



Practicing psychodrama in Chinese culture

Nien-Hwa Lai, PhD., T.E.P.^{a,*}, Hsin-Hao Tsai, PhD.^b

^a Department of Psychology and Counseling, National Taipei University of Education, 134 Heping E. Road Sec 2, Da-an District, 10671, Taipei, Taiwan

^b Institute of Life and Death Education and Counseling, National Taipei University of Nursing and Health Sciences, 365 Ming-te Road, Bei-tou District, 11219 Taipei, Taiwan



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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, psychodrama has gained great popularity in traditional Chinese communities, such as those in Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and naturally, China. However, little has been done to describe the adaptation of psychodrama for traditionally Chinese clients. To shed light on a culturally competent approach to psychodrama, we suggested technical modifications, which were presented as case illustrations with Taiwanese clients. A discussion of the implications for future work is also provided.

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Introduction

Psychodrama is an action-based psychotherapy method that has quickly gained popularity in Asian communities in the past decade. Many training workshops and programs were regularly held in traditionally Chinese communities, such as those in Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and China (Deng, Sun, Fei, & Shi, 2010; Gong, 1999, 2001; Hudgins & Su, 2006; Lai, 2005; Remer & Remer, 2003; Shi, 2006). The practice of psychodrama has also been conducted in diverse settings. For example, in Taiwan, one of the earliest places in Asia to introduce psychodrama, it is well established in psychiatric hospitals, in schools, and in community services, while it is burgeoning in correctional institutes and employee assistance programs (Lai, 2013).

Nevertheless, concerns and questions have been raised regarding the adaptability of psychodrama for traditionally Chinese clients. Chang (1997) postulated that enactment, the fundamental element of psychodrama, could collide with the indirect and suppressive manner of expression in Chinese tradition. The Taiwanese pioneer and psychiatrist C. C. Chen, in a 1984 article, also worried that Chinese values around social hierarchy and familism may cause difficulty for group participants to comfortably reveal personal issues in front of an audience of outsiders. Moreover, the obedient characteristic of Chinese clients might hamper the practice and effectiveness of psychodrama, which encourages changes and confrontation.

Answers to these concerns may be found, in part, in the recent development of the culture-specific practice with Asian clients (Chen & You, 2001; Chong & Liu, 2002; Hwang, 2006; MohdZain, 2010; Saner-Yiu & Saner-Yiu, 1985; Sue & Sue, 2013). However, little has been done to describe the application of these concepts in conjunction with psychodramatic techniques in Chinese communities. To shed light on this process, we present our practical experience working within the Chinese cultural framework. A discussion of the implications for the culturally competent practice is also provided. Before moving further, it is nonetheless important to note that much of the following information generalizes what constitutes Chinese culture and must not be construed and applied rigidly for the dynamic in-culture diversity, such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, legal status, as well as personal history.

Psychodrama theories and techniques

Psychodrama was first introduced in Vienna in 1921 by the young psychiatrist J. L. Moreno, who devised this action method to encourage clients to enact events and experiences in their lives on a living stage, integrating different time and space into simply “here and now” (Blatner, 1996; Hare & Hare, 1996; Kellermann, 1992; Moreno, 1953). He also described “warm-up”, “enactment”, and “closure” as the three phases of psychodrama, which employs five principle elements: director, protagonist, auxiliary egos, audience, and stage (Blatner, 1996; Dayton, 1994; Horvatin & Schreiber, 2006; Kellermann, 1992; Moreno, 1953).

In classical psychodrama, the therapist, or so-called “director” or “group leader”, guides participants in a warm-up, as is commonly seen in group psychotherapy. When group members are

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +886 2 27321104x55144; fax: +886 2 25452254.

E-mail addresses: annielai2009@gmail.com, annielai@tea.ntue.edu.tw (N.-H. Lai), hsinhao@gmail.com (H.-H. Tsai).

sufficiently warmed up, the client, or so-called “protagonist” of the session, is elected based on the group dynamic. Group participants at the end of this phase should become more spontaneous and creative, which is essential for the effectiveness of psychodrama (Blatner, 2000; Hale, 1985; Kellermann, 1992). Having selected a protagonist, the drama enters the enactment phase. During this phase, the director guides the protagonist to enact an issue of choice through the assistance of “auxiliary egos” or “auxiliaries” who are chosen from the rest of the group to perform roles involved in the issue. Those who do not participate in acting but instead watch the acting are the “audience”. All of the action is performed in a specific area called the “stage”, an important element of psychodrama that allows participants to freely present scenes unrestricted by time and space. When the protagonist works through his/her issue, the director ends enactment and provides the group with closure by having all participants share what they felt and experienced as the story progressed during the session. This is an important phase for the protagonist to again become part of the group while increasing group cohesion and universality (Blatner, 2000; Dayton, 1994; Kellermann, 1992). The whole process generally takes 2.5–3 h, including approximately 30–40 min for warm-up, 1.5 h for enactment, and another 40–60 min for sharing.

