

Working through shame with an intercultural couple in Japan: Transforming negative emotional interactions and expanding positive emotional resources

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Abstract

Japan is often described as an intricate yet contradictory society in which the elements of the most advanced technologies and ancient cultural traditions coexist. Social cohesion rooted in uniformity and ethnic purity has long been the implicit, normative ideal in Japan, while diversity as intrinsic value is still a relatively new concept. In this monocultural milieu, intercultural couples often encounter issues associated with culturally-bound notions of gender roles and the societal pressure to conform to the implicit cultural ideal. The distress of unresolved past emotional injuries may also surface, which often results in the couple getting stuck in negative emotional cycles. This paper will discuss the case of Yoko and Frank, who were treated with an affect-focused approach in which their emotional conflicts, particularly their feelings of shame, were worked through while each partner developed their self- and other-emotion regulating capacity. The therapist also helped the couple develop new patterns of positive emotional interaction.

KEYWORDS

diversity, emotion-focused couples' therapy, intercultural couples, Japan, positive emotions, shame

1 | JAPAN AND ITS DIVERSITY ISSUES

Japan is frequently represented as an intricate yet contradictory society in which the elements of the most advanced technologies and ancient cultural traditions coexist to create a distinct esthetic and moral order with interpersonal rules of conduct impermeable to outsiders. Japan is a cosmopolitan country, with approximately 30 million people visiting Japan for sightseeing each year. There are 2.56 million legal foreign residents, of whom 7.5% are from China, followed in numbers by Koreans and Vietnamese, with those from the United States making up 3.7% of the total. Japanese people also travel overseas: Last year 17.3 million Japanese nationals traveled abroad, out of a population of 126.7 million people. Yet in spite of increasing globalization, Japan maintains its ideal of mono-culturalism by emphasizing a singular national culture distinct from all others, particularly from those of western countries but also from those of neighboring countries such as China and South Korea, which, from a larger international perspective, share many very similar cultural practices.

The predominance of mono-culturalism may be partly related to Japan's history, which can be characterized by periods of openness to influences from the outside world followed by long periods of isolation. Before the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Edo government maintained a foreign relations policy for approximately 250 years that denied entry to foreigners with the exception of a very limited, highly controlled number of Dutch merchants, craftspeople, and doctors. One of the goals of the Edo-era shogunate was to expunge Catholic religious influences introduced to Japan by the Portuguese. This seclusion enriched many unique cultural practices and economic developments in Japan. However, following the Meiji Restoration, the nation's urgent task was to incorporate technological developments from western nations to accelerate the process of modernization. The slogan *wakon yōsai*, which means "maintaining Japanese spirit and acquiring and integrating Western Technology," has long mobilized Japanese people in an incessant effort to advance economic and technological development while maintaining close emotional ties to sources of traditional Japanese identity. Though it's unusual to hear this slogan spoken aloud in contemporary times, many aspects of Japanese people's behavior are based on the notion that they can maintain two or more potentially contradictory and conflicting moral principles without feeling a sense of internal dissonance or a loss of a sense of personal integrity.

Although Japanese society has long valued uniformity, more recently Japanese people seek harmony between collectivist and individualist values. The dominance of uniformity, however, can easily be seen from the way people dress to their facial expressions, gestures, and other mannerisms. People are mindful not to stand out in public and generally conform to the same set of unspoken yet powerful social and interpersonal rules. Violation of these rules results in a momentary yet still painful punishment: an other's accusatory stare laden with contempt, disgust, or disapproval. There is a strong sense of societal shame around deviating from what is considered socially appropriate behavior, which is considered necessary to maintain the social order.

