



Intergenerational Communication about Historical Trauma in Asian American Families

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Abstract

Little is known about how Asian American families, as well as other racially marginalized families, communicate about ethnic and racial group histories, particularly regarding historical trauma. Unlike personal trauma, historical trauma refers to distressing or life-threatening events which members of a group with a shared social identity experience together and pass on to their descendants. It has been studied in a variety of groups and contexts, notably in Holocaust survivors and their families and in Native American communities. The concept has seen limited application to Asian American groups, despite its relevance to their unique and shared lived experiences. For instance, the majority of Asian Americans have immigrated from countries across Asia that have been profoundly affected by war and political upheaval in the past century. Research on historical trauma among Asian Americans has focused primarily on refugees who fled the US wars in Southeast Asia, with some research on Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during World War II. Historical trauma related to other major events, such as the India/Pakistan Partition, the Chinese Civil War and Cultural Revolution, the Korean War, and the Sri Lankan Civil War, have not been examined among Asian Americans. A lack of recognition of these historical traumas within families and communities, as well as in the psychological literature, may mask important pre-migration history effects on Asian American families across generations. In this paper, we consider how historical trauma impacts Asian American individuals, families, and communities. We also examine the role of intergenerational communication in historical trauma and in Asian American families and communities. Finally, we discuss historical trauma among Asian Americans within the framework of radical healing, particularly how intergenerational communication about historical trauma can raise critical consciousness, facilitate ethnic-racial identity development, and reinforce ethnic-racial socialization.

Keywords Asian American · Historical trauma · Intergenerational communication · Ethnic-racial identity · Radical healing

Introduction

And though my parents took us far away from the site of their grief... certain shadows stretched far, casting a gray stillness over our childhood... hinting at a darkness we did not understand but could always FEEL.

—Bui (2018) (Vietnamese American graphic novelist and illustrator), *The Best We Could Do*

For many Asian American children of immigrants, their family's lives before immigration are often a hazy unknown that seems distant and unrelated to their lives in the USA, as far away as the homelands left behind. In her illustrated memoir, Thi Bui describes how though immigrant parents seeking a new life in a new country may avoid discussing the past, their children can still feel its reverberations. Asian Americans carry with them the legacies of imperialism and colonialism—war, political upheaval, and scarcity of resources have been widespread across Asia through the twentieth century and beyond, which has subsequently driven waves of migration from Asia to the USA (Kim-Prieto et al., 2018; Lowe, 1996). These historical traumas, as well as their social, psychological, and political implications, have had profound effects on the adaptation and adjustment, mental and physical health, and relationship quality in Asian American families across generations. But

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these traumatic experiences have often been shrouded in silence within Asian American families and communities and in wider US society (Liem, 2007). For Asian Americans, access to ethnic and racial group history is restricted by erasure from dominant discourses in the USA. Thus, for younger generations of Asian Americans, understanding of themselves, their cultures, and their ethnic-racial identities largely depends on intergenerational communication within families and communities about these histories and experiences. However, this communication may be curtailed both by Asian Americans' invisibility from mainstream American history and a desire among Asian American parents, grandparents, and extended family to leave the past behind.

Historical trauma describes massive distressing or life-threatening events experienced collectively by a group with a shared identity such as ethnicity or nationality which has cross-generational psychological effects (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Those who experience historical trauma often remain silent about their experiences, even with their family members. This silence can contribute to difficulties in the relationship between survivor parents and their children. Without open communication about the trauma, parents may continue to suffer the consequences of their trauma without recognizing them, and their children are left to speculate about the reasons for the parents' behavior (Danieli et al., 2016). Lacking knowledge of their family history, children may not be able to develop a coherent and positive sense of identity (Lin et al., 2009). Children's understanding of their parents' experiences is often limited to their own inferences and what their parents let slip during moments of conflict (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020; Lee & Clarke, 2013; Lin & Suyemoto, 2016; Lin et al., 2009). Intergenerational communication (including silence) about historical trauma has been identified as a major mechanism for the transmission of trauma's cross-generational effects (Nagata & Cheng, 2003). To prevent negative intergenerational impacts of historical trauma and to instead promote collective healing, families must engage in adaptive intergenerational communication about historical trauma. This communication may take various forms, including conversations, storytelling, and development of shared narratives emphasizing collective resilience.

Despite its relevance, the concept of historical trauma has not been widely applied to Asian Americans. We draw on the existing literature on historical trauma, intergenerational communication, and ethnic-racial socialization and identity development to make three arguments: (1) the concept of historical trauma should be applied to more Asian American subgroups in order to contextualize the experiences of Asian American families within the history of US imperialism; (2) the impacts of historical trauma on Asian American family functioning, particularly intergenerational communication about historical trauma, must be a focus of this research; and (3) knowledge and intergenerational communication about historical trauma should be investigated as part of Asian

American ethnic-racial identity development, and such intergenerational communication—as a specific form of ethnic-racial socialization—may provide a pathway to radical healing in Asian American families and communities.

