

Acculturation, Cultural Congruity, Perception of the University Environment, and the Model Minority Construct: Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help in Vietnamese Americans

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown that Vietnamese Americans underutilize mental health services, despite the reality of psychological problems within the Vietnamese American community. The underutilization of mental health services has been attributed to specific cultural beliefs that discourage the disclosure of mental health issues to professionals in the field. Other correlates to underutilization have been found by evaluating the stigma associated with mental health problems, as well as the disparate beliefs between counselor and client. Research in this field continually attempts to understand the needs of Vietnamese Americans, in order to promote greater mental health through cultural awareness.

Purpose of the Study

By researching specific ethnic groups, a greater understanding and knowledge of individual group differences can be discovered and eventually converted into practical and operational use. This study therefore focuses on Vietnamese Americans, and eventually hones in on the experiences and perceptions of Vietnamese American college students as an ethnic minority in American culture. It will attempt to explore the predictive value of the model minority construct, cultural congruity, the university environment, and acculturation on the attitudes toward mental health services of Vietnamese American college students. Analyses of gender and generational differences will also be examined. This study will hopefully provide insight into the psychological and cultural issues that are pertinent to Vietnamese Americans.

Literature Review

The rampant underutilization of mental health services by Vietnamese Americans and Asian Americans in general (Leong, 1986), have long been attributed to their “model minority” status (Sue & Sue, 1999). But upon further analysis, the model minority construct has been shown a myth (e.g., Cheng, 1997; Lee, 1994; Tang, 1997), which actually masks the real problems and mental health concerns of Vietnamese Americans (e.g. Nguyen, 1999).

In actuality, it isn't a lack of need that drives the trend of underutilization of mental health services (Leong, 1986), but rather the attitudes toward counseling that affect the help-seeking behaviors of Vietnamese Americans (e.g., Nguyen, 1999). Studies have shown that orientation of values, cultural congruity, and perception of the university environment may play a part in people's help-seeking attitudes and behaviors (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). Acculturation level was also found to be related to the perceptions of counseling for Vietnamese Americans (e.g. Atkinson & Gim, 1989; Gim, Atkinson, & Whitely, 1990; Ly, 2001).

The theory that Vietnamese Americans underutilize mental health services because they are already psychologically healthy simply does not hold up. Studies have found that Vietnamese Americans have significant psychological concerns, due to the traumas of war, the refugee experience, culture shock, racial prejudice, acculturation process, and economic challenges (Gold, 1992). The stigma and underplaying of mental health problems in Vietnamese culture may be further attributed to traditional beliefs toward mental illness (Gold, 1992; Nguyen, 1999; Rutledge, 1992), which would then affect the attitudes and behaviors of Vietnamese Americans toward professional psychological help.

Model Minority Construct

The model minority theory suggests that Asian Americans as a group are economically and occupationally successful, due to a cultural emphasis on high educational achievement and a strong work ethic (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. [LEAP], 2001; Oyserman and Sakamoto, 1997). Therefore, Asian Americans are held up as an example for other minority groups to emulate. Oyserman and Sakamoto (1997)

found that Asian Americans felt that non-Asians stereotyped them as “intelligent,” “overachiever[s],” and “competitive and diligent.” It can then be inferred that by stereotyping Asian Americans as a model minority, it is suggested that they have overcome problems such as racism, discrimination, and the “glass-ceiling” effect that are common to minority groups. Research has shown the model minority construct to be a myth, due to its gross generalization of Asian Americans based on limited facts (e.g. Cheng, 1997; Crystal, 1989; Tang, 1997; Chan and Hune, 1995).

Much of the data used to support the construct is misleading. For example in 1998, 33% of Asian American/Pacific Islander families had annual earnings in excess of \$75,000—in comparison to 29% of non-Hispanic Whites—but there were 21% who had earnings of less than \$25,000 (Humes & McKinnon, 2000). Also, the high mean incomes of Asian Americans are further misleading, because Asian American families average more workers per household than the norm (Chan & Hune, 1995; Crystal, 1989), and mostly live in metropolitan areas, where the income and cost of living is greater than other areas (Chan & Hune, 1995). The model minority myth masks the impoverished conditions of some Asian Americans.

