Bridging the Gap between Two Cultures: An Analysis on Identity Attitudes and Attachment of Asian Americans

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A commonly observed weakness of American and European psychologists and developmental theorist is that their theories are most applicable to white, middle-class, two-parent households. In context of today’s immigration patterns of our nation, we must take into consideration individuals and families that are immigrating to the United States from nations of non-Western cultures and that Western developmental and psychological theories do not apply to those of non-Western cultures. The adjustment and adaptation of non-Western Americans is something that must be addressed by every profession from psychology to social work to education to public health, considering that the population of Asian immigrant groups is growing at rapid rates. This review paper will look specifically at the Asian American experience and the way that attachment theory may or may not apply to understanding their social and psychological behaviors, while looking at other factors that contribute to their ethnic identity in defining who they are. Often it is the later generations of Asian Americans that have difficulty answering the question of “who am I?” Consequently, this paper will focus heavily on identity formation and various other factors that play a major role in identity development of Asian Americans. [Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention 8:251–263 (2008)]

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In the last quarter of the 20th century, immigration to the United States experienced an exponential increase as a result of the landmark Immigration Act of 1965 (Ong & Miller, 2002). Eliminating the outdated national origins quota system that was instituted in 1924, the Immigration Act ushered in a new wave of immigration from countries that had previously been denied entry. In reducing these barriers to immigration, the law also dramatically altered the racial and ethnic landscape of the United States (Ong & Miller). In particular, the new law has had a significant impact in Asian countries, whose people had previously been the target of systematic and thorough exclusion from the United States for much of the 20th century. These changes have contributed to an explosive increase in the number of Asian Americans from 1.4 million in 1970 to over 10 million by 2000 (Ong & Miller). This population growth has not only been a result of continued...
migration from Asia but also reflects the growing population of the children of these first-generation immigrants, the new second generation of Asian Americans born in the United States (Ong & Miller).

The recent arrival of this first generation to the United States underlies the relative lack of research on these groups prior to 1965. However, the changes that took place within the academy as a result of the Third World Strike and the increasing popularity of ethnic studies have contributed to the increasing visibility of Asian Americans of both the first and second generation (Takaki, 1998). This recognition has also been accompanied by a growing body of research on these groups, with much of the recent literature emerging as a backlash against traditional misconceptions of Asian Americans such as the “model minority” (as well as the equally injurious “perpetual foreigner”) myth. Although extensive research on the experiences of acculturation and identity formation is beginning to emerge with respect to the first and second generation of Asian immigrants, so much more work needs to be done in regards to the developmental differences and similarities among the first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation Asian Americans.

A commonly observed weakness of American and European psychologists and developmental theorist is that their theories are most applicable to white, middle-class, two-parent households. Attachment theory, as examined briefly in this article, also must be analyzed for application to non-Western cultures. Attachment theory, in context of today’s immigration patterns of our nation, must also take into consideration that individuals and families that are immigrating to the United States are emigrating mostly from nations of non-Western cultures. The adjustment and adaptation of non-Western Americans is something that must be addressed by every profession from education to social work to criminology, considering that the population of Asian immigrant groups is growing at rapid rates.

This review article will look specifically at the Asian American immigrant population otherwise referred to as first generation and the way that attachment theory may or may not apply to understanding their social and psychological behaviors, while looking at other factors that contribute to their ethnic identity in defining who they are. Often, it is the later generations of Asian Americans that have difficulty answering the question of “who am I?” Consequently, this article will focus heavily on identity formation and various other factors that play a major role in identity development of Asian Americans.

The Second Generation

The experiences of first- and second-generation Asian Americans has garnered a significant amount of academic and scholarly attention as the first wave of second-generation children from the 1965 wave of immigration have reached their 20s and 30s (Ramakrishnan, 2004). Much of the literature has focused on the assimilation and acculturation experiences of the second generation because scholars have regarded the outcomes of the second generation as fundamental to understanding the immigrant experience of acculturation and assimilation (Ramakrishnan).

