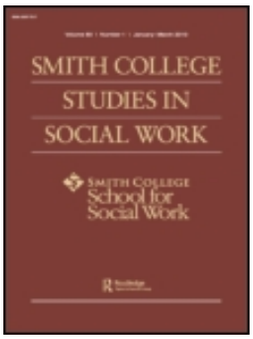

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Connecting the Strengths of Gestalt Chairs to Asian Clients

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The authors have used Gestalt empty-chair techniques in social work settings, helping Asian clients who may be nonexpressive to deal with bereavement issues, to confront parent–child relationship issues, and to express feelings toward personal losses. The applications of various empty-chair methods are based on four characteristics of many Asian clients: (1) connecting the meaning of "shame" in therapeutic interventions, (2) avoiding the loss of "face" in confronting relatives and friends, (3) using alternative and complementary means to replace traditional therapy and direct confrontation, and (4) using inner control and spirituality in resolving interpersonal guilt and conflict. From concrete evidence with their Asian clients, the authors illustrate specific therapeutic steps with practice dialogues to help practitioners develop culturally-sensitive skills in the process of using empty-chair techniques. These dialogues support positive outcomes in (1) responding to the therapeutic exercise, (2) engaging in therapeutic work on their issue, (3) responding to treatment within one session and showing progress within two sessions, and (4) expressing emotions or unresolved conflict throughout the therapeutic journey. Practice implications are drawn from the strength of Gestalt techniques to design culturally-sensitive principles with Asian clients and families.

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Gestalt therapy has been praised as a popular therapeutic approach in counseling because of its focus on experiential techniques that aim at helping clients express their difficulties or concerns. Friedman (2003) found two types of Gestalt techniques globally tested as helpful: dialoguing with polarities and the chair technique. The "dialoguing with polarities" exercise is used when clients are faced with two extremes (such as decisions or dilemmas). Through concrete examples, clients may see, feel, sense, and play their roles to experience what it is like to express their concerns to their family or friends, challenge their past feelings and thoughts, and replace negativity with positivity (Daniels, 2004). Employing the "chair techniques" as the conversational target to encourage clients to break resistance, Elliot, Watson, Goldman, and Greenberg (2004) found that many clients have been dealing with two unfinished issues: (1) neglect or abandonment and (2) abuse or trauma. These clients are usually not able to verbalize their concerns or not aware that they could. Kellogg (2004) called this empowerment approach "a form of cognitive restructuring" (p. 310) in that it changes clients' thought processes during a dramatic encountering between the self and the other person in a conflictual relationship.

With the aim to connect past issues with present feelings, the "empty chair" application can help clients discover their ability to disclose previously unexpressed interpersonal needs. Combining the empty-chair technique with dialogues is a way in the intervention process to help the clients break the silence of a therapeutic relationship and find ways to resolve past issues. In a study by Greenberg and Malcolm (2002), 26 clients who suffered from various forms of interpersonal problems and childhood maltreatment were treated in emotion-focused, experiential therapy with Gestalt empty-chair dialogues and experienced positive outcomes in resolving their emotional distress. In another evidence-based study, Greenberg, Warwar, and Malcolm (2008) worked with 46 clients in their process of forgiveness in resolving interpersonal injuries and investigated the relationship between letting go of distressing feelings and forgiveness. In their study, the clients who were engaged in empty-chair dialogue showed significantly more improvement than the psychoeducation treatment on all measures of forgiveness and psychological resolutions (Greenberg et al.). Nevertheless, evidence-based publications have not reported the impact of Gestalt chair techniques on Asian clients although its therapeutic use has been tested in clinical studies with other ethnic populations such as African American adolescents to improve self-esteem and confidence in interpersonal communications (Plummer & Tukufu, 2001; Woodard, 1995). This article aims to describe the usefulness of empty-chair techniques and through the use of

clinical dialogues with the Asian clients we served in the past to illustrate how social workers can develop concrete techniques to work with clients who are nonexpressive.