Humes and McKinnon (2000) reported from census information that 13% of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders were listed as poor, in comparison to 8% of non-Hispanic Whites. In reference to the diversity among Asian Americans, Chinese and Japanese populations have a higher median income than the national average, but other minority groups have greater poverty rates (66% Hmong, 47% Cambodians, 34% Laotians), including 34% of Vietnamese Americans who are considered impoverished (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2002). The stereotype is not only misleading, but the implications of the label can have an adverse effect on Asian American minority groups. In a prior study, Lee (1994) found that some Asian American students felt that their model minority status created a situation, where they had to meet greater expectations. This in turn, caused them increased levels of stress and anxiety.

By overemphasizing the success of Asian Americans, the model minority stereotype underemphasizes the needs of those Asian Americans who are less successful and may need assistance. It also underplays the fact that discrimination and racism still play a part in the lives of Asian Americans (Chan & Hune, 1995; LEAP, 2003). Furthermore, the stereotype fails to acknowledge the diverse experiences of the Asian American subgroups, which likely affect their psychological well-being and subsequent success in American society. As noted previously, Vietnamese Americans mostly relocated to the U.S. as refugees, thereby conflicting with the image of a model minority. Being a refugee carries with it much more psychological trauma, emotional stress, physical exhaustion, and economic need (Gold, 1992).

Cultural Congruity and University Environment

The perceptions and attitudes of Vietnamese American college students are affected by a variety of variables that shape their subsequent behaviors. In essence, the issues include Vietnamese American college student perceptions of the university environment, and the implications of either cultural congruity or incongruity between the values endorsed by higher education institutions and those endorsed by traditional Vietnamese culture. As noted in Rutledge (1992), the academic success of Vietnamese Americans is inherently important in Vietnamese culture, as education and learning is highly valued. Therefore, it is important to look at students’ perceptions of the university environment and the establishment of cultural congruity, because they act as mediators in individuals’ persistence at the university (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996).

Gloria & Robinson Kurpius (1996) deduced that individuals’ views about the university environment were related to decisions about staying in or dropping out of higher education institutions. Therefore, the university environment may be an important factor affecting the future success of Vietnamese Americans. Perceptions of the university environment are further influenced by the concept of cultural congruity. Higher education systems have pre-established values that act as an integral part of the environment. So, upon entering a higher education institution, ethnic minorities may experience cultural incongruity if their values are disparate from those set by the institution (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). It is further mentioned that

students who experience cultural incongruity face the challenge of both retaining their cultural values, while also trying to adapt to the majority culture. Findings suggest that cultural congruity, including perceptions of social support, were related to college success rates (Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999).

Pham (1983) found that education was a primary component in the assimilation process of Vietnamese American refugees and immigrants. It relied on the premise that receiving an education and the necessary academic degrees would affect the opportunities, capabilities, and success of Vietnamese Americans. One of the problems for Vietnamese American youth is that they feel tremendous strain as a result of cultural disparities. They report feeling alone in their endeavor to merge two distinct cultures, by maintaining traditional family-endorsed values and those endorsed by American social institutions (Yu, 1995). Yu further suggests that by having more informed faculty at school who understand cultural differences, the cultural gap between traditional Vietnamese parents and school institutions can be minimized. The resultant consequences may effectively reduce the strain of Vietnamese American youth. Therefore, it is important to investigate whether higher education institutions are conducive to the needs of Vietnamese Americans.

