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Counseling Taiwanese University Students: Considerations For Practitioners

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Abstract

The present article explores the literature to gain a better understanding of the cultural background of Taiwanese college students. By gaining a clearer picture of their values, the counseling process may better meet the needs of the growing Taiwanese population in American colleges and universities.

Counseling Taiwanese University Students: Considerations For Practitioners

Counseling is a highly individualized intervention process. When working with individuals, counselors' strategies should be carefully chosen according to the needs and specific situations of the individual. For counseling to be effective, counselors must acknowledge that cultural background plays an important role in how problems and issues are defined, what helping strategies and interventions are employed, and whether successful therapeutic outcomes occur (Patterson, 1985; Sue, 1981; Sue & Sue, 1977; Waxer, 1989; Sue & Sue, 1999). For several decades now, the field of counseling has been working towards meeting the needs of a diverse nation (Collins & Pieterse, 2007). In fact, Akutsu, Lin, and Zane (1990) proposed that emphasis on cultural knowledge or culture-specific techniques is directly linked to the particular processes that have been found to be associated with effective psychotherapy (Akutsu, Lin, & Zane, 1990). This notion seems to hold true especially when counseling individuals from the Far East, where there is a great discrepancy of cultural background from the traditional values of Western countries.

Therefore, the present article explores the literature to gain a better understanding of the cultural background of Taiwanese people and how their background shapes their personality, self-concept, and locus of control. By gaining a clearer picture of their values and beliefs, the therapeutic process may be better individualized to meet the needs of the growing Taiwanese population in American colleges and universities.

Personality Characteristics of Taiwanese University Students

In Taiwan, nearly all of the population is Chinese. There are 20,000,000 people on a 3600 square-mile island. Of these numbers, there are almost 680,000 students in 130 colleges and universities. Most of these students' parents hold traditional Oriental views that are still

very strong and hold an enormous amount of influence on their children. Although not a religion in the strict sense, Confucianism, which emphasizes the goodness in life, is a serious code of conduct in China and Taiwan (Stalcup, 2003). Historically, two basic schools of philosophy—Confucian Liberalism and Taoist Individualism, guided the Chinese. As a result of these two models of thinking, the Chinese society upholds the sanctity of the individual and adopts the “doctrine of the golden mean” as the fundamental approach to nature and human relationships. In general, the Chinese personality is marked by self-reflection, decorum, gentleness, and loyalty (Kong, 1985). Similarly, in LaBarre’s (1945) study of Chinese character structure, the Chinese were characterized as orally indulgent people, filially obedient, and extremely subject to group influence. The whole genius of Chinese political and cosmological philosophy has been to live in harmony with other people and to get in step with the universe. LaBarre (1945) suggested that in the old familial Chinese society, passivity and dependence were sometimes a necessity, just as aggressiveness and independence were in individualistic America.

Confucianism advocates a rationalized social order, which begins with a person’s exercising self-cultivation, and then learning to maintain a harmonious relationship with the family and taking responsibility in community affairs, and finally ruling over the country. The functional assumption underlying this social order is that if all Taiwanese in the society perform their roles in accordance with a common code of ethics, there will be social stability and universal peace (Kong, 1985).

To the Chinese, the political atmosphere and educational system should be conservative and authoritarian. The school system is based on a belief in uniformity. Very little opportunity exists for students to express individuality. The teacher is supposed to be a model for knowledge, wisdom, moral conduct, and his or her authority can never be questioned. Starting

from nursery school, there is a preponderance of group activities. Children are always in a group, following a leader who may be the teacher or a student selected by the teacher from among the students. Students are overloaded academically, leaving little or no free time for the development of individual interests. The common characteristics of students are highly stressed and the individual's unique characteristics are ignored (Dillard, 1983; Hoyt, 1974).

Discouraging Chinese students from speaking up, "showing off," or talking to get attention in class is commonplace (Kong, 1985).