EMPTY CHAIRS WITH ASIAN CLIENTS

As a result of the cultural emphasis on concreteness, Asian therapists have tried experiential techniques in psychotherapy (Shen, 2007). Among the few articles that address Gestalt applications in working with Asians, Shen (2007) compared Gestalt play therapy with a cognitive-verbal approach in a study with Taiwanese adolescents and found that the use of Gestalt work improved the behavioral and emotional strengths of these adolescents and enhanced communication between the adolescents and their families. The adolescents' perceived ability to see their involvement in a situation empowers them to address unspoken concerns about relationship issues with their family members even though it is culturally prohibited to discuss these issues with people outside of the family. In another study, Coven (2004) suggested that the experiential nature of Gestalt with a here-and-now emphasis encouraged Taiwanese college students to express their emotions, from which they could identify a personal connection for disclosing hidden concerns about their family issues.

The literature focused on the application of Gestalt techniques addresses the empowerment aspect of this approach. It describes how to keep clients in touch with concrete examples and spiritually connected incidents so that they can use metaphoric ways to verbalize concerns and express emotions. These techniques aim to discover creative means to express feelings through which clients will feel safe to be engaged in the therapeutic process.

Clinical Applications

Based on research that addresses the essential use of clients' cultural and spiritual background to help them unlock their potential problem-solving power (e.g., Nagai, 2008), we have used Gestalt techniques to help Asian clients who are nonexpressive. We used empty-chair techniques with more than 100 Asian clients and found that this technique deals with unspoken grief and bereavement issues, helps clients identify an alternative method to resolve relationship difficulties, and assists clients to express feelings surrounding a lack of childhood care or parental abandonment.

Although qualitative in nature, the application of this approach is based on the principles of cultural and spiritual sensitivity when working with many Asian Americans. It is also based on four characteristics observed from Asian clients that are research based: (1) connecting the meaning

of *shame* in therapeutic interventions (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008), (2) avoiding the loss of "face" in confronting relatives and friends (Cheung, Leung, & Tsui, 2009), (3) using alternative and complementary means to replace traditional therapy and direct confrontation (Choi & Kim, 2010; Lee, Goldstein, Brown, & Ballard-Barbash, 2010), and (4) using inner control and spirituality in resolving interpersonal guilt and conflict (Albertsen, O'Connor, & Berry, 2006; Nagai, 2008). It is worth noting that rapport building and establishment of trust between the therapist and the client must take place before the application of the Gestalt chair techniques with most Asian clients.

Due to cultural norms where direct communication and confrontation are not commonly utilized, many of our clients do not want to talk directly with or about the involved family members and prefer the use of alternative methods to resolve psychological distress. The process of using empty chairs is culturally sensitive, for it highlights the importance of expression and does not require clients to carry out the direct action of communicating and confronting the individual with whom they experience conflicts. Although the empty-chair techniques assist clients to identify resistance or hidden concerns, they are not used to force clients to directly or immediately disclose their secrets. Alternative methods are used to allow clients to pace their expression and the process of disclosure. In sum, taking into consideration the cultural factors of Asian Americans it is important to start with an assessment of the client's cultural background and readiness to face a missing component in life, whether it is regarding a loss, a trauma, or an unresolved feeling. From a clinical point of view, practicing cultural awareness in the context of the meaning of an empty chair can help the clients feel safe, particularly when they depend on their cultural beliefs and spiritual connections in resolving their conflicts and at the same time when the clinician uses the therapeutic moment to achieve clinical objectives.

Demonstrations Through Case Dialogues

In our clinical experiences, we found that when an empty chair is applied, all our cases share a commonality—the client wants to find a concrete way to express mixed emotions. In a means of sharing clinical experiences, we use a standardized client "Mei-lin" who has a conflict with her father to represent those Asian clients who have achieved therapeutic outcomes through these "chair" exercises. These outcomes include their willingness to express their past trauma or conflict, ability to identify alternatives to resolve issues or problems, and understanding the problem from at least one other perspective. *Father* is used because many clients present their problems as they are related to their parents, but this "father" can be anyone whom the client has conflict with or represent something that may have created the presenting problem or blocked positive outcomes.

The dialogues reported under the therapeutic steps and corresponding skills are extracted directly from our clinical experiences with Asian clients. They are based on the following positive outcomes that these clients experienced: (1) responding to the therapeutic exercise, (2) continuing to work on their issue, (3) responding to treatment within one session and show progress within two sessions, and (4) expressing emotions or unresolved conflict throughout the therapeutic journey. Client's responses, such as refusing to respond or treating the therapist as an authority figure, are based on direct observations from our Asian clients served in the United States. Three therapeutic steps are illustrated based on the process that leads to positive outcomes.