To facilitate treatment, Moreno also developed a wide range of psychodramatic techniques and methods (Blatner, 1996; Dayton, 1994; Karp, Holmes, & Tavon, 1998). While his methods hinge on role-playing significant figures involved in a story, (either human or non-human), he devised role reversal to allow for an experiential exchange between two acting members. This technique serves to expand protagonists’ perceptions toward his/her external world and is often called the “engine of psychodrama” (Karp et al., 1998). Another important technique is the double, or “alter ego”, which refers to an auxiliary portraying some part of the protagonist in order to externalize inner feelings, clarify unspoken ideation, and expand self-awareness (Blatner, 1996; Dayton, 1994). When a protagonist is asked to step back and observe auxiliaries play a scene, often including his/her own role by an auxiliary, it is called a mirror. This technique allows the protagonist to watch objectively and gain previously overlooked nonverbal information (Blatner, 1996). It could also help the protagonist to view the problem from a less heated position and with the support of the director (Dayton, 1994). It is important to remember that while it is the job of the director to deploy these action techniques, he/she is also supposed to co-create with the protagonist by respecting and understanding the protagonist’s condition, enhancing and expanding his/her perception and fostering change (Kellermann, 1992).

Culture-specific practice for Chinese clients

The adoption of western psychotherapy for traditionally Chinese clients has been regularly discussed with a focus on core beliefs of collectivism, familism, and social hierarchy, which translate into cultural values including conformity to the norm, deference to authority figures, emotional suppression, filial piety, and humility (Chen & You, 2001; Chong & Liu, 2002; Hwang, K. K., 1999, 2009; Hwang, W.C., 2006; Ji, Lee, & Guo, 2010; MohdZain, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2013).

The collectivistic worldview in Chinese culture emphasizes conforming to group norms (Hwang, 2006; Sue & Sue, 2013; Yang, 1995; Yang & Lu, 2005). In Asian schools, students wear uniforms to show conformity to the group, while in the classroom, they stay quiet and tend to follow teachers’ instructions passively. Students acting differently from the rest, such as voluntarily offering ideas or raising questions, are likely to be viewed as disruptive to the group norm. In families, the most valued group of all, it is important to follow family traditions, meet family expectations, and

strive for family goals. Therefore, it has been suggested that, when working with Chinese clients, goals and treatments may have to include a family or social perspective, instead of focusing on only individual needs and personal identity (Chen, 2009; Hwang, 2006; Kwan, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2013). It is also preferable to resolve conflicts by finding a compromise that promotes interpersonal and intrapersonal harmony.

Furthermore, Chinese social hierarchy praises deference to authority figures. Subordinates revere their superiors, and students revere their teachers. Talking back and challenging the superior or senior is considered extremely rude. At home, this is aided by the concept of filial piety and contributes to an authoritative and directive parenting style, where children are expected to be submissive to parental opinions (Chen & You, 2001; Hwang, 1999; Kwan, 2000). Moreover, disobedient behavior suggests a lack of discipline and filial piety, which could reflect poor parenting and bring shame to the family. In this respect, Sue and Sue (2013) suggested reframing techniques to address more positive parenting strategies when dealing with child-rearing issues. Kwan (2000) noted the persistent influence of filial piety on Chinese clients and suggested the consideration of the context of intergenerational relationships throughout counseling processes. It is further suggested that therapists explore both positive and negative emotions associated with the practice of filial piety in order to help clients make sense of confusion and ambiguous feelings rooted in parent-child conflicts.

Another essential factor in counseling with Chinese clients is the indirect and suppressive manner of communication. While the conventional thinking finds implicitness and indirectness indicative of a thoughtful and humble gentleman, teachings on the middle way further suggest that public display of extreme positions and strong emotions is a sign of immaturity and weak-mindedness (Hwang, 2009; Ji et al., 2010). Such concepts are in stark contrast to the open display of emotions and opinions in Western culture. To address this tendency, Sue and Sue (2013) specifically noted that “focusing directly on emotions may be uncomfortable and produce shame for traditional Asian Americans,” and therapists should try responding with indirect acknowledgment of emotions and focusing more on behaviors than emotions. Nevertheless, it is equally important not to misconstrue the lack of openness and passive manner in Chinese clients as signs of avoidance, evasiveness, or disingenuousness (Kuo, Hsu & Lai, 2011).

While these cultural insights have provided a useful compass to find ways to understand and communicate with traditionally Chinese clients in counseling, it remains challenging to successfully apply them in practice. This is especially true with action-based psychodrama, for reasons mentioned above. Before we further discuss the cultural competence of psychodrama for Chinese clientele, case examples are provided here to demonstrate ways of employing psychodramatic techniques when working with a traditionally Chinese client.

Case illustrations

The following examples were extracted from a 3-year training program in Taiwan, led by a licensed local counseling psychologist (first author) who has more than 20 years’ experience using psychodrama in Chinese culture. There was also an American trainer visiting annually to co-lead workshops as part of the program. Program participants were Taiwanese counseling psychologists and graduate students with mixed psychodrama experiences; some were also new to the group. For training purposes, every psychodrama session in this program also included an additional Q&A segment for processing the work. Examples illustrated below were based on the questions and discussion raised during processing of the visiting trainer’s work. They were presented in the order of

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