Assimilation Theories

Because this article focuses on first- and second-generation Asian Americans, a brief overview of major assimilation theories is applicable in comparing these two groups. A number of different interpretations of the assimilation process for immigrants in America have been posited by various researchers. Beginning in the 1920s, the traditional assimilation model arose in large part from Chicago school
sociologists in an attempt to explain the process of assimilation into American society. Seen as the ultimate goal for all immigrants, assimilation was considered to be a process of social disorganization, adjustment, and eventual Americanization as traditional ethnic, family, and kinship ties to the country of origin dissolved (Liu, 2002). It places particular emphasis on the generational effects of relocation to the United States, where first-generation persons are expected to be distinct, second-generation persons less so, and then the final and most critical stages is intermarriage, which eliminates any single ethnic reference point (Wildsmith 1995). U.S. society was perceived to be a “melting pot” where the various immigrant groups would eventually take on the demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of the native-born population. A discussion of this “classic” assimilation paradigm, however, entails a number of caveats. In reality, the model was formulated in the context of a predominantly European immigration flow from Ireland, Poland, Greece, and Italy, when it was considered to be a permanent resettlement for these peoples (Liu). Indeed, the classical model of assimilation raises a number of issues in its inapplicability for the very different immigrant flows America has experienced since the early 20th century, particularly from Asia. The model has been criticized for requiring the “new” immigrant group to wholly take on the characteristics of the dominant group in order to assimilate. The classic model has also been criticized for its potential to breed social intolerance of those groups that do not fit into this model of assimilation. Given the various concerns about the validity of the classic model as well as the changing demographics of the immigrant population after 1965, Portes and Rumbaut (1996) suggested a process of segmented assimilation to describe the process for immigrants. In their framework, immigrants may follow three different paths to segmented assimilation: adaptation and integration into the white middle class, adaptation to the underclass and a condition of permanent and sustained poverty, or socioeconomic adaptation that occurs along with the maintenance of strong cultural ties within the ethnic community (Liu, 2002). In contrast to the classic model, segmented assimilation does not assume a linearity of assimilation and allows for the possibility that a new immigrant group may assimilate while retaining certain aspects of their culture. Instead, they suggest that second-generation acculturation for the children of immigrants is affected by a number of contextual factors, including color, geographic location, and finally, changes in the labor market (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Based on the literature, the third mode of assimilation Portes and Rumbaut (2005) seems to be particularly appropriate in describing how second-generation Asian Americans regard their own experience of assimilation (or lack thereof) into American life. In a broad study of second-generation Asian Americans residing in San Diego, Xiong and Zhou (2005) find that almost none of the respondents identified themselves as an unhyphenated “American.” Rather, the respondents referred to themselves either as hyphenated with their ethnicities or simply by their ethnicity alone. The authors posit that this comes about as a result of the tendency to associate American with white, a conception that is reinforced by the physical characteristics that accompany the stereotype of the forever foreigner (Xiong & Zhou). Xiong and Zhou further suggest that this is a reactive response to resulting experiences with discrimination, rather than a voluntary option (Xiong & Zhou, 2005).
Ethnic Identities

This common experience of a forced or given ethnicity is examined closely in Waters’ (1990) innovative study on Gans’ notion of “symbolic ethnicity.” Gans hypothesized that latter generations of white ethnic groups possessed only a symbolic identification with the ethnicity of their ancestors. Waters uses this concept as a platform to explore the existence, construction, and maintenance of ethnicity for whites beyond the third generation. She concludes that ethnicity is both flexible and voluntary for white Americans, emphasizing the importance of choice in whether or not the person decides to possess symbolic ethnicity. For nonwhite Americans, Waters finds that ethnicity is neither symbolic nor voluntary. Rather, it is something that is real and ascribed, with social and political consequences: “the situation is very different for members of racial minorities, whose lives are strongly influenced by their race or national origin regardless of how much they may choose not to identify themselves in ethnic or racial terms”.