Step 1: Introducing the function of using an empty chair

The therapist explains the use of an "exercise" to help the client think about past feelings of an issue. Empty-chair techniques are framed as an exercise and a concrete action with a function, and it is spontaneously done after the client has indicated that he or she has a concern about a conflict. An introduction of the chair exercise is essential because it helps the client define his or her comfort zone. It is not to force the client to enter into an imaginary situation, but it is indeed to assist the client to think about the connection between the unresolved problem or feeling and someone in the relationship. The concrete connection to a person can bring the client into the "now" and think more deeply about the problem or conflict.

> I'd like for us to do an exercise so that you could express your emotions directly to your father without having him actually being here. Now, close your eyes for a few seconds. [Pause] Now, I'm going to ask you some questions. Please answer them based on your current feelings or emotional responses. If you don't feel comfortable at any time, just open your eyes or tell me "I can't continue."

If the client refuses to engage in this activity, the therapist can use this opportunity to address the feeling of refusal, particularly related to shame, "face" issues, or inner conflict.

> What makes you feel uncomfortable about doing an exercise to disclose your feelings? [Wait for answer] Tell me what comes to your mind when this chair is pulled in front of you. [Wait for answer] This would be a great opportunity for you to confront your inner conflict. Let's give it a try.

Because Asian culture, in general, is characterized by a hierarchical family and social structure (Nguyen & Williams, 1988) where respect is emphasized, Asian clients tend to believe that directives given by those in authority are given for good reasons. Through this experiential connection, they may

begin to become aware of the importance of talking about the cause of their discomfort.

Step 2: Engaging the client in the therapeutic process

In the therapeutic process, the therapist must follow the client's clues, verbal and nonverbal, to choose an appropriate method that aims to facilitate a therapeutic effort of expressing feelings and thoughts. These techniques are not listed in any particular order but simply as alternative ways to show how the therapist introduces the chair in a sensitive manner. Knowing that they have alternatives to continue the conversations is important to the Asian clients who are learning how to express their feelings, particularly with their families even when they are not present.

We use a standardized case to illustrate the chair techniques with "Mei-lin" who was physically abused by her father during her childhood because she said that she does not want to talk about it. The following examples demonstrate how to help her experience her current feelings and release the distress that has been brought from her childhood into her adulthood. Our experiences with similar clients have identified 10 skills to help a client talk in this engagement and therapeutic process. However, it is important to be aware that some Asian cultures may have already influenced the clients to think that open expressions of emotion are inappropriate and undesirable (Park & Chi, 1999). This perception may cause some Asian clients to be reserved when participating in experiential exercises. Therefore, the encouragement skills used along with the Gestalt chair can be reframed as "alternatives" or "alternative actions." In this case with Mei-lin, some techniques are used to empower her to engage in a conversation. Alternatively, we may ask Mei-lin to bring a photo of her father, or ask her to draw something to represent the father, to replace the use of a chair. Once the client is capable of verbalizing the concern and expressing feelings, then the therapist can ask her to continue the disclosure at her own pace. At this juncture, the chair (or photo) exercise can be temporarily set aside until the final stage of debriefing. These ten skills are:

Skill 1: Starting without a Chair

> Assuming that your father is sitting in this room, and he has just heard what you said, what do you think he might say to you? [Wait for response] What would be some of your responses to what he might have said?

Skill 2: Starting with a Concrete Chair

> Here is a chair. Assuming that your father is sitting here, I'd like for you to think about the situation for a few seconds. What would you tell him about your past experience with him?

Skill 3: Using Imagery (If the client cannot think of a situation, giving the client time to think is essential.)

> Let's try to imagine a situation. Close your eyes and relax. Think of a time when you were talking with your father [pause]. Keep that conversation in your mind [pause]. Continue to keep your eyes closed. If your father is here now, what would you want to say to him? [Pause] Now open your eyes and tell me about it.

Skill 4: Using Direct Dialogues (If the client starts talking directly to the therapist instead of to the chair, the therapist can invite the client to repeat what has been said but this time directly to the chair to get a different perspective.)

