Cultural Patterns of South Asian and Southeast Asian Americans

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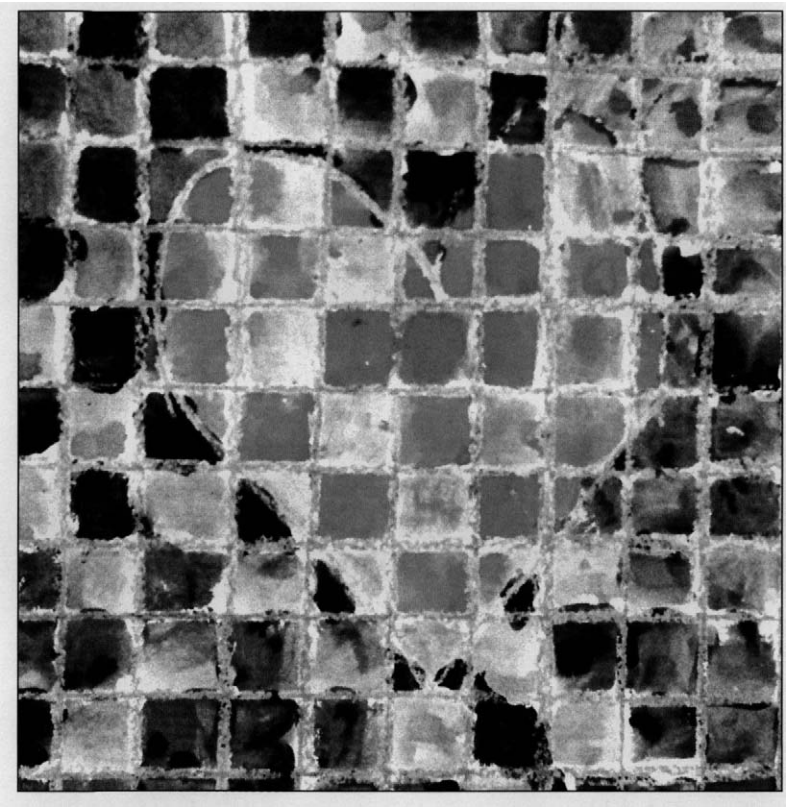

An overview of South Asian and Southeast Asian Americans is discussed to aid teachers in understanding some behaviors exhibited by students from these diverse backgrounds. Although there are some similarities in cultural practices among the vast Asian ethnic groups, Asians do not fall into one homogeneous group. The value of honoring the family is very strongly ingrained in South Asian and Southeast Asian children; therefore, discussing any personal problems with an outsider is regarded as a disgrace to the family. Implications for teaching based on cultural practices are outlined.

The number of South Asians and Southeast Asians in the United States has increased dramatically in the past 20 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). South Asians include people from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. People from Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmaro, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines are considered to be Southeast Asians. The increasing number of first-generation Asians has definitely contributed to a higher percentage of school-age children in all parts of the United States (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997), especially in larger urban areas such as New York City, its New Jersey suburbs, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). All Asians do not have the same cultural practices (Betz, 1993). Instead, their different cultures are based on their country of origin, region, religion, social class, and educational level. Although some basic beliefs and values are shared by all Asian groups, teachers should recognize the diversity among Asian American students and avoid the myth of cultural homogeneity (Kim, Rendon, & Valadez, 1998).

Several studies have shown that family participation is an essential factor in improving the students' performance (Meheran & White, 1988; Met Life, 1998; Sileo & Prater, 1998; Sileo, Sileo, & Prater, 1996). Voltz (1994)

stated that parents tend to shy away from school involvement if they sense that schools lack understanding and acceptance. Apparently, educators need to have a clear concept of their students' sociocultural backgrounds to ensure effective teaching. In order for a teacher to work effectively with South Asian and Southeast Asian students and their families, he or she needs to understand certain important factors, including the following:

- family relationships,
- respect for age,
- social interaction and behavior,
- communication style,
- family expectations of success,
- humility,
- school situations,
- decision making, and
- barriers to socialization