Waters continues by noting the ways in which ethnicity is still an important part of life for nonwhites, not only in its resulting experiences of discrimination but also the choice of spouse, place of residence, career path, choice of friends, and one’s chances of success in America. Kibria (2002) argues that the Asian American experience with this ethnic American model results in a confrontation with its underlying racial premise of “whiteness” that makes it difficult for Asian Americans to become ethnic Americans. Indeed, for many European Americans, being American is associated with being “white” (Gudykunst, 2001).

Although white Americans must overly emphasize their ethnicity if they wish to be associated with a different ethnicity, Asian Americans are automatically presumed to be foreigners regardless of generational status unless “proven” otherwise (Tuan, 1998). Furthermore, questions such as “where are you really from?” reflect a societal expectation by the mainstream that Asian ethnicities retain their ethnic identity despite the gradual loss of their cultural identification that increases as they experience greater acculturation (Tuan, 1998). For second-generation Asian immigrants, this disparity is particularly pronounced as they feel both a strong connection to the ethnic American model but simultaneously an intense frustration with the inability to fully adopt it—Asian Americans seem to be “a part yet apart” (Kibria, 1997). The larger historical trend of figuring minorities as the central “other” to American conceptions of whiteness further reinforces the incompatibility of second-generation Asian Americans into the ethnic American model. Kibria (1997) notes that “such incorporation would require a very radical shift in our understandings of whiteness—so radical as to perhaps threaten the dissolution of the concept itself.”

Nevertheless, the suggestion that ethnicities are ascribed to nonwhites does not preclude the potential voluntary adoption of ethnicity by Asian Americans. Ethnic identities are based on how Asian Americans identify themselves, “self-making,” as well as how others such as the mainstream define them, “being-made” (Gudykunst, 2001). In addition to Waters’ (1990) concept of given ethnicities, Hall posits the possibility of Asian Americans having room to “play” with their ethnic identities (Hall, 1991). Because identities by nature are unstable, Asian Americans can maneuver within and around their identities either reinforcing or opposing the categories created by mainstream American cultures.

For the second generation, the process of negotiating between various identities is made particularly complex by their families. For example, parents often serve to reinforce and
preserve the second generation’s sense of the parents’ native culture and ethnic heritage. This is due, in part, to the importance that the Korean, Chinese, and Japanese culture places on child-rearing: “Korean/Chinese culture is intricately tied to how one ‘parents’” (Park, 2005). Nevertheless, because immigration and acculturation to the United States results in immigrant families’ confrontation with social structures that differ radically from the ones they leave behind, the second generation often experiences a combative dialogue between experiences inside and outside the home environment. For example, one of the major differences between Western and Asian social structures is the different emphasis placed on the collective versus the individual. Whereas the parents’ societies “tend to stress norms of collectivist obligation to one’s family and society . . . Western societies, especially the United States, emphasize individualism and independence” (Pyke, 2005). For Chinese and Korean households, this emphasis on the collective derives from the Confucian tradition of emphasizing family as a priority over personal desires—a tradition that often produces conflict in immigrant families (Jo, 1999). As a result, second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans find themselves in a complicated family environment where they must negotiate a number of roles, obligations, and expectations (Park).

Jo (1999) explores the Korean traditional family value system in immigrant families as a source of these tensions. In a traditional Korean family, absolute obedience of the children to the parents is expected with respect for all elders being the fundamental underpinning of traditional Korean family values. Unlike other Asian countries, the values derived from the Confucian tradition, Taoism, Buddhism, as well as Christianity have continued to exist despite the economic, demographic, and social changes that Korea has experienced in recent decades (Jo, 1999). Although the emphasis and maintenance of such cultural traits may seem difficult to comprehend, Jo suggests that the importance of kinship relations for the survival of immigrant families (financial, emotional, familial support) heavily contributes to the preservation of these values. Nevertheless, children feel the strain of these conflicting social systems. Immigrant Korean and Chinese parents expect absolute obedience from their children along with excellence in academic work and the pursuit of professional careers. Paradoxically, this also results in the parents’ recognition of individual autonomy and self-assertion with respect to their academic and social success (Chang, 2003). As a result, many of the second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans report feelings of confusion, frustration, and anger during counseling that they attribute to difficult relationships with their parents.

