

**CHASING PERFECT**

**A PRIMER ON**

**ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN**

**AND PSYCHOLOGY**

## INTRODUCTION

Asian American psychology has grown in the past few decades, permeating ethnic studies curriculums and publications, and through the diligent work of Asian American associations devoted to providing resources to this often ignored group. Yet we have not seen it enter into regular discourse about psychology and there are still unaddressed issues in counseling and therapy related to Asian Americans. For this very reason, I have been working on a project with the Active Minds Foundation to study Asian American women at my college and their attitudes towards mental health and mental illness.

However, before I go into specific interviews and the ideas they've brought up, I had to go into the literature of Asian American psychology. This zine is an (incomplete) collection of common issues that Asian American women face.

I have not even touched upon violence in Asian communities, whether that's sexual violence or abuse. I have not touched upon mental disorders of any kind and the stigma associated with having them. I have not talked about non-Western conceptions of mental health and mental illness. However, I hope this zine will serve as a base from which to learn more.

## DIFFERENT GROUPS, DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS

Asian groups are diverse and have varied cultural identities that are informed by region, religious background, education, home life, class, etc. Even within the major regions – East, Southeast, and South Asia – there are different nuances. Although “Asian American” is the overarching political category for all of these different groups, it is challenging to generalize about the needs of this varied group. Keeping this in mind, I have grouped together some common themes of Asian American psychology and how they specifically affect women seeking help for mental health issues.

In my work, I have focused specifically on Asian American female college students attending Barnard College and Columbia University in the city of New York, but have read literature that surveys other groups of Asian Americans. This pamphlet, however, will focus on college-age second generation Asian American women and their intersectional identities as a way to open the conversation about Asian American mental health. There is still a lot to be discussed and explored, so by no means is this the definitive resource on all Asian American issues – it’s just a primer to take you where you need to go next!

## STIGMA

Mental health and counseling is a taboo topic among most Asian Americans. In younger generations, taking care of mental health is recognized as important, but accessing counseling services can still be challenging.

Miscommunication with family members, feeling like it would dishonor others, time, expense, thinking that it would be unhelpful or that the counselor would be judgmental, and feeling like one's problems are not "serious" enough are all common concerns. Misinterpretation by counselors of issues related to race may also be a concern.

Family members, whether they are new immigrants or not, may feel like these issues should be "kept in the family" to preserve face or say that mental illness doesn't exist. They also may believe that counselors and other services are part of larger systems of oppression – that they may use responses given in confidence to report on them or study them without their consent. This is especially a fear of undocumented immigrants and lower class people, who are classified as "vulnerable populations."

## MODEL MINORITY MYTH

The model minority myth is a collection of stereotypes about Asian Americans that categorize them as hardworking, quiet, obedient, and driven towards math and science. While these ideas may seem positive on the surface, they serve to exclude Asian Americans from leadership roles (because they don't have the "right type of skills"), take away their power as political agents, and separate them from other minority groups when trying to organize for societal change.

In counseling situations, these stereotypes can produce:

- Microaggressions by the therapist (i.e. not recognizing racial issues because racism is not "really" a problem for Asians)
- Discouraging people from seeking help because they see their problems as not important
- Dismissive attitudes from peers because "Asians don't get stressed/are good at everything/can get through it on their own"

## **MICROAGGRESSIONS**

Microaggressions are small acts of aggression and hate that can be based off of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. - sometimes they go unrecognized by the initiator, but they can build up over time and they are based off of stereotypes in the larger community. Microaggressions can be performed by anyone, including people in the group that is receiving the microaggression.

In the context of counseling services and mental healthcare, microaggressions can make the person receiving care feel alienated and unheard. If an Asian American woman approaches counseling, for example, and experiences a microaggression against her during the initial appointment, she may not choose to return. Therefore, both stigma and counselor-client relations can affect the way that Asian American women approach counseling.

In the next few pages, we'll go through some common types of microaggressions and how they affect mental healthcare.

## HONOR AND CLASS

Honor figures prominently for Asian American women – they have strong feelings of responsibility to their parents in that they must support them and occasionally mold themselves to represent their family to other people, whether this is in the context of representing them to other Asian Americans or in American society as “good citizens.” Asian Americans often only have one or two generations worth of family in the United States, which makes it very important that their children can bridge the line between being Americans and holding Asian values.

