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Implications of American Acculturation on Asian Immigrants' Likelihood of Depression

Societies across the globe are experiencing rapid shifts in the prevalence and forms of mental health issues (Liu et al., 2020). Unfortunately, these changes have often been for the worse (Liu et al., 2020). A study on the evolution of mental health prevalence indicates that depression has increased globally by around 50% over 27 years (Liu et al., 2020). However, the rapid increase of mental health problems did not rise concertedly across the globe. Countries associated with 'Western culture,' such as the United States, led in the increase of mental health issues before other countries and their respective national identities (Kessler et al., 2013). The Western Pacific Region accounted for the majority of global depression diagnoses, making up 27% of depression cases in the world (World Health Organization (WHO), 2017). This suggests that Western culture is predisposed to hosting and contributing to more mental health issues. By extension, this may also imply that migrants acclimating to Western culture would be at a greater risk of depression as a direct result of accepting Western culture. Analysis of the prevalence of depression of Asians several years after migrating to the United States can effectively determine Western culture's influence on public mental health.

The mental health of Asian migrants is a valuable indicator of the impacts of Western acculturation as they are the fastest-growing minority group in the U.S. and have some of the lowest rates of depression prior to emigrating (Census Redistricting and Voting Rights Data Office, 2021 & WHO, 2017). These factors would better account for the mental health

implications of migrant acculturation for multiple reasons. For one, the high growth rate of Asian immigrants in the U.S. acts as a sufficiently large sample to gather data and base conclusions. Additionally, Asian cultures are often associated with collectivism, while Western culture often appeals to individualism (Tremmel, 2019). Studies have suggested that these factors are potentially significant determinants of the depression discrepancies across cultures, which may better explain the mental health effects of Asian immigrants after moving to the U.S. (Tremmel, 2019). Acculturation accounts for higher depression rates of Asian immigrants after migrating to the U.S., but this is not largely due to realignment with Western individualistic culture. Instead, it is due to the loss of a robust cultural identification as a whole.

Empirical data on the rates of depression among Asian American migrants suggests that American acculturation burdens the mental health of Asian migrants (Kalibatseva et al., 2018 & WHO, 2017). The rate of depression in the three most populated Asian countries averaged 2.1%, considerably below the world average of 4.4% (Kalibatseva et al., 2018). As of 2020, the United States has the second-greatest rate of overall depression in the world at 6.4% (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020). Asians in the United States have exhibited a rate of depression of 4.5%, below the national average but still notably higher than Asia's rate of depression (Kim HJ et al., 2019). These primary sources indicate that Asians who have acclimated to Western culture have experienced a great increase in their risks of depression during acculturation. However, these figures include Asians who have spent most of their entire lives in the United States. In the interest of examining the impact of American acculturation on migrants who were previously acclimated to Asian culture, depression rates need to be narrowed down to recent Asian American migrants specifically. A 2020 study accomplished this by surveying recent Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese individuals immigrating to the United States.

The study found that “...the likelihood of being moderately to severely depressed was significantly increased among [these] immigrants living in the US for < 10 years,” (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3). An average of 29.8% of surveyed immigrants felt they had mild depressive symptoms, while 7.7% identified with severe symptoms (Lee et al., 2020). Both of these findings greatly exceed the national average and Asian origin average. These findings indicate that certain Asian immigrants that experience acculturation in the United States have a higher chance of becoming depressed.

Differences between specific Asian subcultures, however, may account for sizable contrasts in their respective likelihood of being depressed following American acculturation. In fact, immigrants identifying with cultures of various geographical regions in Asia had high variations in depression rates following immigration (Misra et al., 2020). A 2020 study utilized need-assessment surveys for Asian migrants in New York City to measure their mental health status, blocking a total of 16 subculture groups. The study found that Southeast Asians had the highest risk of depression (19%), followed by South Asians (11%) and East Asians (9%) (Misra et al., 2020). These sizable differences in the risk of depression indicate that the measured likelihood of depression is highly variable based on specific subculture identification. In each of these 16 groups, their risk of becoming depressed was higher due to immigration (Misra et al., 2020). This research indicates that regardless of the differences in depression rates associated with Asian subculture identification, Asian American immigrants are generally still more likely to become more depressed after experiencing acculturation. At the same time, this evidence supports that the specific geographical origin of Asian American immigrants is a significant determinant of the extent to which the likelihood of acculturation-related depression is exacerbated. Certain Asian subculture identification may protect better against depression than

others due to differences in cultural beliefs and positive social stigma surrounding mental health, accounting for the aforementioned findings.

