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TRANSFERENCE AND EMPATHY IN ASIAN AMERICAN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Cultural Values and Treatment Needs

**Jean Lau Chin, Joan Huser Liem, Mary Anna
Domokos-Cheng Ham, George K. Hong**

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Transference and
Empathy in
Asian American
Psychotherapy

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Jean Lau Chin, Joan Huser Liem,
MaryAnna Domokos-Cheng Ham,
and
George K. Hong

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Preface

During the last decade there has been increased recognition of the need for clinical training programs and curricula directed at preparing therapists to work more effectively with ethnic minority clients in general and, more specifically, with Asian American clients (Shon, 1979; Wong, 1986). Bernal and Padilla (1982) note the dearth of curricula in training programs nationwide that address the needs of low-income and ethnic minority populations. Wong (1986) describes the state of the art in mental health service delivery to Asian American communities and calls for an increase in culturally sensitive training and curricula.

In August 1987, the Department of Mental Health and Social Service of the South Cove Community Health Center, Boston, and the Psychology Department of the University of Massachusetts–Boston, Harbor Campus, cosponsored a two-day interactive forum on transference and empathy in psychotherapy with Asian Americans. The issues of transference and empathy were chosen as the foci of the forum because they address two critical aspects of the therapeutic relationship that the conference organizers believed need to be reexamined in the context of Asian American cultural values and treatment needs. The specific goals of the forum were:

- To bring together a critical mass of Asian American mental health professionals and agencies nationwide to examine issues critical to psychotherapy with Asian American populations.
- To support Asian American practitioners in documenting their clinical experiences with Asian Americans.
- To develop training materials for the education of mental health professionals providing psychotherapy to Asian American populations.
- To develop a partnership between the academic community and community agencies.
- To develop an interactive-forum format to serve as a model for training.
- To enhance theory development and clinical practice relevant to Asian Americans.

Both theoretical papers and clinical case presentations were commissioned for the interactive forum.

This book evolved from and incorporates major issues discussed at the forum. Part I summarizes the main concepts of the theoretical papers. In the chapters on transference and empathy, Jean Chin and MaryAnna Ham have also included their own conceptualizations of these two critical aspects of the therapeutic relationship. Part II contains, in their entirety, the cases to provide clinical material to illustrate psychotherapeutic processes and concepts and a focus for discussions of theory and practice. In all of the case studies the names and certain identifying data have been altered or withheld to ensure confidentiality. The case authors, who all conduct psychotherapy using the client's primary language, bring to their cases their unique orientations, and these chapters illustrate the importance of cultural and linguistic variables in influencing the therapeutic process. In the cases included in this book, Gloria Chieko Saito conducted her psychotherapy using English and a psychodynamic approach; George Hong conducted his psychotherapy using Cantonese Chinese and a cognitive behavioral approach; Siu Ping

Ma conducted her work using Cantonese Chinese and an eclectic approach combining systems, psychodynamic, and psychosocial approaches; and Jennie Yee conducted her work using English and an eclectic approach. In Part III, Joan Liem links theory and practice.

Questions and exercises have been included at the end of each chapter to stimulate discussion and the exploration of specific issues related to transference and empathy. The questions, which in Parts I and II are specific to the chapters, are designed to provoke thought and to raise issues rather than to bring closure, since it is our sense that these issues are relevant to the emergence of different perspectives on the practice of psychotherapy for Asian American and other ethnic minority clients.

This volume is intended to be used as a training manual for mental health providers of Asian American clients. We hope it will become part of the training curricula of academic institutions committed to training culturally sensitive clinicians and of agencies providing clinical service to ethnic minority clients. We also hope it will serve to further the development of theory regarding psychotherapy with ethnic minority clients.

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Part I

Theoretical Issues

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Contextual Factors in Psychotherapy with Asian Americans

George K. Hong

Before discussing transference and empathy, it is essential to have an overview of how Asian Americans differ from other ethnic and racial groups in the ways they conceptualize mental health and illness. This influences their use of mental health services and their expectations of psychotherapy. Asian American is used here as a general term to include diverse people from different countries in Asia. It is impossible to discuss every individual Asian country or ethnic group. However, because of their proximity to one another and because of the historical interaction among them, Asian countries, especially those in the Pacific area, share many cultural features. Historically, Chinese culture was a major influence on the cultures of other countries in the area. In addition, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism strongly influenced the cultures of China, Japan, Korea, and other Asian countries. Such philosophical orientations distinguish East Asian people from those of Western countries, American as well as European, which are dominated by a Judeo-Christian heritage. In this regard, it is possible to speak of Asian Americans as a group in contrast to the majority of the American population, which is of European heritage. Instead of examining every aspect of Asian cultures, I will focus on the major

characteristics of Asian Americans that are especially relevant to the provision of mental health services.

Asian Americans are currently the fastest growing minority group in the United States. Their numbers have more than doubled from 3.5 million in the 1980 census to 7.3 million in the 1990 census. Their current numbers represent 2.9 percent of the U.S. population; by the year 2000, their numbers could total 9.9 million or 4 percent (Gardner, Robey, & Smith, 1985).

In spite of the dramatic increase in numbers, Asian Americans remain the third largest racial or ethnic minority, trailing sharply behind African Americans (30 million or 12.1% of the total U.S. population) and Hispanic Americans (22.4 million or 9% of the total U.S. population), according to the 1990 census. As such, Asian Americans are a minority among minorities and are often neglected when minority issues in mental health are examined.

The findings of Sue and McKinney (1975), Wong (1982), and Yamamoto (1978) indicate that Asian American clients often drop out of treatment prematurely and often seek psychotherapy only upon experiencing acute breakdown or severe psychopathology. Sue (1977), Kim (1978), and others argue that low service utilization among Asian Americans reflects not a lack of need but rather a lack of responsiveness by practitioners to the special needs of Asian American clients. Differences between Asian Americans and other client groups as well as differences among Asian Americans, such as their county of origin, immigration history, number of generations in the United States, and degree of English facility, must be taken into account for effective therapeutic intervention.

Cultural variables often define help-seeking behaviors, symptom manifestation, and attitudes toward the therapeutic process. Although many clinicians are beginning to recognize the need for therapeutic approaches that are more responsive to the cultural values and needs of Asian Americans, little exists in the literature on how to accomplish this task (Chin, 1980). This book addresses this need by focusing on two critical aspects of the therapeutic relationship: transference and empathy. Transference and empathy are widely acknowledged in the mental health literature as central