On the one hand, children of Chinese and Korean immigrants appreciate the devotion of a great deal of their parents’ money and resources for their success. Indeed, Jo (1999) notes that most immigrant children do, indeed, work very hard to please their parents, often striving for academic success while helping parents with housekeeping tasks, English language problems, and assisting with the family business whenever possible. Moreover, these children are often driven to succeed academically while simultaneously preserving the culture and language in order to avoid a sense of guilt for their parents’ sacrifices (Bhattacharya, 1999). One second-generation Korean American poignantly sums up the pressure he experienced growing up: “Growing up, you know the air you breathe in your house is not free. When your parents come home at night, you know they weren’t out at the clubs. They come home and they can’t put food in their mouths fast enough, and then they go to sleep, so they can wake up six hours later to go back to work. They’re not working sixteen hours a day to get a Mercedes. There are easier ways to get
a Mercedes. Their blood, sweat, and tears fund the success of the next generation. It’s not a luxury they’re looking for” (Jo, 1999). On the other hand, the confusion and frustration that many second-generation Korean Americans report feeling seems to result from the internalization of these opposing views in a country where such views seem out of place. Many children are bothered by the strict and demanding attitudes of their parents, using words such as “very authoritarian,” “uncompromising,” “overprotective,” “undemocratic,” and “one-track minded” to express the attitudes of their parents (Jo, 1999). In a different study of Asian immigrant families, Chang (2003) found that many Asian American youth report similar problems of unrealistic parental expectations in terms of academic and career achievements, parental overinvolvement in their children’s lives, parents’ overall tendency to exclude their children in the decision-making process, and negative attitudes toward their children’s behaviors and lifestyles.

Moreover, Park (2005) suggests that a number of second-generation children experience bitterness about having to contribute to the family business, in cases where such businesses exist. In the case of Korean Americans, because small businesses are common sources of family income, many children are often obligated to work weekends and nights at the family store. This results in what many refer to as “claustrophobic feelings” caused by overwhelming feelings of guilt and obligation toward their parents (Park).

The crux of the issues between immigrants and their children lies, in large part, in the different rates of acculturation between the two generations. Although immigrant parents tend to retain their native language, traditional values, lifestyles and child-rearing practices, their children absorb the dominant society’s cultural practices and beliefs much easier and faster (Chang, 2003). Not surprisingly, a study by Phinney (1992) found that those of the second generation who are able to maintain a positive identification with both their native ethnicity as well as with that of the dominant group report higher levels of self-esteem (in “acculturation attitudes”). From this, in the context of the previous discussion of Chinese and Korean American children of immigrants, it follows that children who are able to recognize and balance the pressures of their parents and their own desires will express more of an acceptance of their Korean or Chinese ethnicity, even though it may be ascribed. Despite these forms of acculturative stress that may be experienced by the children of Korean and Chinese immigrants, evidence in the literature also points to some elements of voluntary adoption of the children’s Korean or Chinese ethnicity. One noticeable way in which this is done is through the voluntary acquisition, retention, and use of the language. In a study of second-generation Korean Americans enrolled in Korean language courses at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Jo (2002) suggests that learning Korean allows these students to mediate between different and shared transnational experiences of living in bigenerational households. During the language courses, she found that students recalled and introduced elements of their personal references for Korean objects and customs that reflect an adoption of a personally modified and selected Korean ethnic heritage (Jo, 2002). Most importantly, Jo (2002) argues that these Korean language classes are places where Korean ethnic identities are not only maintained and reproduced but also contested and reshaped outside the home environment.

