Abstract

The paper presents a detailed idiographic analysis of Chinese clinical psychology students' lived experiences and understandings of their psychological health, distress and wellbeing. This is a qualitative, experience-near interview study using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with an interpreter with eleven students who had begun their clinical placements in Beijing, China. There were ten females and one male. The interviews were audio-recorded and the transcripts subjected to IPA. Conflict of tradition and modernity was a major theme in the participants' accounts of their psychological wellbeing. This comprised four subthemes: 1. Strict pragmatism in the family; 2. Emotion moderation; 3. Coordinating individual and relational selves; and 4. Conflict of gender inequality. Participants' attempts to reconcile cultural tradition with postmodern, urbanised perspectives was a source of psychological malaise. We discuss the findings in terms of indigenous psychology and cultural modifications of psychotherapy for Chinese clients. The study suggests a role for phenomenological approaches especially attuned to the encounter with otherness.

Keywords: Chinese psychology, culture, phenomenology, psychotherapy, qualitative research

‘Filial piety is the foundation’: A qualitative study of psychological distress and wellbeing in
a cohort of Chinese clinical psychology students

This paper presents a study of Chinese psychological wellbeing as understood by a contemporary cohort of clinical psychology students in China. China’s presence on the world stage has become more visible under the current leadership, and the new generations of middle class Chinese have increasing access to global travel, communication and continuous world media, albeit censored, via the internet and digital outlets proliferating in the major conurbations. Sun & Ryder (2016) described China’s rapid modernisation as a sociocultural phenomenon potentially comparable in significance to the Italian Renaissance or Britain’s Industrial Revolution. The impacts of individualism and Westernisation on over a billion Chinese people, increase in depression and declining life satisfaction, massive economic growth and social inequality, the largest rural—urban migration in human history, and “unleashing of emotion” against a norm of emotional concealment, are not yet fully realized. The authors conclude research is required to address the psychological consequences of rapid sociocultural change on China, East Asia, and beyond. Previous studies of collectivistic conflict resulting from the Westernisation of people from Confucian-based cultures have been based principally on Chinese societies outside of the mainland, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, which are arguably already bicultural (e.g. Chan & Lee, 1995; Kwan, 2009). Furthermore, these societies’ confrontation with individualism is historically and socioculturally unique, and distinct from that currently ongoing in China. Zhang & Weng (2019) recently utilised large scale data to assess cultural change and cultural endurance in China through changes in word frequencies in Google books’ Chinese corpus. They replicated the pattern of rising individualism and declining collectivism, however, found an exception for core collectivistic words – words of high perceived traditional importance.

These actually increased in frequency, thus departing from the general trend and suggesting elements of rising individualism co-exist with enduring collectivism. Wu et al's (2018) recent nationwide study of tweets from 1.6 million Weibo users found a 'cultural value mismatch' in China due to urbanisation – urbanisation moderated the collectivism–wellbeing equation such that it was negative in high–urbanised provinces compared with low– and middle–urbanised provinces. The effect was driven by an increase in negative emotions, and led the authors to call for further qualitative research in future studies.

A national seminar for applied psychologists concluded an urgent need for professionalisation of clinical and counselling psychology training in China to meet the increasing need for mental health services (Lin, Jiang & Duan, 2016). These disciplines have not yet established independent professional status from Medicine. The need for indigenous psychotherapeutic and psychological practice is the subject of ongoing debate (e.g. Hwang, 2009). This paper explores the psychological situation as understood by a contemporary cohort of Chinese clinical psychology trainees at a major university in Beijing. The experiences and understandings of clinical psychology and psychotherapy trainees in the West have recently been studied using qualitative, experience-near, methodologies (e.g. Galvin & Smith, 2017; Jones & Thompson, 2016). To our knowledge, no qualitative study has enquired into the personal lived experiences of trainee psychological practitioners in China. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach adopted in this paper attempts to gain an 'insider's perspective' on the lifeworlds of participants, while acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity as inextricable and indispensable to the phenomena disclosed (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This approach implies a rigorous methodological reflexivity — techniques to attend to the researcher's subjectivity, as both limitation and opportunity enabling the enquiry. Phenomenological psychotherapies, such as gestalt therapy, similarly acknowledge and include the subjective experiencing of the psychotherapist as

integral to therapeutic practice. In this paper we develop the benefits of working phenomenologically with Chinese and other clients from different cultures. For example, Sun & Ryder (2016) argued that rapid modernization indicated a shift away from traditionally endorsed externally-oriented thinking (EOT) toward “increasing openness to the use of psychological language [and] attention to internal psychological states” (p. 9). This has implications for the debate on developing culturally sensitive modifications to psychotherapy for Chinese and other non-Western individuals (Pederson, Draguns, Lonner & Trimble, 2008).

