

Chapter 3

Religion, Spirituality, and Worldviews: Implications for Mental Health



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Abstract This chapter introduces Asian religious traditions and draws out some implications for mental health that are important to counselors, mental health professionals, and social workers serving Asian North American families. Special attention is paid to religio-cultural views of gender, sexuality, and family. Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Muslim, Baha'i, Confucian, Taoist, Shamanic, Shinto, and Christian traditions are considered.

Keywords Asian American religion · Mental health · Families · Gender · Sexuality

Asian religious traditions have a long history in North America. From its beginnings in the sixteenth century to its current realities, where Asians constitute a large and growing percentage of the immigrant population, Asian immigration brings a rich diversity of religious beliefs and practices (Baker & DeVries, 2010; Mann, Numrich, & Williams, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2012a). The economic success of many Asian North Americans has helped local Asian American religious communities financially and structurally (there has been a veritable boom in temple, gurdwara, and mosque building), even as there is a growing gap between rich and poor among Asian Americans (Coloma, McElhinny, Tungohan, Catungal, & Davidson, 2012; DeVries, Baker, & Overmyer, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2018). In order to facilitate better understanding of and services to Asian North Americans, this chapter provides key information on diverse Asian religions relevant to family and mental health contexts.

It is impossible to present an exhaustive picture of the spiritualities, worldviews, and practices of Asian American religious traditions. From those Asian North American families who have been in Canada and the United States for generations to those who are more recent immigrants, there are wide variances of beliefs and

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practices. However, since religious traditions and practices are integral to many Asian and Asian American families, researchers have attempted to find ways to develop religious/cultural competencies or to facilitate work with religious communities. One strategy that researchers used was to emphasize the (positive and/or negative) relationship between religion, spirituality, and mental health—in either (or both) research and clinical work (Cashwell & Young, 2011; Koenig, 2018; Loewenthal, 2007). Another common strategy has been to present overviews of religious traditions or of religious views of illness, health, and life cycles (Crisp, 2017; Loue, 2017; Sorajjakool, Carr, & Nam, 2010). While such approaches are important, there is limited understanding in these sources of Asian and Asian American religio-cultural views of gender, sexuality, and family. To address these issues, this chapter offers brief overviews of major Asian religions with a focus on gender, sexuality, and family. Finally, the chapter draws out some important implications from Asian religions for mental health in Asian North American families.

Hindu Spiritualities and Worldviews

Hinduism is a diverse cluster of religious traditions that originates in the Indian subcontinent and spans thousands of years (Flood, 1996). Many Hindu traditions center on devotion to a particular deity or deities, though Hinduism is often understood as an all-encompassing way of life (Flueckiger, 2015). Fifteen percent of the world's population is Hindu, over 1.032 billion people (Pew Research Center, 2012b). The Hindu population in Canada is around 498,000 and 1.79 million in the United States (Chui & Flanders, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2012b).

From a general Hindu perspective, people's identities are constructs formed by our action (karma) over a myriad of lives. All beings have a true self or soul that is united with (or actually is, depending on the tradition) ultimate reality/God/Goddess (Flood, 1996). This principle that the divine is at the core of every being simultaneously downplays the significance of gender, sexuality, and family (because the true self/soul is distinct from physical and social life) as well as affirms the value of persons, families, and society (because the true self/soul is within physical and social life). One's karmic identity is a part of the harmony of the universe. Thus, following one's personal, family, and social path (e.g., performing rituals proper to your place, conforming to gender expectations, marriage, having children, following class and professional obligations) are all important for maintaining personal, social, and cosmic order (Flueckiger, 2015).

The Hindu presumption tends to be that people should get married and have children; in retirement, they can dedicate themselves to purely spiritual pursuits (Courtright, 2006). Women often lead ritual practice in the home (Flueckiger, 2015). Because every person has a place/role in the universe and in society, people who do not fit into a procreative framework must have a legitimate and valued path (Rambachan, 2007). This need can be seen in the Hindu recognition of a third

gender (*tritiya prakriti*) (Lidke, 2003). Third gender persons are recognized legally in Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

Jain Spiritualities and Worldviews

Jainism is an Indian religious tradition that emphasizes restraint as a path to liberation. Whether ascetics or householders, Jains work to conquer their attachments and devote themselves to the 24 Jinas (“victors”) who are Tirthankaras (“bridge builders”) across the ocean of birth, death, and rebirth, and into liberation (Vallely, 2010). The global Jain population is difficult to gauge, though estimates range from 4.2 to 12 million (Lee, Matsuoka, Yee, & Nakasone, 2015; Long, 2009). The estimated Jain population in the United States and Canada is 150,000 and 10,000, respectively (The Pluralism Project, n.d.; Wiley, 2004).