Another aspect of life into which many second-generation Korean and Chinese Americans introduce their ethnicity is in the area of relationships and marriage. Interestingly, Kibria’s (1997) study of second-generation Korean Americans suggests that some of them choose to retain and apply conceptions of racial and
lineage “purity” that are instilled by their parents. Linking racial continuity to family continuity, Kibria (1997) examines the role of family honor in this retention of the desire to maintain their lineage. One of her respondents recalled her father’s lecture on the importance of maintaining Korean purity in this way: After college my first boyfriend was Jewish American. They liked him but the fact that he wasn’t Korean was a big concern. My father talked to me about it. It was very dramatic, but he said if you do marry a non-Korean you will be putting an end to our history. Indeed, despite the tendency in America of seeing any attempt to maintain racial purity as being “racist,” Kibria (1997) found that a number of respondents fully planned to marry within their own ethnicity, whether it be Korean, Chinese, or Japanese. In fact, one of her respondents even defended his intention to marry a Korean woman by citing it as a reaction to America’s history of maintaining racial divisions where nonwhites possessed limited opportunities to fully integrate.

Furthermore, one’s identification with a larger Asian American community also seems to impact one’s choice of partners. Although many Korean and Chinese Americans also mentioned the importance of individual choice and romance in dating and relationships, even second-generation Asian Americans without significant involvement in Asian American organizations also exhibited a heightened sense of an Asian racial identity (Kibria, 1997). As expected, those familiar with Asian American organizations displayed the greatest recognition of the need for Asians to come together as a racial group to form a panethnic group—even through dating and marriage. Not surprisingly, among this population, Kibria (1997) found that Asian Americans were greatly preferred as partners over whites. Among politically active college students, marrying outside their Asian race was even seen as a violation of one’s political commitment to fighting racism for all Asian ethnics (Kibria, 1997).

Models of Ethnic Identity Development

As presented in the literature, second-generation Asian Americans often feel trapped between two different, often oppositional cultures resulting in ethnic identities that are negotiations between them. In Phinney’s (1992) components model of ethnic identity development, there are three parts in the development of Asian American ethnic identity. The first part of the model is the affective component, which is a measure of how strongly the individual feels a sense of belonging and commitment to her or his ethnic community. This component is associated with how positive are the person’s feelings toward their ethnicity. As suggested in the aforementioned literature, Phinney also finds that Asian Americans exhibit both positive and negative perceptions of their ethnicity and a balance that may shift over time.

The second element of this model is cognitive, which focuses on the extent to which individuals adopt or are interested in their ethnicity in terms of its history, traditions and values. The final component of development is behavioral that examines the level of the individual’s involvement in activities related to their ethnicity. Such activities may include practicing cultural traditions, eating their ethnic foods, and speaking ethnic languages. In her 2003 version of the components model, Uba (2003) echoes Phinney in positing three aspects of Asian American ethnic development: conscious recognition of ethnicity, adoption of ethnic identity, and activation of ethnic identity. Combining Phinney’s affective and cognitive components, Uba’s conscious recognition of ethnicity involves recognition of the cultural characteristics of the ethnic group. The adoption of ethnicity is similar to Phinney’s affective component in which an ethnic identity is integrated into the individual’s personality and creates a connection between the individual and
his or her ethnicity. Finally, activation of one’s ethnic identity is the use of the individual’s ethnicity in guiding behavior; this may either be conscious or unconscious and is situation dependent.