Applying Historical Trauma to Asian Americans

Conceptualization of Historical Trauma

The notion that trauma could be transmitted across generations has been researched in a variety of populations, including Holocaust survivors, indigenous communities in North America, survivors of the Cambodian Genocide, combat veterans, and Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II (Danieli, 1998). The terms “historical trauma” and “intergenerational trauma” have been used interchangeably to describe the transmission of collective trauma across generations. While “historical trauma” is primarily used in the literature on indigenous people in North America (Brave Heart et al., 2011, p. 283), “intergenerational trauma” is predominantly used with other groups. However, the term “intergenerational trauma” has lost some precision as it has been extended to include the intergenerational impacts of individual experiences of trauma outside of the context of structural oppression (Heberle, Obus, & Gray, 2020). Hartmann et al. (2019) frame historical trauma as a critical discourse to move beyond just addressing individual suffering, shifting focus to the political structures that oppress indigenous, immigrant, and other marginalized groups and perpetuate health disparities. As such, we have chosen to use the term “historical trauma” because it invokes the necessity of situating Asian American trauma in the broader historical context of war and political upheaval.

Despite its focus on a collective experience of trauma, historical trauma can paradoxically individualize trauma, focusing attention on individual healing rather than the structural oppression that causes and maintains the trauma (Kirmayer et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2014). The original concept of historical trauma was based on the model of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and thus framed historical trauma as a clinical syndrome that could be treated through culturally adapted psychotherapy (Brave Heart et al., 2011). This approach inadvertently reifies the image of indigenous and other marginalized communities as inherently traumatized and “damaged” (Hartmann et al., 2019; Teo, 2010; Tuck, 2009). Rather than casting historical trauma as a literal clinical diagnosis, Hartmann et al. (2019) argue that historical trauma is better understood as a critical discourse, i.e., a metaphor or narrative which contextualizes the historical and structural oppression of people affected by historical trauma (Phillips et al., 2015). This approach calls for the

integration of psychology with other fields, such as history and ethnic/critical race studies, and has an explicit goal of working towards liberation and self-determination.

Asian American Historical Context

Asian immigration to what became the USA has always been driven by Western imperialism, which created a world order in which Europe and its settler colonies exploited the resources and people of the world to expand their own wealth. Centuries of resulting violence and destabilization culminated in World War II and the subsequent decolonial movements (Fujitani et al., 2001; Okihiro, 2016). The Philippines and India (from which Pakistan would be forcibly partitioned) were directly colonized by Western powers and regained independence after WWII (Carey, 2012; Lowe, 1996; Zamindar, 2007). The Chinese Communist Party, after defeating the US-backed Guomindang, established the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Hsu, 2015). The USA responded to the communist victory by invading Korea (1950–1952) and Vietnam (1955–1975) to “contain” the spread of communism in Asia (Espiritu, 2014; Hsu, 2015). During the Vietnam War, the USA made Cambodia the most heavily bombed country in history, paving the way for the rise of the genocidal Khmer Rouge (Owen & Kiernan, 2007; Tang, 2015). The USA recruited Hmong soldiers for a “Secret War” against North Vietnam in Laos, which also involved heavy US bombardment (Lee & Clarke, 2013). All of these Cold War conflicts resulted in waves of refugees fleeing from Asia to the

USA (e.g., 1.2 million refugees from Southeast Asia between 1975 and 2010; Lee, 2015). While a complete overview of this history is beyond the scope of this article, see Table 1 for a non-comprehensive timeline of these and other relevant events.

Not only did US (and European) imperialism create the conditions in Asia that would drive out generations of migrants, but it also determined which migrants were allowed into the USA and under which conditions, which in turn shaped the racialization of Asian Americans. Early Asian migrant workers were brought to the USA to accumulate wealth for white property owners, but were excluded from citizenship and later from legal immigration to prevent their encroachment on that wealth (Lowe, 1996). With shifting US economic and geopolitical priorities after WWII, the 1965 Hart-Celler Act reopened immigration from Asia but specifically selected for highly educated immigrants who could contribute to the US technological race against the Soviet Union. These intentionally selected Asian immigrants thus formed the basis for the image of the successful “model minority” Asian American families. Removing national origin immigration quotas and welcoming these highly useful, upwardly mobile Asian immigrants also allowed the USA to portray itself as racially equitable and humanitarian land of opportunity. In the 1950s, the USA offered refugee status to Chinese students who did not want to return to communist China (Hsu, 2015). Southeast Asian refugees later offered the USA another opportunity to solidify its anti-communist hegemony and demonstrate its humanitarian interest in

