

Asian Culture Brief: Japan

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Mission:

To increase employment opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities nationwide.

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The purpose of this brief, developed as part of a series of Asia and Pacific Island culture briefs, is to present readers with a quick overview of the Japanese culture and to introduce references that will provide more in-depth perspectives.

Introduction

Every discussion about culture should begin with the acknowledgement that culture is a fluid, not static, concept. Moreover, changes within cultures are influenced by many factors, from other cultures to movies and mass media. A society, for example, may slowly change its way of living to be more like a popular culture or a different country seen on television or in the movies. The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) segment of the U.S. population is growing faster than any other. One author reports that from approximately 1.5 percent of the population in 1980, the Asian Pacific American population - the term he prefers - grew to comprise almost 3 percent in 1990, for a growth rate of more than 100 percent (Leung, 1996). The majority of AAPIs live in the five states of California, Hawai'i, New York, Illinois, and Texas; however, AAPIs can be found in all areas of the country. AAPIs are projected to increase to more than 10 percent of the total U.S. population by 2050. Japanese Americans account for many of those AAPIs.

A Snapshot of Japanese Culture

In Japan, each person is expected to conform to societal ways and norms, though there are exceptions with much of the radical younger generation and a few individuals that intentionally mock conformity. Japan is a collectivist society where group needs and wants are placed above those of the individual and Japanese people tend to be other-directed (Ritts, 2000). Subsequently, they are extremely sensitive to and concerned about relationships. A noteworthy Japanese quote, "The nail that sticks out is hammered down" (Russo, 2003-05) indicates how individualism is negatively viewed in Japanese society. Japanese Americans are guided by their heritage, or possibly parental teachings, consciously or unconsciously, to conform to societal expectations. American society, on the other hand, values individualism and uniqueness. American parents frequently want their children to stand apart from the crowd. Japanese culture discourages individualism whereas American culture embraces it.

In American schools, for instance, students are valued and frequently receive better grades if they speak up and participate, even if their participation is unnecessary. Japanese society views such contributions as rude and disruptive, and active participators might very possibly receive lower grades. Japanese people believe that sensei (teachers) always know best and students should listen only to them.

Assimilating to American society may be difficult for someone of Japanese heritage because of such divergent thought patterns. Several other traditional values that may make assimilating to American society difficult for someone with Asian heritage include: filial piety, shame as a method of reinforcing expectations and proper behavior, self-control, emphasis on consensus, fatalism, and inconspicuousness (Ho, 1992).

A Brief History of Japanese in America

In May 1868, a ship sailed out of Yokohama for Hawai'i, carrying 153 Japanese migrants bound for employment on the sugar plantations (JANET, 1996). These adventurers constituted the first mass emigration of Japanese overseas. Emigration and immigration continued at a steady pace until May 26, 1924, when President Calvin Coolidge signed the 1924 immigration bill into law to slow the flood of immigrants into the US - essentially a quota system - effectively ending Japanese immigration to the U.S. Then, in 1942, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Western Defense Command of the United States Army decided the military situation at that time required the removal of all Japanese Americans in the area. President Franklin Roosevelt subsequently created the War Relocation Authority (WRA), which established 10 relocation camps that would house more than 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry who lived chiefly along the Pacific Coast (Relocation of Japanese Americans, 1943). The WRA closed its doors on June 30, 1946 but not until 1952, did the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act end racially based naturalization and the 1924 ban on Asian immigration.

About the time of the Vietnam War protests, the Asian American Movement began, which was essentially a middle-class reform effort for Asian Americans to achieve racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment (Wei, 1995). That movement helped develop unique, yet cohesive, ethnic identities and led to Japanese American involvement in electoral politics and the quest for political empowerment. It was not until the 1980s, however, that the United States Congress even began to consider some kind of redress for the victims of the wartime incarceration, eventually passing the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. More than twenty years prior to the passage of the 1988 Act, Petersen (1966) wrote about a basic change taking place in the minds of many Americans toward Asians, specifically those of Japanese descent: they became known as a model minority, a group of people that many Americans believed strives for success based on merit alone.

