PSYC 215: COUNSELING TECHNIQUES

GLOBAL ASSIGNMENT

As a counselor in any environment where counselors are utilized you are likely to be involved in a therapeutic relationship with a person who comes from a different culture than you. If you are not prepared to deal with this you are not likely to be helpful to the client, and you may even cause harm. It is important for you to know that people may be very different about the way they think about and utilize help in a counseling relationship to either optimize your effectiveness or seek help when you note that there is a lack of rapport in the relationship.

Please read the article below about counseling with a Japanese client and then answer the questions (found after the references) as you are requested by your instructor.

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**JAPANESE CULTURE AND THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP**

Yuko Nippoda

**ABSTRACT**

Japan's culture is by nature collectivistic, and there are, therefore, some culturally indigenous patterns in forming relationships in Japan. One of the important elements in these patterns is hierarchy. Counseling and psychotherapy is based on Western concepts and the Japanese have different views about them. When the Japanese utilise counseling and psychotherapy services, they generally apply Japanese methods of forming relationships to the consequently hierarchical relationship between client and therapist. In this chapter, the hierarchical relationships in the Japanese cultural context are introduced. Reflections of this pattern of relationship in the author's therapeutic work with Japanese clients are presented. Suggestions as to how this dynamic can be used positively in the therapy setting are also included. The author uses examples from her clinical practice to demonstrate pertinent aspects of her therapeutic techniques.

**INTRODUCTION**

Japanese people are not, in general, familiar with counseling and psychotherapy and still do not understand the concept of it, although the number of Japanese people who use counseling and psychotherapy is increasing. Counseling and psychotherapy is largely based on Western psychology, and it has not permeated the Japanese culture very much. According to the research conducted to investigate their attitude towards counseling and psychotherapy (Nippoda, 2000), one third of the total participants answered that they do not know if they want to utilise the service as they do not know what it is about. I also found that there are many different impressions of counseling. The common image of counseling and psychotherapy is advice or answers given to their problems, correcting bad behaviour, befriending, listening, curing mental illness, etc (Nippoda, 1997). When Japanese clients assume that counseling and psychotherapy is about a cure for mental illness, it has stigma and shame attached to it (Sue, 1999). For people think its role is mainly listening or befriending. They even show hesitation about paying for counseling and psychotherapy. They would be willing to pay for medicine, but not for talking. The concept of the profession is not properly established. In Japan, mental health issues are mainly dealt with according to a medical model, or people might go to elders for advice. For personal development, activities such as martial arts, flower arrangements or the tea ceremony are used.

In my practice, I see many Japanese clients living in the U.K. as well as clients from many other different cultures. Although they have vague ideas about counseling and psychotherapy, I have found a certain pattern of how Japanese people perceive counselors and psychotherapists and how they form relationships with them in the therapy sessions. Japanese cultural aspects are reflected in the therapeutic relationship. Japan is a collectivistic society with a homogenous nature. There are some culturally indigenous patterns in relationships. One of the phenomena is hierarchy. Clients perceive counselors and psychotherapists as very powerful authority figures and they try to form a hierarchical relationship.

In many cultures, there is a power differential between therapists and clients. However, the Japanese hierarchical therapist-client relationship is very obvious. Sometimes Western therapists are not familiar with these cultural differences and the therapy process could be unsuccessful as a result. In cross-cultural settings, therapists can use the dynamics of their relationship as a therapeutic tool. In this article, the hierarchical relationships in the Japanese cultural context are introduced. Then how this pattern of relationship is reflected in the therapeutic relationship with Japanese people is explained. Finally, the author addresses how this relationship can be used positively in the therapy setting.

**Hierarchy as a Part of Japanese Culture**

Hierarchy is a significant part of Japanese culture. This structure is reflected everywhere in Japanese life, at home, school, community, organisations, traditional institutions such as martial arts, flower arrangements or tea ceremonies. How hierarchy is formed depends mainly on seniority, social roles and gender. Matsumoto, et al. (1996) introduced the hierarchical rubric of collectivism of Japan as obedience to elders and higher-status others. At home, parents are authorities for children as in other cultures. But a distinguishing feature of the Japanese culture is that older siblings have tremendous power over younger siblings. Most of younger siblings generally call their older siblings 'older brother' or 'older sister' whereas older siblings call younger ones by their names. Traditionally, Japanese older siblings or a man when older siblings are women, had the right to inherit the father's profession and properties. In the modern era, the system has changed and all siblings have the same right according to the law, but the legacy of the tradition still remains and older siblings have more power in deciding family matters in many cases. Besides, gender counts. A female does not have as much power as a male. In many cases, younger brothers have more power than older sisters.