An epistemological gap in current service provision is hermeneutic-phenomenological approaches which facilitate the Chinese client’s here-and-now self-experience (P Yao, personal communication, 13th October 2015). Such modifications may offer possibilities for working through identity and value-oriented impasses, which may arise from collectivistic conflict during therapy. The ongoing debate on the need for indigenous psychotherapies implies a place for phenomenological techniques, such as employed in the gestalt therapies, which enquire into the client’s embodied self-experiencing as indicating existential bearings (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951/2006). Chen’s (2009) model of individual-relational self-coordination under collectivistic conflict indicated that citizens of contemporary Chinese societies undergo constant re-balancing between individual and relational ethics in postmodern spaces. Key to this perspective is raising awareness and sensitivity to the social ethics of particular situations, strengthening both selves to enable a ‘self-coordinating process’ in the selection of authentic behavior. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the complexities of therapeutic practice at these intersections. Our aim is to contribute to the discourse by enquiring into the lived experiences and understandings of a new generation of psychological practitioners. The study came about as part of a broader enquiry into practitioners’ understandings of psychological healing, near the beginning of their clinical

placements. Lee & Prior (2016) have argued that this developmental boundary presents a special opportunity for fresh disclosure on the nature of the talking cure.

Method

Participants

Eleven students who were completing a two-year, full-time, clinical psychology Masters programme at a major university in Beijing, China were invited to participate. The theoretical orientation of the programme included psychodynamic perspectives, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and systemic family therapy. The curriculum (now a three-year programme) combines lectures and seminars, personal development exercises, and small group work, and is assessed through essays and assessment of practice skills. Principal topics include theories of psychopathology; the therapeutic relationship and process; and core concepts and techniques of psychotherapy. The clinical psychology programme, in line with similar others in China, does not qualify graduates for clinical work in hospitals. Most Chinese state hospitals do not currently offer clinical psychology services. At the time of writing nine of the graduates were practising as psychological counsellors or therapists: four in university counselling centres, three in mental health service agencies, one in a school, and one in a hospital. One graduate was working as a government employee, and one was not practising. Their practice locations included: Beijing, Hebei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Shanghai, and Sichuan.

The invitation to participate in the research was made towards the end of the year, when it was assumed that the students would be sufficiently advanced to be able to reflect on their experience and give informed consent to participate. All eleven students agreed to be interviewed and these were carried out by the first author with the assistance of an interpreter, a US qualified, native Chinese psychotherapist, currently practising in Beijing. The ten female and one male participants ranged in age from 23 to 31 years. Their home towns were

drawn from a range of provinces including: Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hebei, Hunan, and Zhejiang. Following the first two interviews the interview questions were modified to better suit the cultural context of the study. The original interview schedule had been adapted from a previous study which focused on participants' experiences of developing therapeutic listening (Authors). The revised interview schedule focused on their understanding of psychological distress and wellbeing in their personal lives, their friends and family, and in wider society. Nine transcripts (eight women, one man) were subjected to an experience-near, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) have recommended between three and six participants for this type of study, to balance analytic detail with sufficient range for invariants of the phenomenon to emerge.

Procedure

Interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Phenomenological interviewing principles were followed, paying attention to bodily self-awareness, bodily empathy and intercorporeality. Participants' concrete lived experience was sought in preference to speculation and discursivity. For example, the seating configuration of interviewer, interpreter and participant was devised, after experimentation, for the latter two to be seated side-by-side, which seemed to best facilitate the three-way interaction. Nonverbal communications e.g. paralanguage and other notable features of embodied communication were noted. These were used to supplement the transcript and support a deeper empathic analysis of participants' articulated meanings. The interview invited participants to reflect freely, drawing on their own lived experience, in three main areas, supported by prompt questions where required: 1) Their decision to train in clinical psychology (e.g. what experiences made you aware of psychological suffering); 2) Their understanding of psychological distress in China (e.g. what is your experience of psychological suffering or wellbeing in your family); 3) Their understanding of how talking therapy is helpful or healing

(e.g. how are therapeutic conversations different from social ones). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with all names replaced and any potentially identifying features in the transcript replaced or removed. An English translation of each transcript was made available for use by the first author. All extracts selected and presented have been back-translated and rigorously checked for accuracy and nuance with the assistance of two bilingual Chinese students studying Psychology at a UK university.