Acculturation

The acculturation process including its implications for mental health status (i.e. attitudes toward counseling, and utilization of mental health services) (e.g. Gim, Atkinson, & Whiteley, 1990; Ly, 2001; Tata & Leong, 1999), social integration (Pham & Harris, 2001), and inter-group as well as intra-group relations (i.e. ethnic identity) (e.g. Phinney, 1990; Gim, Atkinson, & Kim, 1991; Tran, 1989), is particularly relevant for ethnic minorities who have relocated to the U.S. Even second-generation ethnic minorities are affected by the acculturation process, as they have been raised in homes with first generations parents. There may be conflicts between traditional cultural norms and values and the cultural customs of the host country that may proliferate post-migration stress and psychological difficulties (Gim et al., 1990).

Several studies help to highlight the variables that are correlated with acculturation. In a study conducted with 75 Vietnamese American female college students, it was found that the age at which the participants came to the U.S. was specifically correlated with acculturation (Tran, 1989). Specifically, those who relocated to the U.S. at an early age and had been in the U.S. for an extended period of time were shown to be more acculturated. Other studies supported Tran's findings on the inverse relationship of arrival age and the direct relationship of length of residence with acculturation level (Gim et al., 1990; Ly, 2001; To, 1999). Gim et al. further added that because of the recent immigration status of Southeast Asians, they may be more likely to be low acculturated, which may lead to greater levels of distress.

Other studies on acculturation have identified variables that appear to be unrelated to acculturation. Again, To (1999) originally hypothesized that gender would be a factor in acculturation (where females would be more acculturated than males), but no significant relationship was established. In contrast, Chung, Bemak, and Wong (2000) found that Vietnamese females were markedly more acculturated than males. An interesting study on Southeast Asian students done by Lese and Robbins (1994), found that acculturation was not related academic achievement or goal attainment. The participants were all refugees dealing with adjustment issues, yet in general, they were all academically performing relatively well. This may be related to the Vietnamese cultural beliefs that stress strong family values, education, and achievement (Tran, 1993). Yu (1995) reported that Vietnamese parents were more likely to monitor and help their children in academics when compared to the national norms, and prioritize education from an early age.

Gim et al. (1990) conducted an extensive study on acculturation with 816 Asian American participants (e.g. 103 Southeast Asians). Those who were less acculturated were found to experience more concerns, which Gim et al. hypothesized to be a result of psychosocial stressors. It is then important to investigate whether low or high acculturated individuals are more likely to express positive attitudes about available mental health services and/or utilize professional psychological help. Interestingly, it was concluded in one study that acculturation was inversely related to a willingness to seek professional psychological help (Gim et al., 1990).

This study is contrary to other studies that found less acculturated individuals were less likely than high acculturated individuals, to have positive views toward utilizing mental health services (Atkinson & Gim, 1989; Ly, 2001; Tata & Leong, 1994). The direct relationship between acculturation and positive help-seeking attitudes has been found in a sample of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans (Atkinson & Gim, 1989), in a Chinese American sample (Tata & Leong, 1994), and a Vietnamese American sample (Ly, 2001).

Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help

It has been established that Asian Americans and Vietnamese Americans have concerns regarding psychological issues, but there continues to be an underutilization of mental health services (Leong, 1986). The documentation of Vietnamese Americans mental health concerns necessitates an investigation into their willingness to seek help for psychological problems, in order to promote the future psychological health of Vietnamese Americans. By reaching a more informed position on perceptions toward mental illness and counseling services, more effective and culturally appropriate means of treatment can be developed.

Traditionally in Vietnamese culture, mental illness would be equated to craziness, and that concept gives credence to the shame and stigma of psychological problems in the Vietnamese community (Gold, 1992; Rutledge, 1992). Subsequently mental illness has been underemphasized in Vietnamese culture. Nguyen (1999) found that the cultural constructs of problem prioritizing, help-seeking preferences, and disclosure were predictive of attitudes toward the utilization of professional psychological help in Vietnamese Americans. There was a direct correlation between concern for psychological/emotional issues, preferential rating for professional psychological help, willingness to disclose personal information, and positive attitudes toward utilizing mental health services. In contrast, there was an inverse relationship between concern for physical/practical problems, preferential rating for family/social network, unwillingness to disclose personal information, and positive attitudes toward utilizing mental health services. As noted in Gold (1992), Vietnamese Americans are traditionally more hesitant to freely disclose personal information to strangers, partly because of cultural beliefs and partly due to lingering feelings of distrust as a result of the refugee experience.