Class pressures are also involved in this idea of honor: while the stereotype of Asian Americans is that they are high-performing and therefore have higher incomes than even white families, many first generation immigrants are lower class and expect to sacrifice for their children to go on to have better lives. Honoring this attitude and making the best of oneself is very important to second generation Asian Americans – however, it must be done in the most discreet manner possible, often encouraging people not to talk about their families’ struggles or their own.

## FAMILIAL PRESSURES

Common familial pressures placed on Asian American women include pressures to achieve – whether that means a high-paying job or high academic degree – the pressure to be a “proper” woman, and the pressure to get married. Asian American women have the double pressure of being both socially *and* academically high-achieving; they must both be able to take care of household chores, provide financially for aging parents, and find an appropriate marriage partner.

South Asian females and Muslim females tend to have more pressures surrounding arranged marriage, even though all Asian females express some expectation by their families that they will get married in the future.





## BODY IMAGE

Asian American women, like other women, deal with body image issues; however, they experience an added layer of racialization that stress the importance of looks. Questions like:

- Do you look “Asian enough”?
- Do you look like the “right type” of Asian?
- How close are you to white beauty ideal?

Tensions between these three questions come up often – being too “whitewashed” is nearly as bad as being too fat or thin, too dark, having too small eyes or too short legs, wearing a hijab, having the wrong hair, etc.

## LGBT WOMEN

LGBT Asian Americans are made virtually invisible amongst first generation Asian immigrants, and second generation people may feel like they are living two lives when they are unable to tell their parents (common to a lot of the LGBT community, but because LGBT people are not even seen or their identity is viewed as a “choice” or “illness” in the Asian community, it may be even harder to come out to Asian parents).

Even amongst peers, acknowledging non-heterosexual relationships is challenging due to homophobic comments and the stereotype that only white people are LGBT.

Sex and dating before marriage are already viewed by many Asian families as Western or undesirable and so, as I have heard it stated before, “it is even hard to come out as straight/a sexual being to your parents, so coming out as LGBT is even more difficult.”

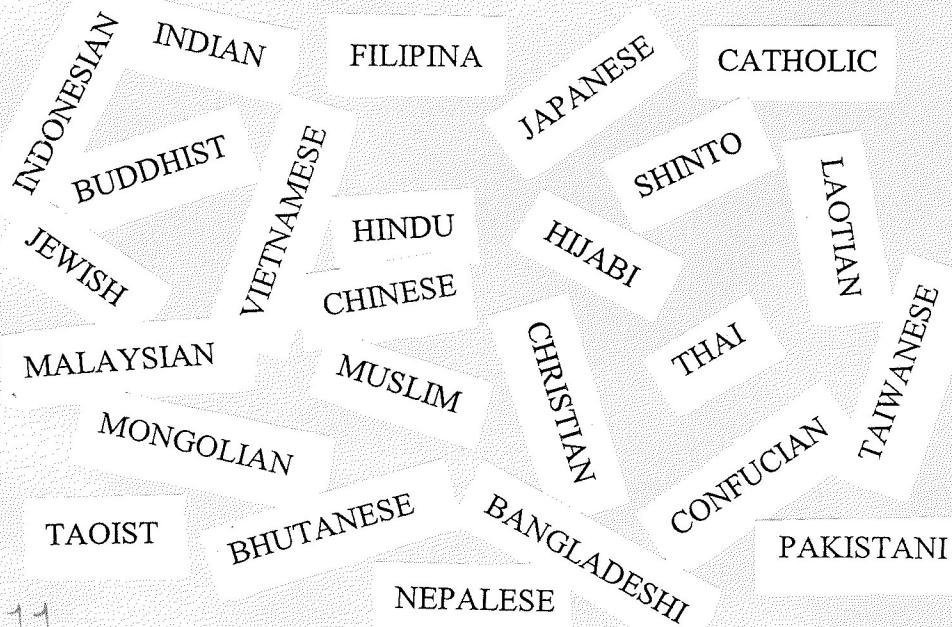
## FEMINISM AND THERAPY: CHALLENGES

While feminism has helped to make physical and mental healthcare more accessible and better address the needs of female patients, feminist approaches to therapy may obscure and contradict the experiences of Asian American women.

Western feminism, particularly in the United States, has been focused on the experiences of white women. Ideas about women having to “speak up” and be assertive, separate themselves from their families if there is tension, and focusing on the individual person rather than their interconnectedness with others can all be more harmful than positive approaches.



