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CHAPTER 28

FAMILY TIMELINE MURAL DRAWING WITH ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Rieko Miyakuni and Catherine Ford Sori

Type of Contribution: Activity

Objectives

According to the 2010 U.S. Census Report, Asians were the fastest-growing race and ethnic group in the United States between 2000 and 2010, increasing by 43.3% (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2010). “Asian” refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asian, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam (Hoeffel et al., 2010).

The majority of Asian Americans are foreign born or first-generation living in multigenerational households. As a result, three or more generations typically live under the same roof with different degrees of acculturation, English proficiency, and practices of traditional Asian cultural values and norms (Pew Research Center, 2013). In addition to these differences, racial diversity exists within a particular group, which indicates that clinicians are more likely to see Asian American children with parents from two or more different ethnic/racial and cultural backgrounds. The goal of this chapter is to introduce the Family Timeline Mural activity for use with Asian American families and children. The authors also will briefly review major traditional and cultural views that are common across most Asian cultures.

Rationale for Use

The majority of Asian Americans have an immigration story regardless of whether they are first, second, or an older generation. Asian American families continue to honor their ancestors and their traditional cultures, and they encourage both immigrated and U.S.-born children to do the same. Different degrees of adherence to traditional values and customs, especially among parents and children, younger siblings and older siblings, may contribute to an intergenerational conflict. The “Asian value gap” (Ahn, Kim, & Park, 2009; Park, Vo, & Tsong, 2009) refers to disparities in the degree of acculturation and one’s upholding of traditional values. Clinicians must be aware of intergenerational conflict between Asian parents and their children, who are often more acculturated to American values and norms than are their parents. The Family Timeline Mural may help open communication about why Asian traditions are important to parents, and why parents wish their children to uphold their traditions. In addition, parents can hear the children’s reactions and their experiences to being raised in the U.S.
A timeline is an excellent way to trace the family history and tell a family’s story using visual aids. History can be complicated and not very interesting to children, who may find it difficult to connect the dots of family historical events, discover relevant meanings to the family members who were involved, and learn who the major participants in the events were, as well as the outcomes or consequences. A timeline can help the family members make a connection between the parents and children through understanding family and cultural history, values, dreams, and sacrifices.

Care must be taken in introducing any playful activity with Asian Americans, and efforts should be made to determine each culture’s perceptions of play. Some may see play as useful to promote education or learning, enhance interpersonal relationships, or maintain harmony (e.g., Farver, Kim, & Lee, 1995; Holmes, Liden, & Shin, 2013). Others, probably the majority of Chinese parents, see play as entertainment up to a certain age, where the focus of play shifts to components that are more educational and a way to foster responsibility and self-discipline (Chao, 1994; Willgerodt & Thompson, 2005). Some may find it difficult to understand that unstructured, non-directive playful sessions would be beneficial to their child (Tarroja, Calipon, Dey, & Garcia, 2013). Therefore, clinicians must remain sensitive when addressing the cultural and social context of the child’s family in the implementation of play activities (Kim & Nahm, 2008; Siu, 2010; Tarroja et al., 2013). Further, counselors must respect the historical, psychological, sociological, and political dimensions of each particular culture and/or ethnic group, examine the problem from the parent’s cultural view (Coleman, Parmer, & Barker, 1993), and explain the activity as a step toward promoting honor, understanding, and respect, while balancing the needs of Asian children and their parents.

Many Asian cultures are unfamiliar with therapeutic processes, such as talking problems out or sharing emotions openly outside the family. For example, Japanese Americans believe in “freedom of silence” (Chung, 1992, as cited in Shibusawa, 2005, p. 343), while European Americans value freedom of speech. It is actually a Japanese virtue to endure difficulties by being silent and not talking about one’s problems. However, clinicians can integrate clients’ cultural values with Western psychology to reach a population that otherwise may be unlikely to seek help. Japanese families, like other Asian families, may be reluctant to seek mental health services due to the fact that mental illness is traditionally considered to be “in the blood” and hereditary (Shibusawa, 2005) or from a “lack of will power” (Sue & Morishima, 1983, p. 33). Normalizing and universalizing the presenting problems will help diminish the stigma and shame (Shibusawa, 2005). Referral for counseling also can be reframed as childcare consultation or support for an academic-related issue (even being gifted or talented), which may be less threatening to families.