While Jain philosophy is somewhat similar to the Hindu concept of a lower self that is a construct of karma, it generally deemphasizes the role of social order and instead emphasizes the liberation found in renunciation of social conventions and materiality. Although the soul is infinite, it is entangled in, and obscured by, karmic matter. Jain values and vows, observed fully by monks and partially by householders, structure Jain practices. The three values are non-violence, non-absolutism, and non-attachment. The five vows of Jain practice are non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity, and non-attachment. Through right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct, the soul is liberated (Long, 2009; Vallely, 2010).

In theory, gender distinction goes against a Jain spirituality of renunciation. However, karma does condition the mind and life of a person (Peach, 2002). Thus, women are sometimes seen as naturally more attached to the world since it is in their nature to care for children (Kelting, 2009). If monks and nuns renounce family, sex, and gender/sexual identity, householders uphold but restrain them (Long, 2009). For Jain householders, sex should not be excessive (Mahajan, Pimple, Palsetia, Dave, & De Sousa, 2013). It is only appropriate within marriage and for the purposes of procreation (Long, 2009; Mahajan et al., 2013). Thus, sex has a relative status in Jainism, as celibacy is largely held up as the ideal—even for householders. While this can lead to negative views of sex, sexuality, and same-sex relationships, this can also lead to more egalitarian views of gender.

Buddhist Spiritualities and Worldviews

Although Buddhism, like Hinduism and Jainism, has its origins on the Indian subcontinent, its adherents live largely outside the Indian subcontinent. The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, himself was born around the sixth century B.C.E. in modern-day Nepal (Seager, 1999). As of 2010, there were around 488 million Buddhists across the three major branches of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana

Buddhism (7% of the world population) (Pew Research Center, 2012b). Canada's Buddhist population is around 366,800; the U.S. Buddhist population is about 3.57 million (Chui & Flanders, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2012b). However, a Pew Research study found that only 33% of U.S. Buddhists were of Asian descent (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Buddhism shares Hindu and Jain concepts of karma; it prioritizes (along with Jainism) the spirituality of renunciation (Long, 2009). Four truths ground Buddhist thought: (a) everything suffers, dies, and is impermanent; (b) desire for permanence leads to attachment and suffering; (c) when desire is extinguished (nirvana), there is an end to rebirth and suffering; and (d) the path to this liberation is an eightfold path of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration (Amore, 2010). All Buddhists are to follow five general precepts to avoid killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication (Amore, 2010).

Although Buddhist thought sometimes privileges the monastic path, householders and other lay people are essential for supporting temples, monks, and nuns (Cole, 2006). As a result, there are strong traditions of Buddhist family life often tied to indigenous practices such as ancestor devotion (Lee & Nadeau, 2014). Even so, sexual desire is sometimes seen as an attachment leading to suffering (Wilson, 2003). Although gender and sexuality are aspects of the impermanent, changing self, Buddhists may assume that this psychic construct is important as the medium of religious life (Cabezón, 1992). Negative karma may be perceived to limit women's spiritual abilities; same-sex sex may be seen as a manifestation of sexual attachment (Cabezón, 1992; Wilson, 2003).

Sikh Spiritualities and Worldviews

Sikhism emerged in the rich spiritual and interreligious context of fifteenth century Punjab (Singh, 2010). Guru Nanak (1469–1539 C.E.), the first of ten Sikh Gurus, emphasized liberation in this life (Mandair, 2010; Singh, 2010). Focused on immediate experience of the divine, Guru Nanak developed a path of mystical spirituality at work in the world (Singh, 2010). There are roughly 455,000 Canadian Sikhs and between 200,000 and 500,000 U.S. Sikhs (Chui & Flanders, 2015; Mandair, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2012c).

Sikh spirituality centers on God (Waheguru), the Creator within the self that is one with all things (Ek Onkar) (Kaur, 2014; Mahajan et al., 2013). Guru Nanak stressed the inner paths of meditation and devotion that brings about union with God and liberation from the karmic cycle. Thus, Sikhs see all humans as equal, and love of God and love of others are front and center in spiritual practice (Kaur, 2014). Thus, every Sikh gurdwara, place of worship, has a langar hall for feeding all people for free, regardless of their background (Singh, 2010). Spiritual life and the life of the householder go together, and so Sikh spirituality embeds devotion and meditation within everyday family life: devotional singing, meditation, and remembrance

of the divine name are practiced alongside service and active work for justice (Singh, 2010). Sikhs are called to pray, work, and give.