Family and Community Structure

Historically, the family rather than the individual has been the basic unit of Japanese society, however, that is changing to some degree (Imamura, 1990). Whereas the traditional family ways and norms no longer strictly apply in many Japanese families, neither do contemporary individualistic norms. There is also still a strong gender-based division of labor. Husbands are perceived as the primary breadwinners and wives as primarily responsible for the home. However, it is important to remember that Japanese Americans live in the United States, not in Japan. Subsequently, they may have an even more difficult time fitting in if they happen to be only second generation Japanese Americans as opposed to third or fourth generation. They may also have different levels of difficulty depending on whether their ancestors resist or embrace culture change. Put another way, as acculturation increases, acculturative stress decreases for individuals trying to assimilate to a dominant culture (Organista, Organista, & Kurasaki, 2002). Cultures also are in a constant state of flux; family structure is culture-bound.

View of Disability

The cultural and societal norms and values mentioned previously seem to be reflected in the Japanese view of the elderly and individuals with disabilities. The concept of disability is inconsistent with the Japanese concept of conformity. From openly admitting the existence of a disabling condition to rehabilitation, Japanese people would historically view such concerns as family business and see little need to involve others. Pain may even be endured by the person with a disability as a matter of family honor (Sharts-Hopko, 2003). This way of thinking

will influence the Japanese American way of thinking. Thus, Japanese Americans may view a disability as a personal or familial issue and try to keep every aspect “all in the family.” Unfortunately, one of the adverse side effects of keeping disability all in the family is not actively seeking rehabilitation services. Additionally, being perceived as a model minority results in the belief that Japanese Americans have no problems because they have literally made it in American society and, therefore, rehabilitation professionals may believe that they have no need for services. Those reasons all contribute to large numbers of AAPI not receiving or not seeking rehabilitation services.

Providing Rehabilitation Services to Japanese Americans

Services for AAPIs with disabilities need to match the cultural, religious, linguistic and psychosocial characteristics of each individual (Hampton, 2000). Leung (1995) further recommends in working with a Japanese American consumer it is important to take the family into consideration. The rehabilitation professional has to examine the impact of a disability on the whole family as well as the individual consumer. It would not only be important to look at how any physical impairment, if one exists, will affect the family, but also how the disability psychologically affects them. Rehabilitation providers should also keep in mind that, even though American society is instructing and expecting all rehabilitation consumers to be individuals, their Japanese heritage and/or parents are guiding and instructing them not to stick out and to conform. Moreover, it may be useful for rehabilitation counselors working with all Asian Americans to network with community agencies and other culturally sensitive providers in allied professions (Hong, 1995).

Recommendations to Rehabilitation Service Providers

Hong (1995) believes rehabilitation professionals are currently ill-prepared to assist AAPIs with disabilities. Considering the limited training and employment available to ethnic and linguistic persons from minority groups such as Asians a rehabilitation counselor, for example, has to be especially resourceful and persistent (Hong, 1995). He or she will likely need to be an advocate for consumers, arguing their cases before government agencies and locating legal assistance when needed. He or she must also serve as the liaison between different agencies, such as medical services, job training, and welfare services, to ensure the consumer will not get lost in the shuffle between them. That person should also consider utilizing different techniques and strategies depending on how many generations removed rehabilitation consumers are from their immigrating ancestors. Given the traditional importance of the family in Japanese society, the counselor has to be careful to include relevant family members in the decision-making process (Hong, 1995). How the family is affected by the disabling condition, but also how they might perceive it. Another author further recommends using courtesy and thoughtfulness, as well as an empathetic, blameless, and problem solving approach, especially in counseling situations, which are preferable to a direct and blunt approach (Tanabe, 2005).

Ways you can become more familiar with Japanese culture

First and foremost, for any professional serving a Japanese American, reviewing literature about Japanese culture would be invaluable (see Bachnik, 2004; Sharts-Hopko, 2003 and Ritts, 2000). Without first having a common frame of reference/perspective, misunderstandings are probable. Moreover, it is important to remember that Japanese Americans will each have different views of family, disability and conformity depending on their different circumstances. Courtesy and thoughtfulness, as Tanabe (2005) recommends, are wise until more clearly understanding each individual’s unique paradigm.

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The information in this brief can be provided in accessible formats upon request.
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