In a slightly different developmental model of ethnic identity development, Sue (1981) suggests five different stages of a progressive development of Asian American ethnic identity. The process of ethnic identity development begins initially with a period of **conformity** in which the individual reflects a preference for and identification with the mainstream dominant culture. For Asian Americans, Sue argues that the history of American media negatively portraying Asian Americans contributes to this phase. Following conformity, the individual enters the stage of **dissonance** in which the individual recognizes contradictions between negative external conceptions and positive personal perceptions of their ethnicity. Chun’s (2000) explanation of Asian Americans’ period of identity crisis describes this stage well: “Asian Americans, who no longer wish to ascribe to white norms and values ... realize that self-contempt and confusion ... realize that self-contempt and confusion were natural responses to the disciplining and defining gaze of white America.” It is during this phase that individuals realize their status as minorities and the racial and ethnic prejudices that accompany their position. As a result, he or she enters a stage of **resistance and immersion** in which the individual proactively seeks to immerse her or himself in their ethnic culture and traditions. Moreover, during this stage, individuals also actively search for instances of racial or ethnic prejudice against their ethnic group. However, as resistance and immersion continues, a stage of **introspection** occurs in which individuals begin to realize the negative aspects of full immersion and outward resistance to the dominant culture. **Integrative awareness** is eventually produced in which individuals are able to reconcile the conflict between the dominant culture and their own ethnicities and they begin “picking and choosing” from both cultures. Gudykunst (2001) suggests that because most of these ethnic identity models were created as descriptive frameworks, it is impossible to gauge their validity through any research amount of research. These models were created for counselors and therapists to better understand and treat Asian Americans with their unique processes of ethnic identity formation. Nevertheless, they carry a number of implications that may be relevant for anyone seeking answers about their own identity. For example, in the context of the previous discussion of collectivist versus individual orientations, it would be expected that those reflecting later stages of ethnic identity development would exhibit greater collectivist tendencies, including more or stronger references to family involvement and obligations. Moreover, given the latter stages of active cultural and ethnic practices in these models, those in these latter stages may also be expected to use their ethnic languages to a greater extent (Gudykunst, 2001). Finally, the ethnicity and/or racial identities of friends, close friends and partners may also be related to ethnic identity development; it would be expected that those reflecting greater ethnic identity development would also share more networks with other Asian Americans.

**Asian Americans as the Model Minority**

Since the racist exclusionary policies of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the perception of Asian Americans in the American consciousness has experienced a dramatic shift from one of utter dehumanization to one of almost superhuman status. Indeed, the position of Asian Americans has evolved into a view of Asian Americans as a “super” minority with the inherent capability for success and achievement,
something that has bestowed upon the group the label of the model minority. The effects of this notion can be seen politically, socially, and also in terms of education. The view of Asian Americans as the model minority stems from the belief that they have achieved an exceptional level of accomplishment and success through hard work and determination—something that has even earned Asian Americans the label of the “new Jews” (Wu, 2002). However, this celebration of economic success and educational accomplishment ignores the darker reality that it has largely been used as a justification for the continued neglect of other minorities. Moreover, the model minority claim also overlooks the hardships and obstacles that continue to define the lives of many Asian Americans.

The media has been the primary agent for the propagation of the model minority myth. For example, in 1986, both NBC Nightly News and McNeil/Lehrer Report aired separate special news segments on the successes of Asian American students (Takaki, 1998). This was followed in 1987 by another CBS 60 Minutes episode praising Asian American educational achievement. Not surprisingly, questions that were asked in the episode reflected sweeping assumptions about the entire Asian American community; one question asked “why are Asian Americans doing so exceptionally well in school?” Periodicals and magazines also reinforced this discourse. One edition of U.S. News and World Report carried a cover story on Asian Americans and their “advances,” while Time magazine even referred to Asian Americans as a “meteoric minority” that was the driving force behind “The Changing Face of America” (Takaki). Even on campuses, media served to reinforce this increasingly typecast view of Asian Americans with Newsweek entitling the cover of their college campus magazine Asian Americans: The Drive to Excel with the lead article blatantly entitled: “Asian Americans: A model minority” (Takaki).