Sikhism prioritizes family life over celibacy and renunciation (Mandair, 2010). The love of marriage is seen as an analogy for the love of God (Mandair, 2010). Husbands and wives are portrayed as equal partners. Marriage is not only spiritual and not only earthly; it is a sacrament for the pursuit of both spiritual liberation and earthly happiness (Mandair, 2010). While sex is a natural good, it must be restrained and channelled in a (usually heterosexual) marriage (Mandair, 2010). Sexual desire, or lust, is seen as a vice. Without restraint in marriage, sexual desire can go out of control and tempt the person away from God (Mandair, 2010).

Zoroastrian Spiritualities and Worldviews

Although there are few Zoroastrians in the Americas today, “Zoroastrianism” refers to communities, beliefs, and practices that span millennia and have far-reaching religious and cultural impact (Rose, 2011a). Global population estimates including Iranian and Indian (Parsi and Irani) Zoroastrians are between 124,000 and 190,000 (Gruzder, 2008). The Canadian population is around 6000 (Statistics Canada, 2011), and the U.S. population is about 11,000 (Eduljee, 2005).

Founded by Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), who lived sometime in the second millennium B.C.E. in present day Iran or Afghanistan, Zoroastrianism believes in one God, Ahura Mazda (Ahura, “Being,” and Mazda, “Mind”) (Rose, 2011b). Angra Mainyu, the destructive spirit, opposes Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda eventually will win; the Saoshyant (“one who brings benefit”) will bring about a final renovation of the universe and the dead will be resurrected (Rose, 2011a, 2011b). Zoroastrian spirituality sees humans as essential for protecting and preserving the cosmos (Rose, 2011b). Reverence for the natural elements is also central to Zoroastrian spirituality (water and fire purify, and water is the source of wisdom while fire is the medium of wisdom). The three ethical principles of Zoroastrianism are good words, good deeds, and good thoughts (Rose, 2011b).

Marriage and children are important obligations in Zoroastrian communities. Marriage within the Zoroastrian community is also expected and strongly encouraged (Mahajan et al., 2013). Traditionally, conversion to Zoroastrianism is not allowed, and religious communities may not accept the children of Zoroastrian women and non-Zoroastrian men (Mahajan et al., 2013). Children are essential, as children preserve Zoroastrian faith and promote truth and order (Rose, 2011b). Same-sex sex is traditionally discouraged, as it is not seen as procreative. In protecting and preserving creation, the dynamic of pollution and purity pervades life and affects the social and religious dynamics of family life. Personal purification includes mental purification, daily washing, and cleansing after sex (Rose, 2011b). While both men and women share religious responsibilities, purity observances specific to women do restrict them in some ways (for example, during menstruation and after childbirth) (Rose, 2011b).

Muslim Spiritualities and Worldviews

Islam is a large and diverse religion. Globally, there are more than 1.6 billion adherents (Pew Research Center, 2012b). There are over a million Muslims in Canada and over 2.77 million Muslims in the United States (Chui & Flanders, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2012b). Although Islam emerged in the Arabian Peninsula, the majority of Muslims are not Arab; there are large Asian Muslim populations (Hidayatullah, 2003). Most Muslims (85%) are Sunni; the rest identify as Shi'i or Sufi (Hidayatullah, 2003).

Muslims share some common beliefs and practices, such as faith in the one God (Allah), Muhammad (d. 632 C.E.) as God's prophet, and the Qur'an as Word of God (Hussain, 2011). There are five "pillars": shahada (bearing witness), salat (daily prayer), zakat (almsgiving), sawm (fasting), and hajj (pilgrimage) (Hussain, 2011). Oriented on heaven yet enacted in this world, Muslim worldviews see all things unfold according to the divine will. Faith, righteousness, good works, and surrender of the self to the will of the one God are key aspects of Muslim spirituality (Hussain, 2011). There is a coming Day of Judgment when one's deeds will be judged (Hidayatullah, 2003). Like with Zoroastrianism, Muslim spiritualities are simultaneously present and future oriented.