Table 1 Non-comprehensive timeline of imperialist violence in Asia and sequelae

| Event | Date |
|---|--|
| Opium Wars | 1839–1842; 1856–1860 ¹ |
| First Sino-Japanese War | 1894–1895 ² |
| British raj in India | 1857–1947 ³ |
| India-Pakistan Partition | 1947 ⁴ |
| US colonization of the Philippines | 1898–1946 ⁵ |
| Japanese invasion of Manchuria, China | 1931 ² |
| Second Sino-Japanese War | 1937–1945 ² |
| World War II in Asia (as marked by bombing of Pearl Harbor) | 1941–1945 ² |
| US nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki | 1945 ² |
| US military occupation of Japan begins | 1945 ² |
| Chinese Civil War | 1945–1949 ⁶ |
| Great Leap Forward | 1958–1961 ⁷ |
| Cultural Revolution | 1966–1976 ⁷ |
| First Indochina War | 1946–1954 ⁸ |
| Korean War | 1950–present (armistice 1952) ⁶ |
| Vietnam War | 1955–1975 ⁹ |
| US bombing of Cambodia and Laos (“Operation Menu”) | 1965–1975 ¹⁰ |
| US coup in Cambodia | 1970 ¹⁰ |
| Cambodian Genocide | 1975–1979 ¹⁰ |
| Sri Lankan Civil War | 1983–2009 ⁸ |

¹ Okihiro (2016); ² Fujitani et al. (2001); ³ Carey (2012); ⁴ Zamindar (2007); ⁵ Lowe (1996); ⁶ Hsu (2015); ⁷ Wang et al. (2013); ⁸ Jeyasundaram et al. (2020); ⁹ Espiritu (2014); ¹⁰ Tang (2015)

protecting those brave refugees who risked everything to flee communism and seek freedom in America (Espiritu, 2014; Tang, 2015).

Organized Forgetting

The dominant narratives and silences around the violence of US imperialism shape how these events are remembered by individuals, families, and communities in the USA (Liem, 2007). Central to the development of imperial power is the paradoxical erasure of its imperialist nature: imperial powers like the US construct dominant narratives of themselves as benevolent civilizers, rescuers, and defenders of freedom while marginalizing and silencing contrary narratives (Fujitani et al., 2001), a process Espiritu (2014) calls “organized forgetting.” Liem (2007) proposes a model of silence about historical trauma based on oral histories of Korean American survivors of the Korean War and their descendants. The model describes how silence at the level of the state (the erasure of historical trauma from dominant discourses) reinforces silence about historical trauma within communities, families, and individuals. The Korean War, for example, is known as “the forgotten war,” or otherwise as a war in which the USA heroically saved South Koreans from communism. Such narratives uphold the US hegemonic position in the world and erase the experiences of Korean Americans whose families survived the war from public consciousness. Dominant narratives in the USA have similarly erased the atrocities of the Vietnam War, bombings of Cambodia, and the Secret War, along with the entire history of Western imperialism in Asia (Espiritu, 2014; Lee & Clarke, 2013; Lin & Suyemoto, 2016; Lin et al., 2009). As Lowe (1996) writes, “These immigrants retain the memories of imperialism that the US nation seeks to forget” (p. 17). Thus, these immigrants and their descendants must be pressured to forget those memories and instead embrace the narrative of the USA as the land of opportunity and salvation. To “become American,” memories of the suffering wrought by US imperialism are best left behind.

As an academic discipline, psychology is both produced by and a reproducer of dominant narratives in the USA that erase the human consequences of Western imperialism, including mass migration from Asia to the USA (Adams et al., 2015; Bhatia, 2017). As a result, Asian and Asian American history have been largely ignored within psychology and psychologists have only researched historical trauma in a very narrow subset of Asian Americans. The small body of research on Asian American historical (or as it is usually termed, intergenerational) trauma is largely limited to Southeast Asian (primarily Cambodian) refugees and research on Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII (Danieli, 1998; Nagata et al., 2015; Sangalang & Vang, 2017). A focus on Cambodian refugees is not surprising,

as their trauma is the easiest to recognize without breaking the prevailing silence around US responsibility: the trauma can be attributed exclusively to the Cambodian Genocide and the doing of a foreign despot, while the US own aerial massacre of Cambodians and later support of the deposed Khmer Rouge is erased (Tang, 2015).

Ignoring the potential effects of historical trauma on other Asian American populations reproduces the racialization of Asian Americans as a “model minority.” The model minority myth casts Asian Americans as a problem-free, successful immigrant group grateful to be in America. A model minority cannot be traumatized and cannot force the USA to reckon with the human cost of imperialism; instead, a model minority bolsters the narratives of American exceptionalism and benevolence, particularly through those immigrants who can be upheld as succeeding in the USA after being “rescued” from communism in Asia (Hsu, 2015). Most Asian American ethnic groups have been neatly folded into the model minority, with the circumstances that drove their migration glossed over or invisibilized. For example, even Vietnamese refugees fleeing directly from war are refigured as rescued and perfectly poised to succeed in the USA. Poverty rates among Vietnamese Americans are ignored, and American soldiers are remembered as the sole victims of the war (Espiritu, 2014).

But war and famine, poverty and repression are not optional for those caught in their midsts. The idea that such trauma might be sticky—might be a monster that sinks into your skin or your brain or your lungs and won’t wash out—is terrifying. Accepting that would be tantamount to believing that we carry with each generation traces of the one that came before; every dream and desire, but also every wound and every heartbreak. We would be composites of injuries both ancient and new. Scar tissue too tangled to trace, so that the only thing we would know was that there can be no life without some kind of healing, however crooked. Still, I think there is nothing my mother has ever yearned for more than a fresh start.