Therapists that have not been trained in Asian American psychology, though they may have good intentions, may commit microaggressions around ideas such as arranged marriage, quietness, and honor – all ideas that are of great importance to many Asian American women. Different styles of therapy may also not be as respected as one-on-one counseling – group therapy or family therapy may be viewed as less valuable even when they are more important to the client. When these ideas are viewed as symptoms of stress and disempowerment rather than social realities, the person seeking help may not get the care that they need.



## MISCELLANEOUS MICROAGGRESSIONS

The perpetual foreigner assumption:  
("where are you *really* from?")

Representative of the entire culture:

"why do they eat *that*?")

All ideas that are not "traditional" are Westernized

Not politically active: ("Asians don't really do protests...")

That outer appearance = inner personality:

("oh, but you look so cute and quiet!")

Asians have money and are not struggling:

("they don't need affirmative action")

Exotic friend/partner: ("I like you because you're spicy")

Restrictive parents: ("judging Asian dad")

Not the right type of Asian/Asian enough/not Asian at all

## RESOURCES

### Books –

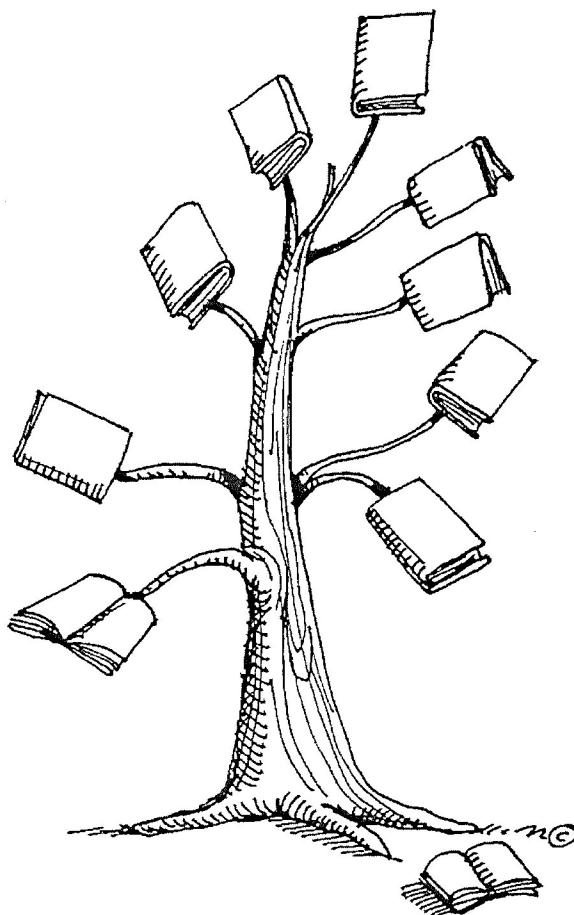
*Asian American Psychology: The Science of Lives in Context*  
*The Handbook of Asian American Psychology*  
*Asian Americans: Social and Psychological Perspectives*  
*Leaving Deep Water: The Lives of Asian American Women at the Crossroads of Two Cultures*  
*Feminist Reflections on Growth and Transformation: Asian American Women in Therapy*

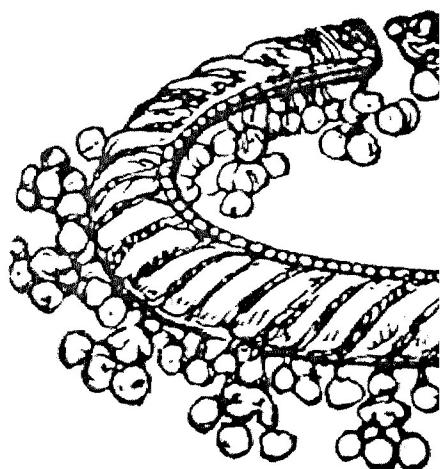
### Websites –

<http://www.thickdumplingskin.com/about> (body image)  
<http://www.myacpa.org/comm/ccaps/05OctCCAPSart.cfm>  
(college students)  
<http://www.acrs.org/> (Asian Counseling Referral Services)  
<http://www.nyawc.org/> (New York Asian Women's Center)

### Zines –

Moonroot  
Bamboo Girl  
Aqsa Zine





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