

***Guanxi* (relationship) oriented psychotherapy**

Jung-Kwang Wen

**Abstract.** *The interpersonal guanxi-oriented psychotherapy (GPT) is a culture-sensitive and culture-specific indigenous form of psychotherapy applicable to Chinese societies. In contrast to Western object relations theory which is person-centered, Chinese object relations theory is guanxi-centered. A construct based on guanxi theory called the “relational self” is proposed to interpret psychopathology. The implication of guanxi theory to clinical psychiatry and the unique features of the practice of GPT are presented.*

**Key words:** psychotherapy, interpersonal connection, relationship-oriented therapy, culture-sensitive therapy, indigenous psychotherapy, Chinese, Taiwan.

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**INTRODUCTION** The term *guanxi* in Chinese literally means relations or relationships, and it refers mainly to interpersonal relations. Based on the theory of social capital, *guanxi* is understood as the web of extended familial ties and obligations. However, the psycho-social and psychodynamic meanings are addressed here, which encompass interpersonal relationships in both extrapsychic and intrapsychic domains.

**BASIC CONSTRUCT OF GUANXI THEORIES** According to the Chinese scholars who proposed and elaborated on *guanxi* theories (Ho, 1998; Hsu, 1971; Hwang, 2000), the basic assumption is that an individual in Chinese culture lives life by his/her “relational self” more than his/her “individual self.” The psycho-sociology of a Chinese individual is governed by extra-psychic external domains (by ‘*Jen*’), rather than by intra-psychic internal domains: the unconscious, preconscious, and unexpressed conscious (according to Freudian personality theory). In other words, the Chinese individual is society-oriented with the locus of control lying outside of the individual; while the Western individual is person-centered, with the locus of control being more internalized.

The object relations theories in Western culture are concerned with the individual’s early experiences of attachment, individuation and separation during the developmental process of the self in relations to the object. The self and ego psychologies, which advocate the individual’s self-reliant, self-actualizing, sole responsibility for his or her own health or illness, have become the pivotal theories for the practice of psychotherapy. In contrast, Chinese relationalism which *guanxi*

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theories are based upon, advocate the omnipotent role of the relational self in the pursuit of health and wellbeing, which is defined as psychosocial homeostasis (with emphasis on balance and harmony). The focus of Chinese object relations theories is concerned more with the long-term interpersonal, interdependent (symbiotic) relationships, either intra-psychic or extra-psychic, with significant others; rather than with individuation and separation. In this sense, the construct of “relational self” makes the indigenous *guanxi* oriented psychotherapy (GPT) a culturally compatible treatment modality for psychiatric patients from a Chinese background.

**AN INDIGENOUS VIEW OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGY** In a relation-oriented culture, a person’s goals are jointly defined by the person and the significant others in that person’s surroundings. If the person identifies with family values during early socialization and endeavors to achieve these goals after growing up in accordance with his/her family expectations; the person may show strong socially-motivated aspirations, and one’s family members would be able to provide and maintain a state of psychosocial homeostasis without causing feelings of psychological conflict.

In contrast, if the person cannot meet the expectations of significant others, or if the goal the person aspires toward is deviant from the expectations of significant others, the person may experience interpersonal conflicts with authority figures or superiors who are obliged to take care of him/or her. When in conflict with others, an individual may express various negative emotions that can disturb the psychosocial homeostasis. Mood disorders, such as depressive illnesses, can be understood as a disrupted or disharmonious state of mind resulting from conflicts between the relational self and individual self of the patient. Psychotherapeutic studies on the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT) of Chinese patients in Taiwan with mental disorders revealed that the key figures in interpersonal conflicts were parent-child relationships followed by spousal relationships (Lee *et al.*, 2000).

Empirical studies on the psychosocial and psychiatric risk factors of suicide in Taiwan by Cheng and colleagues (2000) demonstrated that, significant risk factors for suicide included loss, suicidal behaviour in first-degree relatives, diagnoses of major depressive episodes (using the ICD-10), emotionally unstable personality disorders and substance abuse. Furthermore, Cheng noted that the category of “loss of cherished idea”, was the most significant life event. On the list of cherished ideas were fidelity, obligation, honour, and respect -- almost all of them were in the context of relationships with significant others, some of whom had been in close to the patients. The relational selves of these patients who committed or attempted suicide were very vulnerable to psychosocial stressors associated with major life/role changes, family problems, and drastic socio-economic changes, all of which could jeopardize psychosocial homeostasis and lead to crisis in relationships and mental disorders. Epidemiological studies carried out in Mainland China on suicide and attempted suicide (Philips *et al.*, 2002; Pearson *et al.*, 2002) support this speculation relating to suicidology of the Chinese.

**THEORETICAL MODEL AND FEATURES OF GPT** A theoretical model (Wen, 2005) has been proposed to illustrate the unique features of GPT in contrast to individual-oriented psychotherapy. GPT is grounded in Chinese indigenous culture, with contributions from Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Shamanism as well as relationalism, which are more compatible with the folk belief, illness behavior, and mental health services in local communities (Wen, 1998). Therefore, the goals and strategies of GPT are geared to help the patient to develop and maintain “good relationships” with his/her significant others or key persons, including with the therapists during the therapy.

Regarding the practice of the *guanxi*-oriented psychotherapy (GPT) (in contrast to Western individual-oriented psychotherapy), there are several important elements. Namely:

- a. To offer counseling about life (rather an analysis of the complex);
- b. To achieve and maintain Ying-Yang balance (instead of psychosomatic homeostasis);
- c. To deal with symbiotic antagonism (rather working on the issues of separation-individualism);
- d. To value endurance-containment (rather confrontation-working through);
- e. To encourage self-sacrifice (rather self-actualization);
- f. To attend to the state of “no-self, no-me” (rather than the state of “I think, therefore I am”).

Dynamically, during the psychotherapeutic process the patient’s relational self in distress, conflict, turmoil, or crisis, is contained and protected until he/she regains harmonious (usually moral or ethical) relationships with significant others, even at the cost of his/her own individual self.

Through interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) advocated by Weissman, Markowitz, and Klerman (2000) or relationship-centered psychotherapy developed by Eugene Kelly (1997), Western societies focus on interpersonal relationships, yet their goals and strategies are basically individual-oriented. Another distinguishing feature of GPT in practice is that it usually combines and integrates family, group, and individual therapies; approaches that are more suitable and acceptable to the local culture.

In summary, GPT can be regarded as indigenous psychotherapy as well as one of the major psychosocial treatment modalities which may be beneficial to most Asian societies outside of China, which are also concerned with interpersonal relationships as molded by their society and culture.

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**GUANXI ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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