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Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
UCSF

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SPOTLIGHT: RAVI CHANDRA, MD—VOLUNTEER CLINICAL PROFESSOR



*Pictured Ravi Chandra, MD
Photo credit: Bob Hsiang*

Congratulations to Dr. Ravi Chandra— volunteer clinical professor! He is the recipient of the **2025 Kun-Po Soo Award for achievement in Asian American psychiatry from the American Psychiatric Association and Association Foundation**. He was awarded for his talk, “The Struggle with the Battleship of Biases is Real: Dark Horses, Black Sheep, Scapegoats, Underdogs and Claiming Face in the Asian American Psyche.” Dr. Chandra took the time to talk about his personal and professional journey to working in the Asian American psychiatry space.

Tell us a little bit about where you're from and your educational background.

“I’m a 1.8 generation immigrant from South India, immigrating at 2 years of age with my mother first to Tuskegee, Alabama, then Nashville, TN, St. Louis, MO, and Flint and Detroit, MI, where she was completing her residency training in Pediatrics at historically Black medical institutions. My community was predominantly Black for most of my early years, but my racial identity was more confused as I moved across the country echoing the path of the Great Migration of Blacks to the North. My identity as an Asian American and BIPOC ally was formed at Brown University, where I earned an Sc.B with Honors in Biology, and Stanford University Medical School. I switched from Family Medicine into Psychiatry at UCSF, and completed my training in 2005.”

What have you been up to since you graduated from residency?

“I learned a lot in community mental health at RAMS, where I worked halftime until early 2013, finally serving as Medical Director. RAMS is now 50 years old, and serves patients in about 25 languages. I worked primarily with Asian language and Russian-speaking immigrants and refugees, and was able to hone medication management, cultural, and team skills. I continued to volunteer at RAMS until the pandemic, leading a group for my Cambodian patients there, all of them survivors of the Pol Pot genocide. I also amplified my writing for the public. I wrote about Asian American film for the [Center for Asian American Media](#) from 2006 to 2020, and broader sociopolitical and cultural issues for [East Wind eZine](#) beginning in 2020, where I am now the publisher as well. Since 2011, I’ve written the [Pacific Heart expert blog for Psychology Today](#). All in all, I’ve written about 500 essays for these sites and others. I’ve also written a book on social media that won a 2017 Nautilus Silver Award, as well as directing a [feature length documentary](#) that won Best Film at the 2021 Cannes Independent Film Festival. Last summer I started a [Substack](#). I’m also a trained teacher of Mindful Self Compassion and Compassion Cultivation Training, modalities I employ in my work with patients in my private practice, which I’ve had since graduating residency.”

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How long have you been a VCP with UCSF?

“Surprisingly, I’ve only been a VCP since 2023! I’ve really enjoyed being a community supervisor for two outstanding residents so far.”

How did you develop your interest in Asian American psychiatry?

“Asian American identity and community has been a source of comfort and personal growth since my college days. I switched over from Family Medicine to Psychiatry primarily because of my work with refugees from Laos, Vietnam and Somalia. In the end, I was more interested in reading about culture and identity at midnight than bronchopneumonia! I’m glad there are people who specialize in the latter, but you’ve gotta go where the action is for your heart, mind, body, and soul. Also, I was deeply moved by the psychological growth that Asian American independent films portrayed.”

What are some of the challenges do you feel that Asian Americans face who are working in the mental health field?

“Asian Americans are often seen as worker-drones and model minorities, and thus silenced. We may not be seen as leaders - and we have an added responsibility to promote diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice, in my view. There are also many “missing Asian Americans” because of limits on immigration before 1965. I often think of what American psychiatry might have been like if more Asian Americans had a voice over many decades. It’s a constant struggle to find our voice and create allyship across our diversity and in community with others seeking both representation and improved mental health care. Also, Asian Americans are very diverse! E Pluribus Unum really applies to Asian Americans. Disaggregating our populations while also working towards a broader and deeper unity is very important. One of my essays might be helpful to understand my perspective on the transformation of historical trauma: [MOSF 17.10: Asian American Histories of the United States: “Come, meet us in our wounds.”](#)”

What are some of the challenges that patients face?

“I was harmed by an Asian American psychiatrist I saw in medical school because she did not understand Asian American issues, and broadly speaking, approached me with a more judgmental than compassionate frame. But many of us have had to deal with caregivers who did not understand us, so my experience is not unique, and is a source of empathy for my patients and communities. There are issues specific to the Asian American community. Asian American identity formation is complex. We all want to be understood, and we all need emotional and relational guidance about facing suffering and distress. Suffering is a crisis in connection. The opposite of suffering is belonging - and even affects need belonging. There is no such thing as self-regulation. We are all comforted in relatedness. And as most psychiatrists learn, it is really rewarding and comforting to help others. Psychiatrists can do better at learning about psychosocial stressors, including the Social Determinants of Mental Health, as well as how abusive power impacts all of us.”

Tell us a little bit about your talk, “The Struggle with the Battleship of Biases is Real: Dark Horses, Black Sheep, Scapegoats, Underdogs and Claiming Face in the Asian American Psyche.”

“I’m kinda known for over-the-top titles! It’s a mouthful, and it was a mouthful of a talk. To summarize, it’s important to gain proximity with suffering, instead of stigmatizing and scapegoating suffering and vulnerability. To paraphrase what my colleague Gary Belkin from New York City said in a rally during the APA Annual Meeting protesting Medicaid and SAMHSA cuts, compassion for vulnerability is the cornerstone of a healthy society. It’s not a distraction. There is no “suicidal empathy” for Western society as people like Elon Musk have claimed. Proximity to suffering brings us to our very humanity, as Bryan Stevenson has said. Compassion and nurture have been essential in the survival of the human species for our entire existence. Psychiatrists are in that great tradition. It’s an enormous calling and responsibility - but also one where we can help people find their ways to joy - the topic of one of my other collaborations at the APA Annual Meeting this year.”

What advice to you have to early career psychiatrists and trainees who are interested in working in the Asian American psychiatry space?

In the Bay Area, please come to meetings of the NCPS Asian American Issues committee, chaired by Dr. Jackie Chang for over 20 years. We meet bimonthly and there’s always more to learn. Also, [sign up for the Asian American Caucus listserv of the APA](#), also open to anyone interested in Asian American issues. Come to the APAAM, and attend the growing number of talks on Asian American psychiatry. Most importantly, make sure you support diverse cultural offerings in the community - these are always a great learning experience, from [film festivals](#) to cultural events.

