

# What Marriage Educators Should Know About Working with Asian American Couples and Individuals

The Asian American population is diverse, but there are many commonalities among this culture that would be helpful for marriage educators to know in order to provide effective services.

Culture influences marriage and it is helpful for practitioners to understand this influence in order to offer culturally relevant marriage education services. Although Asian Americans make up a relatively small portion of the U.S. population (4.4 percent, Census, 2002), they are highly represented in interracial marriages. Other common characteristics in Asian American households include high rates of marriage, and a larger portion of households are family households. Although the Asian American population is diverse, representing at least 16 different countries and multiple languages, there are many commonalities such as the high value placed on family. This tip sheet is designed to provide background information to marriage educators working with Asian intermarried couples as well as couples where one or both partners are Asian immigrants.

## Unexpressed cultural expectations and heritage

In an interracial couple, both the Asian individual and the non-Asian partner have expectations regarding their specific roles and behaviors in the relationship. If these expectations are not adequately expressed, the relationship can be strained. It is essential for each individual to be aware of his or her own expectations and how they are different from those of his or her partner, family of origin, community members and society as a whole. In the case of

inter-ethnic marriages, these expectations reflect a couple's identity, heritage, acculturation and nativity. For example, even though a Chinese foreign-born husband and a Chinese-American-born wife may share the same ethnic background, they may not have the same expectations about familial duties. The wife may want to work outside the home. In contrast, the husband may want his wife to stay at home to raise the children, which is reflective of traditional Chinese culture.

## Language Barriers

Practitioners may encounter individuals who do not speak English well and have to rely on their partners to communicate. This can strain the couple relationship as well as become a challenge to service providers. Practitioners should keep in mind that all couples have to work to communicate, and all individuals have to learn to communicate in ways that their partners can understand. Therefore,



couples should be encouraged to practice better communication skills in the language of their choice or seek assistance from a practitioner who can speak the couple's common language.

example, many Asian women in the U.S. report that they are expected to be submissive in relationships because of their ethnicity.

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Additionally, using culturally-appropriate and relevant metaphors and stories are important to help deliver program lessons. Along the same line, practitioners should avoid using American sayings and slang. Educators who are familiar with Asian and Asian American cultures should integrate subtle cultural background into curricula and class exercises so the audience can relate to the material. For example, instead of using a baseball metaphor with an Asian American audience, use a cricket metaphor to demonstrate the point. If a program is translating materials, such as the curriculum or brochures, identify a translator within the community who will be familiar with local values and phrases. This is likely to result in a higher quality translation than merely selecting the least expensive vendors.

### **Transference of cultural expectations**

Individuals may carry misconceptions of culture into the couple relationship or marriage. People sometimes find themselves attracted to an individual based on their perceived cultural expectations for this individual. However, these cultural expectations can be inappropriate and sometimes insulting. For

### **Be aware of the context of intermarriage**

All couples and individuals have differences in cultural background, social upbringing, education, and available social support. Any one of these can account for

a variety of stressors and strengths in the marriage. For example, an interracial couple's experience living in a community with few or no interracial couples will differ from couples living in an area populated with interracial couples. An *interracial* marriage occurs when two people from different racial groups marry (i.e. Asian American and Hispanic), whereas an *interethnic* marriage is between members of the same racial group, but with different ethnicities (i.e. Chinese American and Korean American).

### **Be aware of relationship issues as a result of refugee experiences**

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political, economic and social hardships. For example, refugees that are survivors of torture by foreign governments are dealing with the strain of seeking medical, social, psychological and even legal assistance and becoming rehabilitated in an unfamiliar country.

## **Attempt to strengthen familial relationships**

The Asian culture places a high value on family and children. This value system can be a great asset in a marriage involving couples of different ethnicities/ races. It's also important that inter-racial/inter-ethnicity couples show a mutual respect for each other's heritage. However, a couple's relationship with their parents (and other relatives) might be strained due to a number of reasons. These can include a parent's perceived sense of rejection of heritage because their child has married outside of the race, ethnicity, or religion, and the parents feel that the couple has assimilated to more "American" values. Offering opportunities and encouraging couples to communicate their relationship expectations with their parents can help reconcile these misunderstandings and strengthen the couple's support system. Because respect for elders is also valued across many Asian cultures, supportive parents can, in turn, strengthen the marriage.

## **Be aware of culturally taboo topics**

The Asian immigrant cultures have strong concepts of tradition. Imposing any views that seem too Western can cause the facilitator to lose credibility. Facilitators should build trust with participating couples through cultural sensitivity. This is often a gradual process and requires research and consideration. For example, Muslim couples may have both religious and cultural reasons for avoiding certain forms of public expressions of affection, including touching.

Similarly, some Asian participants might feel uncomfortable sharing personal information in public. Children often learn the English language quickly and serve as mediators between American systems and their families. It is also common that many refugees fail to meet re-certification standards in the United States forcing them to seek employment outside their given field. This often leads to a difficult change in their social status which may be an uncomfortable topic in a couples class.

## **Conclusion**

There is great diversity among Asian Americans as this population represents 37 different countries of origin. These nations have distinct traditions, religious practices and languages. Practitioners can, however, be aware of common cultural values and their impact on the couple relationship.

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