In Japan, diversity does not yet have the cachet it does elsewhere, though this is rapidly changing, at least on a superficial level. Xenophobia is still shared widely and openly without the censorship of political correctness, and there is still a strong tendency to prefer purity, sameness, and oneness to diversity, difference, and divergence in terms of culture and gender issues. Bi-culturalism evokes mixed feelings in Japan. On Japanese TV and in fashion magazines, you will see quite a few "hafu" (young people with one Japanese and one non-Japanese parent, usually—but not always—of European descent) performing as "talent" or working as models. Their popularity comes from their exotic look combining Asian and non-Asian features; they are rarely spotlighted for their intellectual or performance skills. Children of two expatriate Japanese parents often encounter problems "fitting in" once they return to Japan. They are called *kikoku shijo* and are admired for their dual-language skills as well as their knowledge of life abroad, but their lack of understanding of established interpersonal codes of conduct cause many to be somewhat shunned. There is surface-level acceptance and admiration for a mixture of other cultures with Japanese culture. However, this acceptance is often limited to cultural artifacts and seldom extends to cultural practices, so it rarely penetrates the underlying monocultural tendency.

1.1 | Psychotherapy and couples therapy

Since the 1990s, the field of psychotherapy has been rapidly developing and expanding in Japan in response to social problems such as growing rates of truancy and bullying in middle schools, depression, and other mental health issues in the workplace, the consistently high-suicide rate, and two major earthquakes (Iwakabe & Enns, 2012). However, attending counseling and psychotherapy is still not very common. The stigma around seeking mental health services is still high and people usually do not seek counseling until problems become quite severe.

Couples' therapy tends to lag behind the most. There is still no formal graduate program that teaches couples to work in Japan, though there are family therapists who work with couples. The majority of couples' therapists in Japan are either Japanese therapists who were educated and trained in masters programs abroad or expatriate therapists whose first language is English. Couples therapy is in greater demand amongst expatriates and intercultural couples with one partner coming from an English-speaking country. Therapists who work with couples are usually bilingual and have some experience living in English-speaking countries. They, therefore, rely on their clinical and personal experiences with other cultures to guide their clinical work.

However, this does not mean that there are few troubled couples in Japan. Indeed, marriage, or marital dissonance, has been a consistent focus of the media over the last 40 years. Recently, despair and anxiety associated with marriage have peaked in Japan, with more and more people choosing not to marry at all. Divorce within the household, or *kateinai rikon*, a term coined in the 1980s to describe couples who are emotionally estranged yet who continue to live together for the sake of economic and social forces against divorce, is very common. A survey in 2012 showed that about 50% of married couples in Japan do not share physical intimacy. The survey also showed that the number of married people who had had an intimate relationship outside their marriage tripled over a 10-year period. Indeed, marriage and intimate relationships are where many people experience persistent difficulties, while at the same time most people feel a great deal of reservation and reluctance about discussing couples' problems and conflicts. There is a strong sense of shame around couples' difficulties. Most typically, Japanese couples ask their parents to intervene when they face major conflicts and difficulties such as affairs, debts, and addiction. People tend to view marital problems as a sign of weakness and a lack of maturity; few people are willing to talk to an outsider unless they share a strong bond of trust and confidence unless the situation is completely intolerable.

1.2 | Intercultural couples in Japan

The number of intercultural marriages in 2017 was 21,475, or 3.7% of the total number of marriages in Japan, and this has remained constant for the last 10 years. Historically, intercultural marriage has been regarded with mixed feelings. After World War II, there were some Japanese war brides who married American soldiers and moved to the United States. Some stories describe their fulfilled and economically secure lives at a time when in Japan food was scarce and the future uncertain, whereas others tell of tragic isolation and exploitation. With the economic prosperity of the 1980s, coupled with a shortage of women willing to marry and take up the back-breaking labor of farm life, farmers in the countryside increasingly turned to import their spouses from the Philippines and other neighboring Asian countries where, like Japan, arranged marriage was common within certain social strata.

There seems to be less inhibition about intercultural marriage these days, with more young people being exposed to other cultures. There are also romantic views about a kind of love that transcends language and cultural barriers. For many people who marry European or American men, there is an element of protest against prevailing views of gender and marriage roles. In Japan, it is still commonly assumed that parenting and domestic labor and parenting are women's work and that it is only natural that married couples lose any romantic feeling toward each other as they get older. Women, in particular, are widely considered to have lost their sexual attractiveness at an alarmingly young age. Intercultural marriage may be sought to avoid this rather pessimistic married life course. In spite of difficulties that are often projected onto intercultural marriages, the divorce rate is not higher when you

consider certain gender/culture configurations. For example, marriages involving American men and Japanese women have a lower divorce rate than do Japanese-only marriages.

