producing event for traditional Asian Americans. Those emotions can be addressed but in an indirect manner. For example, rather than placing emphasis on the client by saying, “You look troubled,” a more face-saving statement about the generality or the event instead of the person is preferable, such as “This predicament would make anyone troubled.”

Often, the children of Asian immigrants who are raised and educated in the United States are more proficient in and become more identified with mainstream American culture relative to their parents, who tend to have stronger memories and emotional ties to their Asian cultural roots. At the same time, the children are being bombarded with messages from peers, schools, and the mass media championing that Western standards are superior and better than their own. How they adapt to the majority culture and at the same time retain their connection to their culture of origin can produce enough stress within the individual and the family. Okubo, Yeh, Lin, Fujita, and Shea (2007) quoted a scenario in which Asian youths behave in their negotiation and balance their bicultural living by being more “American” outside of their home and being more “Chinese” or “Indian” at home. This dual living can be stressful and exhausting and becomes more important when making critical choices such as future career plans, dating, and marriage (Okubo et al., 2007). Often during counseling sessions, these intergenerational mixed with acculturation conflicts play themselves when immigrant youths accuse their parents of being old-fashioned or controlling, and the parents complain that their children are rebellious or corrupted by the host American culture. This cultural gap creates friction that can be intense enough to lead to family conflicts. These parent–child conflicts are the most common presenting problems for Asian American college students seeking counseling (Lee, Su, & Yoshida, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2008). In their study of 8 Chinese American youths with a median age of 16.8 years ($SD = 1.36$) in New York City
with the number of years in the United States ranging from 1 to 16, Okubo et al. (2007) found that other than cultural values and cultural expectation, Asian youths do consider their individual interests and familial expectations when making career-related decisions. The youths also factored in issues such as maintaining the family reputation, saving face, caring for parents, and respecting elders’ wishes as well as their own goals in their chosen profession.

Asian American children often face greater pressure to succeed academically, and they have more fear of academic failures when compared to their European American counterparts (Sue & Sue, 2008). Schools in Asia are much more structured and regimented with stricter rules and regulations relative to the public schools in the United States. In Asian countries, students are typically required to wear school uniforms. In the classroom, students may stay quiet and listen to teachers. The open discussion format, flexibility, and egalitarian and participatory atmosphere in American public schools could be a source of confusion for Asian American immigrants. Asian American students tend to spend twice as much time each week on academic work compared to non–Asian American students, but they also report feeling isolated, depressed, anxious, and that they receive little or no praise for their accomplishment (Kao, 1995; Sue & Sue, 2008). Asian American parents may have specific career goals in mind for their children, usually in technical fields or hard sciences (Okubo et al., 2007; Sue & Sue, 2008). Often this is merely a reflection on the part of the parents about their expectations and insistence and that they appear to be oblivious to the individual child’s talent or interest. Hong and Domokos-Cheng Ham (2001) pointed out an often-occurring misunderstanding between Asian immigrant parents and public school teachers centered on the parents’ complaints of their children not having enough homework assigned to them, whereas the teachers advised them not to put too much academic pressure on their children. Asian Americans place high value on education, and the successful performance of their children is viewed as an affirmation and validation of their good parenting skills along with an expectation of moving toward achieving higher social status within the community. Thus parents often have high expectations for their children to achieve academically, and from an Asian collectivistic perspective, education of children is also an investment in a family’s future (Hong & Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2001; Sue & Sue, 2008).

Counseling Issues

Asian collectivist tradition does not distinguish the mind and body. It places a premium of maintaining social and familial harmony. Often, the route Asian Americans take toward that end is by discouraging their open display of
emotions and avoiding exposure of personal weakness. Asians Americans are taught to deny the experience and expression of emotions. It is more acceptable to express psychological distress through the body. This cultural attribute contributes to a large amount of expression of somatic symptoms among Asian Americans when compared to White Americans (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). In other words, Asian Americans do not necessarily suppress or repress affective symptoms, but rather it is the context in which what is being presented and how it is presented. For example, a Chinese client may display somatic symptom such as aches and pains or fatigue to a clinician but show depressive symptoms to others. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) acknowledged that our present knowledge of the counseling needs of Asian Americans is very limited and that Asian Americans have the lowest rates of utilization of mental health services among ethnic group populations. In a study of 242 Asian American college students at a large mid-Atlantic university and a large university in Hawaii, Kim and Omizo (2003) showed an inverse relationship between adherence to Asian cultural values and attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. The study also showed the same inverse relationship between adherence to Asian cultural values and willingness to see a counselor. The study by Gloria, Castellanos, Park, and Kim (2008) supported this contention that decreased adherence to cultural values was predictive of increased help-seeking attitudes among second-generation Korean American undergraduates.

