



Short Paper

Application of proverbs in psychotherapy for the Chinese

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Abstract. Examining Chinese proverbs or common sayings as a cultural product is one of the ways to examine the cultural aspects of the mental life of the Chinese. It provides one route to discuss how to provide culture-suitable psychotherapy for the Chinese. After a brief review of Chinese psychology through the review of some proverbs, the application of proverbs for Chinese psychotherapy is discussed in terms of how it will promote communication and improve relationships between the therapist and the patient; help the patient to identify their problems quickly by crystallized key words; and communicate culturally shared value systems for coping with problems. It is advocated that the suitable use of proverbs in psychotherapy will promote culture-relevant communication and therapy for the Chinese patients.

Key words: Proverbs, psychotherapy, culture, communication, value system, problems identification.

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INTRODUCTION The essential elements of successful psychotherapy are effective communication, caring and understanding, providing useful comments and effective suggestions to the patient, and treating the patient for improvement. Culturally-relevant communication with the patients is very important.

Chinese culture dates back to ancient civilizations and endured thousands of years of history. Throughout many thousands of years of history, Chinese proverbs derived, emerged, and flourished, and have become commonly used words and phrases in daily language, and they are embedded in China's culture. Chinese proverbs or common sayings are crystallized thoughts that reflect the mind of the Chinese, expressing the commonly shared ideology and philosophy that has been repeatedly used, screened, and reserved through many individuals of many thousands of years of history.

Therefore, to study Chinese proverbs or common sayings is one of the ways to examine the cultural impact on the mental health of the Chinese. It also offers one route to discuss how to provide culture-suitable psychotherapy for the Chinese.

CHINESE PROVERBS AND PSYCHOLOGY

Expression of affection and somatization of feeling

In social life, Chinese tend to suppress the affection-related expression. "Not to react (excessively) with fright or indulgence upon receiving insult (from others)," "Joy or anger is not to

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be shown on the facial expression,” and “Golden mouth and jade words (do not talk easily and only with carefully selected proper words)” are some of the examples of Chinese proverbs. Chinese are encouraged not to react too emotionally, not to express emotions too directly, and not to show their real inside feelings. If a person speaks openly or too much, then “Too many words will lead to loss,” or “Misfortune comes out from the mouth.” Therefore, the Chinese learn to “Point to the mulberry tree to scold pagoda tree,” or “To spit out sand (from the mouth) to attack the shadow (throw out insinuations against subject)” by indirect communication, being tactful and discreet.

Associated with this, Chinese learn to express emotion through body language. Being influenced by traditional medical concepts, the Chinese believe that emotions are regulated by various visceral organs. It is believed that the soul takes residence in the heart, or the emotion of fear resides in the kidney. The Chinese also believe that excessive emotions may hurt the corresponding visceral organs accordingly, such as: “Sadness injures lung,” or “Anger injures liver.” Therefore, many Chinese learn to express their emotions through organ language. For instance, the matter causes me: “Headache,” “Torn heart, split lung,” “Intestine broken into many small pieces by worrying,” or “Angry hair strike up the hat (on the head).” Clinically, we often observe the anxious or depressed patient make somatic complaints, manifesting somatized symptoms. Skillful clinicians need to understand this culture-patterned communication of distress.

Social hierarchy and sense of shame

During the era of the feudal system, social inequality between persons appeared. The words of “Three guides and five regulations,” or “Men superior and women lowly” began to appear for people to follow and the shame (face-oriented) culture developed. The phrase such as: “Disgraceful to converse beneath others,” “Shame in asking the subordinate person,” and “Shame to be the hip of a cow” illustrates the sense of shame associated with hierarchy created in the society. The sense of shame for the Chinese is related to the superior-lowly relation of interpersonal relations. The daily words of “Thick face without shame” or “No anxiousness for feeling shame,” or Confucius’ saying: “Knowing shame will be close to being brave” or Mencius’ saying: “Without sense of shame, (it is) not human” all illustrate that the Chinese stress the sense of shame, or, in other words, are concerned with keeping “face” in interpersonal relationships. Within the Chinese culture, “face” implies “myself in other’s eyes.” The concern over how to keep one’s “face” means how to pay attention to one’s behavior, and how one’s behavior will affect others. It is related to self-image, based on self-confidence within the context of interpersonal relations, and also the guide for one’s own behavior. Ancient scholars say that: “Based on the reflection from the copper board (as mirror), you could adjust your dress; based on the observation of the past, you could learn the vicissitude of human history; based on others’ response, you could obtain insight about your deed.” This stresses the importance of interpersonally related reality of life.

