

[Reaction Paper]

## **Practicing Counseling in Chinese Communities: Some Reflections on Cultural Competence and Indigenization**

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There are two articles published in this volume discussing issues related to the counseling practice among Chinese people. Authors of the two papers have highlighted the impact of filial piety and collectivity in the Chinese society, their possible influence on clients and cautions counselors have to be aware of in the counseling process. Practical adjustments of counseling strategies due to considering the cultural differences have also been delineated. However, in order to become more effective and more competent in counseling Chinese clients, counselors have to be aware of their own beliefs, attitudes and values on filial piety and collectivity. Research efforts are needed to study the culture-related perspectives of Chinese people and the effectiveness of different therapeutic approaches in the Chinese context.

In the last volume of *Asian Journal of Counselling*, there are four articles introducing the development of counseling in four Chinese communities, the Chinese Mainland (Fan, 1999), Taiwan (Chen, 1999), Singapore (Sim, 1999) and Hong Kong (Leung, 1999). One common theme of these articles is that the authors highlighted the importance of building up indigenous counseling theories in the Chinese society. I am very excited to read the two articles in this volume (Duan & Wang, 2000; Kwan, 2000) discussing the cultural perspectives that professional counselors should take into consideration when they are counseling Chinese people. These perspectives are filial piety and the accommodation of individualism with collectivism.

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They are surely important issues to consider in adopting Western theories of counseling in a Chinese context. In this reaction paper, I will comment on the authors' viewpoints from the framework of cultural competence (e.g., D. W. Sue, D. Sue & McDavis, 1992). Issues related to indigenization are also discussed.

### **The Search for Effective Cultural Competence**

After reading the two articles, the first question that came into my mind is, "How can we be more effective and more competent in counseling Chinese people?" The answer the authors gave is that we should first understand the main characteristics of the Chinese culture in which filial piety and collectivism are important notions. After exploring these cultural issues, we can use them as a frame of reference to understand Chinese clients and to help them conceptualize and resolve their problems in a more proper way. Thus, counselors have to develop their cultural competence so as to become more effective helping professionals.

In discussing the issue of competency of multicultural counselors, D. W. Sue and D. Sue (1990) identified three characteristics. A culturally skilled counselor should (1) become aware of his/her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations, and so forth; (2) understand the worldview of his/her culturally different client without negative judgments; and (3) actively develop and practice appropriate, relevant, and sensitive intervention strategies and skills in working with his/her culturally different clients. Based on these characteristics, D. W. Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992) developed a conceptual framework for competencies and standards in multicultural counseling with three dimensions, namely beliefs and attitudes; knowledge; and skill. The authors of the two papers seem to have put much effort to elaborate the importance of knowledge and skill in counseling Chinese people but they have not made counselors' beliefs and attitudes a focus for discussion.

Along the same line of the idea of D. W Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), McFadden (1996) reviewed five qualities related to cultural competence from an article "Services to Minority Populations: What Does It Mean to be a Culturally Competent Professional?" (McManus, 1988) published in *The Focal Point*, the bulletin of the Research and Training Center at Portland State University. These qualities are (1) to be aware of and accept cultural differences; (2) to be aware of one's own cultural values; (3) to understand that people of different cultures have different ways of communicating, behaving, and problem solving; (4) to have basic knowledge about a client's culture; and (5) to be willing to adjust the way one works with people and to take into consideration cultural differences (p. 235). McFadden emphasized that these are necessary qualities of culturally competent providers. I would like to use this framework as a basis to respond to the two articles.

#### Knowledge of Clients' Cultural Background

Points number 1, 3 and 4 raised by McFadden (1996) are related to the knowledge about a client's cultural background. These issues are adequately addressed in the two articles. The authors clearly presented the background, the importance and the impact of filial piety and collectivism in the Chinese culture. They emphasized that counselors should have a basic understanding of their clients' cultural background, such as filial piety and the individualism-collectivism dimension.

A common theme of the two articles is that counselors should respect the cultural characteristics of Chinese people. The authors pointed out that Chinese people might sacrifice their own needs in situations like mate selection, career decision making and child rearing practices in order to fulfill one's filial obligations or expectations of other members in the family. Maintaining the harmony within the family is an action in line with the collectivistic character of the Chinese culture. Thus, counselors should not regard these behavior as resistance, lack of trust or having low self awareness.

The authors also discussed the hierarchical structure of Chinese families, which governs intergenerational and intragenerational relationships. Chinese people might have difficulties in communicating themselves especially in talking about family conflicts, or in disclosing feelings against their parents to outsiders of the family. Negative feelings like guilt or betrayal are often generated in the process.

According to Corey (1996), it is not realistic to expect counselors to understand everything about the cultural background of a client although they can acquire general knowledge and skills that would enable them to function more effectively with diverse client populations. In line with the views of authors of the two papers, I believe that if helping professionals could develop a comprehensive understanding of their clients' cultural background, they could be more effective in their actual practice.

#### Personal Beliefs and Attitudes of Counselors

For the second point raised by McFadden (1996) was that the counselors should be aware of their own cultural values. This seems to be the missing point in the two articles. I agree with the authors that filial piety and individualism-collectivism are important perspectives in the Chinese culture. When counseling Chinese people, helping professionals should learn about the meaning of these issues in the Chinese culture and pay intensive attention to the impact of these issues on their clients. However, the counselors themselves have to be sensitive and be aware of their own attitudes towards filial piety and collectivism. These beliefs and attitudes might affect their reactions to the clients when related issues are raised in the counseling process. The awareness of counselors' filial expectations and individualistic or collectivistic needs may prevent them from imposing their own values on their clients.

#### Willingness to Adjust in Actual Counseling Practice

For the fifth point raised by McFadden (1996), counselors have to be willing to adjust their approach in working with client, and to take into

consideration cultural differences. The authors of the two articles have clearly advocated the need for counselor to adjust their approach to counseling in working with Chinese people and to take into consideration possible cultural differences.

In discussing the implications of filial piety for counseling Chinese people, Kwan (2000) suggested that counselors should pay more attention to the centrality of family and the collectivistic values which characterize the relationship patterns of Chinese people. Information about a client's relationship with their parents should be gathered. The filial attitudes and the filial expectations of family members should also be explored. Kwan further pointed out that counselors must be sensitive to the potential feelings of guilt and betrayal generated from filial issues. Obviously these suggestions are proposed after considering the impact of the concept of filial piety in the Chinese culture. They provide a wider scope for understanding Chinese people.

On the other hand, in order to understand and to connect with Chinese clients, Duan and Wang (2000) proposed that (1) counselors should be empathic toward the client, despite what individualistic or collectivistic values are expressed; (2) counselors should respect the cultural characteristics and interpersonal communications; and (3) counselors should understand the role of family and individuals' family duties and obligations expected by the Chinese culture. These suggestions are similar to those proposed by Kwan. As I have pointed out earlier, if counselors possess accurate knowledge about Chinese culture, they can have a frame of reference to better understand their Chinese clients and to be more empathic toward their clients.

Duan and Wang (2000) proposed that counselors should consider both individualistic and collectivistic views of the clients in order to determine whether the behavior or emotion is healthy or unhealthy, desirable or undesirable. They suggested that counselors might need to focus on family

actualization or group actualization instead of self actualization in a collectivistic society. Advice giving may not be a bad practice in counseling Chinese people. They asserted that “clients may feel comfortable with getting what is expected from the expert” and “giving cultural appropriate advice... can help the counseling to serve the role of promoting social and group interest as well as individual interest, which may gain the profession social and cultural acceptance” (p.14, 15).

I agree that collectivism is a central characteristic in Chinese culture. Chinese people prefer harmonious interpersonal relationship with a hierarchical structure. They are expected to show filial obedience, or to defer to parents’ decisions. Therefore, we must be very careful in determining the so-called unhealthy emotions and behavior. However, I have reservations on the suggestion of giving advice in counseling practice. Seeking advice is not a unique characteristic of clients in the Chinese context. Probably it is a common phenomenon among clients across different cultures. Clients may wish their counselors to tell them what exactly they should do in order to solve their problems or to deal with their emotions.

Mosak (1995) asserted that even though Adlerian therapist freely gives advice, he/she must take care to encourage the client’s self directiveness and willingness to stand along and be very cautious not to encourage dependency. Ivey, Ivey and Simek-Morgan (1993) cautioned that advice and instructions could be overused. Kottler and Kottler (2000) further reminded counselors not to give advice in practicing counseling because even the advice was on-target and the client responded according to the counselor’s instructions, what the client learned was to consult an expert when he/she had a problem in the future. Advice giving might reinforce the belief that the client was not able to make decisions on his/her own. Although Chinese people living in a collectivistic society might have a tendency to depend on an expert authority, helping professionals should not further reinforce such dependency. Advice has to be given to clients with care.

Corey (1996) stated that “Effective multicultural practice demands an open stance on the part of the practitioner, a flexibility, and a willingness to modify strategies to fit the needs and the situation of the individual client” (p. 30). In addition to an open-mind, flexible and willing to change attitude, I think that an effective counselor should be very cautious in modifying therapeutic strategies and in defining needs according to the cultural background of the client.

### **The Quest for Indigenization**

Another interesting question raised by the two papers is “How to build up indigenous counseling theories and techniques for working with Chinese people?” The issue of searching for indigenization in Asian communities has been thoroughly discussed by Shek (1999) when he reviewed the review papers on the development of counseling in four Chinese communities. Based on Shek’s argument, I would like to point out some questions that we need to consider when we are talking about the building up of indigenous theories for counseling Chinese people. These questions are:

- (1) In what way are Western theories not applicable to Chinese people?
- (2) Would indigenous theories be more effective than non-indigenous approaches in counseling Chinese people?
- (3) Is it reasonable to assume that all Chinese people are homogenous so that the goal of indigenization is easily accomplished?

Closely related to these questions, Shek (1999) also pointed out an additional embarrassing problem confronting Asian counselors. He wrote, “Asian counselors discard western theories without demonstrating they do not work. They form indigenous theories without demonstrating they really work” (p. 111). It is more desirable that all newly proposed theories or practices should be supported by careful research. For example, when Duan

and Wang (2000) assert that advice giving may not be a bad practice in counseling Chinese people because it is consistent with the hierarchical structure of Chinese culture, this implies a need for empirical studies to support the effectiveness of offering advice in counseling in a Chinese context.

In addition, Capuzzi and Gross (1995) mentioned that the implementation of multicultural counseling into daily professional practice requires a counselor to determine the appropriateness and inappropriateness of his/her therapeutic approaches. This position is also related to the indigenization of counseling theories. However, I believe that it is difficult for counselors to determine the “appropriate reaction” to respond to different cultural perspectives in the counseling process. When conflicts exist between the theoretical framework used by the counselor and the cultural characteristics of the client, e.g., the emphasis of individualism of different counseling theories and the collectivistic characteristics of Chinese clients, what should the counselor do? It is really a question whether the counselor should accept the cultural differences and adjust so that the counseling goal are consistent with the cultural nature of the client, or whether the counselor should confront the client on the cultural issues and help him/her to acquire a new perspective in dealing with his/her problem. To conform or confront is a choice that has to be made. To me, the latter may be a better way to accommodate individualism with collectivism within the Chinese society. Still, this idea needs further research to support.

The authors of the two papers have proposed ways to adjust the strategies to counsel Chinese people. Not only have they proposed logical and constructive ideas in treating culture-related issues in counseling Chinese people, they have also opened a platform for further discussion in conceptualizing cultural issues in counseling practice. This is a way to approach the indigenization of counseling theories in the Chinese society. Apart from this kind of discussion, further systematic empirical studies are needed to investigate the impact of cultural issues on Chinese people, the



applicability and practicability of Western counseling approaches when applied to the Chinese communities, and the effectiveness of the newly proposed theories, techniques, and practices.

There is still a long way to go toward indigenization though it is really a noble and natural dream for every Asian counselor (Othman & Awang, 1993). Perhaps, we have to appreciate what Capuzzi and Gross (1995) stated, "As counselors and therapists, we cannot wait for the evolution of a new theory because we need to proceed now with what we know" (p. 585).

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### 在中國人社群推展輔導工作：對文化能力和本色化的反省

今期的《亞洲輔導學報》刊登了兩篇探討在中國人社群推展輔導工作的文章。兩位作者點出了孝道和群體主義對中國社會及求助者的影響，以及在輔導過程中，輔導員要特別注意的事項。文章又探討了因著文化差異而對輔導策略作出的實際調整。而為了能夠更有效及更適當的輔導中國求助者，輔導員要留意自己對於孝道和群體主義的信念、態度和價值觀。此外，還需要研究各種與文化有關的看法，以及研究在中國社會裏運用不同治療取向的效果。