Migration experience and adjustment challenge the very structure and organization of the family as a unit. Asian immigrant families may find that their traditional Asian family structure is no longer sustainable in this new adopted land. For example, Asian immigrant children, influenced by the values of mainstream American society, may demand greater autonomy and treatment along a continuum ranging from less than hierarchical to egalitarian than culturally permitted in traditional Asia settings. On the other hand, the first-generation Asian immigrants are struggling in their negotiations to balance the past and all those cultural backgrounds and attachments with the pragmatic present. Remember, when the newer generation is asking the older generation to redefine themselves, it touches the core of the individual’s self-identity and hence the presence of a robust energy within each of the holon of the entire system, a dynamic that counselors have to grapple with when providing counseling services.

For immigrant couples who have to leave their parents behind in Asia, their inability to care for aging parents may create constant feelings of guilt, especially when they have no other siblings there to assume the responsibility. Some may choose to sponsor their aging parents to immigrate and live with them in the United States. At their advanced age, the older parents often find it difficult to
adjust to the new lifestyle and culture in the United States, and for the couple, the entry of their parents into the nuclear family will change their life patterns. Asian immigrants are not immune to universal issues such as in-laws and generation conflict. Thus, the solution about caring for older parents can be stressful for both the couple and their older parents.

There are family rituals that Asian immigrants are accustomed to, and they face an agonizing dilemma surrounding developmental issues such as births, weddings, and deaths. The rituals as practiced in mainstream American cultures may seem insufficient and inadequate for some Asian Americans, and they are left feeling guilty and despondent over their inability to carry out the full gamut of rituals as they experienced in their native land. They often travel to their home countries to continue and follow up with a more elaborate and “corrected version” of the rituals. Rituals such as welcoming a newborn or planning a wedding can be postponed, but a funeral has a special urgency and meaning, hence its profound effects on the immigrants. (Hong & Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2001)

Issues for Counselors

Engaging Asian immigrants in counseling poses a unique challenge for counselors. Counselors need to become more responsive to a culturally adapted counseling approach when counseling Asian immigrants who tend to retain strong cultural values (Kim et al., 2009; Portland, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2008). The structural approach in counseling Asian immigrants, with its emphasis less on insights but more on behavioral changes and the interventions that focus on a family's organization and its communication in the present, seems closer to the Asian cultural milieu. Hammond and Nichols (2008) recommended that counselors use a collaborative partnership approach, although seemingly known for its forceful directive interventions, in their attempts to make their interventions effective. To be effective when working with immigrant families, counselors must develop self-awareness of their own feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about immigrants and working with them (Portland, 2009). Counselors need to be flexible and practical to provide effective interventions that are focused and clear and to learn about their clients and the particulars of the family's culture in terms of roles, rules, values, and relationships (Portland, 2009; Poulsen, 2009). The goal of the intervention is for the clients to develop new perspectives that will lead them to adopt new actions, not by pushing clients to change but by understanding and affirming them via reaching and motivating them to accept responsibilities for changing their behaviors (Hammond & Nichols, 2008). The prerequisite, according to Hammond and Nichols (2008), is for the counselors
to make active efforts to elicit and acknowledge what their clients think and feel and, at the same time, work as respectful collaborative partners before embarking on the tasks of challenging them to change. As helping professionals, counselors are working in a constant state of mediating the influences of cultural forces within self, clients, and others, and within this context, they must be proactive in responding to the needed knowledge, awareness, and skills necessary to be of service to their clients (Portman, 2009).

From the outset, when a counselor forms an alliance with his or her clients, the goals have always been to free the identified patient of the symptoms, to reduce conflict and stress for the family, and for the family to learn new ways of coping (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Counselors must consider the behaviors, values, and priorities relating to other developmental landmarks such as dating practices, marriage, and gender roles in the context of cultural backgrounds of their Asian American clients (Madathil & Sandhu, 2008). At the same time, this subtle process enables the counselor to gather data about the family’s existing hierarchies, values, and norms while affirming and acknowledging each member of the family. In a roundabout way, the joining process is conducive to the Asian cultural milieu, taking into account the Asian immigrant clients’ cultural expectations such as the counselor is a professional with expert knowledge and that he or she respects the hierarchical structure of common patriarchal Asian families. The counselor is letting the clients know that he or she understands them and is working with and for them. Generally, these attempts by the counselor to gain acceptance and admission to the family are viewed as congruent with what typical Asian immigrants expect from counseling.