It is informative to comparatively measure the attitudes of males and females, as well as the attitudes of differing groups. Several studies have reported that women tend to have more positive attitudes toward counseling than men (Gim et al.; 1990; Tata & Leong, 1994; Yeh & Wang, 2000), but Nguyen (1997) found no gender differences in his investigation. In a small comparative study between Vietnamese and Caucasian American college students, the Vietnamese American refugees were found to have less favorable attitudes toward mental health services. The Vietnamese American sample was more reluctant to express a need for and believe in the value of professional psychological help, and was more cognizant of the stigma attached to mental health problems (Atkinson, Ponterotto, & Sanchez, 1984).

In an attempt to provide more effective mental health services, research has been conducted on the preferential characteristics of a counselor. Atkinson, Poston, and Furlong (1989) sampled 339 college students (e.g. 118 Asian American students) on what attribute they would most want in a counselor. The four overarching attributes were a counselor with similar attitudes, with a comparable personality, who was highly educated, and who was older than the respondents. Gim, Atkinson, and Kim (1991) found that Asian American students felt that an ethnically similar as well as a culturally aware counselor, was more effective in treatment situations than a counselor who was ethnically different and culturally unaware. Furthermore, Ryujin, Ford, and Breux (2001) found that Asian Americans had more confidence in an ethnically similar counselor.

Several studies highlight some possible reasons for the underutilization of mental health services in the Asian American population. Ryujin et al. (2001) found that the Asian American students were more likely to feel that their families would disapprove and be embarrassed of them seeking counseling. Asian Americans also were less confident that counseling was effective for their ethnic group, that mental health professionals

understood their problems and had comparable beliefs. Yeh and Wang (2000) found that a significant amount of the 470 Asian American sampled, most either dealt with their psychological problems alone or sought help from people in their social network, instead of seeing a professional. Furthermore, McKelvey et al. (1999) found that the respondents in the study were very willing to seek psychological help, but many of them were not aware of the services that were available. That lack of knowledge and hesitance to seek out resources may contribute to the underutilization of mental health services.

Gold (1992) stated that Vietnamese Americans who are in counseling may encounter cultural conflicts and language barriers that prevent effective problem solving and subsequent visits to the center. Tracy, Leong, & Glidden (1986) found that Asian Americans were much more likely to seek counseling for academic and occupational issues, which may be true because it is more culturally acceptable. Nonetheless, Solberg, Ritsma, Davis, Tata, and Jolly (1994) found that Asian American students were more likely to use the counseling center if they had had a previous experience there. Asian Americans attitudes and utilization rates may improve if more culturally compatible services are offered, and as Asian Americans become more acculturated to American society they may be more open to western styles of treatment.

Methods

Participants

A projected 150 students at the University of California, Irvine will be sampled quantitatively through a survey packet. It is expected that a relatively equal number of females and males will be surveyed to better represent the larger Vietnamese American population.

Procedures and Setting

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval must first be attained. After approval, surveys packets will be distributed to Vietnamese American college students at UCI. Random selection will not occur, as specific culturally-based Vietnamese organizations (i.e. Vietnamese Student Association, Vietnamese American Coalition), and classes (i.e. Vietnamese Experience, Vietnam War, and Vietnamese Language) will be targeted. First, these organizations and classes will be contacted, and permission to disseminate the packets will be acquired.