The Qur'an, Hadith (reports of what Muhammad said or allowed), and Shari'a (legal tradition developed from the Qur'an, Hadith, and debate) guide Muslim approaches to gender, sex, sexuality, and family, though there is significant diversity in attitudes and practices. As there is no centralized determinative body in Islam, there are widely divergent views of sex, marriage, women and women's roles, and practices such as veiling (Hidayatullah, 2003). The Qur'an presumes a mutuality and complementarity of men and women (Al-Hibri & El Habti, 2006). Complementary spheres of life mean that women often have their own distinct spiritual and family roles (Al-Hibri & El Habti, 2006). Islam encourages marriage and parenting; married companionship, mutual pleasure, and children are blessings to cherish (Hidayatullah, 2003). Sex should be confined to (usually heterosexual) marriage (Hidayatullah, 2003).

Baha'i Spiritualities and Worldviews

For the Baha'i Faith, the oneness of God and the unity of humanity are central. Historically very close to Islam, Baha'is see themselves as a distinct tradition—even as they understand there to be one dynamic history of religion (Smith, 2008). The founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah (1817–1892), believed he was a messenger of God and the prophetic fulfillment of other religious traditions (Smith, 2008). While many Baha'is are of Iranian origin, the largest population of Baha'i is Indian (Smith, 2008). There are about five million Baha'is globally (Pew Research Center, 2012b). According to the National Household Survey, there are 18,945

Baha'is in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). The number of Baha'is in the United States ranges from 84,000 (Kosmin & Keysar, 2001) to 512,864 (The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2010).

Baha'i spirituality stresses unity: the unity of God (one God), the unity of religion (religions have God as their one source), the unity of humanity (all humans in their diversity are created equal), and world peace (Smith, 2008). Without clergy or many rituals, Baha'is focus on daily prayer, fasting, meditation, and work in the world (Smith, 2008). For Baha'is, marriage and the bearing of faithful children are sacred actions, though not required (Smith, 2008). The family is the central place for realizing and promoting the unity of the world (Smith, 2008).

The spiritual unity of marriage is stressed as the foundation of society (Smith, 2008). Baha'u'llah presumes that marriage is between a man and a woman (Reini & Hiebert, 1996). Sex should be restrained and restricted to marriage (Reini & Hiebert, 1996). Since marriage is presumed to be between a man and a woman, and sex must be confined to heterosexual marriage, Baha'is have generally been against same-sex relationships (Reini & Hiebert, 1996). Even so, same-sex sex is not necessarily more problematic than other issues of personal restraint (Reini & Hiebert, 1996). Baha'i teaching calls Baha'is to treat all people with respect, regardless of sexuality (Reini & Hiebert, 1996).

Chinese Spiritualities and Worldviews

Chinese religions emphasize the order and harmony found through the balance of yin and yang (Woo, 2010). Yin (responsiveness and femininity) and yang (activeness and masculinity) are interdependent, dynamic, and fluid (Hsiung, 2007). While women are predominantly yin and men are predominantly yang, everyone is both, and the cultivation of both is important (Hsiung, 2007). While there are exclusive Confucian or Taoist practitioners (estimates range between six and eight million Confucians and 2.5 to 3.5 million Taoists), the vast majority of practitioners are syncretistic (Woo, 2010; Wu, 2013).

For Confucians, human relationships are characterized by yin and yang (wife subordinate to her husband, son subordinate to father, subject subordinate to the ruler) (Ebrey, 2006). As relationships shift, yin-yang dynamics shift: a male subject is yin to the ruler while yang to his wife; a wife is yin to her husband but yang to her children (Hsiung, 2007). Thus, yin and yang are not synonymous with gender or sex. In the end, the path of harmony is in the person's dedication to a life of virtue: benevolence, reciprocity, self-correcting wisdom, righteousness, filial piety, and right language (Ebrey, 2006; Hsiung, 2007). The importance of children (and especially sons) to fulfill social and ritual obligations does lead to male preference and heteronormative beliefs in many Confucian-influenced communities (Hsiung, 2007).

For Taoism, humanity manifests the basic reality of (and is a microcosm of) the cosmos (Yao, 2003). Ch'i is the manifest Tao, expanding and moving as the vital "breath" or energy of creation (Yao, 2003). The manifestation of ch'i splits into yin

and yang, which leads to creation but also to dissipation, division, imbalance, and death (Yao, 2003). If one can cultivate ch'i through the balance of yin and yang forces in the body, ch'i will not dissolve and lead to sickness and death (Yao, 2003). Emphasizing balance leads to some discouragement of same-sex relationships as lacking the balance important for health (Hsiung, 2007). However, many other physical, mental, and religious practices are also ways of bringing balance to oneself and in one's relationships.