In the past three decades, however, the people in Taiwan have experienced economic and cultural changes. In particular, rapid changes in gender roles and identification have created a paradigm shift in how female's roles are viewed. There is clear evidence for the emergence of a strong female consumer class in Japan, Malaysia, and Taiwan (Frith, 1997; Mueller, 1987). Numerous studies provide evidence that gender roles are undergoing transformation in Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia (Bresnahan, Inoue, Liu, & Nishida, 2001). Due to the rapid rate of change in social structures, the entire society has been transformed from a traditional agricultural society to a modern industrial state. The younger generation is slowly becoming different from the previous generations, and from their parents, in basic values and personality characteristics. The younger generations have increasingly moved away from a Chinese identity in favor of a dual identity, considering themselves to be both Chinese and Taiwanese (Chang & Wang, 2005). As Taiwanese citizens can now express their views and exercise political power freely in the recently democratized society, it can be hypothesized that divergent patterns of Taiwanese/Chinese identities and policy stands on the issue of independence versus unification will appear across different political generations (Chang & Wang, 2005). Such a dramatic shift undoubtedly affects the self-concept of Taiwanese youth. Therefore, counselors who work with

Taiwanese students should have some understanding of the factors that shape these students' self-concept in order to effectively address their needs.

Self-concept of Taiwanese University Students

According to Coopersmith (1967), knowledge of attitudes about self is valuable in developing a better understanding of the counseling needs of Chinese people. The way people feel about themselves has a major effect on all aspects of their lives (Turner & Mo, 1984). Miller (1979) pointed out that the degree of self-esteem in relation to the individual's total value system is the central factor in personality.

Traditionally, Chinese culture reflects substantially different values in the socialization experience of youth (Turner & Mo, 1984). Great obligations exist between the Taiwanese parents and children, and filial piety or respect continually develops throughout the life of these students. There is a high value placed on the sense of obligation to the family, and a strong sense of conformity and obedience to authority (White & Chan, 1983). Diligence and hard work are promoted in order to attain economic advancement and raise the family status. This emphasis is in contrast to Western society, which emphasizes independence and self-reliance (Turner & Mo, 1984).

Chinese culture places an emphasis on humility and modesty, treating oneself strictly and treating others more leniently. This value seems to focus more on qualities such as obedience to authority and restraint in expressing strong feelings (Sue, 1981). These characteristics may make one less independent and autonomous (White & Chan, 1983). However, Asamen and Berry (1987) contended that the view Chinese hold about characteristics such as humility, modesty, and less independence or autonomy might not be due to a less positive self-concept.

In a study of Taiwanese youth's self-image in the five categories of psychological self, social self, sexual self, familial self, and coping self, Turner and Mo (1984) found that Chinese youth scored significantly lower than did Americans. The self-image also showed more intercultural variation. Many of the findings were expected based on an understanding of Chinese culture (Asamen & Berry, 1987). They pointed out that the psychological self reflected the socialization experiences for youth in Chinese cultures. From junior high to high school, Taiwanese youth lose the privilege of clothing and hairstyle choice and continue in an educational system that encourages conformity, diminishes individuality and creativity, and regularly administers tests as a way of measuring ability and establishing self-worth. The official message is that students are expected to study hard, devoting their energies to schoolwork.

Regarding the social self, duty and obligation to elders is a clear cultural message. It is even a major theme in the school curriculum. On morals, Chinese youth score slightly higher than did American youth, while on social relationships and vocational and educational goals, the Chinese showed a poorer self-image. Social relationships influence both sexual self and familial self. Relationships with the opposite sex are not normally a part of the adolescent years in Taiwan. The Taiwanese society strongly discourages all heterosexual social activity for adolescents until college years, has no beauty contests to recognize the physically attractive, and actively rewards those who score well on objective examinations. Chinese youth have ongoing pressure to achieve high academic marks. Only those whose scores among the highest are likely to gain admission to the school and major of their choice (Turner & Mo, 1984).

In coping with self, Chinese youth do not have available to them resources with which to develop control over their external world. Especially for males, there is the requirement of two

years of compulsory military service, beginning at age 20 or often at the completion of higher education. Those who pass college entrance examinations may opt to finish college or the university before entering the armed forces. This situation would seem to have an inevitable effect on the awareness of the external world and the student's feelings about self-control or lack thereof. Chinese youth score high on measures of level adjustment, because Chinese youth are influenced by strong and stable family relationships and consistent but demanding school systems (Turner & Mo, 1984). Yet, with an adequate understanding of self-concept among Taiwanese college students, counselors also need to understand the cultural influences on their locus of control as well. Such an understanding could affect what role the counselor takes when working with these students.

