

The Joy Luck Club Movie and Strategic Family Therapy

GCN 605: Marriage and Family Counseling

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In the movie, *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang, 1993), a groundbreaking movie released in the early 1990's based on the best-selling screenplay and book by Amy Tan, four Chinese-born mothers and their four adult American-born daughters portray their family conflicts due to differing schemas of their respective generations and culture. The four mothers portray three major conceptual frameworks: guilt and shame for past decisions during traumatic circumstances, adherence to rigid hierarchal and gender roles based on Confucian traditions and beliefs of Chinese mysticism which pre-destine one's potential and future success. These schemas clash with the acculturated values and worldviews of their daughters who were born and raised in San Francisco, California in the 1960s. In this paper, I will examine these conceptual frameworks and propose specific strategic family therapy interventions with the aim of ameliorating family relationships.

Strategic family therapy is pragmatic in nature due to its grounding in the principles of Milton H. Erickson (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2015). Less emphasis is placed on insight and catharsis, so that more attention can be given to improving present and future outcomes. Strategic family therapy would be the most appropriate theoretical orientation for Chinese American families such as those portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club*. Goals are directed, results-oriented and specific to improving family functioning and communication. Growing up in feudal China under a Confucian belief system, a skilled strategic family therapist could direct the mothers to reframe the conceptual frameworks which may be rooted in their maladaptive or inaccurate cognitions about themselves and the society around them.

Rather than using a psychoanalytic approach, a strategic family therapist can identify a family's problem(s) and work towards realistic and efficacious goals to resolve them. When new modes of relating or functioning are established, a family's unhealthy homeostasis patterns will

become challenged. The targeted focus will shift to problem solving in the family, rather than scapegoating or alienating a particular family member as the problem (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2015). By using tools such as the PUSH (Protection, Unit, Sequence and Hierarchy) intervention (Capuzzi & Stauffer, p. 245-246) to define the family's problems, a strategic family therapist can better understand a family's current conceptual framework and "rules" which may be problematic. Strategic family therapy is also brief and time-sensitive which is well-suited to Chinese American families who view psychotherapy like visiting a primary care physician for assessment and prescribing of medication (Soo-Hoo, 1999). Since Chinese American families are not as accustomed to accessing counseling services as compared to their Western counterparts due to stigmatized views of mental illness, the directed counseling approach under this particular orientation would also feel comfortable and preferable (Chou & Leonard, 2006).

The first schema portrayed in the movie is represented by the character of Suyuan who carries dissonant feelings of guilt and shame following her traumatic experiences in war-torn China during World War II. For more than 50 years, Suyuan carries the guilt of abandoning her twin babies as she escaped from the Japanese military invading her hometown. Separated from the twins' father, Suyuan makes the heartbreaking decision to abandon her daughters by a tree with her precious gold and jade jewelry wrapped in a handwritten note of future reward if the babies could be reunited with their father in the Northern part of China. Suyuan's guilt overwhelms her life and forms Suyuan's primary identity as a person of shame. Suyuan's low self-image spills into her relationship with her daughter June who is shamed by her mother whenever she fails to fulfill Suyuan's high demands and unreasonable expectations.

This conceptual framework stems from unresolved shame and guilt for past actions and transference of those feelings onto family members when they fail to meet burdensome family

obligations. The yokes of “should” and “must” responsibilities are common in Chinese American families where obedience to elders is expected. Chou & Leonard (2006) make note of this in their research: “shame and guilt are mechanisms used to gain compliance from family members” (p. 81). Parents use their children’s accomplishments as examples of successful parenting and a source of family pride. One intervention tool used in strategic family therapy which can universally be used across all of the conceptual frameworks is reframing the situation.

A psychoanalyst would want to look beneath the iceberg to help Suyuan better understand the psychic pain caused by her trauma during wartime, but a strategic family therapist would look for the process of circular causality to improve Suyuan’s interactions with her daughter June. Neither Suyuan and June have sole responsibility as the problem person. In fact, their relationship problems are due to their “ineffective” interactions. The solution rests with developing efficacious modes of communicating which require both parties to respond differently to each other (Soo-Hoo, 2005).