Ethics

The study was ethically approved by the relevant University Research Ethics Committee. The interviews were conducted by the first author, a British-born Chinese, with the assistance of an interpreter, a native Chinese psychotherapist. Neither were involved in the educational assessment of the students. All participants engaged in a process of informed consent, where the purpose of the study, audio-recording and transcription were explained, as well as how the interview transcript would be anonymised and used.

Reflexivity

Interpretative phenomenology, the epistemological stance adopted in the study, affords a dialogue between an attempt to return to ‘the things themselves’ of participants’ lived experiences, and hermeneutics which acknowledges the inescapability of the researcher’s own being-of-understanding shaped by culture, personal history, and future aspiration. These inevitably come into play in the disclosure of phenomena. The researcher energises this dialogue by actively engaging with their fore-understandings, in order to surface prejudices and preconceptions, both through reflection and actual encounter. E.g. The first author remained cognizant, as a first generation British-born Chinese researcher, that his Chinese acculturation derived from his parents, and from particular linguistic and cultural contexts e.g. Chinese school and Chinatown. I kept a daily journal throughout the research process, and alongside my co-author, a Chinese national, engaged in reflexivity to develop an

‘outside-insider perspective’ (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The interpretative philosophical stance, neither realist nor constructivist, endeavours to stay alert to the pitfalls of cultural misappropriation and colonisation, and to guard against a collapse of the double hermeneutic into a single, ethnocentric one. The importance of researcher reflexivity, however, is not to remove subjectivity, which is impossible. Rather it is to be aware of how subjectivity is both limitation and opportunity – both conceals and unconceals the phenomenon, enabling it to appear (Giorgi, 1994; Heidegger, 1927).

Analysis

Transcripts of the interviews were analysed using the method of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is idiographic, relying on a small number of cases examined in depth and detail, without requiring them to be representative. The primary analysis was conducted in three stages: first independently, then collaboratively by the two authors, and in the third stage candidate extracts were selected by the second author. The second author (a US qualified Chinese Clinical Psychologist) worked with a verbatim transcript of the interview and the first author with an English language translation. The transcripts were analysed one by one, with analysis of each transcript completed before proceeding to the next participant. Left-hand margin codes highlighted significant or striking potential meaning units. These were organised into clusters that became preliminary, candidate sub-themes noted in the right-hand margin. The right-hand codes summarised participants’ *experiential claims* and *objects of concern* (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). After each researcher had analysed their transcript independently, both met to dialogue around their themes and sub-themes. This conversation lasted 40-60 minutes and was audio-recorded to support subsequent analytic work. In this way the interpretive process was a dynamic between the two researchers, each making sense of the other’s sense-making, and then returning to the transcripts, cycling between the part and the whole in a double hermeneutic. The process facilitated a de-

centering of subjectivity, opening up the possibility, when the researcher returned to the transcript, of grasping something new or different which was previously occluded. After all nine transcripts had been analysed this way, a Master theme table identifying theme labels to reflect recurring features across participants was produced, using the collaborative-critical method. Gadamer said, “the important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings”. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 269).

Three superordinate themes were surfaced by this means. Due to space restrictions only one superordinate theme: Understanding Chinese psychological distress and wellbeing, is presented in this paper. The second author re-read the transcripts, in the third stage of the analysis, to select the extracts that reflected this theme. Particular attention was paid to utterances containing striking or unusual language, which indicated fresh experience, imagery, or original meaning-making. These extracts were collated for analytic work.

Results

Table 1 shows the themes and subthemes developed in the analysis.

Themes	Subthemes		
Strict Pragmatism in the Family	Utilitarian ethics	Family glory	Corrective parenting
Emotion Moderation	Neglect of inner life	Negative emotion	Somatisation
Coordinating Selves	Collectivistic conflict	Interpersonal boundaries	Facework
Conflict of Gender Inequality	Devaluation of girls	Traditional gender roles	

Table 1. Themes and subthemes of Chinese clinical psychology students' understandings of psychological distress and wellbeing.

The four main themes in Table 1 combine and interact in the participants' lived experiences and meaning making around psychological health and wellbeing. Extracts which shine-out these themes are presented below translated into English.

Theme 1: Strict Pragmatism in the Family

The theme we have called *Strict pragmatism* consisted of the subthemes: Utilitarian family ethics; Corrective parenting; and Garnering glory for the family.

Utilitarian family ethics: 'I could not feel my parents' warm and loving care'.

