

Presented at the 2005 Annual Conference  
of the  
American Psychological Association  
Washington D. C.

**Korean American undergraduate depressive symptomatology: Examining gender and generation**

**Sara Cho Kim\***

University of Wisconsin – Madison

**Yong S. Park\***

University of California – Santa Barbara

**Jeanett Castellanos**

University of California – Irvine

**Alberta M. Gloria**

University of Wisconsin – Madison

**Daniel C. S. Kim**

University of California – Irvine

\*Equal contribution made by authors.

*Please do not quote or cite without previous permission of the authors.*

## **Abstract**

This study examined the influence of acculturation and perception of the university environment on the depressive symptomatology of 228 Korean American undergraduates. Assessed by gender and generational status, students with higher levels of acculturation perceived the university environment as more positive, reported lower perceived barriers, and identified fewer depressive symptoms. Females and second-generation students reported more depressive symptoms. Perception of barriers was the strongest predictor of depressive symptoms for females (26%), whereas perception of the university environment accounted for the largest portion of variance for males (13%). Study limitations, research directives, and implications for those working with Korean American undergraduates are provided.

## **Depressive Symptomatology and Korean Americans**

- ◆ Research on depressive symptomatology for first- generation Korean Americans examined adults from
  - ◆ community centers (Lin, Lau, Yamamoto, Zheng, Kim, Cho, & Nakasaki, 1992)
  - ◆ churches (Hurh, 1998)
  - ◆ outpatient centers (Lee, 2004)

- ◆ Korean Americans experience higher levels of depression than other Asian ethnic groups (Hurh & Woo, 1990)
- ◆ Korean adults reported twice the rate of depression as compared to Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrant groups (Kuo & Tsai, 1986)
- ◆ Korean American adults at risk for depression due to acculturative stress, language barriers, immigration, and lack of social supports (Hyun, 2001)

## **Korean American Undergraduates in Higher Education**

- ◆ Stereotypes and misperceptions of Korean American students (Kao, 1995; Lee, 1996; Min, 1998) have hindered examinations of their educational experiences and subsequent psychological processes
- ◆ Studies for Korean Americans address issues of academic achievement, acculturation, and ethnic identity (Kim, Brenner, Liang, & Asay, 2003; Koh, 1994; Kim, 2004)
- ◆ In a study examining the relationships among Asian value adherence, cultural fit, and help-seeking attitudes for Korean American undergraduates revealed that Korean females reported significantly higher help-seeking attitudes and cultural congruity than males (Gloria, Castellanos, Park, & Kim, 2005)
- ◆ When having an emotional concern, Korean American undergraduates are more likely to consult religious leaders and participate in religious activities as coping strategies (Yeh & Wang, 2000)
- ◆ Psychosocial factors related to educational attainment not yet fully explored

## **Depressive Symptomatology and Korean American Undergraduates**

- ◆ Korean International students in U.S. have higher levels of depressive symptomatology than Caucasian students (Aldwin & Greenberger, 1987)
  - ◆ value orientations, particularly parental traditionalism, was a strong predictor of depression for Korean students
- ◆ Korean college students reported more depressive symptomatology when compared to Filipino, Taiwanese, and American college students
  - ◆ more likely to report somatic symptoms and least likely to report affective symptoms
- ◆ Examination of depression expression and help seeking behavior among college students in the U.S. and Korea indicated Korean students more likely to somaticize and have negative affect and help-seeking behavior (Yoo & Skovholt, 2001) Despite substantial depressive symptomatology literature about Korean American adults, research has not fully examined depressive symptomatology within the educational setting for Korean American undergraduates

## **Purpose of Study**

- ◆ To examine cultural and environmental factors related to depressive symptomatology for Korean American undergraduates
  - ◆ Differences by gender and generational status (first and second) explored for each of the study's variables
  - ◆ The degree to which acculturation, perception of the university environment, and perceived barriers predicted depressive symptomatology assessed
  - ◆ Differences in the strengths of the relationships by gender and generation analyzed

## Setting and Procedure

- ◆ Study conducted at West Coast Research Type I institution
  - ◆ comprised of 46.9% Asian Americans
- ◆ Two data collection methods
  - ◆ Paper-and-pencil survey
    - ◆ 80% response rate
    - ◆ Survey distributed and completed in Asian-focused classes and student organizations
    - ◆ Instruments counterbalanced with demographic sheet placed first
  - ◆ Electronic survey
    - ◆ 6% response rate
    - ◆ email sent to students with Korean surnames from campus directory
    - ◆ 103 students responded
    - ◆ 84% met participant criteria
- ◆ No incentive provided
- ◆ 30 minutes to complete survey

## Student Participants

- ◆ 228 Korean American undergraduates
- ◆ Gender
  - ◆ 103 males
  - ◆ 124 females
  - ◆ 1 missing
- ◆ Average age: 20.81 years ( $SD = 1.84$ , range = 18 to 30 years)
- ◆ Average grade point = 3.07 ( $SD = .41$ , range = 1.20 to 4.00)
- ◆ Generation
  - ◆ 88 first-generation
  - ◆ 136 second-generation
  - ◆ 4 missing
- ◆ Class standing
  - ◆ 25 freshman (11.3%)
  - ◆ 45 sophomore (20.3%)
  - ◆ 70 juniors (31.5%)

- ♦ 82 seniors (36.9%)
- ♦ 6 missing
- ♦ 22.3% transfer students
- ♦ 76.0% lived off campus