Many Asian parents are more willing to seek counseling for academic problems rather than mental health issues because education is highly valued. However, clinicians must be aware of issues underlying academic problems such as bullying, acculturation, anxiety, depression, marital conflict, separation or divorce (Guo, 2005). Different degrees of acculturation can result in inter-generational conflicts among older and younger siblings, and children and their parents. The more traditional family members tend to impose traditional cultural values and customs onto more acculturated family members. Various techniques such as role-plays and cooperative art activities could facilitate the understanding and acceptance of each other’s experiences and lead to more positive interpersonal communication and improved relationships. Hinnman (2003) emphasized that counselors need to be aware of the acculturation process, and what their clients experienced at each stage. They should honor the family’s traditions, and avoid attempting to change their philosophical orientation, belief system, attitudes, or ways of dealing with the past.
In the Family Timeline Mural activity, family members are given an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings without obligation or threat to share verbally. Family members construct murals (i.e., large-scale paintings that are applied directly to walls, ceilings, or other large flat surfaces) depicting the history and lives of people during an era, which can also communicate messages, hopes, and dreams. The following example describes an intergenerational conflict between the youngest of four children and her Vietnamese parents. The European American therapist approached this family with respect for their cultural values and openness to hear their story. Handout 28.1 (at the end of the chapter) offers important guidelines for working with Asian American families.

Vignette

Cara Tran, the 13-year-old youngest daughter, was brought to the first session by Anh, Cara’s sister. Anh (age 24) reported Cara’s recent out-of-control behaviors, such as sneaking out of the house at night, skipping school, talking back and being disrespectful toward their parents. The problems started a year ago when Lien (19), the middle daughter, left home for college. Anh was finishing her master’s in counseling psychology but lived on her own, and was looking for a job out of state. Hao (28), the oldest and only son, was in his surgical residency many miles away. Mr. Tran (56) had worked at a local factory since he immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1980s. Anh described him as an educated man who had to struggle to provide for his family after their resettlement. Mrs. Tran (51) worked part-time at a nail salon and was described as being patient and a hard worker.

Anh said she brought her sister to counseling because she understands the value of family therapy. She reported that the three older children adhere to traditional Vietnamese values even though some disagreements occur. However, they never are as disrespectful to their parents as Cara. Cara reported that she had been feeling all the pressure from her parents since the adult children left the house and they “dumped everything” on her. She complained that it was too much to live under their parents’ controlling behavior, especially when her father became verbally abusive toward her. According to their traditional beliefs, her mother always complied with her husband’s wishes, which was difficult for Cara to understand. After a few sessions, the parents were persuaded to attend therapy with the two girls.

The therapist first met with the parents alone. Even though the therapist did some homework on Vietnamese culture, she apologized for not knowing their language and having a limited knowledge about their stories; asked them to help educate her and asked how she might be helpful. Then, she asked them to share their views of the problems. She affirmed that these problems sometimes occur in Asian families because children often are eager to fit in with their peers, which can create an intergenerational gap between more acculturated children and their traditional parents. The therapist stated that she wanted to respect their traditional Vietnamese culture and help their daughter become more respectful, while being mindful of Cara’s social needs. Next, she explained that one way to address both the parents’ concerns and the child’s age-appropriate need for peer friendship was for the family to participate in a story-telling activity. She introduced the idea of the Family Timeline Mural activity to promote understanding between the generations, and so Cara could understand why traditional values, including respect, were so important. Other goals included increasing Cara’s knowledge of their parents’ sacrifices and struggles, and hearing the story of their immigration experience. In addition, the therapist wanted to help the parents recognize Cara’s struggles as a first-generation Asian American teen. She also explained that adolescence is a time when teens in America begin moving a bit away from their parents to search out
their own identity as an individual. The mural activity was designed to help children incorporate their past cultural history into their emerging new identity. The parents at first seemed a bit skeptical, but agreed to try it.

They all attended the next session. To initiate the activity, the therapist taped a 6-ft-long roll of newsprint paper (two or three smaller strips could be used) on a blank wall, and divided it into four sections, one for each family member. She asked the parents at what point they wanted to begin their story. They chose the time they first met, so she drew a line dated from that time to the present. Each family member was given blank sheets of paper and asked to draw something (real or abstract), that represented significant life events, with one sheet of paper for each major event. When the father balked at the idea of drawing, the therapist respectfully asked if he could write a few representative words or symbols. He agreed.

