

DIS194

Capstone Research Proposal for the Disability Studies Minor

Introduction: Many Koreans started to immigrate between 1970 to 1980, due to liberalized US immigration laws in the 1960's; thus, there are many first generation Korean-Americans residing in the United States today. Because this is so, Korean-Americans are invariably affected by the nature of their dual cultures, as they are influenced by both Korean and American ideals.

According to literature in the field, due to cultural and circumstantial factors (i.e. possessing a cultural history of stigmatizing mental illness, having language barriers, or not having access to knowledge about available services), Korean-American adults underutilize the mental health services that are available to the public. This underutilization is an important issue to be addressed, because according to Hochang Lee et al. (2008), Korean-Americans in Seattle display the highest depression symptom scores in comparison to all other ethnic groups. Also, in a study based in Chicago, the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D) mean among Korean Americans (of the 622 Korean immigrants who were interviewed) was three to four points higher than that of white Americans and other Asian Americans (p. 15). This relationship between depression and underutilization may indicate a need to address the issue, as Korean-Americans may not be at their highest potential in terms of health and wellness. As a Korean-American residing in Los Angeles, I am quite interested in seeing how Korean-Americans utilize public mental health services, and what factors play a role in their utilization (or lack thereof) of outpatient and inpatient mental health services. The Los Angeles County is home to the largest Korean-American population in the United States, and thus, is a great location, a hub, for resources to inquire the extent to which Korean-Americans utilize available mental health services.

Research Question: To what extent are Korean-Americans in LA utilizing available mental health services?

Literature Review:

- 1) Lee, Hochang, Jennifer Hanner, Seong-Jin Cho, Hae-Ra Han, and Miyoung Kim. "Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Korean American Immigrants: Moving Toward a Community Partnership Between Religious and Mental Health Services." *Psychiatry Invest* 5 (2008): 14-20. Print.

Korean-Americans show the highest depression symptom scores. The Korean-American population is steadily increasing in the United States, yet the status of Korean-Americans in the US healthcare system remains marginal—Korean-Americans rank the lowest among minority groups in having medical insurance. This journal highlights very critical components of barriers to mental health services for Korean-Americans. These include: 1) language barriers 2) lack of culturally sensitive psychiatrists 3) stigmas associated with mental disorders 4) limited awareness of mental disorders 5) limited awareness of services 6) belief in ethnic, traditional medicine. Korean churches also play a big role in meeting the social/cultural needs of Korean-Americans.

- 2) Bernstein, Kunsook. "Mental Health Issues Among Urban Korean American Immigrants." *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 18 (2007): 175-180. *Mental Health Issues Among Urban Korean American Immigrants -- Bernstein 18(2): 175 -- Journal of Transcultural Nursing*. Web. 13 Feb. 2010.

This journal expands on the struggle of Korean-Americans in assimilating to American culture. Culturally, mental illness is seen as a curse, something to be ashamed of and inherited within a family line, and according to the results in the survey given, Korean-Americans do not elaborate openly about family matters at all—especially matters revolving around mental illnesses. Bernstein lays out the most common barriers to mental illness services for Korean-Americans, and they go as follows: cultural stigma, financial constraints, long working hours,

lack of resources, poor family support, and lack of knowledge. Bernstein also stresses the role of religion in the lives of Korean-American immigrants as a means of social and emotional support.

- 3) Wu, Michelle , Frederick Kviz, and Arlene Miller. "Identifying Individual and Contextual Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Services Among Korean American Immigrant Women." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 30 (2009): 78-85. Print.

More than two of three Korean-Americans in the United States are foreign born (according to the 2008 Census). Married Korean-American women, ages 40-70 with the ability to read, write, and speak English fluently, were surveyed regarding their opinions and personal experiences with mental health services. The most common problems that the women faced in attaining appropriate mental health services for themselves were the inability to actually find services tailored to meet their cultural needs as well as a lack of family support. However, as 75% of Korean-American immigrants attend church, the church plays a pivotal role in giving emotional support to Korean-Americans.

Proposed Methodology: Data will be collected essentially through three methods: a traditional literature review, which would include recently published journal articles delving into this issue, archival data, as well as interviews, if resources provide. Archival data can be retrieved at the various mental health service centers available to the public in the Los Angeles County (http://dmh.lacounty.gov/ProviderLocator/dmh_provider_network.html) to analyze the demographics of people who utilize the respective services—namely, outpatient as well as inpatient services. Because the Los Angeles County is quite expansive, research will be focused on service areas 3,4,5,6,7, and 8 (refer to attached map at the end of document), and the reason for this is the large Korean-American population in these regions of the Los Angeles County. If staff members at these respective sites are willing, personal interviews will be conducted to expand on collected data.

Contribution to Disability Studies: Korean Americans may not be receiving the necessary access to mental health services, and the cultural factors that affect many Korean Americans may be fundamentally disabling to the Korean-American population. While Korean culture creates the aforementioned barriers to receiving Western mental health services, American culture is one that provides resources (i.e. public mental health service centers). This intersection of cultures, for Korean-Americans, is an important area of study, because the growing population in line with the apparent lack of utilization may call for a need for culturally sensitive and accommodating professionals in the field to encourage healthy mental health among Korean-Americans.

Map of Los Angeles County:

