Defining intimacy in diverse Asian cultures

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ABSTRACT

America has continued to diversify as a nation, welcoming people from every race, culture and continent. The US Census Bureau (2004) reported that there were 13.5 million Asians in America and these numbers are increasing (US Census Bureau, 2004). This indicates that there is a greater demand for competent and effective mental health care to meet the needs of this heterogeneous group. Asian Americans can be best helped by a therapist who is sensitive, knowledgeable and has an understanding about the core values which are present in many Asian cultures. There are limited resources and treatment guides for this population due to failure to recruit participants in research studies and high drop-out rates. Sources of information are both narrow in its focus and scarce. In efforts to add to a more complete understanding for use in couple treatment, a literature review was utilized to compile, analyze and explore unique aspects within Asian culture. Six themes emerged as consistent elements throughout the literature in various Asian populations. This study delineates these themes and proposed treatment strategies to address them within a couple therapy format.

BACKGROUND

One’s ethnic identity and culture has been shown to be an integral part of the function of self especially for ethnic minorities (Juang, Nguyen & Lin, 2006). When contextual factors such as culture and values are not considered, a therapist becomes less capable to approach treatment with an in-depth understanding of the conflicting dimensions which may exist when treating Asian Americans. In a couple relationship, family of origin philosophies and traditions are often sustained by each partner, sometimes playing a role in conflict and distress. The dominant culture in America may not adhere to parallel beliefs as those which more collectivistic cultures subscribe to, which can also contribute to relationship difficulties. Asian American couples may find themselves trying to navigate through conflicting ideals and having to re-define their couplehood. A systematic understanding of how intimacy, marital satisfaction and relationships are conceptualized within Asian cultures are invaluable for therapists who aim to help these couples explore and discover their unique identity.

* It is important to understand that not all Asian families are the same. The reasons for migration, national identity, length of time a family has lived in America, education and economic level, degree of acculturation, and many other factors unique to different families are important to consider.

PURPOSE

In this poster, we summarize the literature regarding intimacy and relationship themes in Asian American couples and present salient concepts for therapists to consider when working with these couples. We conducted a review of scholarly literature with a focus on therapy with Asian American couples. Academic search terms and inclusion criteria were broad to ensure that the area of relationships within Asian culture was explored as comprehensively as possible. Search terms such as “Asian American/Chinese/Indian/Muslim/Korean” etc. and “Relationship/Marriage/Satisfaction/Couples/Intimacy” were used in the journal article database PsycInfo. A total of 23 articles and 7 books were included to augment treatment considerations for this population. (References available upon request)

THEMES WITHIN THE LITERATURE AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Clinical implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive Attitudes</td>
<td>• Attitudes are somewhat restrictive, desiring values such as self-effacement, self-control and ‘saving face’ (Kim, 2001)</td>
<td>➤ Acknowledge the difficulty in seeking help</td>
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<td>Family and Society Involvement</td>
<td>• Highly collectivistic (Triandis, 1989; Yeh &amp; Huang, 1996; Markus &amp; Kitayama, 1991)</td>
<td>➤ Sessions focused on emotional expression may create discomfort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duty and Responsibility – Ideals of Marriage</td>
<td>• Family is an important source of assurance of relationship viability and emotional investment</td>
<td>➤ Be sensitive to anxiety when discussing sensitive areas (sex, intimacy, etc) (Sue, 1994)</td>
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<td>Religious Marital Identity</td>
<td>• Possible conflict around desire to invest in their families yet having the need to practice their religion away from their home country</td>
<td>➤ When developing goals, determine changes desired before normalizing common ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept of Love &amp; Marital Satisfaction</td>
<td>• Marital satisfaction is characterized by gratitude, admiration, togetherness and compatibility (Chen &amp; Li, 2007)</td>
<td>➤ Diversify your role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function of Communication</td>
<td>• Valuing conformity, deference to authority figures, restraint, and self-reliance prevents raw and careless disclosure (Kim, 2001)</td>
<td>➤ Avoid overlooking extended family issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Communication may appear less intimate and may have a tendency to seek approval</td>
<td>➤ Use the strong commitment toward their families as a strength within treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Private thoughts may be shared in less conventional ways; symbolically, through actions and inferences</td>
<td>➤ Become clear on the ideals and expectations within Asian families to avoid directives or suggestions that are contradictory</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Be respectful of belief systems

Use psychoeducation to encourage trust and joining

Consider doing research about the clients belief system to better understand important principles and values that the couples may follow

Network with community or faith leaders, if couple agrees that this would be helpful (Kim, Bean, & Harper, 2004)

Be sensitive to anxiety when discussing sensitive areas (sex, intimacy, etc) (Sue, 1994)

When developing goals, determine changes desired before normalizing common ideas

Diversify your role

Avoid overlooking extended family issues

Use the strong commitment toward their families as a strength within treatment

Become clear on the ideals and expectations within Asian families to avoid directives or suggestions that are contradictory

Weave traditional values in treatment to be congruent with family-of-origin values

Recognize that disclosing of unconventional practices (or what may be viewed as strange customs) can be intimidating for a couple

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