

## INTRODUCTION

Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Issue on Advancing Our  
Understanding of Suicide Among Asian AmericansFrederick T. L. Leong  
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The issue of suicide among Asian Americans has been understudied to date, largely because suicide rates for Asian Americans in the United States have been historically lower than Caucasians. The current special issue gathers studies that represent progress in the state of science, both advancing the current state of knowledge about suicide in Asian American communities and highlighting innovative approaches to suicide prevention and management. We discuss how the articles in the special issue address the nature and salience of suicide among Asian Americans, risk factors, culturally based expression of suicidal ideation and behaviors, and recommendations for suicide prevention and interventions. We conclude by noting directions for future research.

***What is the public significance of this article?***

This article provides an overview to a special issue on advancing our understanding of suicide among Asian Americans. Since there is a lack of research on this group, the articles help us identify factors that may be helpful for prevention and intervention to reduce suicide among Asian Americans.

*Keywords:* suicide, depression, risk factors

The issue of suicide among Asian Americans has been understudied to date, largely because suicide rates for Asian Americans in the United States, as a whole, have been historically lower than those for Caucasians or other ethnic groups such as Native Americans. Recent events and developments, however, have highlighted the need for increased attention and research on the topic of suicide among Asian Americans. For example, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have consistently shown that elderly Asian American women of age  $\geq 65$  years have higher suicide rates than any other ethnic group in the same age cohort (CDC, 2017). That suicide rates in Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and China are among the highest in the world is another reason for concern (Kim, Jung-Choi, Jun, & Kawachi, 2010; OECD, 2017; Värnik, 2012).

Other research has raised concerns about elevated suicidal thoughts and attempts among Asian American college-going youth (Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005). Similarly, recent high-profile suicide clusters in Northern, California, garnered national media attention and led to a CDC Epi-Aid study questioning the potential link between the heightened suicide risk among Asian American youth and cultural facets of Asian American families, parenting, or academic expectations (CDC, 2016). However, many of these links between Asian American cultural factors and suicide have been underinvestigated and are in need of greater research attention.

Scientific advances within the past 10 years have lent empirical credence to the idea that culturally specific considerations for suicide are needed for Asian Americans (Leong, Leach, Yeh, & Chou, 2007). For example, suicide may be less linked to mental illness among Asian Americans than the general population and may be precipitated by academic or financial problems, racism, interpersonal shame, difficulties meeting personal and family expectations, or conflict within the family (with conflict between the elderly and their adult children particularly salient for elderly Asian women; Cheng et al., 2010; Chu, Chi, Chen, & Leino, 2014; Shiang et al., 1997; Wang, Wong, & Fu, 2013; Wong, Brownson, & Schwing, 2011;

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Wong, Kim, Nguyen, Cheng, & Saw, 2014; Wong, Koo, Tran, Chiu, & Mok, 2011). Suicide among young Asian American women may be particularly linked to fractured identities related to disempowerment, negative parenting, or difficulties navigating family and societal expectations (Hahm, Gonyea, Chiao, & Koritsanszky, 2014). Finally, Asian Americans may be less likely to perceive a need for and actually seek help for suicide attempts (Chu, Hsieh, & Tokars, 2011).

Though these 10 years of Asian American and suicide research advances have yielded some integration into recommendations for suicide prevention and management practice (Chu et al., 2013; Chu, Goldblum, Floyd, & Bongar, 2010; Chu et al., 2017; Leong, Leach, & Gupta, 2007; Wong, Maffini, & Shin, 2014), applied progress has remained limited to date. Gaps in knowledge and practice of suicide prevention among Asian Americans are evident.

The current special issue gathers studies that represent notable progress in the state of science, both advancing the current state of knowledge about suicide in Asian American communities and highlighting innovative approaches to suicide prevention and management. Collectively, the studies in this special issue take a previously existing broad base of knowledge on Asian Americans and suicide and advance this knowledge base with more in-depth and nuanced understandings. For example, the special issue studies highlight key suicide protective factors; moderating effects across subethnic age, gender, and nativity status subgroups; and more in-depth knowledge about expressions of suicidal distress. In addition, preexisting models of suicide intervention are expanded (e.g., an integration of the Cultural Theory and Model of Suicide (Chu et al., 2010) and the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005), and the addition of a service use component to the Cultural Theory and Model of Suicide).

### Nature and Salience of Suicide Among Asian Americans

Several of the articles in the special issue discuss how suicide may be a salient and severe problem for Asian Americans. Augsberger et al. (2018) found that suicidal ideation and behaviors may be particularly frequent and severe among a group of help-seeking Asian American (Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese American) women, with almost two thirds reporting lifetime suicidal thoughts and approximately one in five experiencing intent to attempt suicide in their lifetime. Among those who reported intent, lethality of plans was moderate to severe for almost half.