> I hear you. This time you will look at the chair as if he is sitting here and tell him directly about something you have wanted to say to him. [If no response] Say what you just said to me. How about starting to say, father, I wanted to tell you that . . .?

Skill 5: Engaging in Role-Play (When the client does not want to look at the chair, the therapist can role play instead of using a chair.)

> I know you don't want him to be here [or I understand you can't imagine he's here]. How about look at me as if I am your father? Now, I'm your father; tell me one thing about our past relationship.

Skill 6: Swapping the Chairs (Role Reversal)

> Let's try this. Now you sit on this chair. [Client sitting on the "empty chair"] Pretend that you are your father. What would you say to your daughter [pointing at the client's original chair]? (Client would assume father's role and/or tone.) Good, go back to your own chair. How do you feel about what your father just said? [Wait for answers] Now how would you respond to your father?

Skill 7: Engaging in Drama (The content below is only an example; Change the content to fit the theme of the issue.)

> Now switch your role to be your father, and repeat after me, "Daughter, I did that for you." [Encourage client to repeat] "I'm sorry that I couldn't tell you." [Repeat] "I don't know how to let you know." [Repeat] "But I love you very much (or whatever the feeling or experience the client has expressed)." [Repeat] Now you are yourself again. How did your father's statements make you feel? [Encourage client to express] Look at the chair now and think about what your father may respond to what you just said.

Skill 8: Telling One Thing

> If your father could come here today to tell you one important thing that will help you, and that he was sitting across from you right now, what would you want him to say? [Wait for answers] What would you want to tell him?

Skill 9: Telling a Story

> How about telling a story with your father together? Assuming I am your father, I start the first line of the story and you follow and then we take turns to complete the story. [Start with the story reflecting the client's issue]

Skill 10: Using Native Language (If the client speaks his/her native language)

Say something to your father in his native language [notice the client's nonverbal behavior]. What would your father respond to you? [Wait for responses] How do you feel when you hear or think of his response?

Step 3: Debriefing

Asian clients may be very appreciative especially when they discover something emotionally, or some type of insight, that they have not previously experienced. It is important to provide an opportunity for them to debrief the process so that they can share their learning or appreciation with the therapist. This debriefing exercise can also provide the therapist with information regarding the effectiveness of the intervention and client motivation. More important, when the clients do not perceive the image of the chair to be threatening, they can express their feelings without reservations. This is also used as a way to guide a formal closure encouraging the client to move on to the next stage of life.

The general closure statement is "Now, let's come back to this room with just you and me. What was that experience like for you? How do you feel?" For the Asian clients, we found the following alternative ways to be helpful when closing the chair exercise because these clients usually do not know how to address feelings without something concrete.

Option 1: As a Learning Opportunity

Now the exercise is done, what did you learn from it? [Wait for response] How did it make you feel? Do you feel any changes within you? Tell me one change in you that may relate to your father.

Option 2: As a Relaxed Way to Deal with a Stressful Situation

Although your father is actually not here today, you can take the perspective you've learned today when you see him next (or when you think of the problem again). [If father deceased or not there for the client any more: Relax next time when you think about him or the problem.]

Option 3: As a Closure

[For the deceased or the absentee] What do you want to tell your father before you formally say good-bye to him? Now you can tell your father, "I want to say good-bye to you." "I forgive you." "I miss you." Are you ready for it? How does it make you feel when you say, "I forgive you"? [Or other therapeutic comments the client just said.]

Option 4: As a Future Action

Next time when you think of your father or the problem, think of the positive things you learned from this exercise and apply them.

Now the exercise is done. I'd like for you to write down your feelings. In the future when you don't have someone to share your thoughts with, you can do the same and process your feelings but try to frame them in a positive way. You can write a letter as if it will be sent to your father and mail it to me.