Another paradoxical technique is positioning which can be used to exaggerate a particular viewpoint or “position.” When June fails to meet Suyuan’s high expectations, a therapist can agree with Suyuan in order to change her perspective. In one humorous scene, June’s nearly deaf piano teacher, Old Chong, misled both June and Suyuan about June’s not-so-exceptional piano skills. Embarrassment hit a high note at June’s highly anticipated piano recital when her off-key and mistake-filled playing mortifies June’s family and friends. Suyuan emotionally distanced herself from June after the recital because she was disappointed and the family “lost face.” A clinician could take the position that the level of embarrassment caused by seven-year-old June could never be overcome and would forever stain her family’s reputation. The expectation would be that Suyuan would realize her own distorted perspective.

The following conversation between June and her mother Suyuan captures June's view of how her lackluster achievements and few milestones have impacted her personally:

June: *I'm just sorry that you got stuck with such a loser, that I've always been so disappointing.*

Suyuan: *What you mean disappoint? Piano?*

June: *Everything: my grades, my job, not getting married, everything you expected of me.*

Suyuan: *Not expect anything! Never expect! Only hope! Only hoping best for you. That's not wrong, to hope.*

June: *No? Well, it hurts, because every time you hoped for something I couldn't deliver, it hurt. It hurt me, Mommy. And no matter what you hope for, I'll never be more than what I am. And you never see that, what I really am (Wang, 1993, 1:54:30).*

If this conversation had taken place in a strategic family therapy session, the counselor might use a Milan technique of circular questioning to delve deeper into understanding how family members, their perspectives and behaviors are intrinsically linked (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2015). The clinician could allow Suyuan to explore the impact of her words or actions on June's feelings and behaviors through circular causality. Accompanying these questions, June's reactionary responses to her mother's behaviors could also be explored.

The second conceptual framework held by *The Joy Luck Club* mothers in feudal China is grounded in strict adherence to the Confucian hierarchal and gender roles systems. Confucius believed that the family is the "central position of the social system and requires primary loyalty, obligation, and reciprocity from its members" (Feng & Wark, 1998, p. 66). Collectivistic in nature, Chinese culture emphasizes harmony, uniformity and filial piety. In many Chinese American families, strict obedience to one's parents is mandated, and children are taught to respect and honor their elders without exception (Hsieh & Bean, 2014). One's behavior and actions must be aligned with the interests of the entire family, while individual needs are considered irrelevant if they do not serve the well-being of the family.

Women are subservient to men who are esteemed in Chinese society due to their ability to carry a family's legacy and name. Hung & Ng (2002) acknowledge that Chinese and Chinese American parents will commonly work two or three jobs to afford every educational opportunity for their children. Boys often are considered the "crown jewels" of the family since they will carry on the family's traditions (p.97). Also, with the enforcement of the one child policy in China, birth of a son signified the only means of carrying the family name into a future generation.

Throughout *The Joy Luck Club*, the stories of the mothers and their submission to these hierarchal and gender roles highlight the social order of that time. In particular, the character of Lindo exemplifies the limited options for Chinese girls in adherence to unequal and discriminatory customs established in her generation. By the age of two, Lindo had already been arranged to marry a boy from a nearby wealthy family. At a young age, Lindo's mother prepared her daughter emotionally to leave the home for marriage once she entered puberty, around the age of 12 or 13. The marriage would turn out to be a disaster, and Lindo was persecuted physically and psychologically by her mother-in-law for not producing a grandson quickly enough. The problem was not in Lindo, but in her teen husband who was more interested in playing games at 12 than in having sex with his new wife.

The Joy Luck Club daughters grew up in San Francisco, Chinatown in the 1960's and espoused Americanized belief systems about power, equality with men and acceptable gender roles, self-efficacy and independence which differed tremendously from their mothers' Chinese upbringings. The intergenerational perspectives of the mothers and their daughters could not be more different. Culturally competent clinicians should take note that family members in Chinese American families may differ in degrees of acculturation. Conflict will likely occur when the

more acculturated (younger) members of the family resist the traditional or culturally expected schemas that the less acculturated (older) members may still hold to despite being transplanted into a dominant culture (Fang & Wark, 1998, p.63).