Chu, Lin, Akutsu, Joshi, and Yang (2018) identify and discuss hidden suicidal ideation or intent (HSI) as a salient cultural factor in suicide among Asian Americans. Defined as the concealment or nondisclosure of suicidal distress to others, HSI seems particularly common when there are heightened states of distress among Asian Americans.

A couple of the articles in this special issue also focused on specific Asian American subgroups. For example, Meyerhoff, Rohan, and Fondacaro (2018) noted that suicidal behavior and death by suicide are significant and pressing problems in the Bhutanese refugee community. These Bhutanese refugees are dying by suicide at a rate nearly two times that of the general U.S.

population. Their article reviews specific cultural factors related to psychopathology and suicide among Bhutanese refugees.

In another study focused on Asian American subgroups, Yang et al. (2018) examined the experience of suicide for a Lao group in California by using the Cultural Theory and Model of Suicide. The results of their interviews revealed specific areas in the community that had a notable suicide risk within the Lao group. Consistent with the cultural model of suicide, the community factors identified in this study would be important dimensions in intervention efforts among the Lao people in California.

### Risk Factors for Suicide

The special issue also sheds light on the types of problems and experiences that may precipitate suicide among Asian Americans. Some of the articles discussed risk factors for suicide that are specific for Asian Americans. Through qualitative data analysis, Augsberger and colleagues showed that culturally relevant risk factors for suicide are experienced in a group of young (average age = 23–24 years) Asian American women. For example, suicidal ideation may be linked to performance pressure related to achievement or interpersonal factors such as having restrictive parents or losing power in intimate relationships.

In the same vein, Wang, La Salle, Wu, Do, and Sullivan (2018) examined a large data set collected in Georgia school systems and found a significant relationship between greater face-to-face and cyber victimization and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (with the effect being stronger for girls than boys). It is unknown whether this victimization was culturally based or related to ethnic minority identity. Their study also showed that factors such as a positive school climate and parental involvement may protect against potential effects of cyber and face-to-face victimization on increased suicidal behaviors, with nuances in these buffering effects based on gender, type of victimization, and individuals versus school-level perception of school climate.

Chu et al.'s (2018) identification of HSI as a common occurrence related to heightened suicidal distress among Asian Americans also adds this as a cultural risk factor for suicide. Because Asian Americans tend to have a greater frequency of suicidal thoughts and attempts than their White American counterparts, Masicampo and Tang (2018) examined help-seeking attitudes and behaviors among Asian American college students. Their study revealed higher levels of two major contributors to suicidal risk: perceived burdensomeness on others and thwarted belongingness with others. These data suggest that for Asian Americans, perceptions of burdensomeness may increase desire for suicide while simultaneously decreasing willingness to seek help with one's mental health issues. Hesitancy to seek help may be perceived as bringing yet further shame to one's family. The authors propose that Asian American students may benefit from culturally tailored mental health outreach efforts on the college campus.

Joanna Kim and colleagues (2018) examined disparities in rates of follow-up mental health services (MHS) for Asian American students assessed for suicide risk in schools. Within a high-performing and ethnically diverse district with robust school MHS, the authors found that Asian American youth are at a greater risk than their Latinx counterparts to have parents decline MHS and to not receive services following a suicide risk assessment. The study

highlights disparities in linkage to care specifically for Asian American youth at risk for suicide.

### Culturally Based Expression of Suicidal Ideation and Behaviors

The articles in this special issue shed light on the ways in which suicidal ideation and behavior are expressed and experienced by Asian American individuals—with a level of nuance that advances previous research. For example, when examining what suicide attempts and behaviors look like in Asian Americans, a suicide decedent study by Wong, Deng, Lee, Grimes, and Li (2018) confirmed previous research that shows hanging as a more common (and firearm and poisoning as less common) means of suicide death among Asian Americans compared with Whites. Their results added depth to existing literature, showing that these differences were more pronounced in Asian American women than men and in immigrants than native-born Asian Americans. The gender by nativity status finding was driven particularly by a higher rate of hanging and lower rate of firearm deaths in male immigrants compared with male native-born Asian Americans.

### Recommendations for Suicide Prevention and Interventions

The special issue articles point to several recommendations for suicide prevention and intervention. Augsburg and colleagues' findings suggested that culturally tailored programming may be particularly beneficial to address suicide risk in young Asian American women. For example, interventions and prevention efforts that address maladaptive perfectionism, supportive parenting, and healthy power differentials in romantic relationships may address the specific cultural concerns that put these Asian American women in a state of suicidal crisis.