Couples therapy with intercultural couples requires working with the influences of cultural expectations around gender and family roles as much as a couple's relational dynamics (Bustamante, Nelson, Henriksen, & Monakes, 2011). Couples often encounter communication issues both in verbal and nonverbal communication. Although they may feel sufficiently connected initially when their affection and attraction for each other helps in overcoming some of the cultural gaps, when difficult issues surface, miscommunication occurs more easily and the couple may be confronted with irreconcilable differences in ways of expressing one's complaints and hurts. In Japanese culture, communication is often more implicit than explicit. There is a traditional esthetic value placed in leaving much unsaid and reading between the lines, and the ability to sense one's interlocutor's emotional state is often regarded as an indication of true, deep, and mature love. Such a communication style is often contrasted with a more assertive, highly verbal style often praised in North American and European cultures. Differences in communication style in addition to differences in linguistic ability easily become obstacles to effectively discussing some of the most intimate and personal feelings, which requires communicating with subtlety and nuance regardless of culture.

Another challenge for intercultural couples in Japan is child-rearing and extended family relationships. A strong bond is usually maintained between Japanese parents and their adult children, even after they are married. When a mother works, grandparents often help with childcare. According to a survey of grandparents, about 50% of grandparents regularly take care of their grandchildren and were consulted about health issues, while about 40% are regularly consulted about education and discipline (Kitamura, 2008). Japanese grandparents' involvement in child-rearing is often much needed, as there are long waiting lists to get into nursery schools in large cities like Tokyo. However, this can also cause multigenerational conflicts, especially in the context of intercultural marriage, as grandparents may have very different values from the couple.

1.3 | Affect-focused couples' therapy

The therapist in the case described below assumed an integrative affect-focused couples' therapy approach combining two distinctive yet converging theoretical approaches to couples' therapy: Emotion-Focused Therapy for couples (EFT-C; Greenberg & Goldman, 2008) and Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy for Couples (AEDPfc; Mars, 2011). EFT-C was originally developed by Greenberg and Johnson (1988) on the basic premise that disclosing underlying vulnerable yet adaptive feelings related to unmet adult needs within the couple facilitates transformation of the problematic interactional patterns that result in a couple's conflicts. EFT-C also derived many ideas from the empirical research and clinical practice of individual Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT, Greenberg, 2002) the therapeutic goal of which is to help anxious, depressed, and traumatized individuals access core maladaptive emotional schemes and learn how to self-soothe and regulate their deepest core fears and shame, and transform these by accessing adaptive emotions. In couples' therapy, partners reveal underlying vulnerable feelings based on unmet adult needs for closeness and recognition by the other partner; to be seen and received is crucial to restructuring emotional bonds (Greenberg & Iwakabe, 2011). Transformation of the emotional pain of unmet childhood needs is often required to change unmet adult needs for closeness and validation that are central to a couple's conflict.

The therapist also incorporated interventions from Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy (AEDP), integrative psychotherapy whose foundation lies in emotion theory, short-term psychodynamic therapy, and attachment theories and research (Fosha, 2000). In its basic stance, AEDP and EFT are in agreement: facilitation of underlying affect to heal the deepest emotional injuries within the context of a safe and empathic relationship. What AEDP offers in addition to EFT-C is its focus on positive emotional interactions and relational interventions. In AEDP, positive emotions such as joy, a sense of connection, and contentment are worked through to not only cement change that was achieved in sessions but also to expand and amplify such experiences for the better. AEDP cultivates the client's capacity to feel positive emotions and receive empathy, affirmation, and love from the other.

In couples' therapy (Mars, 2011), the concept of witnessing is particularly helpful, in which partners are fully present to see, feel, and be with the other's emotional experience and thus become a 'true other', building a deep, caring, and authentic connection. The couple's relationship becomes a safe and nurturing haven in which the two grow and transform. These foci are important in couples to work as couples cannot see positive aspects of their relationship when they are fixated on their problems.