—Jiang (2017) (Chinese American student), “Metastasis: On radiation, migration, and remembrance”

Historical Trauma and Asian American Mental Health

The small body of research on Asian American historical trauma often frames historical trauma as a clinical condition (Hartmann et al., 2019), but this approach has demonstrated limited utility. One study found a negative relationship between Vietnamese refugee fathers’ PTSD at migration and children’s mental health 23 years later (Vaage et al., 2011). Others have failed to show a direct effect of parents’ trauma on children’s outcomes (Eng et al.,

2009; Burchert et al., 2017), though some research suggests indirect effects (Han, 2006; Sangalang et al., 2017). Field et al. (2013) found that mothers' role-reversing parenting style mediated the relationship between their own post-traumatic symptoms and their daughters' mental health outcomes. This finding was replicated in a Cambodian American sample, providing evidence for parent–child relationships as a mechanism for transmission of trauma.

Framing historical trauma as a clinical condition and focusing on psychopathology is not only limited in its lack of empirical support, but also limits our understanding of Asian American historical trauma more broadly. As described above, the existing research has failed to find strong evidence for the effect of parents' post-traumatic symptoms and children's mental health outcomes among Asian or Asian diaspora samples. Focusing on historical trauma as individualized post-traumatic psychopathology removes the trauma from its historical context and obscures how common historical trauma is likely to be among Asian American families, because it fails to identify US and Western imperialism in Asia as the root of the trauma.

Psychologists must engage in the “critical remembering” (Fujitani et al., 2001) that can break through the dominant silence about Western imperialism and its human cost, which is manifested in Asian American families. As Liem (2007) outlines, the silence about historical traumas affecting Asian Americans at the level of the US nation-state reinforces the “conspiracy of silence” within Asian American communities and families. Psychologists can break the silence by extending the concept of historical trauma to other Asian American ethnic groups and examining the impacts of their unique histories of Western imperialism and immigration to the USA. Understandings of trauma and the impacts of imperialism can then extend beyond experiences of violence and war to the political instability and poverty created by imperialist exploitation, which pushes so many immigrants out of their homelands. To do this, historical trauma must be understood not as a clinical condition but as a critical discourse, building an understanding of Asian American families within the context of US imperialism with the goal of liberation from imperialism (Hartmann et al., 2019).

Intergenerational Communication about Historical Trauma

My mother doesn't dwell in the past, so she smiles and shakes her head when I ask about her life during the Khmer Rouge regime. *Mom, what did you do? Did you have to work?* She shrugs. Her eyes are soft, then perplexed by my eagerness to bear witness to her story. What story? What do you want to know? In order to live her life and support me and my brother, she explains, it is necessary to move on. Forget the past. Don't think about it. But I am not like her. I can't

forget the past and I always think about it. Yet, my mother seems to evade my questions on every rare visit home. Sometimes I give up asking. Her silence around her personal history often leaves me with doubts on how to begin telling my own.

—Sok (2016) (Cambodian American poet), “On Fear, Fearlessness, and Intergenerational Trauma”

Family relationships serve as the primary mechanism through which historical trauma exerts intergenerational effects. Families affected by historical trauma often find themselves in a “conspiracy of silence” in which parents who directly experience trauma avoid discussing the trauma and their children avoid asking about it (Danieli et al., 2016). Donna Nagata, in her research on Japanese American survivors of incarceration during WWII, documented this silence: those who were incarcerated avoided discussing their experiences to avoid “burdening” the next generation, who then interpreted this silence as marking a past “too painful to discuss” (Nagata et al., 2015, p. 362). Pervasive silence about the past has also been documented in other Asian diaspora families affected by historical trauma in the USA and Canada (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020; Lee & Clarke, 2013; Lin & Suyemoto, 2016; Lin et al., 2009). Silence may contribute to a lack of understanding between parents and children and increased family dysfunction. In contrast, open communication from parents about historical trauma may facilitate closer parent–child relationships and allow children to understand their parents better, develop stronger cultural identity, and see their parents and ethnic communities as resilient (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020; Lin & Suyemoto, 2016).

Though silence about historical trauma within families can be detrimental, the mere presence of communication about historical trauma is not necessarily positive. Both silence and communication from parents can negatively impact the parent–child relationship and reduce children's motivation to learn about family history. Potentially negative patterns of communication about historical trauma include only disclosing information about historical trauma during conflicts or arguments with children and using stories about trauma to discipline or shame children (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020; Lee & Clarke, 2013; Lin & Suyemoto, 2016; Lin et al., 2009). Parents' experiences of historical trauma (poverty, instability, and violence) also manifest as anxiety about safety and economic security in their life after migration, leading parents to put pressure on children to secure the family's future. Parents may allude to their trauma in their emphasis on how fortunate their children are to grow up in the USA and how much the parents went through to immigrate. Parents may even feel their children's lives are so much easier than their own childhoods that they minimize or dismiss any distress expressed by

their children (Meschke & Juang, 2014). These messages can all contribute to children's feelings of guilt and fear about disappointing their parents and ethnic community (e.g., by falling short of academic or professional expectations) and subsequently making major life decisions based on this fear (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020). Thus, historical trauma may arguably be a contributing factor in Asian immigrant parents' preoccupation with academic success (Qin, 2008).