Participant 7 understood her strict upbringing in terms of Chinese parents' utilitarian ethics centred on school grades and scholarship. She frames her experience in terms of the ancient

tradition of the imperial civil service exam, which could ultimately guarantee a livelihood through selection as a government officer:

In terms of society, there is a long history of the imperial examination in China, and there is the concept that ‘filial piety is the foundation of all virtues’, therefore, we need to listen to our parents and follow a life according to them. However, nowadays we do have a degree of personal independence, hence there will be some conflict between the personal and the collective.

She mentions the two traditions of scholarship and filial piety that dominated her early relationship with the parents. During a period of bullying and isolation from her peers – which led her to study psychology – she says her teachers and parents only noticed her when her grades had gone down, and attempted to remedy this by beating and scolding. She was an only child:

I am an only child and when I was young I did not have a good relationship with my parents, because at that time they were very strict on me. They would scold me and beat me when I made even a small mistake. Back then I was afraid of them. I could not feel my parents’ warm and loving care, except when I was sick.

She received attention when she was sick, and only at these times would she experience her parents’ warm and loving care.

Glory for the family name: ‘It is requested nowadays that children study well, do better than others’. Participant 3 relates her school experience to Chinese children’s duty to garner glory for the family name:

In the family, parents had requirements of children. These were “success and fame” (功成名就) and “garner glory for the family name” (光耀门楣). Nowadays they require that children study well, do better than others, not lag behind. They care more about these pragmatic matters. [...] I find children are emotionally neglected. Parents think as long as you are not delaying anything or are sick – delaying anything – negative emotions are melodramatic and mean nothing at all.

She reiterates the sentiment ‘not delaying’ in the extract. The extract brings out what seems all important is the child’s duty to garner glory for the family. Through traditional literature she says, Chinese culture and the socialisation of children values pragmatism and practical

outcomes over emotion and sentiment. These ensure success and glory through family reputation, wealth and status.

Corrective parenting: ‘His intent was to make me modest’. Participant 5

understood his father’s constant diminishment in terms of parental training in the virtues of modesty and non-complacency:

My father would say after the parents’ evening that I did not improve if I did make some progress, and he would say that I regressed if I maintained the same level. His intent was to make me modest (谦虚) and not complacent (不骄傲), so that I would keep working hard. However, this made me feel that no matter how hard I tried, I felt inferior when I was six to twelve years old. Later, my primary school education ended. Actually, my dad treated me quite well, he often bought me something. As a kid, I remember, I learned gymnastics in kindergarten. In the afternoon, when my dad did not have many business matters he would take me to gymnastics. Childhood was how I’ve described.

It is noteworthy, in Chinese, how he says ‘I improved’ and ‘I remained the same as before’ rather than *my grades* improved or remained the same. His father’s motivation, he explains, was to push him to keep on working hard, and never to experience a sense that his work was finished or complete. In the extract he uses the phrases ‘modesty’ (谦虚) and ‘non-complacency’ (不骄傲) two traditional idioms. The focus on grades coupled with the sense of never-ending work led to feelings of inferiority. This focus is indicative of the Confucian concept of self-cultivation central to Chinese traditional understandings of psychological maturation.

Theme 2: Emotion Moderation and False Sentimentality

The theme we have called *Emotion moderation* encompasses the subthemes Neglect of inner life; Negative emotion expression; and Somatisation. The participants experienced a lack of awareness and of emotional literacy around their psychological wellbeing. This was coupled with a prevalence of negative emotionality, including anger and blame, and expressed criticism within the family.

Neglect of inner life: ‘To them emotional suffering is unimportant’. Participants described their parents as pragmatic and some related this to severe strife in the previous generation. E.g. grandparents’ experiences of starvation, family calamities, and unexplained disappearances. Participant 3 elaborates on her parents’ generation’s minimisation of emotional suffering:

Generally speaking, I feel my parents’ generation neglect their feelings. They think emotional suffering is unimportant. Don’t you have something to eat and some clothes to wear? Isn’t that good enough? What could make you unhappy? Why are you so ‘false sentimental’ (矫情)? To them, emotional suffering is not important at all.

Because of what the grandparents had endured, for this participant’s parents, emotions, including unhappiness, that are not based on something physically awry, amount to “false sentimentality”.

Negative emotion expression: ‘I only feel strong feelings in our family when we are angry’. Participant 10 notes her lack of strong, tender or affectionate verbal expressions from either of her parents:

Besides anger we do not express other emotions in our family. For instance, my dad will not say he loves me in front of my mum or say he’s very happy today. He does not say “I love you daughter, I feel proud of you”. My mum doesn’t either. They would not express love between themselves or to me. But when I made them angry they would say “Was your conscience eaten by a dog? We gave you our heart, everything we’ve done has been for your good, don’t you understand our love?” I only feel strong feelings in our family when we are angry. For instance, when my parents are making a righteous point, or if I did not do something well they would scold me. These are times when I would feel strong emotions. I rarely express or experience love. Actually, I can experience love. When I was sick, my parents treated me kindly, took care of me wholeheartedly. So, I can experience love in these ways.