EFT and AEDP are used by clinicians in many countries including in Asia (Levitt, Whelton, & Iwakabe, 2018). With intercultural couples, it is important to pay attention to culturally based display rules so that the therapist can teach partners to accurately perceive each other's emotional experience. It is also helpful for the therapist to bring up a particular emotion that the couple has trouble with, such as anger or shame, and to provide psychoeducation about how anger or shame is expressed differently depending on cultural and individual factors. This can reveal certain cultural assumptions about emotions that feed into miscommunication and misunderstanding. The therapist needs to be respectful and appreciative of the varied cultural understandings of certain emotions.

2 | CASE ILLUSTRATION

2.1 | Presenting problems and client description

Yoko and Frank came to the author's office when they were referred by the author's colleague. Their relationship had become so strained that they did not speak to each other and often didn't make eye contact for a few months at a time. Yoko would smile when she talked with their son, Kai, and would go out happily with her friends. But she refused to spend time with Frank and whenever he talked to her, she didn't attempt to conceal her annoyance. If Frank brought up their relationship with Yoko she refused to discuss it, saying that there was no point. For over 2 years Frank wanted to have couples' therapy but Yoko refused, saying that it was too expensive and also that it was for mentally weak people. After Frank persuaded Yoko that their frequent and explosive arguments were affecting their son emotionally, she reluctantly agreed to come with him, but only once. Neither of them considered divorce an option: Yoko did not want to divorce again. For Frank, this was the best thing he had in his life. Both of them wanted to make a good family for their son.

The couple married 5 years ago when Yoko was 6 months pregnant with their son, Kai. It was just months after Frank had arrived in Tokyo for an English teaching position that his friend recommended to him. At the time, Frank did not have any plans to either stay in Japan or to leave for something else. He worked many different jobs, most lasting less than a year. He wanted to change his life. He was interested in leading a life that was different from the one he had, which was filled with difficulties, disappointment, and boredom. On the other hand, Yoko was newly divorced after a 2-year marriage that had brought her feelings of alienation, isolation, and confinement.

Frank grew up with his mother and his maternal grandmother, who moved in with them soon after his parents' separation. He was 3 years old when his father left and Frank had only a vague recollection of him. His mother didn't want to talk about him, while his grandmother spoke ill of him, if at all. Frank gradually stopped mentioning his father to them. Frank often felt like a failure: he wasn't handsome, he didn't do well in sports, and he didn't have many friends. After graduating from college, he took on a series of jobs to pay off his student loans: store clerk, telephone salesperson, and so forth. He did not do badly but was never interested in any of the things he did. He had a few girlfriends but the relationships did not last more than a year. When a relationship got serious, he felt burdened and he then became cold, closed, and emotionally unavailable, which led to a similar pattern of painful breakups. He never understood his motive behind this behavior clearly but he had begun to think that growing up with two women for whom he felt emotionally responsible had something to do with it. When he felt like he was running out of things to do he heard from a friend who was enjoying his life in Tokyo; he decided to take up a job offer in an English school.

Yoko was divorced and she worked as a manager. Yoko comes from a typical good family. Her father was a stern man who worked at a local government office all his life. Her mother stayed home to raise three girls. Yoko

appreciated her parents' support throughout her life. She felt sympathetic toward her mother who was very talented and intelligent but decided to stay home for the family. Yoko also felt conflicted about their values. Yoko's father insisted that she go to a women's university to study home economics or nutrition because that would be a better life for a woman than going to an elite university. He was afraid that that would make her too challenging for men and would be detrimental to establishing a good family life. Although Yoko rebelled against this idea, she ultimately obeyed her father's wishes by marrying a man whom her parents assessed would make a good husband and father. Their marriage did not work out at all. Her husband forced a strongly traditional gender role on her. He wanted her to do all the household chores. He wanted her to come home before him to cook and wait for his arrival. He complained that she was not "loving" or "gentle" and said that she lacked lovable, feminine qualities. Yoko thought that this was appalling and based on prejudice, yet she also felt that it had some truth: she always felt that she lacked a certain feminine quality and that she was "too much" for men.