My dad came here in his late forties and he had to catch up with the rest. And he'd had a really hard time. So he kept telling me and my brother that you need to go to school, graduate, work, and have a great life. I feel that they came here for our future and so now it's up to us to make it happen.

—Thảo Hồ, 22-year-old Vietnamese American (Espiritu, 2014, p. 159)

A lack of communication about historical trauma in Asian American immigrant families may also reflect inhibited communication between parents and children generally. Due to the high proportion of immigrants in the Asian American population (71% of Asian American adults; Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), research on intergenerational relationships in Asian American families has primarily focused on acculturative challenges. Migration to a new cultural context presents many parenting challenges for Asian American immigrants which can affect intergenerational communication. Children often acculturate or adapt to the new culture much more quickly than their parents, creating an intergenerational acculturative gap which may then contribute to family conflict and more distant relationships (Lui, 2015). Parents and children may differ in their cultural understandings, for example regarding what constitutes appropriate parent–child communication (Qin, 2008; Yuwen & Chen, 2013). Parents and children may develop a language gap that inhibits each party's ability to express themselves fully (Meschke & Juang, 2014). Research on the acculturative gap must begin incorporating an understanding of historical trauma, as parents' strategies for dealing with cross-generational acculturative challenges may be affected by their experiences. Historical trauma should be investigated as a significant component of the cultural context from which the immigrant parent arrives in the USA that can widen the acculturative and intergenerational gaps between parents and children.

I was always hungry during the war so when my children brought their friends, I was always trying to give them cookies. I was always trying to give my children everything because I never had anything. When time comes for their friends to go, I say, “go, have some more, have some more”. My daughter thinks this is because I'm a Korean mother, all Koreans do that. But,

looking back at history, I think the reason is because we never had enough food, too many years without.

—Helen Kyungsook Daniels (Korean American; Liem, 2007, p. 167)

Lin and Suyemoto (2016) identified factors which contributed to positive, successful intergenerational communication about historical trauma. Both the younger and older generations have to be motivated and willingly engaged, as opposed to the communication being imposed by either party. Successful communication depends on the attunement of each party to the other's emotional state and the potential emotional consequences of sharing and hearing stories of trauma. Appropriate timing is also vital: communication must be developmentally appropriate for the younger generation and shared when the older generation is ready. These parameters for positive intergenerational communication about historical trauma are supported by research in refugee populations which suggests that while silence about trauma is not adaptive, open communication does not universally yield positive outcomes (Dalgaard & Montgomery, 2015; Dalgaard et al., 2016). Instead, positive outcomes are associated with modulated disclosure, or communication from parents that is sensitive to the child's needs and is appropriately timed. Thus, communication about historical trauma cannot be understood in terms of a silence/communication dichotomy; rather, the communication must fit the context and be calibrated to factors including the child's developmental stage, cultural norms about communication, and the parents' post-traumatic symptoms.

Within the field of psychology, the organized forgetting of Western imperialism in Asia and its ongoing consequences is evident in the absence of consideration of how historical trauma may impact Asian American family functioning. A focus on culture and cultural differences has obscured the effects of the historical contexts for Asian migration to the USA, which includes escaping from traumatic circumstances resulting from imperialism. For example, researchers have often noted Asian American immigrant parents' emphasis on academic success and economic security without examining how the war, poverty, and underdevelopment in Asia that generated wealth for the USA and Europe in turn drove immigrants from Asia to seek prosperity in the imperial core (Lowe, 1996). With their history erased from mainstream society, Asian immigrants are encouraged to erase their past and assume their role as a model minority chasing the “American Dream.” Subsequent generations of Asian Americans grow up with an incomplete understanding of their families and their ethnic group history. Research must continue to examine the effects of historical trauma on Asian American family dynamics and intergenerational communication, and explore the role of this communication in Asian American identity development.

Intergenerational Communication and Asian American Ethnic-Racial Identity

Communication across generations serves many purposes and has been theorized as vital to the development of an individual identity that is situated within a family, community, and culture. For adults, intergenerational narratives allow them to teach and inform the next generation, transmitting culture and life lessons. For adolescents, these narratives are important for identity development and facilitating connection with family members (Merrill & Fivush, 2016). In adolescence and beyond, individuals move past a simple identification of themselves as members of racial and ethnic groups to a deeper understanding that their group membership reflects shared experiences with other members of their group which differ from the experiences of other groups (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Learning ethnic group history, including narratives of historical trauma may play a central role in this developing understanding. Stories are an important mode through which parents socialize their children; for ethnic and racial minority parents, stories may be part of ethnic and racial socialization (Hughes et al., 2006). The stories parents choose to tell may reflect the parents' unique socialization goals based on their own experiences; for example, parents who have experienced migration and economic hardship may emphasize the importance of working hard (Raffaelli et al., 2017).