Furthermore, a clinician may not necessarily be aware of Chinese American clients who struggle with bicultural identity if the clinician considers the family unit to be a monolithic entity which observes only one cultural identity. Soo-Hoo (2005) notes that the American emphasis on individualism can be challenging for adolescents who want to assimilate into American society while still trying to remain loyal to Chinese family customs. In particular, the Chinese American female adolescent may experience a deeper sense of cultural conflict than a Chinese American male adolescent. If she is exposed to alternative roles for women in American society, such as did the daughters in the movie given the time and place of their birth, how willing would she allow herself to be treated as a second-class citizen (p. 49)? Probably not very likely.

In dealing with the conceptual framework around restrictive gender and hierarchal positions in the Chinese American family, a strategic family clinician should target second order changes instead of first order changes (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2015). Making first order changes only revises the superficial or surface parameters of those rules without actually transforming the basis for a particular family structure or system rules. Changing the rules or duties does not change the underlying assumptions and conceptual framework of a family.

Questions that a clinician could ask to further refine what this might include the following: What are the socially acceptable hierarchal and gender roles in this family? Does every member of the family agree on the family frameworks? If not, how can new family norms or frameworks be incorporated? Which cultural rituals are no longer relevant or meaningful in

the current family system? Having honest and transparent conversations around these topics could improve the interpersonal relationships and circular causation effects in a family.

The third and final conceptual framework that I found intriguing in the movie centers around the Chinese mystical beliefs and the influence of the spirit realm on present day events. Each mother believed that due to past sins (committed by herself or by one's ancestors), they along with all future generations would suffer loss and misfortune. In essence, one's future potential for success has already been pre-destined stemming from one's ancestral wrong doing. For more traditional Chinese American immigrant families, this understanding about the power of the spirit realm is fairly consistent.

However, the strategic family therapeutic orientation would be the most suitable to shift the focus from being a victim of one's ancestral background to being a person with the means of attaining self-efficacy and self-empowerment. Rather than discussing one's feelings to gain more clinical insight, a clinician could help family members establish present-day focused and behaviorally-based solutions (Soo-Hoo, 1999). Instead of trying to fix this belief, strategic family therapy takes on more of a reality therapy stance of dealing with the present circumstances to solve a problem. The family members are empowered by the therapist to improve their lifestyles.

In summary, I would recommend using strategic family therapy to bring improvement to relational and communication interactions in Chinese American families such as those portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club*. The three conceptual frameworks that were observed include: guilt and shame for past decisions resulting from traumatic circumstances, adherence to rigid hierarchal and gender roles based on Confucian traditions and belief in Chinese mysticism which appear to pre-destine one's potential and future success. The intervention tools of using the PUSH process, reframing, positioning, paradoxical interventions, ordeals and circular questioning can be

successfully incorporated into therapy sessions to foster second order changes. Pragmatic, brief, and goal-directed in nature, strategic family therapy aligns well with the Chinese American concept and attitude towards psychotherapy.

Personally, watching the movie again as a graduate student in our Marriage and Family class provided deeper levels of insight and several lightbulb moments. When I watched the movie when it was first released, I could relate to the stories from a shared experience perspective. I recalled my past conflicts with my mother and her objections that I was becoming too Americanized, why she considered it inappropriate to move out of my parents' home as a single Chinese American woman while my male cousins were allowed to and not agreeing to perform certain cultural customs that seem outdated to me. However, when I watched the movie this time, I have a better understanding about the second order changes that could have taken place to enable us to navigate around our conflicts. Reading the research articles, Terry Soo-Hoo's research specifically, did allow me to see why the strategic family therapeutic orientation is effective in counseling with Chinese American families. I am grateful to the Lord that because my mother is still alive, I have been granted time to "experiment" with strategic family interventions to guide my relationship with my mother when we have differing intergenerational perspectives due to - among several things - our degrees of acculturation, our birth settings and trauma history. Also, I will be a more skilled clinician in future counseling work with Chinese and Chinese American couples and families.

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