After the divorce, Yoko started going out with a series of western men. Initially, it was liberating for her not to have to think about marriage, instead of enjoying relatively noncommitted relationships. She also enjoyed a feminine side that seemed to emerge when she was with western men, who she saw as taking the lead. Frank was romantic, and they shared simple yet relaxing and fulfilling times watching movies and going for day trips. Yoko also supported Frank through a series of job interviews that were very stressful for him. Frank spoke no Japanese and she enjoyed expressing herself in English, which made her feel freer and more relaxed.

Unexpectedly, Yoko became pregnant. This was just too much for her to deal with: her parents were too conservative to accept her marrying a non-Japanese man, not to mention getting pregnant before marriage! But Yoko also felt that she was at an age that not continuing this pregnancy might mean that she would never have a child. Their relationship immediately started to deteriorate. Yoko became quite worried about their financial status as a couple. Frank was very scared of this new responsibility. His father left before he was three and he did not know what it meant to be a father. After Kai was born, Yoko worked long hours and was often upset about Frank. Frank didn't understand why she had to be so cold and rejecting. Frank sought her love and tried his best to rekindle their romances by buying flowers and planning evenings alone. When he invited her on these dates she didn't just say no, she also laughed at him for being childish and was often annoyed that he didn't understand how busy she was and how financially strained they were.

2.2 | Case formulation

The important areas of case formulation in emotion-focused couples' therapy is how couples regulate their own and each others' emotions, forming typical interactional patterns that result in deadlocks, with each spouse's emotional and attachment wounds and injuries intersecting to create conflicts and collisions. In addition, the therapist needs to identify primary adaptive emotions that each partner needs to feel and express and to have accepted and validated by the other, as well as primary maladaptive emotions that each feels and feels invalidated by.

One of the core emotional conflicts in this couple developed around the shame that both felt, yet felt differently according to their respective cultural values. There were a few different layers of shame for both Yoko and Frank. Yoko felt rebellious toward traditional gender and family values. She also felt ashamed of not fitting into Japanese society or being "feminine" according to Japanese men's standard. Her shame was related to her parents and the implicit gender roles and societal values that she had fought against for many years.

On the other hand, Frank had a sense of core shame: he felt worthless and that he would never amount to anything. He was insecure about his self-worth and needed someone to reassure him that he is lovable. Shame was well covered and hidden when the two were dating. Yoko was able to experience herself as an independent woman who could enjoy romance and relationships without being tied down by marriage and gender role values. Frank felt liberated from his past failures. Yoko appreciated his ability to be present and be with her. Their relationship was a place where the two could be free of the weight of social and cultural burdens as long as it stayed as it was.

Yoko was devastated by her unexpected pregnancy. Yoko's family values flooded back. Yoko was obsessed with the financial worries that she knew would be the first thing her father would focus on. She dismissed Frank because he didn't provide their family with financial security. With the emotional burden of forming a family, Yoko and Frank lost the emotion regulating functions that they had for each other. Frank was not producing positive emotions in Yoko, while he only contributed to the worsening of negative emotions such as shame, anxiety, and anger. Yoko used to validate Frank's sense of worth by receiving, welcoming, and enjoying his affection and kindness. However, she was now constantly telling him that he was not enough, provoking his sense of shame. This was particularly hard for him: as a fatherless man, he already felt inadequate to his new role. Yoko's attack only made him feel bad and he did not have a clue as to how he could change. The couple needed to de-shame their relationship and also learn how to regulate and transform each other's shame without reacting with anger and resentment. They also needed to learn to help each other work through gender role values as they built their family.

Finally, the cultural aspects of their relationship needed to be addressed. Frank mostly saw the independent, "westernized" part of Yoko when they were dating. Yoko also saw Frank's personality as he was in Japan, but she didn't know the many years of struggle in his background. They were both seeking distance from pasts of which they were not proud. However, as they started to form a family, they needed to access their past experiences and share them with each other because the past is an important resource in building their own culture as an intercultural family, regardless of whether these past experiences were good or bad. They both hid their past experiences from each other but the hurt and shame still lingered, which made it more difficult to appreciate each other's feelings, intentions, and values. They needed to open up to and hear each other.

2.3 | Course of treatment

Frank brought Yoko, who agreed to attend only one session. After the first session, Yoko agreed to come for a few more sessions until there were some changes in their relationship. They found couples sessions helpful in reducing the frequency of their arguments and so decided to come for a total of 12 sessions. Sessions were held bi-weekly except the last few sessions, which were held at longer intervals.