The students will be informed by the investigator(s) and through the consent form, that participation is completely voluntary. Participants will also be encouraged to answer each question honestly, and will be informed that anonymity will be protected as consent is established when the questionnaire is completed and returned to the researcher(s). Participants will be able to discontinue participation at any time during the process of completing the questionnaire. Compensation for filling out the questionnaire will not be provided by the researcher(s). Arrangements will then be made as to how the participants will return the survey to the researcher(s) (e.g. completed in class and returned thereafter, researcher returns to pick up questionnaires, or students may mail the questionnaires to a designated location).

Instrumentation

The independent variables of the study are model minority perception, cultural congruity, university environment perception, and acculturation level. The dependent variable of the study is attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. The research questionnaire will include a demographic sheet followed by five test instruments that will be counterbalanced to control for response set and fatigue. The packets will be systematically numbered, in order to insure an accurate count of response rate. The questionnaire packet will include the consent form first, followed by the demographic sheet, and finally the five test measures.

Demographic Form. The demographic form will include general background questions that include items regarding gender, age, marital status, family income, race/ethnicity, generational status, and occupation. It will also include items regarding educational status such as GPA, class level, and family education level.

Model Minority Scale. The model minority scale will be extracted from an existing model minority questionnaire (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998), by utilizing a specified number of pertinent questions from the questionnaire. The questionnaire is constructed on a 4 to 6-point Likert-type scale, and measures individuals' perceptions of the model minority construct.

Cultural Congruity Scale (CCS; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). This scale measures the perception of cultural congruity between an individual's value system and those held by the university. The scale is comprised of 13 items with either a 7-point (original) or 4-point (modified) Likert-type scale that ranges from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 or 7 (*Strongly Agree*). About half of the 13 items are reversed scored in order to prevent a response set. A sample item includes "I feel that I have to change myself to fit in at school." The original studies reported Cronbach's alpha of .81 to .89 for a sample of Chicano/Chicana undergraduates (Gloria et al., 1996). Subsequent studies were conducted on other racial and ethnic minorities, where a .76 alpha was reported for Asian American undergraduates (Gloria & Ho, 2003). The CCS has been shown to be reliable.

University Environment Scale (UES; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). The UES is a 14-item scale that measures students' perceptions of the university environment. The scale originally utilized a 7-point Likert-type scale, but it has been revised in subsequent studies to a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 or 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Sample items include "University staff have been warm and friendly" and, "The university seems like a cold, uncaring place to me." The UES reported Cronbach's alphas from .81 to .85 for a sample of Chicano/Chicana undergraduates (Gloria et al., 1996). Other ethnic minority populations were sampled where the UES was found to be reliable. Specifically, in a sample of Asian Americans, the alpha was reported to be .82 (Gloria & Ho, 2003).

Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (SL-ASIA; Suinn, Rickard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987). This scale was shown to be reliable and valid in measuring acculturation, especially in the sense of biculturalism. The scale consists of six components which are identified as *language, choice of friendship, perception of identity, cultural behaviors, generational history, and ethnic pride*. The original scale includes 21 questions each measured on a 5-point scale, where choice 1 is indicative of low acculturation, while choice 5 is indicative of high acculturation level. A sample item from the measure states "What language do you prefer?" The answer choices for that particular question ranges from 1 (*Asian only [e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese etc.]*) to 5 (*Only English*). Other items include "Whom do you associate with in the community?" and "How do you identify yourself?" The scale was initially found to have a .88 alpha coefficient, and subsequent studies have reported similar alpha coefficients from .86 to .88 (Choi, & Harachi, 2002; Chung, Bemak, & Wong, 2000).

Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS; Fischer & Turner, 1970). The ATSPPHS is a test instrument that measures an individual's outlook on seeking psychological assistance. The original scale includes 29 items over 4 categories that evaluate attitudes toward counseling. A revised version was created by Fischer and Farina (1995) utilizing 10 items from the original scale, as well as updating some of the terms used in the scale. The ATSPPHS is formatted on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*agree*) to 4 (*disagree*). Fischer et al. (1970) reported a Cronbach alpha of .83 and .86. Fischer et al. (1995) using their revised version of the scale, reported a Cronbach's alpha of .84. The ATSPPHS is a widely used instrument and has been found to be a reliable measure.