For Asian American children of immigrants, stories about family history (or lack thereof) may play an important role in the development of their ethnic and racial identity. For marginalized groups, historical trauma is a cultural trauma which fundamentally (re)defines what it means to be a member of that group (Alexander, 2004). Recent waves of immigrants from Asia have been largely driven by traumatic events, including war. In other words, the very presence of these immigrants in the USA is defined by historical trauma. As Lin et al. (2009) propose, the older generations' silence about historical trauma can therefore "risk alienating their children not only from themselves but from significant dimensions of family and community history that have shaped the present-day context for both parents and children" (p. 200). Silence about such integral parts of family, community, and ethnic group history limits the younger generations' ability to develop a contextualized narrative identity at each of these levels (Merrill & Fivush, 2016). Without this intergenerational historical knowledge, Asian Americans may find themselves defined instead by the dominant narratives and stereotypes of Asian Americans as benevolently rescued model minorities.

Yet, the historical trauma literature has not been integrated with the ethnic-racial identity and ethnic-racial socialization literature. Seeking knowledge about ethnic

group history, including histories of imperialism and colonialism, has been mentioned but not elaborated on as an element of ethnic-racial identity exploration, or the process in which individuals seek out information about their ethnic or racial group (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Ethnic-racial identity exploration is conceptualized as vital to achieving a coherent sense of one's ethnic-racial identity, which in turn has been linked to positive adjustment for racial minority youth (though this research is somewhat limited for Asian American youth; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Family ethnic-racial socialization and positive relationships with parents have also been shown to be important to ethnic-racial identity development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The research to date on intergenerational communication about historical trauma suggests that learning about ethnic group historical trauma from elders may be important not only to developing closer family relationships but also to developing a coherent ethnic identity, which the ethnic-racial identity literature suggests are themselves interrelated processes. For Asian American children of refugees, positive intergenerational communication about historical trauma fostered closer family relationships and greater positive regard for their ethnic community, whereas negative or absent communication could lead to children disengaging from their families and ethnic communities (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020; Lin & Suyemoto, 2016).

Vietnamese youth are constantly criticized by elders. They say we don't know, don't understand, our history and culture. But where do we go to learn this? They don't talk about it at home and they certainly don't teach it in school!

—Vietnamese American high school student (Espiritu, 2014, p. 143)

Ethnic-racial socialization is defined as parents teaching children about their ethnic and racial heritage and history and promoting children's ethnic and racial pride (Hughes et al., 2006). Again, although transmitting ethnic heritage group history is conceptualized as part of ethnic socialization, the historical dimensions of ethnic socialization have not been well-explored in the literature. The pervasive silence documented in Asian American families who have experienced historical trauma suggests that a significant element of ethnic socialization is being suppressed with immigrant parents' traumatic memories. Absent or fragmented ethnic-racial socialization around events which so fundamentally define the experiences of Asian American ethnic groups may have important implications for Asian American ethnic-racial identity development which have not been examined in the ethnic-racial socialization literature. Furthermore, psychologists have not explored how historical trauma itself shapes the cultural values, traditions, and pride

which parents transmit to their children. As in the field of psychology more broadly, “culture” has largely been conceptualized as static and outside of history. However, as previously discussed, traumatic historical events are a fundamental component of immigrant parents’ pre-migration cultural contexts which undoubtedly shape their socialization goals for their children, for example around economic stability, hard work, and appreciation for living in the “West.”

Possibilities for Radical Healing

Applying the concept of historical trauma to Asian Americans necessarily raises the question of how this trauma can be healed. In advocating for a more structural perspective of historical trauma, Hartmann et al. (2019) connect historical trauma with the related construct of racial trauma. Like historical trauma, racial trauma was conceptualized to connect experiences of racial oppression with health disparities and was based on the model of PTSD. Anti-colonial thinkers like Fanon (2007) and Césaire (2001) had long theorized the dehumanizing and psychologically damaging impacts of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized. Therefore, healing from racial or historical trauma requires dismantling the systems of racism and imperialism which marginalize Asians and Asian Americans.

The Radical Healing Collective (French et al., 2020) proposed the framework of radical healing to reflect this fundamental need to end systemic oppression in order for marginalized people to truly heal. Radical healing moves beyond individualistic notions of healing to an emphasis on collective liberation, helping individuals understand their position as marginalized people in their society and the world. The term “healing” is used to emphasize that the goal is to “mov[e] beyond the goal of merely surviving within an oppressive society to thriving” (p. 19). To achieve this, people of color must develop their own understanding of the systems that oppress them and others and build their capacity to resist those systems, not as a solitary individual, but with the other marginalized people of the world who share a common struggle for liberation. Radical healing is thus achieved not through individual coping, but through collective movements for justice.