Locus of Control of Taiwanese University Students

Cheung (1986) has described Chinese individual behavior as often determined by interpersonal transactions within specific situations of the Chinese culture. Cheung (1986) and Yang (1982) noted a concept of yuan as an important external attribution for success or failure in interpersonal and person-object relationships among the Chinese. The concept of yuan was originally used in Buddhism as an explanation for a personal outcome by alluding to fate, predetermination, and external control. In the modern application, it is described as follows:

Yuan may be used as a force of destiny to foster interpersonal relationships, as a psychological state, which promotes the development of such relationships, or as a description of the harmonious relationship itself. As a stable external factor which yuan served the function of maintaining interpersonal harmony by attributing the success or failure of relationships to forces beyond one's personal control, thereby ridding oneself or others of the responsibility for the outcome.

Thus, yuan not only protects the individual by enabling him or her to save face, but also saves the face of others. It helps the individual to rationalize failure, by reducing his/her self-blame and blame of others. (Yang, 1982, p. 202)

The earliest study on locus of control involving Chinese subjects by Hsieh, Shybut, and Lotsof (1969) found that Americans exhibited a stronger belief in internal control of reinforcement. This higher externality of the Chinese was later confirmed by Tseng's (1972) study. Both studies used the Rotter's Internal-External (I-E) Control Scale with university students (Hsieh, Shybut, & Lotsof, 1969; Tseng, 1972; Yang, 1986).

Yang (1986) and Cheung (1986) pointed out that Chinese people have relatively high authoritarian attitudes and low internal-control attitudes. They also found that locus of control has been incorporated into theories of attribution and helplessness (Cheung, 1986; Yang, 1986). Kuo, Gray, and Lin (1979) found that the locus of control was an important determinant of symptoms of psychological distress among Chinese Americans who believed that rewards in life were contingent upon social forces beyond their personal control. Kuo et al. (1979) asserted that internally oriented Chinese Americans would be better prepared to deal with adjustment problems if they felt that they had better control over the adversities of their lives.

Low scoring students on depression tended to attribute negative interpersonal relationships to lack of yuan more frequently than did the students high scoring on depression. In contrast to Yang's (1986) study with university students, they suggested that university students did not view yuan as an entirely deterministic and stable force. Furthermore, they found that depression scores were highest among those students who attributed negative life events to internal, stable, and global factors. Depressed students tended to attribute both positive and negative events to uncontrollable factors (Cheung, 1986; Yang, 1982).

In a study of attributed causes of school performance from the perspective of learned helplessness among high-school students in Taiwan, Chung and Hwang (1981) found six attributional factors, representing internal versus external locus of control, and stable versus unstable dimensions. They noted that learned helplessness related to the pattern of attributing academic failure to causal factors that are internal and stable in locus of control, such as lack of ability. At the same time, these students tended not to attribute their academic success to stable internal factors, including ability and effort. Learned helplessness was manifested in their expectation of low performance, their lack of persistence in studying, and in their poor self-esteem. These students were found to have a lower sense of wellbeing and poorer academic achievement (Chung & Hwang, 1981).

Hwang (1981) studied the perception of controllability and stability and its relation to the magnitude of stress resulting from life events experienced by Taiwanese university students. He suggested that the perceptual dimensions were important psychological coping considerations. Since the findings expressed a negative linear relationship between controllability and magnitude of stress, the uncontrollable life events were perceived to be more stressful. Stability was not directly related to the magnitude of stress (Hwang, 1981). The aforementioned studies are just a few that speak to the locus of control of Taiwanese university students. Yet, counselors still need insight into the perspective that these students hold in how they view the world. Such a perspective can serve as a useful guide in determining the counseling needs of these students.