Initially, Yoko looked displeased but also somewhat relieved to find that the therapist was not an authoritarian or traditional-looking Japanese man in a suit, as one might expect of someone in the position of a university professor or specialist. The therapist affirmed for the couple that visiting a couples' therapist is not an easy thing to do and that he admired their courage and willingness to improve their relationship. Yoko looked relieved. When Yoko's facial expression seemed to soften, the therapist invited her to speak about her emotional reaction; she said that she had given up trying to improve their marital relationship but still wanted to do anything she could for Kai and that was why she had come. Her voice trembled and she wiped away tears. Frank seemed to sense this was happening in the corner of his sight, but he was visibly stiff and did not turn toward her, as if he had decided not to pay attention.

Therapist: (To Yoko) I can see that there are a lot of feelings around this.

Yoko: (Nods and wipes tears).

Frank: (Shakes his head, sighs).

Therapist: (To Frank) Frank, I see that you are seeing her pain but something holds you back from reaching out to her in her pain.

Frank: I am surprised that she is crying because she never does. But she is saying that she is doing it for Kai but not for us. I just feel bad listening to it. What about us? Shouldn't that come first?

Yoko: (To the therapist) He is only thinking of himself. It is always me, me, and me. I don't have a husband. I have two children.

Frank: (To Therapist) You see, this is what it is like to speak to her. It is not possible to have a decent conversation.

Frank thought that Yoko was so resentful that she rejected his affection. It was clear that both were resentful of each other and in distress. Frank perceived her pain as a negative evaluation of him and did not see that when she was actually in pain she was potentially receptive to his affection. Frank grew up with two women whose negative emotions overwhelmed him. For Yoko, showing her vulnerable side to Frank was not easy: she had always been emotionally independent and it felt wrong to depend on a man. Therefore, when this vulnerable part was not accepted by Frank, Yoko quickly and viciously attacked back, which also made her feel bad about herself. The therapist introduced the concept of escalating cycles and explained to them how they get locked into this cycle. The therapist also emphasized that therapy was not about finding out which one was at fault but acknowledging that both partners contributed equally yet differently to their problems. The therapist ended the session by affirming their decision to come to therapy to discuss issues that were not easy to disclose to a stranger. Both Frank and Yoko felt hopeful and they agreed to try therapy out for a few more sessions.

The homework given was to observe their interactions and internal experience. They were also asked to note any positive emotional experiences that happened between them during the week, however, short. As a result, they were more self-conscious and refrained from potentially hurtful comments that they used to unwittingly and carelessly make. The following segment comes from an early session held after Yoko returned from a weekend trip to her hometown. Yoko was very excited that the therapist had a colleague from the same area.

Yoko: Do you know it well? Yes, they don't even want their children to marry someone from neighboring towns! It is a very old and closed world.

Th: So they are really together and making a society of their own!

Yoko: Yeah. (smiles and sighs, suddenly looking sad and tearful).

Th: What's happening Yoko?

Yoko: It just makes me feel a bit sad. I really love my family. I must have believed in me that I would have that sort of peaceful family life.

Frank: (sighs, shakes his head). I feel really bad. I can never provide that for you.

Th: What are you feeling, Frank?

Frank: It feels like I am blamed for what she cannot have, like I destroyed her dream. She is angry.

Th: Would you look at Yoko? I am not so sure if she is angry. Tell me what she is feeling.

Frank: (glances at Yoko and looks toward the therapist, looking upset) Well, I don't know. I am not so sure, but I feel like I am being blamed.

Th: (to Frank) Would you look again? Just feel what she is feeling. (a pause). I feel that she is sad. She is just sad. She is not angry. She is not blaming you right at this moment.

Frank: It feels like I spoiled her dream by marrying her.

Th: Let's stay with her sadness. I wonder if you can respond to her sadness.

Frank: I am sorry that you cannot be there in the same way you used to be.

Th: (to Yoko) It sounds like there was a very peaceful life that you imagined you might have, though you also wanted to get away from it, too.