The model of radical healing includes critical consciousness, radical hope, strength and resistance, cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, and collectivism as necessary components for healing. Critical consciousness describes “a reflexive understanding of the world and recognition of the interconnectedness of individualism, social, and structural experience” (Phillips et al., 2015; p. 373) necessary to understand and therefore combat systems of oppression. Individuals must have radical hope

that their struggle against these systems is meaningful, and they must have the strength to engage in this struggle of resistance. Cultural authenticity and self-knowledge draw focus to the wisdom in marginalized communities that can facilitate healing and which is erased by the Western, colonial approaches centered in psychology. The component of collectivism emphasizes that marginalized people must seek healing through collective, rather than solely individual, liberation, and highlights the collectivist values of many communities of color.

Just as silence about historical trauma is manifested at the levels of the state, community, family, and individual, a framework of radical healing suggests that breaking the silence may offer opportunities for healing at each of these levels (Liem, 2007). For the descendants of the survivor generation, positive intergenerational communication about historical trauma promotes closer parent–child relationships, which then promotes positive psychosocial outcomes and ethnic-racial identity development (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020; Lin & Suyemoto, 2016; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Parents and children would be better able to understand each other across the differences in their cultural, generational, and historical contexts, and children would develop a clearer understanding of “where they’re from” (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020; p. 418). Situating themselves within an understanding that their ethnic group shares resilience, perseverance, and strength may also promote individual resilience through ethnic identity (Dalgaard et al., 2019; Ramirez & Hammack, 2014). Interventions at the individual and family levels can seek to promote positive intergenerational communication, as suggested by the literature on modulated disclosure (Dalgaard & Montgomery, 2015). The dynamics of intergenerational communication about historical trauma should continue to be investigated in Asian American families to understand how positive communication can be facilitated.

Future Directions

How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined? I used to imagine that history had infused my parents’ lives with the dust of a cataclysmic explosion. That it had seeped through their skin and become part of their blood. That being my father’s child, I, too, was a product of war... and being my mother’s child, could never measure up to her. But maybe being their child simply means that I will always feel the weight of their past. Nothing that happened makes me special. But my life is a gift that is too great—a debt I can never repay.

—Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do*

Research Implications

Researchers must study Asian American psychology within the broader context of Western imperialism which brought Asian Americans to the US. Psychologists' failure to do so is itself an act of imperialism, silencing the histories of Asian American groups, flattening them into "model minorities" or "good immigrants," and upholding American exceptionalism (Hsu, 2015). Historical trauma as a critical discourse (Hartmann et al., 2019) offers a valuable framework for understanding the cross-generational impacts of imperialism on Asian American and other Asian diaspora families. This understanding requires psychologists to take a decolonial approach in this research and break the field's own complicity in erasing the impacts of US and Western imperialism on marginalized populations (Bhatia, 2017). An Asian Americanist psychology approach (Tseng & Lee, 2021) holds that Asian Americans must be understood in their sociopolitical and historical context, including an understanding of how racism and imperialism operate structurally to produce Asian Americans as a racial group.

To push research on historical trauma in Asian American immigrants forward, psychologists should investigate intergenerational communication about historical trauma in Asian American families and communities. Psychologists also can examine the role of intergenerational communication about historical trauma in ethnic-racial identity development, intergenerational cultural conflict, and parenting. These psychological constructs, among others (e.g., acculturation, discrimination), have typically been studied without consideration of historical context; instead, they are typically framed in terms of static, simplistic "cultural differences" between "East" and "West" (Tseng & Lee, 2021). An understanding of historical trauma to these cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences brings attention to how Asian American psychology and Asian/Asian American cultures themselves are dynamic and shaped by history. At the same time, a focus on historical trauma must not stop at simply labeling Asian American individuals and families as "traumatized"; an understanding of historical trauma must be approached as a means through which Asian American communities can raise critical consciousness and empower themselves (Hartmann et al., 2019; Tuck, 2009).

Clinical Implications

Clinicians must consider how Asian American clients and their families may be impacted by historical trauma as well as racial trauma. Knowledge about ethnic and racial groups has long been considered an important component of cultural competence (Sue & Torino, 2005). This knowledge includes information about ethnic and racial group history, but this is typically emphasized much less than

other components, such as knowledge of cultural values. Knowledge of racial and ethnic group histories, including potential historical trauma, must be considered an important component of cultural competency which clinicians can use to contextualize their clients. In particular, awareness of historical trauma can be valuable for understanding Asian American clients' family relationships, as family conflict is a common issue for Asian Americans seeking therapy (Lee et al., 2005). Additionally, developing knowledge of racial and ethnic group history can help clinicians apply the framework of radical healing by facilitating the development of the client's own self-knowledge, critical consciousness, and ability to challenge dominant narratives like the model minority myth.