Shamanic and Shinto Spiritualities and Worldviews

Shamanic practices cross Asia and Asian America and often co-exist with other beliefs and practices—whether they be Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Christian, or otherwise. These worldviews emphasize the interpenetration of the material and the spiritual (Gerdner & Xiong, 2015; Kasulis, 2004; Kim, 2003). For example, Hmong shamanism emphasizes harmony between the spiritual and physical worlds, and rituals are important for the maintenance of much of physical life. The person has multiple souls, all of which must be in balance for a healthy life. Sickness occurs when a soul is lost or seized by another, or when there is another unknown spiritual affliction. A shaman diagnoses and fixes the problem (Gerdner & Xiong, 2015).

The Korean worldview similarly intertwines the spiritual and physical. Korean shamans mediate between spiritual and physical worlds, curing illnesses (through exorcisms or other means) and ensuring well-being. Many problems in the physical world arise when evil spirits or spirits of those who died under unfortunate circumstances afflict the living. Shamans must determine the particular spirit and spirit-problem in order to appease and heal both the living and the dead (Kim, 2003).

Shinto spirituality centers on simplicity, nature, and connection. Being in harmony with the kami (spirits) and others ground Shinto life. Disharmony and disconnection from self, others, kami, and the world lead to pollution, which creates problems for people, families, and even the country. Shinto rites focus on purifying the pollution, restoring balance, and fostering connection (Kasulis, 2004).

In Shamanic and Shinto traditions, there is a fundamental link between spirit and matter, the individual and the social. Family is a central consideration, and family obligations continue after death (Earhart, 1996). The importance of family and social order means that more traditional Shinto and Shamanic approaches tend to privilege (heterosexual) marriage and children. While women are prominent as shamans in Shamanism, shamans are sometimes socially marginal figures (Kim, 2003). Concern over the pollution of menstrual blood has led to more restrictions of Shinto women, though there are many miko (female shrine specialists/shamans) and some female priests (Earhart, 1996; Ellwood, 2016; Kasulis, 2004).

Christian Spiritualities and Worldviews

Although Christianity is often described as a “Western” religion, it emerged in the Near Eastern cultural and religious landscape of the first century (C.E.). Early Christians followed trade routes East and established Asian Christian communities (Moffett, 1998). As a result, there are Asian Americans who have been Christians for generations as well as those who have more recently converted, and there is a wide spectrum of belief and practice (Phan, 2003, 2011). There are around 2.2 billion Christians today, with 13% of the Christian population living in Asia and the Pacific (Pew Research Center, 2012b). Thus, the largest religious group of U.S. Asian Americans is Christian (Pew Research Center, 2012a).

While Christian spirituality generally centers on Jesus and the salvation found through his life, death, and resurrection, Asian Christian spirituality and practice have some distinctive features. Asian and Asian American Christians often interrelate faith in Jesus with charismatic experiences of spirits; a narrative Bible-based faith (particularly for Evangelicals and other Protestants); and popular devotional practices to saints and/or Mary, the mother of Jesus (particularly for Orthodox, Catholics, and other “high church” Christians) (Kim, 2003; Phan, 2003). In all these emphases, Asian Christianity and Asian American Christianity tend to find a close relationship between the spiritual and the physical, personal and social (Phan, 2003, 2011).

Although celibacy and ascetical practices are valued in a number of Christian traditions (notably, Catholic and Orthodox denominations), marriage and family nevertheless are quite important for many. There certainly is a notable ambivalence of sex embedded in some New Testament scripture and early Christian thinkers; celibacy was seen as the higher spiritual path. Even so, the biblical commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” was a strong impulse. In contemporary times, many Christian denominations emphasize marriage as a sacred institution. For many of those that argue that a primary purpose of sex/marriage is procreation, heterosexual marriage and children are important. Artificial contraception may be discouraged or even banned. Some traditions subscribe to a gender complementarity and limit women’s ritual/sacramental leadership (Cavendish, 2003; DeRogatis, 2003; Johnson & Jordan, 2006).

Asian North American Religions: Implications for Mental Health

Ethnoreligious worldviews, beliefs, and practices operate in both explicit and implicit ways, affecting cultural, familial, social, and psychological dynamics. However, it is impossible to make any definitive conclusions within Asian religious traditions—much less across them—on mental health in Asian American communities. There are, nevertheless, some broad implications that can help mental

health professionals researching and working with Asian North American communities.