Interventions specific to Asian American middle school-aged students may include bolstering of parent involvement and ensuring a positive and supportive school climate, particularly in situations where there is peer-based in-person or cyber victimization (Wang et al., 2018). Wong and colleagues' findings suggest invaluable information for suicide prevention and management efforts related to suicide means and methods. For example, in suicide prevention or management situations, it will be important for questions regarding means of suicide to go beyond inquiry about firearms to include hanging and poisoning as well (particularly for Asian American women and Asian American male immigrants). Means restriction prevention efforts for Asian Americans may also need increased innovation and attention to hanging and ligatures.

By integrating the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005) and the Cultural Theory and Model of Suicide (Chu et al., 2010), Meyerhoff et al. (2018) provide recommendations for preventing suicide from a systems framework and discuss practical lessons from a preliminary study designed to test a culturally responsive model of suicide in Bhutanese refugees.

Javier (2018) examined how a motivation-enhancing intervention (a culturally tailored educational video) could engage Filipino families in the adoption of evidence-based parenting practices. By using a qualitative community-engaged participatory research approach, the author highlights how immigrant communities can respond adaptively to raising children in the United States.

Masicampo and Tang (2018) examined risk factors for suicide and willingness to seek help among Asian American college students. Perceived burdensomeness but not thwarted belongingness was found to mediate the link between race and reluctance to seek help. This was surprising given the importance of relational self among Asian Americans.

### Future Research Directions

The articles in this *Asian American Journal of Psychology* special issue on Asian Americans and suicide provide a compendium of potential future research directions specific to their topics. We would like to supplement these article commentaries by highlighting a few additional areas of future research that may advance the science and knowledge of suicide in Asian Americans.

Nath, VanLeer, and Ahmad-Stout (2018) found that attitudes toward help-seeking appear to be much more related to beliefs about suicide among a sample of South Asians living in the United States, and results were comparable with a U.K. sample. Specifically, positive attitudes toward help-seeking resulted in higher reasons for living scores. Given Beck's (1988) research on hopelessness and suicide, it would be useful for future research to examine the moderating or mediating role of hopelessness in this relationship among South Asians. This approach illustrates the value of integrating culture-specific studies of suicide with culture-general findings such as the role of hopelessness.

Previous research has highlighted the need to examine severe acculturative stress among immigrant families to understand this construct as a distinct risk for suicide among youth and young adults. Many of the themes raised in this issue support the notion that the field would benefit from more specific examinations of acculturative family distancing among both youth and parents (Hwang, Wood, & Fujimoto, 2010; Wang-Kraus et al., 2014).

In terms of the method of suicide, Wong et al. (2018) found that Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans are much more likely to use hanging (and less likely to use firearms) as a method than White Americans, particularly for Asian American women and immigrants overall, and male immigrants. Future research may explore the mechanisms behind these ethnic group differences. For example, a preference for hanging as a method of suicide may be explained by ease and availability of means, political or cultural views on gun control, or even the cultural messaging or meaning behind death by hanging. These investigations may facilitate a deeper understanding of Asian Americans' preference of hanging, which may inform a more culturally attuned design of suicide prevention or means restriction interventions.

Chu et al.'s (2018) identification and delineation of HSI as a culturally salient phenomenon for Asian Americans related to heightened suicidal distress seems worthy of further exploration as a culturally based risk factor. Whereas their discussion has highlighted the consistency between HSI and emotion regulation styles of Asian Americans (i.e., preference for emotion suppression), another promising future direction would be to examine the relationship of HSI and shame/loss of face (Zane & Yeh, 2002). The role of shame and loss of face has already been examined often in relation to the mental health of Asian Americans (Leong, Byrne, Hardin, Zhang, & Chong, 2018; Wong et al., 2014). It would be valuable to assess if loss-of-face concerns serve as a major mechanism underlying HSI among Asian Americans.

Finally, both articles by Meyerhoff et al. (2018) and Yang et al. (2018) combined and advanced existing models of suicide through examination and discussion of suicide in Asian American subethnic groups. Meyerhoff and colleagues integrated the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005) with the Cultural Theory and Model of Suicide (Chu et al., 2010) by proposing cultural model of suicide factors in moderating roles, and Yang added a community and help-seeking component to the Cultural Theory and Model of Suicide. These studies take important steps in advancing our understanding of how culture interplays with the development of suicide risk. Future research will benefit from additional large-scale empirical testing of these theoretical developments.

### Conclusions

Overall, this special issue makes timely and important contributions to burgeoning questions about heightened or growing suicide ideation, behaviors, and deaths among Asian American subgroups and provides guidance for community and clinical efforts to curtail the problem of suicide in Asian American populations.

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