## Instruments

Scale	Construct Measured	#	Likert-Type Scale
Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (SL-ASIA) (Suinn, Lew, & Vigil, 1987)	Acculturation	21	1 ( <i>Very Asian</i> ) 5 ( <i>Very Anglicized</i> )
University Environment Scale (UES) (Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996)	Perceptions of the university environment	14	1 ( <i>Strongly Disagree</i> ) 4 ( <i>Strongly Agree</i> )
Perception of Barriers: Withdraw and Stay subscales (PBwd, PBstay) (McWhirter, 1997)	Perceptions of potential educational barriers	14	1 ( <i>Strongly Agree</i> ) 4 ( <i>Strongly Disagree</i> )
Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS) (Zung, 1965)	Depressive symptoms	20	1 ( <i>Little of the time or never</i> ) 4 ( <i>Most of the time</i> )

## Results

### MANOVA

- ♦ Significant gender main effect,  $F(5, 203) = 2.91, p \leq .05, \eta^2 = .07$ 
  - ♦ Females had significantly higher
    - ♦ PB-stay ( $M=4.00, SD=.78$ ) than males ( $M = 3.65, SD =.96$ )
    - ♦ PB-withdraw ( $M=3.94, SD=.66$ ) than males ( $M = 3.66, SD =.78$ )
- ♦ Significant generation main effect,  $F(5, 203) = 14.63, p \leq .01, \eta^2 = .27$ 
  - ♦ 2nd generation students reported higher
    - ♦ levels of acculturation ( $M =3.15, SD=.32$ ) than 1st generation students ( $M=2.75, SD=.42$ )
    - ♦ PB-withdraw ( $M =3.88, SD =.70$ ) than 1st generation students ( $M=3.70, SD=.71$ )
- ♦ Nonsignificant gender by generation interaction ( $p > .05$ )

### Hierarchical Regressions

- ♦ Four 3-step regressions predicting depressive symptomatology (gender and generation)

Step	Male	Female	First	Second
1 SLS	2% $\beta = -.14, p > .05$	1% $\beta = -.09, p > .05$	0% $\beta = .01, p > .05$	0% $\beta = .03, p > .05$
2 UES	13% $\beta = -.31, p < .01$	4% $\beta = -.14, p \leq .05$	7% $\beta = -.22, p \leq .05$	13% $\beta = -.26, p \leq .001$
3 PBstay* PBwd	9% $\beta = -.33, p < .01$	26% $\beta = -.52, p < .001$	19% $\beta = -.52, p \leq .001$	20% $\beta = -.39, p < .001$

### Differences of Coefficients ( $p \leq .05$ )

- ◆ Relationship of PBwd and SDS significantly stronger for 2nd generation students ( $r = -.32$ ) than first generation students ( $r = -.16$ )
- ◆ Relationship of UES and SDS significantly stronger for males ( $r = -.39$ ) than females ( $r = -.20$ )
- ◆ Relationship of PBwd and SDS significantly stronger for females ( $r = -.30$ ) than males ( $r = -.15$ )

## Discussion and Implications

- ◆ Student sample “mildly depressed”
- ◆ No differences in depressive symptomatology by gender or generation
- ◆ Differences in perceived barriers by gender (PB-withdraw, PB-stay) and generation (PB-withdraw)

### Generation

- ◆ Second-generation Korean Americans’ higher levels of acculturation and perceived increased barriers may prompt their withdraw
- ◆ Relationship of PB-wd and SDS was significantly stronger for second-generation than first-generation students
- ◆ Environmental barriers may be more acutely felt by second-generation students who may feel discouraged by unwelcoming educational settings and negative environmental responses (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Tan, 1994)
- ◆ Less acculturated individuals who may adhere stronger to Asian values (e.g., conformity to norms, deference to authority, and maintaining harmony) may contribute to their limited reporting of discriminatory behaviors and emotional distress (Alvarez, 2001, 1999)
  - ◆ Korean American students are experiencing depression and college student personnel may not be able to recognize their needs due to a reluctance to seeking help (Gloria, Castellanos, Park, & Kim, in press)

- ◆ Additional steps should be taken when determining depressive symptomatology in Korean American undergraduates that could lead to more effective interventions and improved outcomes

### **Gender**

- ◆ Perceived barriers to stay in school significantly greater in predicting depressive symptomatology in females (26%) than for males (9%)
  - ◆ Females had stronger relationship of PB-withdraw to depressive symptomatology (SDS)
    - ◆ Females may be more attuned to the barriers in the environment
    - ◆ Females are more likely to have less support for education than their male counterparts (Min, 1998)
- ◆ Males perception of the university environment plays a salient role in their college experience and their ultimate sense of depression
  - ◆ Males may overlook negative events (e.g., racism, discrimination) as part of one's career trajectory
- ◆ College student personnel working with Korean American undergraduates may want to consider asking specific question regarding generation status and gender role expectations

### **Study Limitations ~ Future Research**

- ◆ Cross-sectional study ~ Longitudinal studies to determine critical junctures in student's development and track progression of depressive symptomatology in Korean American undergraduates
- ◆ Nonrandomized sample: current participants were self-selected based on interest in topic ~ Recruit participants from different disciplines and student organizations outside of Asian focused groups
- ◆ Atypical university campus ~ Replicate study at institution where Asian American students are numerical minority
- ◆ Study focused on negative aspects and educational difficulties ~ Expand conceptualization of students needs to address well-being or successful management of difficult educational experiences
- ◆ 1.5 generation students not examined ~ Assess International student status, number of years in U.S., and influence of university context on student well-being