At school, primary school pupils are so young that they do not pay much attention to hierarchy when they play together. Older children are told by adults to look after younger ones, but they do not necessarily do as they are told. Younger ones are not necessarily loyal to them, either. However, from junior high school, which is from the age of 12, this structure becomes very rigid. Younger ones have to be obedient in return for older ones looking after them, even if there is only one year difference. Older ones are called "Sempai" (meaning senior person) and younger ones are called "Kohai" (meaning junior person) in general in Japanese society. These names, distinguishing the age differences, continue for life. However, as in the family, younger ones call older ones "Sempai", although older ones call younger ones by their names when they address individuals directly. These kinds of interactions create tremendous power dynamics. If "Kohai" do not obey older people, they often get punished and bullied. "Sempai" is represented as the strong and "Kohai" is represented as the weak. Students learn these kinds of dynamics through their school activities such as sports clubs or many other art clubs. This structure creates tremendous pressure and strictness as to how to exist in a hierarchy.

This would change more or less when students graduate from school. In adulthood, social roles become more important. In companies, people in high positions have enormous power. The Japanese conventional way is that they are promoted by their backgrounds such as their age, gender, or status of their university. Nowadays, the structure has changed and people are promoted according to their own ability and performances in some companies, but the tradition still remains in general. If people in lower positions are loyal and obedient to authority, they are recognised more easily and receive better deals. Also, there are still differences between men and women in working conditions and employees attitudes. Markus and Kitayama (1991) stated that Japanese behaviour is based on the needs and reactions of others, as meeting others' expectations is essential for personal goals. How to please authority is a key issue in relationships.

All in all, this kind of relationship is widespread in society. People who have respected careers such as doctors, lawyers or teachers have enormous authority. In doctor-patient relationships, patients tell the doctor their symptoms. The doctors diagnose the patient's illness and prescribe medicine. The patient just listens to the doctor without questioning. There are more doctors who explain the details of the patient's illness recently, but the traditional dynamics of the relationship still remain. In the worse case, doctors sometimes do not even tell the patients about their diagnosis, but just prescribe medicine. If the patient does not like the doctor, they give in. Normally, patients do not question or give their opinions to the doctors. Other well-respected professions have the same dynamics in the relationship.

Hofstede (1991) explains that everybody is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family in individualistic cultures, whereas in collectivistic cultures, people are integrated into cohesive in-groups, which protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Authority figures look after the less powerful, and the less powerful obey those in authority. This kind of hierarchy is traditional and deep-rooted in Japanese relationships. Negotiation in the relationships or exchange of opinions does not normally exist. It is difficult for the Japanese to form equal relationships. It is not easy for persons in lower positions to present their opinions to authority figures. What happens psychologically is that the less powerful learn how to please authority figures by fulfilling their expectations in order to be acknowledged and recognized. They project high expectations onto authority figures and expect very high standards of behavior from them. Authority figures always have to be right in order for the less powerful to obey them. In Japan, there is a different sense of self than exists among Western Europeans. One's social role is more important than who a person is (Nippoda, 1997). Japanese people do not have a strong individual identity. In this kind of environment, sense of self as an individual is not developed. They need to consider how to meet authority figures' expectations rather than their own needs. There are lots of Japanese people who are not happy about this hierarchical relationship. In my practice, more Japanese than people from other cultures have problems in their relationships with parents.

**Therapeutic Relationship Manifested with Japanese Clients**

When a Japanese client comes to a consulting room, he/she just sits down very tensely in front of the therapist. He/she would answer clearly the therapist's questions. When the therapist gives some feedback on the client issues, he/she would react calmly. This kind of interaction is quite typical. Japanese clients normally perform ideally. The doctor-patient relationships I mentioned earlier are reflected in therapist-client relationships. Clients tell the therapist about their issues, and then the clients just wait for the therapist to analyse them. Then clients expect the therapist to tell them what to do. A few years ago, it was reported in the media that a parent killed his own child in Japan. The parent was in counseling. The son was so violent that his father could not cope with the situation. The counselor told him to put up with his son's behaviour. This parent just accepted the counselor's idea. In the end, his rage became so great that he could not contain it, and killed the son.