Yoko: Yes, I love my extended family. It just felt so great to be surrounded by them for the New Year's holidays. Playing together and laughing together. It was just so joyful and peaceful. We have grown up and now we are all scattered all over the country. My parents are getting old. I don't really see my relatives.

Th: (Frank). What is it like listening to her? What's your internal reaction?

Frank: Yeah, there is sadness. It is like lots of losses.

Th: (Frank). Would you let her know what you felt?

Frank: (To Yoko) Well, I hear your sadness. It sounds like you had a wonderful childhood surrounded by such warm people....

Th: (To Frank) I am happy to hear that you are hearing her and seeing her. (To Yoko) What is it like to hear him feel in response to your tears?

Yoko: It feels good. It feels good to be heard.

Frank: I always felt that it was all her complaints about what I cannot provide her with. But I think she had a wonderful childhood and it must have been nice (the therapist gestures that Frank should talk to Yoko directly and Frank sits facing Yoko) ... To have that kind of a large family. I wish I had that. I don't know if Kai can have a close connection with his cousins but I hope that we can provide together that kind of feeling of peacefulness for him.

Yoko: (to Frank) I take him there to my hometown because it is so important to me.

Frank: Not against me. I do understand now. I know that is the warm place you want him to feel.

Yoko: Thank you for understanding me.

Th: (To Yoko) What is it like to have that understanding from him?

Yoko: It feels good. My family is so important. I don't want them to suffer. They don't know the world outside them. I don't think I can make them understand us. I also feel so guilty to make Frank suffer too. So when he tells me that he doesn't feel bad, it feels like a huge weight off of my chest.

Th: (To Yoko) Would you tell that directly to Frank?

Yoko: (Looking at Frank) Thank you. I already feel so bad about them but when you don't attack me, I feel so relieved. It is good to have you understand because I don't know if anyone can.

Frank: (a big sigh of relief) I see it. I see it differently now. I see you really love your family. Perhaps, we can give the same feeling to Kai together.

Yoko: (tearful). Yes. That would be nice.

Th: (to Yoko) Lots of feelings in you right now for Frank. Would you put them into words and tell him?

Yoko: (To Frank) I feel like we are together and I can rely on you. I can be open.

Th: (To Yoko). Would you tell him again that you can rely on him?

Yoko: (a bit shyly) I can trust you.

Th: (To Frank) Let yourself feel and just let that sink in. (After a pause) I want to ask you, Yoko first. What did it feel like inside to say that to him?

Yoko: I feel open. Being myself. Without a chip on my shoulder.

Th: Good. Frank, how about you? What did it feel like to receive that?

Frank: Very different. In a way, this is what I always wanted. I feel strong for some reason. Proud.

In this segment, Yoko and Frank worked through a few important issues. Yoko's sense of connection to her family comes from her childhood. Although she later developed strong conflicts with the value system of her hometown, she still cherished her childhood and a strong sense of family. Whenever she tried to speak about it in the past, Frank simply got upset and attacked her family as 'prejudiced and primitive,' while Yoko retaliated and belittled Frank for not knowing anything about family as he didn't have one. When Yoko's vulnerability, as well as her child self, was seen and accepted by Frank, she was able to rely on him. This, in turn, helped Frank feel strong. The vicious cycle was interrupted and a positive new cycle was starting. They were able to respond to what the other needed. Frank was able to let go of the exclusion and prejudice from Yoko's family and stayed with Yoko's hurt.

This piece of the work, on the one hand, shows the importance of working with new emotional experience and focusing on positive experiences in the couple, but also accommodating the social realities that are very hard to change for the couple. Facing and confronting prejudice in the family can be productive and can cement ties for some couples, but it may also evoke helplessness. Couples can still connect and share their feelings and through becoming empathically attuned to each other's hurt, cement their emotional connection, which Yoko and Frank were able to do.

To balance time together and time apart, the therapist proposed a weekend assignment in which the family spends time together while also giving Yoko some free time. The couple agreed. That weekend, when Kai and Frank went to a toy store and bought a kite, Yoko had 2 hr to herself. Frank was happy that he got Kai interested in something other than videogames. They went to the park outside the mall and started playing with the kite. Yoko sat on a bench and watched. The kite was in the sky for a while when the wind suddenly died down. The kite swooped down, falling into a tree. Kai was upset. Frank was also upset but stayed positive, suggesting solutions: "Let's go find a long stick" "We can borrow a ladder from the store."