Woo (2000) explores the media’s subtle role in disseminating the model minority myth. For example, she analyzes an April, 1998, edition of The Washington Post, in which a Korean American born of immigrant parents was touted as the “classic dream of entrepreneurial Americans.” The article explains the rise to success of Kim, who went from “working the night shift at 7–11 to put himself through school” to “[selling] his company—for 1 billion”. From the headline, it seems at first that Kim earned his success through determined hard work and a bit of clever ingenuity. Later in the article, it is revealed that Kim’s company partially funded its venture with a grant from the federal government for small, minority-owned businesses.

Although the article does mention this as a factor in Kim’s success, Woo suggests that articles such as these only serve to reinforce the model minority myth in their framing (i.e., headline). Most importantly, the model minority has proven especially harmful for those Asian ethnic groups that are not achieving the sorts of successes that the myth promulgates. For example, many Asians have been “rendered invisible” such as Hmong, Down-town Chinese, elderly Japanese, old Filipino farm laborers, and others (Takaki, 1998). This, in turn, has led to the denial of social services for these needy groups: Government officials have sometimes denied funding for special service programs designed to help Asian Americans learn English and find employment . . . failing to realize that there are poor Asian families, college administrators have sometimes excluded Asian American students from Educational Opportunity Programs, which are intended for all students from low-income families (Takaki). With the appearance of such readily attainable success, the model minority myth has resulted in anti-Asian American
sentiment that has become a chronic problem for some educational institutions in recent years. For example, racial acronyms for prestigious schools with large Asian student bodies (i.e., Made In Taiwan), discriminatory graffiti on the walls of school buildings, and racially motivated incidents involving violence can all be seen as a consequence of the myth (Takaki). The need to clearly and permanently refute the model minority myth is essential for a true sense of Asian American autonomy to arise. Although this article is not intended to directly dispel the model minority myth only to shed some light on it, research on these two seemingly distinct groups of Asian Americans can demonstrate the diversity of the Asian American community that underlies the need to challenge such myths.

Attachment Theory Defined

Major attachment theorist Bowlby has led the way for studies on the human beings and our desire to live in groups, be connected, yet have the freedom to venture off and explore, knowing full well that we can safely return to our point of reference (Van Ecke, 2005). Van Ecke suggests that the reason why humans have evolved and survived is because of our innate nature that leads us to build and maintain close relationships. The key to the attachment theory, however, is that an individual (or child because it is in the child/caregiver relationship that the individual first forms a bond) must have a secure base in order to survive occasional separation without being devastated. The initial base is the presence of our caregiver, which later becomes a mental representation that carry with us subconsciously. Van Ecke describes this mental representation as our “attachment representation,” which becomes “a state of mind with respect to attachment.”

This attachment representation can exist in three basic structures, as first defined by Bowlby. Van Ecke (2005) summarizes the types of attachment as either secure attachment (one type) or insecure attachment (two types)—“anxious avoidant” when referring to children and “dismissive” when referring to adults, anxious resistant when referring to children, and “preoccupied” when referring to adults. The perceived result of being securely attached is that an individual can interact with people and his/her environment with ease, confidence, and flexibility. Van Ecke points to another major attachment theorist, Mary Ainsworth, to define the following insecure attachments. An anxious avoidant/dismissive attachment is formed when through early interactions we discover that our emotions and needs are rejected by our caregiver, so we therefore reject our own emotions in order to maintain a harmonious relationship with the caregiver. An anxious resistant/preoccupied attachment is formed when the caregiver is needier than the child, which results in spotty and insufficient care for the child, often leading to the child learning to be hypersensitive to the needs of the other.

In Van Ecke’s (2005) interviews with immigrant groups, she found that it was most commonly the dismissive adults who had made the global journey. These adults had perceivably dismissed their own need for personal relationships and decided to leave their homeland. Van Ecke (2005) is defining this as an insecure attachment. Immigrants who are insecurely attached (specifically dismissive attachment) report less psychiatric distress and anxiety and have more of a chance to have an easier adaptation period. Preoccupied attached immigrants have a more difficult of a time adjusting to the host culture, whereas securely attached immigrants suffer the most because they are said to be most in touch with their emotions and pain (Van Ecke).
Examining the Premise of and Cultural Biases of Attachment Theory—Is It Universal?