The Perspective of Taiwanese University Students

In a study of Chinese college students in counseling, Hutcherson (1967) investigated the relationship between attitudes toward responsibility and independence, as well as their preferences for therapeutic treatment as it concerned these same dimensions. He found that

responsibility more than independence was the primary factor determining the preferences for therapeutic method. Most of the students indicated that they had a desire to become more responsible and preferred a counseling method that emphasized responsible behavior (Hutcherson, 1967).

Improvement in academic functioning is one of the main goals sought by university and college students seeking counseling. McClelland (1958) defined *achievement motivation* as a propensity to strive for success in all situations in which a personal standard of excellence is thought to apply. A number of studies showed that Chinese students tended to express a higher need for achievement (Fenz & Arkoff, 1962; Hwang, 1967; Lu, 1970; Yang, 1986). Yang (1986) used the experiment of Gough's study of a comparison of achievement among Chinese, Japanese, and American students to support his finding. His findings indicated that the Chinese were strikingly similar to each other on achievement via conformance and achievement via independence. He found that their mean scores were higher than those of the Japanese and American samples on these two measures of need for achievement (Gough, 1960; Yang, 1986).

A university counseling center generally focuses on assisting students in the areas of ego strengths, focusing on realities, thoughtful independence, and the achievement of better grades (Treadway, 1971). Barclay and Wu (1986) said that before enrolling in colleges and universities, most Taiwanese university and college students had a deep concern for the inordinate pressures in connection with gaining access to higher education. Many of the students exhibit high levels of anxiety and attend expensive evening tutorial schools designed to help them pass examinations. A tremendous desire exists in many young people to prepare themselves for careers that will benefit both themselves and their government by raising the standards of living (Barclay & Wu, 1986). After they have squeezed through the highly

competitive examination system, they seem to have above average learning potentials and the persistence needed to do difficult work. This does not mean, however, that they know how to handle personal and interpersonal problems in their lives or how to take responsibility (Miao, 1981). These are important aspects of coping with university and college life. In a review of the literature, Asamen and Berry (1987) pointed out that college students are involved in issues at a sophisticated level of cognitive, moral, and personality development. They are also not simply maintaining themselves in a stable society, but are rapidly changing individuals engaged in a series of developmental tasks (Oetting, 1967). With such a complex task of adjustment facing these students, there should be some consideration concerning which counseling approaches, if any, are more effective for these students.

The Therapeutic Effectiveness of Counseling Taiwanese University Students

From a review of the literature, a number of arguments presented both advantages and disadvantages when using various counseling approaches with the Chinese in Taiwan (Alexander, Klein, Workneh, & Miller, 1981; Asamen & Berry, 1987; Atkinson, Maruyama, & Matsui, 1978; Exum & Lau, 1988; Sue, 1977; Tan, 1967; Turner & Mo, 1984; Waxer, 1989; Sue & Sue, 1999). Counseling practices in Taiwan indicate that cognitive therapy, behavioral therapy, psychoanalytic therapy, and humanistic therapy are the most widely used counseling techniques (Cheng, 1975; Cheng & Hsu, 1974; Chiu & Lin, 1977; Kung, 1963a; Kung, 1963b; Ng & Lin, 1985; Parsons, 1984; Sue & Sue, 1999). Although some studies indicated the use of cognitive therapy as the preferred method in counseling the Taiwanese, other researchers indicated humanistic interventions as the preferred approach. Still others indicated that behavior therapy is the counseling method preferable in Taiwan (Cheng, 1975; Cheng & Hsu, 1974; Chiu & Lin, 1977; Ho, 1986; Liao, 1987; Lu, 1985; Yau, Sue & Hayden, 1992; Zang, 1986). On the

other hand, despite the professional belief of counselors regarding the inappropriateness of psychoanalysis with Asians, research studies and counseling practice indicates that psychoanalysis is also used in a wide variety of settings in Taiwan (Ng, 1985; Ng & Lin, 1985; Parsons, 1984). Therefore, it seems that there still remains little consensus regarding which approach is the most effective. Thus, it may be possible that specific techniques may hold the key to success in working with Taiwanese students.