There are many Japanese people who come to see me for counseling and psychotherapy, who just sit in front of me and ask for advice. Sometimes they cannot even decide and ask me for advice in choosing what to talk about, such as "There are two things on my mind today, but I don't know which one I should talk about. Which do you think I should start with?" In their psyche, sometimes it is not allowed to be independent in front of an authority figure due to their cultural norm. From the Western point of view, this can be seen as dependent, but it can be a way for Japanese people to show respect by giving power to those in authority. Sometimes, Western therapists seem to find it difficult to work with Japanese clients. Things can be difficult when the therapist is not aware of the culture-person relationship within the Japanese culture. A Japanese client was assessed by an English therapist and it was reported that the client had no sense of self and came across as passive, needy, and repressed. Japanese clients sometimes present as helpless and it might be perceived as playing a victim role. However, from the client's view, this could be considered culturally appropriate. Japanese people, in general, are not confident in speaking English and become passive. English speaking therapists might experience this as a 'child figure'.

**How Can Therapy Use this Therapeutic Relationship for Help?**

Japanese society is well disciplined and organised in many ways. People are looked after by society, the environment, and by other people. In this kind of situation, people may have less need to look after themselves. Japanese people might not question the hierarchical relationship when they accept it as a social norm. However, while they are in cross-cultural transition between Japan and the U.K., they eventually realize that a different kind of relationship is required. In that case, developmental work is needed (Clarkson, 1997). There are two major points of focus. One is for clients to learn to have a more equal relationship and assert their needs. The other is to help clients to find authority within themselves. Japanese people often tell me how difficult it is for them to assert their needs and to negotiate mutual needs in the relationship with other people.

Crittenden and Bae (1994) explain self-effacement and social responsibility in Asian cultures, and they argue that Asian cultures attribute personal success to external causes rather than personal responsibility. In Japan, individuals are thought to be representative of the groups to which they belong, such as their family, company or society. Therefore, in Japanese culture, taking responsibility largely means to be responsible for others and society, rather than oneself. It might help if they learn how to take responsibility for themselves while they are in the U.K. They can use the opportunity of living in this country for this change.

In the light of learning to have more equal relationships, clients can practice this with the therapist in the therapy sessions. At first, a therapist can check to see how the client is experiencing cultural transference in terms of authority figures. Until the therapist and client form trust, it might be difficult for the client to address how they experience the therapist. When the therapist asks, "How do you feel about me now?", they might just answer "I do not feel anything." or they might say, "I feel good about you." You might not get an honest answer from them at first. This needs practice and patience. In my practice, when clients form a hierarchical relationship with me, I share my experience of how they are relating to me. I encourage them to tell me how they feel about me, even when they have negative feelings such as anger and distrust towards me, or a sense of rejection from me. I also explain that this could help them to change their issues around authority so that they can find out who they are. If they continue the same thing as they do in daily life, nothing would change.

I had a client who was working on the issue of Japanese authority figures. She was relating to me in the way that she thought and answered my questions very well. She sometimes tried to please me by telling me that I was very observant or empathic, which was reflecting that she could not rebel against her parents as a child. I even felt that we did not have real human contact. When I brought this case to supervision, my supervisor challenged me, asking if my client was really feeling that way. The answer was obviously no. We talked about how we could break this pattern. I decided to ask my client directly to tell me what she disliked about me. In the next session, I asked her about it. At first she was hesitant to answer, saying that she could not think of anything. I continued to challenge her saying that everybody has something they like and dislike about other people. There must be something. Eventually, she started to say, "Is anything all right, even unreasonable things?" I encouraged her to say something unreasonable that she did not like about me. She said, "I don't like that you have had good education and I am jealous of you." She was not allowed to have higher education due to her parents' wishes. This was a very big step for her. She always felt that she had to obey authority to be recognised. However, she freed herself to voice her true feelings towards authority figures and learned that she did not need to please them. After that she started to be more genuine in the therapeutic relationship. Eventually she became more comfortable with other Japanese authority figures.

This process is very important in development towards individuation. However this is still new to the Japanese client, and the sudden challenge and encouragement to change could damage the client. It might take a while for the client to get used to this relationship or they might become rebellious towards the therapist. The therapist needs to offer tremendous support in this process by constantly encouraging clients to be aware of their pattern of forming relationships, since they are acquiring the way to be themselves through the therapeutic experience.

