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Cultural Competency with the Hong Kong Chinese Community

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In 2021 the UK government introduced a new immigration program, specifically tailored for Hong Kong Citizens. The response was extraordinary, with nearly 90,000 individuals applying within a year and the British government anticipating 300,000 Hong Kong residents in the next five years. To put this in context, this represents a near doubling of the 400,000 UK residents identified as Chinese (Office of National Statistics 2022). It also represents one of the largest non-European migrations in UK history.

The recent political changes in Hong Kong combined with the stresses and trauma of emigrating to a new culture and country have produced numerous mental health problems for this group. From the social movement that ignited in 2019 to the enforcement of the National Security Law, Hong Kong residents have been exposed to extensive political trauma whilst the move to a new country raises the inevitable problems of language barriers, family tensions and job changes.

Mind HK (2019) discovered that 61% of Hong Kong adults currently experience poor mental health, with one in seven people developing a common mental disorder in their lifetime. As in the UK, Anxiety and Depression are the most prevalent mental health issues. Not surprisingly, these problems carry through to new Hong Kong immigrants.

Liang's (2022) recent survey of Hong Kong UK residents identified that 25.8% of respondents displayed symptoms of anxiety disorders, 18.9% had symptoms of depressive disorder, and 23.8% exhibited signs of PTSD.

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Through one of the authors' (KH) experiences of working with clients from Hong Kong, (both in the UK and in their home country), there are a number of issues that makes therapy challenging for CBT therapists without appropriate cultural competency. Equally, CBT supervisors, (following author PG), need to have an equal awareness in order to ensure supervision is appropriate and successful. Although the Hong Kong community is diverse in its views and positions, a number of issues arise that are worth being aware of as CBT therapists.

Firstly, like many other minority (UK) groups, the value of mental health and the seeking of professional help is still evolving, and there is still a long-standing stigma associated with mental health issues. Seeking therapy was often frowned upon or viewed as a sign of weakness. Some may feel a sense of shame or embarrassment. Fear of “loss of face” is a central value in Hong Kong culture. Whatever the intention, the way the CBT therapist communicates with their client needs to accommodate and address this fear.

Secondly, Confucian values are deeply rooted in Hong Kong Chinese culture. An important aspect of this is the emphasis placed on respect for authority and hierarchy. For the CBT Therapist this is a two-edged sword. On the one hand compliance with therapeutic tasks and homework is often enhanced. However, it also means that clients may have particular difficulty expressing concerns, disagreements or problems to their therapist, whereby their deference towards their therapist, potentially hinders open communication.

Mei, a 39 years-old insurance broker was initially referred with anxiety disorder. She was typically collaborative with the

arrangement and implementation of home practice tasks. However, during her 10th session she confided that she did not perceive inter-session work as beneficial or fully grasp its purpose. This occurred despite being informed multiple times of the importance of the collaborative nature of CBT and her possession of a comprehensive understanding of its purpose. It was only at this point that the positive impact of the tasks increased.

Thirdly, Hong Kong culture commonly perceives negative emotions as indicative of weakness, and it is widely believed that individuals should endure hardships without displaying vulnerability. “The person does not show joy or anger on their face, attracting the company of noble and valiant individuals, and gaining the admiration of the young” (quoted from “Records of the Three Kingdoms, Chronicles of Shu, Biography of Liu Bei”). This describes someone who does not display happiness or anger on their face, giving off an air of composure and depth, which is seen as a mature expression and possessing excellent charm in social interactions. From an early age, children are taught to regulate their emotions and prioritise maintaining harmonious relationships. Those who fail to suppress their emotions receive unfavourable evaluations, and children may be labelled as unfilial, while their parents may be deemed irresponsible. These potentially “therapy-interfering beliefs” often necessitate being addressed as part of the therapeutic process.

Andrew, a 30-year-old professional athlete who was referred due to athlete burnout. In the initial sessions, he encountered difficulties in articulating his feelings accurately. Through exploration, he realised that one of the primary reasons for this struggle might stem from the absence of emotional expression in his upbringing. He expressed, “From a young age, people

around me, including my parents and coach, would consistently remind me not to cry, stating that crying is embarrassing or that a man should not shed tears. This was especially true when I experienced disappointment from losing a match or when I was unhappy about being bullied by a teammate." The negative attitude towards negative emotions also means that clients may find the expression of somatic symptoms more socially acceptable. Helping the client to understand their connection with emotional states can be particularly challenging.

Fourthly, the issue of "cultural identity conflict" and its impact on psychological functioning has been well documented- Rabinovich & Morton (2016). Hong Kong clients also experience this both in Hong Kong and within the UK. As a former British colony, Hong Kong has embraced Western ideals of individualism, personal achievement, and self-expression. These often juxtapose against the traditional values mentioned. This clash of beliefs and expectations often results in negative self-perceptions. Chinese society holds a deep reverence for loyalty, righteousness, and the concepts of "guanxi" (interpersonal relationships) and "da ju" (considering the bigger picture). Simultaneously, the pursuit of personal dreams and aspirations can evoke feelings of guilt, shame, or a sense of failure. Many individuals from Hong Kong find themselves navigating a delicate balance between their individual desires and the deeply ingrained customs that shape their historical identity.

Tong, a 47-year-old teacher relocated to the United Kingdom in June 2023. He sought therapy services voluntarily due to experiencing overwhelming guilt and shame upon learning that his 70-year-old mother had recently suffered an accident at home, requiring hospitalisation for treatment. Tong grappled with a significant manifestation of depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and a high level of negative self-talk, including statements such as "I am selfish" and "I am not a good son," among others.

In the face of these challenges, CBT offers an evidence-based approach to helping Hong Kong immigrants in the UK. Firstly, psycho-education plays a vital role. It's content not only provides condition specific information but also helps raise self-awareness of the role of cultural factors and the specific challenges faced by Hong Kong immigrants. By normalising their experiences and reducing stigma, therapists can help clients understand that seeking therapy is not a sign of weakness but a courageous step towards self-care and growth. Given the value of collectivism in Hong Kong, it may also be useful to include family members in psycho-education sessions. This obviously requires careful choice and implementation. However, family

deference and involvement can often be a powerful lever for change in many instances.

Secondly, CBT's Socratic Questioning collaborative style facilitates client engagement. By gently raising, exploring and questioning thoughts, therapists can help clients gain a more balanced and realistic perspective. For example, if a client expresses guilt or shame for pursuing personal dreams that deviate from cultural norms, the therapist might approach this by:

"Let's have a look at the evidence that supports your belief that pursuing your own goals is inherently wrong?"

OR

"What are the potential benefits of following your goals?"

"How might your values be integrated with these goals?"

Thirdly, CBT is a skill-based therapy and so has a central role to play in developing clients' effective coping strategies needed for adaptation to their new environment. Whether this be the use of relaxation techniques, problem solving or emotional regulation skills. The reframing of problems as skills (rather than emotional) deficits and to positioning of therapy as an educational process makes CBT especially appropriate for this client group. It should also be remembered that elements of traditional Chinese healing practices such as mindfulness sit particularly. In conclusion, CBT therapists working with Hong Kong immigrants need to be sensitive to cultural factors and adapt therapeutic techniques accordingly.

We need to:

- Address language barriers
- Respect authority and hierarchy
- Acknowledge the importance of "saving face"
- Facilitate alternative modes of emotional expression
- Integrating cultural beliefs and practices
- Involve family and community

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