APPLICATION OF PROVERBS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Promote communication and improve relationship between the therapist and the patient

Chinese proverbs are the product of a culture with history dating back several thousand years. It is the “collective knowledge” of the Chinese. It reflects the value system held by the people. It can be used in the process of psychotherapy for communicating ideas effectively to the point, as if “One needle (punctured in the right place) will bring the blood right away.” Using familiar proverbs helps the patient feel at home and close to the therapist, identify with the therapist, and increases the effectiveness of the therapy.

Help the patient to identify their problems quickly by crystallized key words

Proverbs express ideas using historical story, in symbolic ways, with philosophical implications. When used to identify problems that a patient is suffering, the idea should be communicated indirectly without commenting on the patient directly so that the patient will feel less embarrassed and less hurt. It reduces the resistance manifested by the patient. For example, the saying: “Mister Ye fond of dragon” describes a story of a man called Mr. Ye who was so fantastically fond of dragons that he painted dragons everywhere on his house’ walls, but, one day, when the actual dragon appeared in his house, he was so scared by the sight of the real dragon. The story-derived proverb can be used to point out a person who was searching for something in his fantasy without a base in reality. “Waiting under the tree to catch the rabbit” is a proverb that can be used to point out a person who is too passive in seeking his own goal. Because the proverb does not refer directly to the patient himself, the patient will not feel so embarrassed, but still will understand the message.

Communicate culturally shared value system for coping with problems

Because proverbs reflect culturally accumulated knowledge dealing with problems encountered in life, they can be used to indicate culturally suitable methods for coping with problems. For the person who is too anxious to make achievements, we may use the proverb of: “Pulling the young plant attempting to make the plant grow fast” to advise him of using hasty method to seek fast achievement. “To paint the feet of the snake” is a proverb that can be used to describe doing something that is not necessary.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES There exists an endless list of Chinese proverbs. At least ten thousand proverbs are used in common daily life; and nearly fifty thousand are recorded in the proverbs dictionary. Therefore, they allow the therapist to make a choice pending the specific need in the therapy. If the right proverbs are used, there will be a powerful effect, as if: “By touching the stone, the stone becomes gold,” or “Painting the eye on the dragon (making the dragon look alive)”. From technical aspects, proverbs provide a “cultural reframing” of problems, and offer subtle ways of interpretation of emotional complexes, which are usually culturally-relevant.

Following are some examples showing the kinds of proverbs which may be used depending on the patients’ needs:

Having difficulty revealing embarrassment. “Human is not tree or grass, it is common to feel embarrassed,” “Appetite and sexual desire are human nature” (no need to embarrassed by your private desire or feeling).

Tend to somatize their problems without dealing with their feelings. “Anger will push your hat up” (by the elected hair), or “Anxious hearts make the fresh tremble.”

Indulging in fantasy and not dealing with reality. “Sitting on the bottom of the well to see the sky,” or “Painting the cake to deal with hunger.”

Having limited knowledge or being short-sighted with problems. “Covering your ears to steal the ring,” or “Climbing the tree to seek for the fish.”

APPLICATION OF PROVERBS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH CHINESE PATIENTS

Having lack of patience, being eager for quick achievement. “Dropping water can penetrate the stone,” “Stupid old man can move the mountain.”

Tending to regret and blame ones self for failure. “Not too late to repair the cage after loosing the sheep,” “Failure is the mother of success.”

Having a shortage of courage to deal with problems. “Without entering the tiger cave, one can not catch the baby tiger,” “A one thousand mile journey starts with the first step.”

FINAL COMMENTS Chinese people customarily use proverbs in their daily lives as philosophical guides to cope with their problems, particularly in times of distress. Patients are familiar with the use of proverbs. Proverbs are often used in folk and professional counseling. The suitable use of proverbs in psychotherapy will promote culture-relevant communication. Proverbs represent cultural wisdom from authority. So many proverbs exist that proper selection and use of them can help the therapist assist the patient in dealing with a wide range of problems in a culturally meaningful and effective way.