Another hierarchical relationship might be manifested when clients bring their own image about counselors and psychotherapists to the session, where this image represents a perfect authority figure. This can include the client's projection of how to behave perfectly as the less powerful. This projection needs to be rejected. A client was angry with me and told me that I was not acting according to what was written about counselors in a book. The image he was holding was somebody who agrees with him all the time with love and warmth. This client was trying very hard to perform well to be accepted. He was afraid of failure and he wanted to fail me before he failed. He was trying to win in this power game. I told him that I was a human being and I did not agree with everything about him. I was willing to be failed by him if he called it failure. In this process, this client learned how to be equal without a power game as well as how to fail. Japanese society is very strict about failure, and it creates stress among people. It is significant for them to know that failure is an important part of life.

In the second point of how to help clients to find authority within themselves, many Japanese clients might ask the therapist to diagnose their problems, and tell them what their issues are about, what was happening to them and what to do in a certain situation. They need permission and approval on what they could do to make choices in their lives. As I have mentioned before, this can be the Japanese way of showing respect to authority. However, in the West, this can be seen as dependency and not taking responsibility for themselves. In the Japanese cultural structure, they might not have problems with this, but I have seen some Japanese clients who are not happy because they do not know what they want in their lives. They did not have many opportunities in Japan to think and choose what they wanted. Therefore, therapist and client can practice together the process of making their own choices. Some clients constantly ask for my opinion and try to use it without digesting it and making it their own. I answer, "I don't know, but what do you think?" When a client and I reviewed the therapy process, he said that he had been quite disappointed at first because I did not give answers to him. However, while he kept asking the same questions many times, and I gave him the same answer, he started to learn that he needed to think for himself. He was gradually able to have authority within himself to decide what he wanted to do and what was the best for him, how he wanted to change. He did not need to ask authority to get permission about doing something in the end, but he was able to give himself permission.

Another example is that a client suddenly said that she might stop coming to therapy, although she had been working hard on her issues. She did not even seem to know what was happening. After exploration, she re-decided that therapy was important for her and wanted to continue. However, in a little while, she said again that she wanted to stop, but failed to give the reason. Some people feel quite unstable about coming to therapy. What occasionally happens is that some clients with this kind of pattern can have authoritarian parents. They start therapy, but in a while, they feel obliged to come. During the therapy, they are conscientious and show willingness to work on their issues. However, they just want to listen to what I say and take the ideas without digestion. They start to feel rebellious and start to say that they want to stop. When this occurs, it is important for therapists to help the client to become aware of their transference. They could not rebel against their parents, so they are rebelling against the therapist. The therapist has to allow the client to experience this rebellion fully and go through with it. This could give the client an opportunity to decide whether or not they want to continue therapy for him/herself, and why they are choosing it. The clients can learn that they have authority within themselves to decide what they want, and that they do not need to rebel any more. Then therapy may be seen as effective.

**Conclusion**

Due to the Japanese cultural norms, clients bring a pattern of hierarchical relationships to the therapy. Particularly while living in the U.K., their way of forming relationship can be greatly challenged and clients need to learn to reform their kind of relationship with other people. Therapy can be beneficial using the therapeutic relationship for their growth and change by helping them to have more equal relationships and to find authority within themselves. When my clients and I finish therapy and we review the process, many clients tell me that the therapy they have had was very different from what they expected at first. They expected that they would receive advice and follow it in their daily lives. However, they feel that they become independent and free to be themselves. Therapists need to be very aware of the pattern, which is in accord with the Japanese culture and support the process.

**About the Author**

Yuko Nippoda is a UKCP registered psychotherapist with extensive experience in the field of counselling and psychotherapy in Japan and England. As a bilingual psychotherapist and counsellor, she has worked with clients on a wide range of issues from many different cultures. Her special interest is in cross-cultural issues, particularly issues between East and West, and she conducts research and has some publications on this subject. She is currently engaging in research and practice for the Japanese community in U.K.

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**Question for Discussion**

1. What is the general attitude of Japanese people towards counseling and psychotherapy?
2. Do you think these kinds of attitudes are presented in other non-Western cultures?
3. Compare hierarchical structure in Japanese society with that in your own culture.
4. Discuss your opinion about Japanese hierarchy described in this chapter.
5. How do Japanese clients, in general, perceive therapists?
6. The dependency of Japanese clients can be seen as childlike in the West, whereas it is the way of respecting authority in Japan. Discuss your view about this.
7. In what ways do you foresee therapy going wrong if Western therapists do not have a good knowledge of the Japanese hierarchical relationship?
8. Discuss your opinions about two points raised in this chapter which might enable the hierarchical relationship to be a therapeutic one.
9. In Western psychology, individuation is emphasised. Do you think individuation should be focused for Japanese clients?
10. How does therapy show progress when focused on fostering authority within the client?

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