Family Relationships

Within South Asian and Southeast Asian families is a hierarchical social order featuring a series of superior and subordinate individuals (Fieg, 1980). In most families, the father is considered to be the head of the family and the decision maker. The mother is the emotionally devoted, nurturant parental figure who feeds the children and takes care of the household. The family extends horizontally and vertically; these various relationships are valued, and appropriate respect is given to each family member. Grandparents have a high status in the family and are respected and cared for by other family members (Berg & Jaya, 1993). It is not uncommon to see grandparents taking care of the children whenever such need arises. Many situations foster dependence in South Asian and Southeast Asian children and youths. For example, most South Asian and Southeast Asian parents take complete financial responsibility for their children until they complete their studies, find a job, or get married. In turn, children acknowledge a great obligation to their parents, "who have brought them into the world" and cared for them when they were helpless. They fulfill this obligation by looking after the parents in their old age (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993).

Respect for Age

South Asians and Southeast Asians believe that the older a person gets, the more maturity and knowledge he or she acquires; older persons thus are respected for these attributes (Sandhu, 1997). Families turn to older family members for advice and support when they are in crisis, and respect is given according to the hierarchical order (Sandhu, 1997). For example, younger siblings are expected to respect older siblings and look up to them for guidance and advice. The younger siblings may not address the older siblings by name, but only by certain special terms.

In addition to respect based on a family hierarchy, South Asians and Southeast Asians traditionally are also taught to respect all people in authority. Age and official position are respected sources of social status. Teachers are respected as experienced and educated persons who are knowledgeable enough to provide answers to both academic queries and personal problems (House & Pinyuchon, 1998).

Social Interaction and Behavior

South Asian and Southeast Asian cultural emphasis in interpersonal relationships is a much more formal one than the informal and spontaneous nature found in the U.S. macroculture (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988). Affection—especially between opposite genders—is not openly displayed. Politeness, which includes good manners, quiet speech, a pleasant smile, gracefulness, and modest dress, is expected. The intent of politeness is to communicate the utmost consideration for the comfort of others. Rude and inappropriate behaviors are attributed to poor parental upbringing (House & Pinyuchon, 1998).

Communication Style

In order to maintain harmony or to prevent disagreements or unpleasant interchanges, South Asians and Southeast Asians usually avoid freely expressing their feelings and thoughts to others, especially in public (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988). They also believe that highly educated people and those with a higher social status should control their emotions as well as their verbal and nonverbal expressions. Thus, there is a tendency to neutralize all emotions. They practice intuitive and nonverbal approaches when dealing with school personnel (Sileo, Sileo, & Prater, 1996). However, they exhibit a very high degree of sensitivity when recognizing the feelings and emotions of others (House & Pinyuchon, 1998).

Family Expectations of Success

Career success and educational achievements are highly valued by South Asians and Southeast Asians. Parents expect their children to bring pride and honor to their

families by attaining a high level of success academically as well as in their chosen careers (House & Pinyuchon, 1998). Children's success is very important because it reflects on the parents. Higher education is viewed as a means of upward mobility. Parents influenced by their cultural heritage believe that no sacrifice is too great to obtain a good education for their children. Scholastic achievement is considered to be the highest tribute one could bring to the parents. Children's failure to meet this parental expectation may cause feelings of inadequacy and incompetence in both parties (House & Pinyuchon, 1998).

Humility

It is extremely important among South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures not to make oneself the center of attraction or discuss one's accomplishments. The degree of humble behavior is expected to increase in tandem with the increase in one's achievements. It is also very important not to portray oneself as being better than others. Other members of the community may, however, shower praises and adoration on those who have achieved (House & Pinyuchon, 1998). Thus, students from South Asian and Southeast Asian cultural backgrounds may find it difficult to speak of their own accomplishments, to ask or to answer questions in class, or to voluntarily express opinions because they are taught to believe that such behaviors are boastful (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988).

School Situations

Obedience, silence, and nonassertiveness are normal traits for most South Asian and Southeast Asian school children, and parents expect the children to practice these virtues at all times (House & Pinyuchon, 1998). As a result, students from these cultural backgrounds may appear withdrawn and unwilling to express themselves freely, which may be viewed as inappropriate personal and social skills in the U.S. macroculture (House & Pinyuchon, 1998).