The literature on intergenerational or historical trauma also points to the potential utility of alternative treatment approaches for individuals, families, and communities affected by historical trauma. Testimonio or testimonial therapy emerged from Latin America along with liberation psychology, an approach to psychology centered around understanding systemic oppression and empowering oppressed people to combat it. Latin America is another region whose people have suffered mass trauma due to US imperialism and anti-communism (Dietz, 1984). Testimonial therapy was first used to treat victims of torture under US-backed Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet: clinicians worked with survivors to compose narratives with the goal of integrating the traumatic experience (Cienfuegos & Monelli, 1983). Testimonio as situated within liberation psychology in particular has the goal of documenting and recognizing the oppression people have experienced and providing a counternarrative to resist oppressive systems (Cervantes, 2020). Testimonial therapy has also been combined with exposure therapy to develop narrative exposure therapy, which has been used with various refugee and asylee populations (Neuner et al., 2004; Wright et al., 2020).

Clinicians should also consider group and community-based therapeutic approaches to address the collective nature of historical trauma and facilitate collective consciousness-raising and mobilization against oppression, as suggested by a radical healing framework (Cervantes, 2020; French et al., 2020). Non-psychotherapy interventions, such as Liem (2007)'s public oral history project, *Still Present Pasts*, can also serve the purpose of documenting narratives, disseminating them to a wider audience, and breaking silence within a community. *Still Present Pasts* captures Korean Americans' family histories of the Korean War and offers a space for public memory of an event and perspective which has been erased from mainstream US society. Such projects in other Asian American communities can offer valuable opportunities for healing through public acknowledgement of historical trauma. The survivor generation's trauma and resilience can be recognized, younger generations can learn

about their ethnic group histories, and intergenerational communication can be opened. Hearing about their own family and community's strength and survival can help Asian American immigrants and children of immigrants alike see their communities as resilient and instill radical hope for the future (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020). Such approaches may also be more accessible to general community populations than interventions labeled as "therapy."

Community and Policy Implications

Public recognition of historical trauma nationally and locally can help open more communication about historical trauma within families and communities as well as in the US national consciousness (Liem, 2007). The Japanese American redress movement, which yielded a formal apology and monetary compensation for Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII, is a rare example of official admission of wrongdoing by the US government (albeit 40 years late). This community advocacy and eventual public acknowledgement opened a national dialogue, formally placed the responsibility on the US government, and mobilized Japanese Americans to share their history to protest and prevent other injustices (Nagata et al., 2019). As the US maintenance of its own imperial power is based on the organized forgetting of the trauma it has inflicted overseas, similar public recognition of the wartime trauma experienced by other Asian American communities is unlikely. In the case of the Vietnam War, only the trauma of American veterans is officially recognized (e.g., in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial), while the millions of Vietnamese killed, even on the South Vietnamese side, are anonymized or erased completely (Espiritu, 2014). Rather than taking a top-down approach of looking to the US government to acknowledge its own violence, Asian American communities must break the silence from the bottom-up.

Within ethnic and racial minority communities, recognition of the group's history can allow older and younger generations alike to understand their current conditions in the USA and their connection to present anti-imperialist collective struggles. Grassroots organizing can serve as a means of caring for the community by confronting systemic problems and educating young people about their ethnic group history (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020). For Southeast Asian Americans, who are disproportionately living in poverty, criminalized, and targeted for deportation, understanding the historical context of their presence in the USA can raise the community's critical consciousness and mobilize them against current systemic oppression (Tang, 2015). For upwardly mobile Asian Americans whose families may feel they have achieved the "American Dream," connecting their family history with the larger history of US imperialism and immigration law can similarly raise their consciousness about past

and present iterations of US imperialism and issues of racial and migrant justice, promoting cross-ethnic, cross-racial, and cross-socioeconomic class solidarity. This critical consciousness is crucial to understanding contemporary issues facing Asian Americans, including violence against South Asians since 9/11, debates over affirmative action in college admissions, and the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Crawford et al., 2021; Lee, 2021).

Formally introducing opportunities to learn about ethnic and racial group history into schools is another way in which community advocacy and policy can help break the silence around historical trauma. Student activism brought ethnic studies to universities across the USA decades ago and is now bringing ethnic studies to high schools (Okimoto, 2016; Zhu, 2022). Education is an important site where dominant narratives are typically reproduced, which means it can also be a site where dominant narratives are disrupted. Representation in curricula can be a powerful way of publicly recognizing historical trauma and open pathways to community healing. As Lin et al. (2009) describe, ethnic studies programs offer a particular opportunity for capturing individual students' family experiences and placing them in their larger historical context, and can provide a structured context for opening intergenerational communication about historical trauma. Policymakers should therefore support ethnic studies programs in high schools and universities to provide students equitably with the opportunity to learn their histories and bring knowledge back to their communities.

Conclusion

Asian American psychology research has largely ignored social, political, and historical contexts. This decontextualization is a mechanism through which psychology as an academic field reproduces dominant ideologies, upholding the image of the USA as a land of opportunity for immigrants while erasing the violent history of US imperialism which produces those migrants. Psychologists must adopt critical, decolonial, and liberatory approaches to psychology to develop nuanced understandings of marginalized communities and meet their needs. Linking historical trauma with racial trauma and applying a framework of radical healing to both highlight important new directions for research on Asian American families and communities, as well as further possibilities for promoting healing through clinical practice, community engagement, and policy change.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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