Responsibilities of the Student Researchers

The researchers are responsible for completing a research manuscript that includes an introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusions/discussion. To accomplish that task, the researchers will have to collect data by disseminating the questionnaire packets to UCI undergraduates (n=150). The data will have to be statistically run, analyzed, and interpreted. The researchers are expected to collaborate with one another on any new developments as well as assign specified tasks to Kevin regarding the research study. In May, the student researchers have a responsibility to present their research finding at the UROP research symposium.

The student researchers have scheduled bi-weekly meetings with their advisor, Dr. Castellanos. In addition to that meeting, the student researchers will be visiting Dr. Castellanos an average of once a week to get direction and advice on how to proceed forward with their study. Dr. Castellanos will advise them of how to prepare a research manuscript, protocol for collecting data, what statistical procedures to run for the data, analysis of the data, and etc. Further collaboration will include other members of Dr. Castellanos's research team, and Dr. Gloria.

Project Timeline

Fall Quarter

- Photocopy all articles found for research partner and Dr. Castellanos. Find more articles.
- Complete introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, literature review, and methods section for research paper.
- Complete research overview sheet (matrix).
- Obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.
- Complete Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) call for proposals.
- Work on finalizing methodological procedures.

Winter Quarter

- Generate consent form, and demographic sheet. Get all the test measures.
- Photocopy consent form, demographic sheet, and all of the test instruments.
- Make questionnaire packets: counterbalance test instruments and systematically number.
- Identify target classes and organizations, and arrange to data collection
- Collect data by distributing questionnaire packets. Need a sample of 150.
- Input data into SPSS, recode, spot-check data.
- Run statistical analysis.
- Evaluate data results. Begin writing up results.

Spring Quarter

- Continue to work on research paper: add results and conclusion/discussion sections.
- Complete research paper. Make sure all the sections are cohesive and polished.
- Complete PowerPoint presentation.
- Present research at UROP research symposium.
- Final evaluation and reflection.

Itemized Budget

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| Photocopying Expenses Questionnaire Packet (7 pages) Presentation Handout (PowerPoint- 5 pages) For UROP oral presentation Color Copies of graphs (3 pages) For UROP oral presentation Articles (750 pages) Pertinent articles are abundant, and copies needed for each researcher. Kinko's Poster Board Production (1) For UROP presentation | $(7 \text{ pages} \times 200 \text{ copies}) = 1400 \times \$0.12 = \$168.00$ $(5 \text{ pages} \times 50 \text{ copies}) = 250 \times \$0.12 = \$30.00$ $(3 \text{ pages} \times 50 \text{ copies}) = 150 \times \$1.00 = \$150.00$ $(750 \text{ pages} \times 3 \text{ copies}) = 2250 \times \$0.12 = \$270.00$ $(1 \text{ poster board} \times \$100.00) = \$100.00$ |
| Research Materials SPSS Student Packet (1) <i>The Vietnamese Experience in America</i> by Paul Rutledge (1): vital reference | $(1 \text{ SPSS} \times \$65.00) = \65.00 $(1 \text{ book} \times \$11.95) = \11.95 |

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| <i>The Vietnamese Americans</i> by Hien Duc Do (1): Vital reference <i>The research Methods Knowledge Base</i> by William Trichim | (1 book x \$45.00)= \$45.00 (1 book x \$44.95)= \$44.95 |
| Office Supplies Paper (2 packets) Printer Ink (Color and Black) for Epson Stylus Color 820 | (2 packets x \$7.00)= \$14.00 (1 black ink x \$30.00)= \$30.00 (1 color ink x \$40.00)= 40.00 |
| Total Amount Requested: \$968.90 | |

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