It is notable that, like participant 7, she only experienced her parents’ love when she was sick, and she experienced her parents’ care through their anger. She speaks eloquently and expansively about her parents’ generation and their practical, rather than sentimental, comportment towards children, through deeds and conduct. She relates it to the impacts of the Cultural Revolution and the “heavy burden” and survival value of anger; her father was

an adopted, and mother the fifth child of six. She never heard her father say he loves her or I'm happy today. Her granddad was a businessman and endured severe strife in the 'old China', where sentimentality held no sway. She relates that, even nowadays, women in rural China "just kill themselves to announce you're a bad husband" and "old people just kill themselves to prevent bills". This severity continues to endure in the collective consciousness of current millennial and post-millennial Chinese.

Somatisation: 'When my mum has a conflict or quarrel with us she would feel a stomach ache'. The somatisation of psychological distress is an established theme in studies of Chinese psychology. Participant 3 states her experience:

On the other hand, feelings would be expressed somatically, such as the child has a fever, a sore throat, due to emotional problems. The parents would be especially caring in these moments. I include myself - I would seldom say directly I do not feel well emotionally, I would rather say I have a headache, or a stomachache, in a somatic language.

Participant 10 makes sense of somatisation in her family in terms of past un verbalised trauma:

My parent's generation, I feel they repress their feelings because they have borne much trauma, such as parents' death or sudden domestic calamity. They had no way to vent or unburden. Many of them I have known are "swallowing bitterness and toiling" (吃苦耐劳) — very considerate of others, but in fact neglect their own feelings. I have not found any true emotional expression (真性情), unlike our generation who can express our emotions and our anger. I think that's rare for them. I feel that their generation lead very scrupulous lives (谨慎).

She says the parents' generation live scrupulously. The word in Chinese has connotations of discretion, prudence, and being careful and cautious — mindful of the whole context (as in "one wrong move and all is lost"). The concept of *jinshen* (谨慎) is a recurrent theme in ancient and modern Chinese literature. This attitude of mind is to carefully assess actions alongside consequences, and to ponder in the long-run and over a protracted period, what the impacts would be of choosing one course of action over another.

In sum, *Emotion moderation* captured participants' understandings of their psychological distress in terms of complex historical and cultural factors in China shaping the emotional ecology. These were severe strife, intergenerational trauma within the family, and the persistence of traditional Chinese attitudes, including prudence, preventing troubles, and foreseeing consequences, such as documented in the *Book of Rites*.

Theme 3: Coordinating Relational and Individual Selves

This theme reflects participants' meaning making around conflicts between the need to harmonise between collective versus personal needs and imperatives. The subthemes are: Collectivistic conflict, Interpersonal boundaries, and Facework.

Collectivistic conflict: 'everyone has some idea of independence'. Participant 7 exemplifies the theme that some young Chinese search for a sense of self but get lost trying to navigate between traditional and modern value orientations:

In China the majority of Chinese families prioritise studying, and do not pay especial attention to their children's mental health. It makes generation after generation of children without much self-concept, who just follow their parents' path. Emotionally, they seem to want to find a sense of self, but at the same time are kind of lost. Some children experience quite a lot of emotional fluctuation, probably linked to intergenerational communication. From the perspective of Chinese society, very early on there was the imperial examination system as well as the concept 'the first virtue of all is filial piety' (百善孝为先), which requires us to listen to our parents and follow their path. However, nowadays, as the culture is more advanced, everyone has some idea of independence. The only thing is there will be some conflict between collectivism and individualism. Also, during the time of the Cultural Revolution and war against Japan, our ancestors suffered many traumas, which have been passed down the generations. This includes patriarchal attitudes ('value man and devalue woman' (重男轻女)), which has brought about unhealthy factors in the development of many girls in China.

She articulates a struggle for a sense of self and "emotional fluctuation" due to conflict between collectivism and individualism. She conveys her own personal resilience and toughness in the interview to heed her parents' teaching that 'the bitter must come before the sweet' (先苦后甜). Despite being "without much self concept" she insisted, against her parents' original wishes, to study Psychology. She displays a clarity and articulacy around her understanding of the role of talking therapies in China. They are to "produce value" by

“reducing loss” and “creating a better life” and these, she states, “cannot be measured by money”.