Decision Making

Parents tend to make all the important decisions for their children, especially those relating to academics and careers. Some parents even play a significant role in selecting spouses for their children as arranged marriages are not uncommon among South Asians (Das & Kemp, 1997). These types of cultural expectations often prevent students from making decisions on their own. This is especially true when the parents are first-generation immigrants (Das & Kemp, 1997).

Socialization Barrier

Many South Asian and Southeast Asian immigrants speak English with a marked accent, and they sometimes lack fluency, which may result in communication problems. This also causes them to restrain from engaging in conversations with other students in the classroom. This avoidance behavior is also common in the parents of children from these backgrounds (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993).

Children from such cultural backgrounds come to school immensely influenced by their families, homes, and communities. Educators with an understanding and knowledge of their cultural heritages will be better prepared to maintain a balance between the students' unique characteristics and mainstream U.S. culture. Recognizing the different cultural traits of these students and making appropriate adjustments will lead to better relationships between teachers and students. Accordingly, based on the South Asian and Southeast Asian student profiles discussed here, the following implications for teaching are offered.

Implications for Teaching

1. Awareness. Teachers should be aware of two critical aspects: First, they should recognize and respect cultural variations and their impact on different ethnic groups' thinking and attitudes. Second, they should understand the students' level of acculturation and their identity status. This is very important in interacting with and securing cooperation from the parents of such students (Das & Kemp, 1997).

2. Nonverbal sensitivity. Teachers should not make the assumption that the student or the student's parents do not or cannot understand their (the teachers') attitudes and nonverbal behaviors (Mortlock, 1989). South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures especially have a high sensitivity to nonverbal communication. For example, they tend to keep quiet about their displeasure in hopes of avoiding unpleasant situations and confrontations (Pratomthong & Baker, 1983). They may even attempt to defuse a tense situation by making jokes or changing the topic (House & Pinyuchon, 1998). Based on their own communication style, they rely on the nonverbal communication of others. It is accepted that a person's words may contradict his or her nonverbal messages. Consequently, nonverbal messages are given much credibility (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997).

3. Role of humility in cultural identity. Teachers should not assume that the student has a poor self-image based on the macroculture of the U.S. However, the presence of this trait will vary with age, acculturation, and the student's status either as an immigrant or one who was born and raised in North America (Ibrahim,

Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997). Children of South Asian and Southeast Asian parents who are first-generation immigrants are socialized in two different cultures: the microculture (culture of the family) and the macroculture. Most parents try to inculcate ethnic pride and awareness of their cultural heritage in their children. If these children immigrated with their parents, they will have an arduous time adjusting to the U.S. macroculture. One of the reasons for this is that they are afraid to hurt the feelings of their parents by behaving against parental expectations (Sodowsky & Carey, 1987).

4. Guidance–nurturant-oriented intervention. When South Asian and Southeast Asian parents seek advice, they want the teacher to take an active role and give them explicit directions on how to solve problems related to their children. This is because they view teachers as experts and authorities and thus believe that teachers will have all the resources to guide them properly. They do not normally initiate conversation, and they are comfortable with silence (House & Pinyuchon, 1998). South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures tend to follow a master–learner model and reflect the value of respect for the authority figure (Sandhu, 1997).

5. Awareness of the fear of family rejection. South Asians and Southeast Asians are conservative and reticent about their personal problems due to a fear of being rejected by their family members. Openness and honesty may be construed by South Asian and Southeast Asian students as an invasion of privacy. Sharing a family problem with outsiders is regarded as bringing shame to the family. Since family problems and conflicts are kept within the family, students from such backgrounds may be reluctant to share with their teachers any family problems that are negatively affecting their studies (Pratomthong & Baker, 1983).

Summary

Behaviors such as timidity, overdependance, and lack of initiative can be manifestations of the cultural traits of students from South Asian and Southeast Asian families. This is especially true of students from first-generation families because their parents expect them to adhere strictly to their own ethnic culture and tradition. These behavioral patterns can be misunderstood as weaknesses unless teachers are aware of the many specific factors related to such traits. Teachers must be sensitive to the cultural aspects of students from various backgrounds in order to work effectively with them and to gain cooperation freely from their parents.

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