Implications for Clinical Practice: From Empty Chairs to Culturally Responsive Techniques

The cultural aspect of these techniques includes understanding the client's priority, being culturally responsive when helping the client deal with societal or cultural barriers when facing an authority figure, responding to the client's preferred way of expressing emotions, and identifying a comfort zone for the client to disclose and handle stressful feelings. Our clinical sharing is based on a commonly observed concrete outcome from the "Gestalt chairs"— helping Asian clients become capable and willing to verbalize their concerns and feelings so that positive therapeutic outcomes can be achieved to resolve their difficulties. Inviting the clients to speak to the air or to a chair can help bring the client into the "here-and-now" and can be seen as a spiritual way to be connected with another person, particularly a family member with whom the client has lost physical or emotional connection. More important, this technique helps reframe the effects of a "therapeutic session" in which personal disclosure about a client's family problems can be viewed as an alternative communication method, rather than a stigma.

The therapeutic goal for Asian clients is usually finding peace, avoiding shame, and/or preventing guilt, particularly in relation to an authoritative person in the family. Through these clinical experiences, we have developed three main practice principles for social work practice.

Principle #1: Empowering clients through the use of diverse techniques

Asian clients usually need to warm up to this exercise, and therefore the therapist must use various techniques to invite the clients to engage in a dialogue. Therapeutically, the most frequently used techniques of this invitation are: "let's assume," "take a look at the chair and imagine," or "remember the face of this person and say it." In addition, if the client has mentioned his or her faith or religious belief that can facilitate the conversation, this invitation can include spirituality such as, "Since you said we are spiritually enriched today, you can speak out what you haven't been able to in the past few months." If the client refuses to engage in the dialogue, the therapist may say, "It's okay not to do it now. Just tell me whenever you are ready for it. How about say (or do) a few things as an opportunity to release your tension?" These techniques are based on the principles of empowerment to make the Asian clients feel comfortable before moving onto a deeper therapeutic mode.

Principle #2: Identifying culturally acceptable means for verbal follow-ups

The "Repeat-After-Me" technique is also used with Asian clients who do not engage in the Gestalt dialogue because they may have difficulty translating

their feelings and emotions into words, particularly when they are about to disclose their feelings. The therapist can start with a few words, such as "Father, I want to let you know. . .," to help start the dialogue and guide the client. With encouragement, the therapist asks the client to repeat these few words and then patiently waits for the client to complete the rest. The therapist can also say a few words at a time and ask the client to repeat the therapist's imaginary statements to achieve the therapeutic effect. It is optimal to use words that match the emotional state of the client to help the client disclose feelings and release emotional distress.

Principle #3: Respecting clients' choice of the therapeutic "chair"

As a general rule, the therapist should never force their clients to enter a "chair dialogue" without checking with the client's willingness and readiness. Reframing the chair exercise as an opportunity to try out something new, the therapist aims to invite their clients to get in touch with any undetected feeling. Many Asian clients feel more comfortable when they do not have to provide direct eye contact when speaking out their emotions or concerns in front of a therapist. The use of an empty chair, as a communication medium, meets this cultural aspect of communication and can be an effective medium for the clients to address their unspoken concerns. Nevertheless, this "chair" can be an actual chair, a drawing, a photo, or a concrete object, which aims to help the clients transfer the discomfort into a replacement object that is concrete. When the client does not feel connected with the suggested chair, the therapist can use himself or herself as the "chair" because an imaginary chair or a metaphoric image that provides a contextualized association often helps the reluctant client find a way to break the communication barrier and get connected. Finding this cultural context, such as a voice that is familiar to the client or a face that the client can closely connect with, is an important preface before the chair exercise can be effectively delivered and evaluated.

In this journey, first and foremost, a rapport and trust must be established between the therapist and the client because "psychotherapy" is not common in most Asian cultures and is usually a new experience for many Asian immigrants. Due to this factor, it is also important that the therapist starts to ask the clients to define "counseling" or "therapy" in their own words to create a sense of comfort. The use of Gestalt therapy such as the empty-chair technique has proven effective with various populations such as African Americans (Plummer & Tukufu, 2001). When used with Asian clients, this technique is not free of limitations, and therefore alternate ways must be prepared in any of the three therapeutic steps, instead of sticking to one plan. When clients are not ready for this type of intervention, the therapist can take this opportunity to check with the clients about their thoughts (or discomfort) about talking to someone who is not present at the therapeutic session. With the various clinical examples presented in this article, our

hope is to demonstrate how the nuances of the Gestalt "chair" techniques can be adapted to be culturally sensitive and thus help to achieve the clinical objectives for serving Asian clients.

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