Interpersonal boundaries: ‘I feel it is like a sticky mess’. Participant 4 states a conflation between her own emotional distress and her mother’s:

I think that relationships in Chinese families are very tangled and the boundaries are unclear. This kind of relationship, very specific to Chinese family culture, may cause much suffering, including the mother-in-law to daughter-in-law relationship. At any rate, whenever I speak of Chinese families, I feel like it is a sticky mess.

Earlier in the interview:

I feel one source of my mum’s emotional distress is that she likes to compare with people around her, and she is always conflicted (纠结). For instance, my aunt wanted to travel with her. If my aunt did not invite her, she would feel excluded; but if my aunt invited her, she would think about it over and over, whether she would go or not, and then she would turn it down. I find it quite annoying.

She relates her identity confusion and distress to unclear boundaries with her mother, whom she cannot bear to be near, saying: “I was from the very south of China and for my undergraduate I went to the very north”. She spoke at length of intergenerational trauma experienced by her classmate: the grandfather was killed by communists and the grandmother re-married a communist officer, and now the entire family are civil servants and have faith in it. She relates the frustration and irony around this state of affairs. She describes the unclear boundaries in the family as “like a sticky mess”. This includes her mother’s double-bind with her own distress, which seems to prevent potential support from family members, as conveyed in the extract.

Facework: ‘We not only consider our clan, but also our face’. The concept of Chinese face demands complex social considerations even in personal matters. Participant 10 elaborates:

I feel the emotional burden on Chinese people is often not only their own, but also the collective (集体) [...] To find a partner for example, not only must they like each other, the partner suits me, but we also have to think about how people around and family would regard my partner, whether they like my partner. If the family shows fierce opposition, we generally

do not dare to marry like this. We not only consider clan (家族) but also face (颜面). When we bring the partner out will people around sneer? Will people dislike them? On the matter of finding a partner, not only do we need to satisfy ourselves, but also people around.

It is notable, concerning the collective, she distinguishes between good for face versus good for the clan. A good partner is not only someone who fits in well with one's clan (extended family group), but someone who also presents as a suitable match to 'people around'. In the interview, she articulates more than any other participant, the inter-related concept of *guanxi* – the Chinese concept of social reciprocation. Her father is a government official who arranged a meeting with the university president; her uncle arranged a meeting with a local renowned psychologist; and her former teacher gave her extra interview help. There is a natural ease in the way her family deploy *guanxi* to elevate her prospects. It seems part of the natural order, rather than individualism or ego-centricity, when she says she is thinking of "management roles" and about how she might be able to contribute to "policy making" to improve mental health in China. It is apposite when she uses the Chinese idiom "I feel my family is a miniature of the whole society".

Theme 4: Conflict of Gender Inequality

Finally, gender played out in all of the participants' interviews directly or indirectly. The majority of participants in the study were women, thus the gendered accounts of distress and wellbeing reflect principally a female perspective. Two subthemes are presented.

Devaluation of girls: 'My paternal grandparents did not like girls'. Participant 11 exemplifies an early experience of being devalued as a girl:

I think that the possible reason is that my paternal grandparents did not like girls when I was young, and treated my mother badly, so that my mum would feel angry. She was determined to bring me up as someone with potential, and to strive to vindicate myself (争口气). These things passed down to me. When I was old enough to understand, I'd already grown up to be very loveable with good academic grades.

This participant described herself in the interview as "those sensitive sort of children who like to help others". She is from a family of teachers, and she "rushed to the front" to

volunteer when her grandmother opened a kindergarten. She read English and Computing Science believing that these would “help other people”. She helped me (first author) by being my interpreter in class. The tone of her interview is upbeat and optimistic, with a barely detectable undercurrent of sadness. An existential confusion comes through in the transcript, as when she says “I feel confused that I do not have a clear picture of my future”. She is puzzled by her own confusion and reflects at the end of the interview “I do not have very clear answers”. She is clear, however, on two matters: her opposition to “disguise” and “smiling depressions”, and her mother’s loss of face to the paternal grandparents. She has a felt sense of being wrong and a “harsh voice inside”. By mid-childhood, however, she recalls “I have already become a loveable and academically very good girl” and the grandparents start to like her, which is consistent with her biographical memory.

Traditional gender roles: ‘everyone lives in the eyes of others’. Participant 8 explains the loss of social standing for women who do not marry:

For instance, in my own family a woman should get married at a certain age, and if she doesn’t, no matter how laudable before, she will not be lauded (赞誉) anymore. That’s to say, everyone lives in the eyes of others, which makes me think it’s a major problem.