Counseling Interventions Practice

Higginbotham (1979) pointed out that behavior modification is a familiar modality to Asians. Wachtel (1977) noted that a combination of behavioral, psychodynamic and humanistic helping techniques might, however, be more appropriate to use in Asian cultures (Wachtel, 1977). Researchers believe that lack of culturally sensitive mental health services partially contributes to the underutilization patterns of Chinese students (James, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1999). This leads one to the hypothesis that the true barrier may lie in the counselor and not simply the method of counseling. Although, most researchers concluded that cognitive and behavioral counseling, with some cultural modifications, seemed to fit the needs of the Taiwanese university and college students (Chen & Wang, 1989).

In the application of Behavior Therapy, Cheng (1984) applied some of the techniques of individual behavior therapy in a group setting of 18 Taiwanese college students. His experimental group showed a great decline in examination anxiety after the use of systematic desensitization and relaxation training. The students in this study continued to show a decrease in examination anxiety after a one-year follow up (Cheng, 1984). Similarly, Wang (1984), Wu (1978), and Lu (1975) found relaxation training to be helpful for reducing examination anxiety and enhancing self-actualization. In her study of 69 phobic Taiwanese female college students,

Chang (1985) found both behavior therapy and cognitive therapy to have significant positive effects on the reduction of symptoms.

The results of studies employing cognitive therapy are mixed (Chen & Wang, 1989). Lu (1985) found that cognitive therapy had a significantly positive effect on the psychological self, ideal self, and self-satisfaction, but showed a very limited effect on the overall picture of self-concept. Ho (1986), similarly, found no significant increases in social skill or creativity after cognitive therapy. In contrast, Liao (1987) reported that in his study of self-actualization and emotional stabilization, cognitive therapy had demonstrated consistently positive results.

Through the use of assertiveness training, Tsia (1984) demonstrated that 10 one-hour weekly sessions were effective in helping 12 students suffering from low self-acceptance to improve their attitudes and behaviors. Two more studies using assertiveness training, one with a mixed group of 26 college students and the other with 20 females, showed improvement in self-acceptance that were maintained at a follow-up one semester later (Wu, 1985; Wu, 1986).

Two studies that used Rational-emotive therapy found no significant improvement in college students in Taiwan when used in group counseling (Chen, 1985; Wu, 1986). The same studies also reported a very limited effect from the use of analytic methods of therapy. Another example of the use of reality therapy with Taiwanese college students is the study by Chang (1984) with 20 male National Taiwan Normal University students. In a controlled study, he used the Tennessee Self-concept scale to assess self-perception. Chang found that students presenting anxiety, isolation, low self-esteem, dependence, and depression symptoms significantly changed their attitudes from inferiority to industry, from dependence to independence, and from low self-esteem to high self-esteem when given an 8-week group program in reality therapy (Chang, 1984). A control group showed no improvement in those areas. Dien (1985) applied reality

therapy to a group of 24 female college students enrolled in night school. She used the Gordon Personal Profile-Inventory as an assessment instrument and found significant improvement in attitudes and behaviors in the areas of basic needs, reality, emotion, responsibility, social suitability, and interpersonal relationship (Dien, 1985). In contrast, Chang (1986) used the same instrument (Gordon Personal Profile-Inventory), but found no significant change in emotional and behavioral stabilization when using the principles of reality therapy. Much like the debate over which therapeutic paradigm was most effective, there is little agreement over which specific techniques are indicated with Taiwanese students. Therefore, an investigation between the benefits of a more directive versus a nondirective approach may provide some clarity in choosing how to work with these students.

Directive Versus Nondirective Approach

Many researchers have reported studies that tend to indicate that Chinese students prefer a directive approach in the counseling interaction (Asamen & Berry, 1987; Exum & Lau, 1988; Sue, 1977; Turner & Mo, 1984; Waxer, 1989). They suggested that traditional, nondirective counseling approaches might be in conflict with the values and life experiences of Chinese clients (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Exum & Lau, 1988). The research indicates that Chinese clients assign more credibility to counselors who employ a directive approach than to those who use nondirective methods (Atkinson, Maruyama, & Matsui, 1978). Chinese students expect to assume a passive client role while the counselor assumes a more directive and nurturing role. These students, it seems, want the counselor to give them explicit directions on how to solve problems and bring immediate relief from disabling distress. They are looking for straightforward solutions to concrete and immediate problems that are generating stress in their lives (Exum & Lau, 1988; Yuan & Tinsley, 1981). In addition, Tseng and Hsu (1970) and Banks

(1975) suggest that Chinese students respond best when the counselors used a direct counseling approach. However, a few studies do demonstrate students' preference for a less direct counseling approach, indicating caution in using only direct counseling approaches (Banks, 1975; Tseng & Hsu, 1970).