First, while there is a broad range in terms of Asian American religiosity and observance (and non-observance), the line between the religious and the cultural is fluid. There may be a religious or “sacred” character to cultural values, beliefs, and practices—even for those who are not observant (Pew Research Center, 2012a). Patients and clients themselves may not fully understand the extent to which religious worldviews affect their own self-understanding and life. This deeply embedded nature of the religious in the cultural means that views of mental health, illness, affliction, sexuality, and family are not easily disposed, replaced, dismissed, or medicalized (nor, necessarily, should they be).

Similarly, the line between the spiritual and physical is also fluid. Physical and mental health are therefore often seen as interconnected and fundamentally related to the spiritual (Koenig, 1998, 2018). While some Asian North Americans may draw a direct line between illness, psychological distress, and the spirit-world, others may not, but may still be inclined toward traditional medicines and therapies based in a holistic, non-dual spirit-body cosmology. Even others may believe in the ecstatic power of prayer or ritual practices for facing illness (Gerdner & Xiong, 2015). In all these approaches, the language of psychology and mental health may sound inadequate, incomplete, patronizing, or even problematic. Many are quite open to combined approaches, particularly in urban American cities where holistic medicine and combined therapies are already more broadly accepted. In talking with Asian North American patients and families, therefore, it may help to speak holistically of a mind-body-spirit connection and work with desires for a combined approach to treatment (Wu, 2013).

Even where individual identity is perceived as a construct, one’s spirituality is not simply a matter of individuality. Whether the extinction of desire leads to pure compassion (Buddhism); whether faith in the oneness of God leads to the pursuit of social unity and justice (Islam); whether liberation and nonviolence are related intrinsically (Jainism); the personal is social and the spiritual is ethical. Patients, clients, and their families may be unconvinced by approaches to mental health that seem overly individualistic or prioritize the individual over the social. Instead, since the personal and the social go hand and hand, it is important to perceive the individual in an essential web of relationships, to treat the person while including the family (even extended family) as much as possible, and to understand the person’s wider reality of spiritual, familial, and social responsibilities.

Many Asian religious traditions view family as fundamentally sacred and a sacred obligation. Even in traditions that tend to prioritize the path of renunciation (like Buddhism and Jainism), householder traditions are essential for the preservation and flourishing of the religious community. The importance of tradition, procreation, family honor, and family order are all of great concern here. Marriage, sex, and children are routinely prioritized; so are sexual restraint, gender complementarity, and heteronormativity. In terms of mental health, this means patients and clients

may experience a number of mental health issues related to sex, sexuality, and gender identity. Families may be inclined to perceive these issues as symptoms of children's Westernization that need to be changed, but study of Asian religious traditions demonstrates the diversity and flexibility of Asian religious views (Ellison & Plaskow, 2007). The more that mental health professionals know about Asian traditions of sacred non-procreative desire/pleasure, women's shamanic/ritual power, third genders, and same-sex relationships, the more they can help their patients and clients navigate families, communities, and themselves.

Future Research

Research on Asian North American religions and families is just beginning. Until now, much work has focused on demography, the history of immigration and migration, social scientific studies of congregations and other public aspects of religious life, intergenerational and interethnic issues in Asian American religions, and constructive theological/ethical articulations of Asian religious faith and practice in the Americas. Asian religions and family, particularly with respect to Asian views of sex, sexuality, and gender, have largely been treated outside of the American context. More consideration of the Asian American context specifically is necessary. Popularly accessible Asian American religious resources on complementary approaches to Eastern and Western health care, family life, sex, sexuality, and gender (beyond religious pronouncements or didactic statements) are also lacking.

Conclusion

When working with Asian North American communities, interference (or perceived interference) in family matters is likely to be met with suspicion and hostility. It is essential for mental health professionals to work *with* families and their values. This requires looking for common ground and respecting the religio-cultural values, practices, and beliefs that may be at play. Contemporary media prefers painting a picture of conflict between Asian religious traditions/cultures and Western norms, between superstitious oppression and broad-minded liberalism. Presuming conflict is profoundly unhelpful and deeply problematic. Understanding the diversity, complexity, and fluidity of Asian religious traditions—and respecting the ways in which spirituality is often embedded into people's lives—allows counselors, mental health professionals, and social workers to work more productively with the communities, families, and persons they serve.

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