She elaborates further that “when we are young we are told we need to obey rules, be quiet, not make a noise, and even touch or a hug is forbidden, and no partying and those kinds of things”. Chinese people, she says, do not have an individual self-identity. They depend on their surroundings. This makes the woman’s status dependent on men and marriage. As she puts it in the interview, however laudable, if a woman does not marry she may be brilliant but she is “some kind of loser”. Chinese men, on the other hand, she explains “are really repressed in their feelings according to culture” while “at least women can express loss, especially suffering”. Chinese traditional patriarchy is asserted by Participant 10 as:

From society’s point of view, I think it may be that Chinese traditional culture does not encourage this kind of emotional expression. Like in ancient China, the son must idolise the father, hold him in the greatest esteem, and the wife revere the husband, remain at his side. It is impossible to have very intimate expressions and emotional disclosures between them.

The words “idolise” and “revere” indicate unique aspects of Chinese cultural expression that allude to Confucius’ cardinal relationships. These ascribe absolute authority to fathers, husbands and sons. The cardinal relations held reciprocal obligations, including expectations of benevolence and propriety from the superordinate role. Both men and women may suffer as a result.

In sum, the theme *Conflict of gender inequality* represents participants’ understandings of the role restrictions of women and men. These understandings continue to evolve against a shifting backdrop e.g. China’s one-child and two child policies. Most of the participants were women, but all spoke either explicitly or implicitly about a gendered dimension in their understandings of intimate relationships, childhood socialisation, and social validation in adulthood.

Discussion

The themes analysed reflect the experiences and understandings of a cohort of Chinese clinical psychology students in China. A significant inter-generational disruption permeated several of their accounts: unresolved absences, foreboding, and unfathomable loss. These findings, from a small sample, represent attempts to get as close as possible to personal lived experience, in its own terms. The idiographic lens employed offers a detailed reading of each case, before moving cautiously to general conclusions. We draw out some implications for psychotherapists who work with diverse communities, including Chinese nationals or the Chinese diaspora.

Phenomenological practices are currently undeveloped or absent from the major psychotherapeutic approaches practised in China. Psychodynamic, Cognitive-Behavioural and Systemic Family psychotherapies are modalities that have been adapted for Chinese clients by Chinese practitioners. Liu et al (2013) examined the practise of Systemic Family

Psychotherapy in China. Their analysis revealed that while adhering to their original training, the therapists significantly modified certain interventions e.g. scale questioning, metaphor, interpretation and direct suggestion, to be commensurate with Chinese principles of family and social order. A paper by Guo & Hanley (2015) examined CBT with Chinese and concluded, despite the tremendous cultural differences underpinning wellbeing and illness behaviours, that CBT was well-matched to the Chinese psyche. Namely, its relative directiveness is commensurate with Confucian social hierarchy; structuredness and task orientation with the Chinese preferred focus on pragmatic and tangible concerns; and the use of psycho-education and homework aligns with the high value of education and scholarship in Confucian-based cultures. However, the paper also acknowledged some inadequacies of CBT e.g. the paradoxical lower rate of homework compliance among Chinese clients, which suggests unresolved conflict with the approach (Shen, Alden, Sochting & Tsang, 2006).

Previous research has indicated that Chinese people have a more external locus of control compared to Europeans and Africans, and employ emotion-focused coping comparatively more than problem-focused coping (Leung, 2010). One Chinese student put it: “Chinese start from what they have, and learn to love what is, while Westerners start from what they love, and seek the object and situation to match”. Adjusting the self to suit the external situation, rather than attempting to change the external situation, has been termed ‘passive coping’, but is culturally valued in East Asia. The Chinese psyche is influenced by Taoism, including the dialectical principle of Yin-Yang. According to this system, change is inevitable e.g. happiness implies that unhappiness is coming, and vice versa — each quality in nature contains the seed of its opposite. Chinese Taoist Cognitive Psychotherapy (CTCP), a cultural adaptation of REBT according to eight core principles from the *Tao Te Ching*, adopts this system (Zhang et al., 2002). Therapeutic work with polarities and the concept of paradoxical change in the gestalt therapies, are similarly inspired. The theme *Emotion*