Acculturation and its impact on immigrant depression can be further determined based on the strengths of one's acceptance of Western culture. A study associated the strength of Asian immigrants' identification of either Western or Asian culture with their likelihood of depression (Gupta et al., 2013). In the interest of accounting for subculture identification, the study used 38 alternate research projects that focused on different individual Asian subcultures and geographic locations to base its conclusions (Gupta et al., 2013). The results indicated a negative relationship between Asian immigrants' identification with Western culture and their likelihood of depression (Gupta et al., 2013). Contrary to expectations, the results of this study may pose a counterargument that suggests that Western acculturation has no (or possibly an inverse effect) on the prevalence of depression. However, this assertion does not consider how acculturation may weaken immigrants' identification with any culture. In fact, the same study concluded that "these effect sizes suggest that orientation toward any culture is a positive concept, " (Gupta et al., 2013, p. 6). From this theory, what appears to be more impactful to the prevalence of depression among Asian immigrants is not their adoption of Western culture and loss of original cultural identification but rather the transition between self-identification with their original culture and Western culture. This narrative is consistent with research findings; the intermediate phase, where recent Asian immigrants' alignment to either Asian or Western culture was weak or ambiguous, was where the highest level of depression occurred (Gupta et al., 2013). Rather than concluding that complete cultural assimilation of Asian immigrants into Western culture results in higher rates of depression, the aforementioned evidence supports a different statement. The diminished cultural identification (regardless of which culture) that occurs within the

acculturation process is the predominant determinant of culture-related depression for Asian migrants.

It would be impossible to generalize these findings without consideration of recent world events impacting Asian American rates of depression. Two recent interrelated developments play a large role in the relationship between Asian American acculturation and their likelihood of depression. One is the COVID-19 pandemic, and the other is recent spikes in Asian American racism and hate crimes. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the prevalence and expression of depression in minorities in ways that are not yet entirely understood. One study on COVID-19's effect on American mental health found that Asian Americans experienced a seven-fold increase in depression/anxiety prevalence compared to 2019 (Tiwari et al., 2021). Asian Americans were also generally more prone to depression compared to white (non-Hispanic), black, and Hispanic Americans, however this also varied by Asian subculture identification (Tiwari et al., 2021). This evidence demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted Asian Americans regarding their mental health. Reasons for this were also analyzed in the research paper, stating, "These differences in mental health impacts can be attributable to the combined effects of an increase in racial discrimination, social isolation, and already existing underutilization of mental health care," (Tiwari et al., 2021, p. 2). This brings up another significant issue of recent increased racial tension against Asian Americans and its impact on their mental health. According to a 2021 study on minority hate crimes, Asian American hate crimes have spiked 331% since the previous year (Zhou et al., 2021). Another 2021 study on the causes and effects of hate crimes on Asian Americans found that the rise in hate crimes is largely attributed to prejudice against Asian Americans associated with the origin of the COVID-19 virus (Lozano et al., 2021). This substantial recent increase in Asian American hate crimes may

skew the aforementioned findings, as increased violence and racism against Asian Americans are tied with reduced cultural association and a greater likelihood of depression (Lozano et al., 2021). By extension, Asian American intolerance may further depression as they experience disdain solely based on their cultural and ethnic identities. This may weaken cultural affinity as a whole within Asian Americans, prompting higher risks of depression.

Acculturation evidently plays a complex role in Asian migrant depression rates in the United States. While Asian Americans experience higher rates of depression following their emigration, acceptance of Western culture is not the largest determinant of their prevalence of depression. Rather, the increased depression rates of Asians after migrating to the U.S. are better explained by migrants becoming distanced from a clear cultural identification when experiencing acculturation. Immigrants may find dissonance with the cultural acceptance of both Western and their original cultural identity, increasing rates of depression from a lack of clear cultural identification and decreased social acceptance. The issue of acculturation on immigrant depression is not a particular problem of accepting Western principles and losing Asian culture identification; it is the state of lacking strong cultural identification regardless of what culture.

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