After all had finished and taped their pictures to the mural, the therapist invited the parents to talk about their drawings. The parents explained that their meeting had been arranged by both their families. They described their traditional marriage, a civil conflict, the death of their grandparents, and their decision to move to the U.S. Then they discussed each child’s birth, the transition from a more privileged background to long work hours with lower wages and multiple lay-offs, as well as the joys of seeing each child going off to college. Anh was assisting her mother, who was collaborating with her father. There was a fine balance of not overstepping the boundary of the oldest daughter and yet assisting the parents to navigate what was an unfamiliar activity. Cara was surprised to hear about her parent’s experiences, as they seldom talked about them unless they mentioned their concerns about remaining family members in Vietnam. The oldest children had witnessed more of their parents’ struggles in the early years, but now Cara had a better understanding of how her parents viewed her “normal” behavior as an American adolescent.

They were all very artistic. During the mural activity, Anh expressed her gratitude to her father, saying, “I remember that you were trying to teach us how to write in Vietnamese. However, you were so busy, working from dawn to dusk. It is a shame that we don’t know how to write as well as you expected us.” With help from Mr. Trang, Anh wrote the names of extended family members in Vietnamese to place on the mural. On a legal size paper, Mr. and Mrs. Trang together drew scenery from their home village, the boat coming over, and their first cramped apartment. Anh drew the life she and her siblings have now, and expressed honor and gratitude to their parents’ hard work to provide for them. Cara drew a picture of the recent vacation that the family took before Lien left for a college. The family remained quiet, but there was respect for and mutual understanding of the roles each member had: father as the leader, and mother as nurturing caregiver, especially toward Cara. Anh, as the oldest daughter, was very respectful toward her parents while playing the role of helping them and guiding Cara, who appeared to be content.

Afterward, the therapist facilitated an open conversation among family members where the parents were able to explain their fears that their youngest daughter was losing her ethnic identity. Cara tearfully explained that she would always remember her Asian heritage, but she wanted to be truly American. She drew a picture of a girl shedding big tears, standing off to the side of a group of children, and explained how she felt isolated and different from American adolescents. As they talked, each expressed sadness in realizing one another’s difficult acculturation experiences. In processing the session, the parents were able to articulate what drew them to America, which was the hope of economic gain and seeing their children achieve more than they had. The children said they were shocked and moved to hear about all that their parents had given up for them to come to America. The parents softened and expressed concern for Cara, not wanting her to feel isolated. The therapist suggested that they begin to think about how an Asian American teen might behave
in order to increase her parents’ trust, honor them, and earn more freedom. All parties agreed to do this. In the next session, each family member discussed their expectations of an Asian American teen who respected her parents and followed the house rules, but was also able to associate more with her American friends. These pictures were added to the timeline to represent the future.

In follow-up sessions, the family continued to engage in this mural activity, bringing in paintings they had done at home to place on the timeline. Mr. Trans created a short poem, describing his remorse, love, and request for forgiveness from his parents that he had hoped to care for. Ant’s picture illustrated her struggles and the responsibilities expected of her when her parents were at work. Both Mr. and Mrs. Trans expressed their appreciation for her and her hard work. Cara drew a picture expressing how much she missed her older siblings, and all they used to do together. The therapist brought up Cara’s wish for more freedom, such as bringing friends to their house for a sleepover, hanging out at her friend’s house, and going out with friends. The parents understood that Cara was feeling lonely without her brother and sisters and agreed to give her more freedom, as long as she kept them informed about her activities, they met her friends, she kept her grades up, and she remained respectful and contributed to the household chores. Cara expressed her interest in continuing to meet with the counselor to learn how to better balance the two cultures. As the therapist explained the influence of the majority culture and normalized acculturation-related issues, the parents seemed to accept that change was inevitable in their life in America. In the last family session, they discussed framing some of the pictures and hanging them in their hallway in historical order to remind everyone of their heritage and their divergent journeys as “strangers in a strange land.”

Suggestions for Follow-Up

A new timeline can be created that illustrates the family’s experiences in therapy and projects their hopes and dreams for the future. Families may also be encouraged to create a family shield that contains symbols of things that are important to them. The movie The Joy Luck Club (Bass & Wang, 1993) could be assigned as family homework, with a follow-up discussion regarding their reactions to the movie, specifically to the relationships portrayed between the parents (all of whom were first-generation immigrants) and their older children. Therapists would then explore any similarities and differences family members related to their own experiences.

Contradictions

Undocumented Asian parents may be hesitant to attend counseling. They may feel overwhelmed and unable to attend to their children’s emotional needs, while their children often feel especially vulnerable in their immigration situation. These immigrant families face unique challenges. Later psychological stressors can re-activate previous losses, emotions, and memories associated with these events. Therapists must be well joined with parents before suggesting this activity since some may not feel comfortable sharing their past history or their immigration story.

References


Adolescents, Culture, and Special Topics