moderation in this study reflected the priority of the outer over the inner, as one participant's parent put it: "Don't you have something to eat and have something to wear? Isn't that good enough?" Another participant spoke of her insistence to "go through the bitterness to achieve a happier life". The ancient literature is elusive on the existence of happiness as a psychological state, implying it rather as an absence of obstacles. Indirect references to health, prosperity, peace, virtue, and comfortable death appear instead. A phenomenological therapeutic approach may be used to support the Chinese client to embody polarities between collectivistic and individualistic value conflicts. For example, a focus on body process may help mitigate the impasse observed in therapeutic work with Chinese clients. One participant stated: "I trust my body because it's my own". A key element of a culturally attuned approach is embodied self-scrutiny on the part of the practitioner, vital in multicultural and multiracial work (e.g. Moodley & Palmer, 2006). This is not an attempt to enter into the other's frame of reference, according to a naive humanism (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Rather it is a coming to an understanding of the matter at hand through different horizons, which requires frank supervision which engages the practitioner's own racism, prejudice, and pre-transference.

This study found the conflicts of gender inequality were a significant feature of the participants' experience. There are indications that the traditional gender inequity is being moderated by China's one-child, now two-child policy, with contemporary attitudes changing as parents focus resources on their only child. Chen (2009) argued in adapting psychotherapy for modern, equalised Chinese couples, psychologists may seek to facilitate self-relation coordination. Therapeutic interventions include: cultivating mutual affection, willingness to change self, containing the other's wish, knowing one's destiny per Confucian ethics, and the Taoist principle to endure through difficulty to change which is imminent.

Adapting psychotherapy to the Chinese psyche has been criticised as pseudo-understanding (Hwang, 2009). China scholars have argued instead for a bottom-up, culturally appropriate, indigenous development of psychological therapies (e.g. Leung & Chen, 2009). The concept of self-cultivation is key in East Asian understandings of psychological maturation. How this concept intersects with individualism is a challenge for therapists working with postmodern Confucian societies. All ‘big five’ indigenous themes in Chinese cultural studies *viz.* collectivism, face, filial piety, guanxi, and Confucian morality, appeared in this study. Ma (2006) has indicated six cultural characteristics that should inform an indigenous Chinese psychotherapy: preference for non-competitiveness and frugality of action; tendencies towards introversion and emotional moderation; inclination towards equality instead of equity; orientation towards a collectivistic way of life; partiality for cognitive conservatism; and an “inordinate” emphasis on face. It was clear that each characteristic implied a significant modification of Western-based therapeutic practices. The self-understandings of our millennial and post-millennial participants, albeit from a restricted demographic, drew freely from globalised discourses, subjecting them to interpretation and re-interpretation. Globalisation, defined as thoughts, values and beliefs of an individual or small group of individuals in one geographical location being able instantly to influence others in a distant location, ensures that no contemporary psychological or psychotherapeutic system can lay claim fully to indigenous status. Effective psychotherapeutic approaches are likely ones attuned to multiple, intersecting, shifting perspectives.

Limitations

One limitation of the research is that participants might have felt obliged to teach the interviewer, as a *huayi*, about the essence of Chineseness. Alternatively, they may have deliberately created self-narratives suitable for foreign export. Another potential limitation was the use of an interpreter in the interviews. Interactions that are assisted by interpreters

involve collaborative meaning making which may alter the speaker's original meanings, because interpreters have their own, albeit altruistic motives (Pugh & Vetere, 2009). Our interpreter was experienced in both simultaneous interpretation and psychotherapy, ensuring a degree of veracity in conveying the participants' lived experiences. According to Gadamer (1960/1989), a conversation is a co-creating of meanings rather than an objective record, and the true conversation is one that neither party intended to have. It would be of interest in further research to triangulate with other perspectives, such as parents' and grandparents', in order to disclose the phenomenon more fully. Lastly, China spans a massive geographical latitude and longitude. For example, its climate ranges from tropical in the far south to subarctic in the far north. There are likely regional differences in Chinese understandings of wellbeing. The majority of the participants' hometowns, although from a range of provinces, were in the geographical centre and north of China. The lived experiences and understandings of more southern and coastal Chinese may vary, and be further moderated by extensive economic reform within the Special Economic Zones concentrated in these regions.

Conclusion

In this study, we present aspects of psychology relevant to contemporary Chinese experience, as understood by a cohort of clinical psychology students. The participants understood conflict around tradition and modernity, self-cultivation versus self-actualisation, to be a major etiology of Chinese emotional distress. The Chinese clinical psychology students in the study expressed a commitment and valuing of the psychological wellbeing that they had discovered first-hand. China has been described as the true other of Eurocentric culture. An implication for psychotherapy with Chinese nationals and the Chinese diaspora is awareness of the deep cultural confrontation, and a requirement for phenomenologically informed practices especially attuned to the encounter with otherness.

Ethics

All procedures were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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