Most importantly for this article, and for understanding the relationship between immigrants and attachment theory, we must first examine the underlying foundation of attachment theory. Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, and Morrelli (2000) conducted studies to examine the universal (or lack there of) qualities of attachment theory. Though they recognize that attachment theory has been less scrutinized for ethnocentrism than other Westernized theories of relating, they say that attachment theory has not been studied enough through a cross-cultural lens—there have only been 14 studies conducted cross-culturally. Rothbaum (2000) used the nation of Japan as their study base to contrast the Western cultural values that are often used to understand the premise of attachment theory. Unpacking this puzzle is the key to understanding that the way Van Ecke had previously categorized and grouped immigrants in her studies may not be valid because her definitions of attachment were based on the Western value system.

Rothbaum (2000) assessed the three main hypotheses of attachment theory for their universality—sensitivity hypothesis, competence hypothesis, and secure base hypothesis. Overall, and in summary, Rothbaum found vast cultural differences between the Japanese and Western caregiver/child relationships. As a primary example, in the sensitivity hypothesis, Japanese mothers often anticipate the need of their infant as a means to minimize the stress of the child. With a Western lens, this may appear to be an impediment on the development of the child’s independence. The Western model of child rearing, according to secure attachment, is to allow for the child to explore and express their needs, as a way to begin the process of individual development. Japanese mothers want to care for their child by maintaining the safe, close bond and protect their child (Rothbaum, 2000). In addition, the Western cultural norms that say that it is good and right to express competence by sociability, autonomy, efficacy, and exploration are not appropriate in Japanese culture. The Japanese consider this as inappropriate behavior, and even “immature” and “uncultivated,” as referenced by Rothbaum (2000). Lastly, the main concept of attachment theory, or a “secure base,” is fundamentally a Western concept because it emphasizes the need to be able to be independent. Japanese society focuses on the need to be dependent and expect another’s love and enjoy resting in that kind of safe environment (Rothbaum, 2000). It is important to be aware of these fundamental cultural differences because without this knowledge it is easy to presume and classify an individual as being insecurely attached (according to Western standards), when in another country, these individuals are actually quite healthy and to their own standards, are securely attached. The result is that we may pathologize what is strength to one who was raised in a different cultural paradigm. And in relation to the immigrant population, theorists may be missing the mark when they try to understand the adaptation process, particularly for the Asian American immigrant population.

Conclusion

The most important end result of this article is that we can become aware of the adaptation difficulties that the Asian American population face, in particular the first-generation Asian American population. The psychological distress that is evident in Asian Americans from the study by Wei (2004) may point us to the pressure of cultural clashes and ideological crises...
that arise in the lives of recent immigrants and for those that are born in the United States. Being raised in one culture that values interdependence and social/group harmony, and then entering into an environment that values independence, competency, being opinionated and outspoken, can cause a severe psychological crisis. My assertion here is that the psychological distress is not caused by being insecurely attached but is the result of living in a paradigm of conflicting cultural values. Perhaps, Asian American immigrants do not really have a problem with being closely attached (in attachment theory terms, this would be “insecure attachment”) but maybe feel the pressure to be different than who they are culturally. If the host environment is telling them that they are doing something wrong, that is, labeling them as being “insecurely attached,” how can we expect anything but psychological distress to arise?

In order to be culturally competent and understand the needs of the fastest growing ethnic group in this country, we need to truly reevaluate our own standards of measure. The labeling theory applies here as well—we cannot diagnose someone with an “unhealthy” or “insecure” attachment without first evaluating one in terms of the context. More work needs to be done among practitioners of the second and third generation of Asian American groups so that they will have an insider’s perspective on cultural philosophies and values, resulting in a truly postmodern revolution of various professions from education to psychology to social work to criminology, all fields are relevant to help understand this often silent and ignored ethnic group, the Asian Americans.

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References