Asian immigrants tend to define their presenting problems in concrete terms, and they expect the counselor, being an expert, to provide them with solutions. Coming for counseling treatment may be viewed as bringing shame to the family. Mental and emotional disorders carry a stigma within the community. Guilt and shame within the context of Asian “loss of face” carry a big stick that implies that the entire family is losing respect and status within the community when one of them is shamed. That identified patient is then positioned in an untenable place and is under heavy pressure to keep the harmony and order within the unit by minimizing any conflicts and problems that could shame and bring guilt to the family (Chung et al., 2008; Ho, 1990; Kim et al., 1999; Sue & Sue, 2008). Thus, a counselor needs to carefully balance his or her attempts to identify the problem while appearing to respect the client’s cultural background in a congruent manner. Often, the client’s initial description of the presenting problems may appear to the counselor as one in which the client externalizes the root causes and spends a lot of time complaining and blaming. It is not uncommon to hear a client who lost his job to attribute such loss to his wife’s inability...
to execute household chores and duties or to attribute their child’s poor school performances on the wife’s spoiling and babying the child too much.

In the context of Asian immigrants’ cultural milieu, the counselor can use the techniques of relabeling, reframing, and therapeutic paradox in his or her attempt to interrupt the sequences of problem-generating behaviors of family members. This attempt is congruent with the concept of “saving face” but is deemed more important in the context of collectivistic, hierarchical family structure of Asian immigrants in which no one in the family is blamed for the sequences of problematic behavior, but instead the expert, in the person of counselor, continues to honor and respect each member of the family by affirming their roles and place in the unit. Counselors need to relabel or reframe the behavioral sequence of the presenting problems to make solutions of the presenting problems appear doable and within the capability and competence of the family. Once the family buys this, it is easier to move gradually to other issues beyond the presenting problems. The counselor, being accepted as an expert by the clients, can easily encourage the members to interact with each other and with the counselor. The counselor can observe the process through which the presenting problems often emerge. On occasion, the counselor will be called to intensify the current transactions to gauge the family’s understanding and acceptance of challenges and the ways they perceive reality. The counselor regulates the transactions in terms of affect, repetition, and duration. Observing interactions within the session is the hallmark of the systemic approach of counseling. Counselors adopting this approach may attempt to shape the competence of the family members in taking care of themselves (without the presenting problem) from the very moment when they meet the family and begin the counseling relationship (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006).

Often, an ability to converse in English can place the family unit in a hierarchical inversion situation, especially when the parents are unable to speak or master the language (e.g., English), and they have to rely on their children to translate, a dynamic that often inverses the traditional hierarchical structure of the family. The parents will find themselves more isolated from mainstream institutions and have to rely on and become dependent on their children to connect to the outside world. This hierarchical inversion can have a destructive effect on the family. Just as it is an awesome task for each of the family members to adjust to the new environment, it is also an equally challenging task for the counselor to formulate effective intervention strategies acceptable to the family members. It can either make or break the counseling relationship with this family.

Counselors also need to be careful when asking each family member to describe what he or she perceives of the family patterns. Often the response is very much influenced by factors such as whether a family member was born and raised
in Asia or born in the United States. Hong and Domokos-Cheng Ham (2001) illustrated such instances in which the parents, born and raised in Asia, may identify a family pattern of responsibility and sacrifice and hence the discipline (“I did that for your own good,” “It hurts me more than you ever know when I punish you”), a theme consistent with Asian cultural values, whereas the children, born and raised in the United States, may identify the same values by relabeling them as stifling restriction, authoritarian, and perhaps downright abusive.

The transactions within the family may reveal the fact that the children, exposed to the egalitarian concept in the mainstream culture, expected to be asked instead of being told, and the parents may perceive such a request as akin to reducing their position within the familial hierarchy or downgrading their status or perhaps perceive it as an act of teenage rebelliousness, defiance, or downright disrespectfulness. In their attempts to reestablish and maintain such traditional hierarchical structure, and not reduce their stature as parents by acquiescing to the demands of the teenage children, they will continue with the same old family patterns to maintain control, hence perpetuating the homeostasis. A keen counselor can detect such scenarios when the observed member starts using the words “demand” or “telling” as opposed to “let’s see” or “asking.” It is incumbent on the counselor to be conscientious in tracking all of these family patterns and in formulating culturally appropriate treatment plans and goals.

When working with recent Asian American families, counselors need to be aware of the within-group diversity and how they relate to the counseling process. Acculturation issues remain a focus that counselors must assess throughout the counseling sessions.

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