Sue (1977) described a Chinese personality and family socialization process, which suggests that Chinese individuals would prefer a direct counseling approach to a nondirective one (Sue, 1977). Sue furthers that Chinese students have probably been socialized to prefer concrete, well-structured situations and well-defined role expectations. Therefore, the ambiguity in the nondirective counseling approach may be confusing. As mentioned before, most young Chinese are also taught to obey their parents and to respect elders and other authority figures. This respect for authority may be generalized to the counseling relationship, which would then be in conflict with a nondirective counseling approach. A nondirective approach, which requires more self-disclosure, may also be more difficult for Chinese (Exum & Lau, 1988; Sue, 1977).

A study by Yuen and Tinsley (1981) compared American students' expectations of counseling with those of a group of Chinese, African, and Iranian students. They discovered that the Americans expected the counselor to be less directive and protective, and they expected to take more responsibility for their own improvements. Chinese, Africans, and Iranians, on the other hand, expected themselves to assume a more passive role in counseling and expected the counselor to be a more directive and nurturing figure (Yuan & Tinsley, 1981). Hence, when dealing with Taiwanese college students' problems, one should be cognizant of their expectations and of some of the distinctive issues that they bring into the counseling situation.

Counseling Implications

Based on this review of the literature, there are several suggestions that counselors should consider when working with Taiwanese university students. First, Asian clients tend to feel more comfortable when the counselor exhibits his or her expertise and authority during the initial session. This may be done by mentioning prior experience with clients who have presented with similar problems, by emphasizing concrete and tangible goals, and by giving the impression that a tentative solution to the problem is possible (Paniagua, 1994). In addition, the counselor should maintain formality and conversational distance and should not expect an open discussion of emotional problems initially. Immigrant youth are more likely to experience psychological problems such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and loneliness (James, 1997). It may be essential to identify the difficulties individuals experience when they come to the United States, and the coping strategies they would use, in order to develop culturally relevant services for immigrant youth (Yeh & Inose, 2002). Often times, Asian clients might express psychological disorders in somatic terms. Also, because many Taiwanese students believe that mental illness can bring shame and humiliation to their family, the counselor should be aware that the client might be in a state of crisis when they finally decide to meet with a counselor. When confronted with such situations, the counselor should avoid questions dealing with traumatic events initially and should not encourage the client to say more than they feel comfortable saying until a deeper rapport is gained. To complicate matters, it is extremely difficult for Asian immigrant youth to express their feelings due to linguistic barriers (Lynch, 1992) and also since Asian culture de-emphasizes emotional expression (Uba, 1994). In addition, Asian immigrant youth may experience a variety of stressors in the school environment, including racial discrimination, racial/ethnic stereotyping, language barriers, and inter-group

conflicts and tensions (Chiu & Ring, 1998). All of which, a counselor will need to be mindful of, when developing counseling techniques for a student. Finally, Asian clients may need to be educated on certain terms used in therapy that might normally be considered common terminology.

In summary, the review of the literature concerning counseling approaches with Taiwanese university and college students reveals that while some therapies are getting positive results, there is still little consensus concerning which therapy modality is the most effective. The same holds true with specific techniques. Therefore, the most effective component may be the relationship between the counselor and the Taiwanese student itself. If this is the case, then a better understanding of the personality characteristics and cultural influences of Taiwanese university students will undoubtedly contribute to the effectiveness of counseling with these students. Finally, future studies are warranted to expand the current understanding of culture-bound traits in Taiwanese students and how these traits influence their development and shape what issues are most troubling for these students. Future studies should also continue to consider the effectiveness of specific therapy modalities and techniques.

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