They found a stick. Frank lifted Kai onto his shoulders. They were not reaching high enough. Kai was getting very upset. Frank was still providing hope to Kai, saying that they could come back to get it. Yoko joined to soothe Kai and they finally left without the kite. The following vignette comes from a session just after this weekend.

Frank: (Sighs) I was so helpless with a kite up the tree and we just could not reach it.

He was so upset. I was also upset.

Th: (The therapist noticed that Yoko was not looking at Frank with her usual critical and distancing gaze, but with a rather affectionate expression. To Yoko:) Tell us what you are feeling. I noticed that this incident seems to touch you.

Yoko: (Softly) I felt good watching the two. Frank was really making an effort to salvage the kite and attend to Kai's feelings. They looked like real father-and-son.

Frank was surprised by her reaction and looked toward Yoko without making an eye contact.

Th: (To Yoko) Would you tell Frank directly how you felt about him?

Yoko: (looking toward Frank without making eye contact) You did what you could. That was very good. You were a very good father.

Th: (To Yoko) What did you feel about Frank? Would you let him know?

Yoko: (Still not making eye contact) You are a good father. You and Kai looked happy playing together.

Th: (To both of them) This is so important. I wonder if you can both look at each other in this moment to see how you feel. Go ahead Yoko.

Yoko: (smiling with embarrassment) You did such a wonderful thing. I watched you two as you played and also when the kite got tangled up in the tree. You were really working hard. You were attending to him the best you could. It was quite good.

Therapist: (to Frank) What do you feel inside as you hear this?

Frank: I cannot believe it. I just felt so bad and powerless that I wasn't getting the kite down. Like I felt so incompetent. I felt like I was a failure as a father.

Frank was visibly touched but still was not receiving the magnitude of her feeling and this event fully.

Th: Yoko, would you tell him again so that he can really feel what you are feeling.

Yoko: I felt like you are a very good father. You are a very good father being with Kai with all your heart, trying to do the best you could. I really felt respect for you. I felt that we have a nice family together.

Frank: (tearful). Thank you, thank you for seeing me.

Th: (To both) Let's just stay here for a bit. Is that okay?

(To Frank) What do you feel inside as you receive this from Yoko?

Frank: I am still absorbing it. I feel lighter. I feel warm. This is the feeling I wanted to feel.

2.4 | Prognosis and outcome

The couple continued to come for three more sessions. They still had some arguments but were learning to respond to each other with empathy and support. The couple started conversations about topics that used to evoke frustration and anxiety: they started talking about finances, moving to the US and also about Kai's future education.

They also regularly visited Frank's friend's cottage in the mountains where they stayed some weekends in exchange for tending the garden. The family built a fire in the backyard and barbequed in the evenings. Doing things together felt relaxing and they also shared the excitement and felt like they were creating their own space where they were free from outside concerns. Yoko also invited her mother to stay with them for a few days. Frank appreciated being a part of preparing for these visits because he was able to feel Yoko's effort to include him in her family.

They were also able to enjoy the small amounts of time they had together. For example, they would have a cup of coffee together as they walked home after picking Kai up from after school care. Frank started to cook one evening a week. This was very stressful for him because he didn't think he was a good cook and it was a lot of work

for him. He knew that his attitude of willingness to challenge himself was important for the family bonds to grow stronger. Frank was still frustrated with Yoko's lack of sexual desire for him. However, they also had more opportunities to hold hands on the street and other casual touching was more frequent.

2.5 | Clinical practice and summary

The first important step in the couples' work was the therapist's recognition and affirmation of the hard work done jointly by this couple in building an intercultural family in a cultural milieu that is not friendly nor sympathetic to international couples and families. The therapist needed to not only recognize the significance and contribution of the society at large to the couple's difficulties but also explicitly communicate this to the couple.

Second, the couple needed to learn about the emotions that they were troubled with. Both Yoko and Frank thought that they were troubled with anger; however, that was secondary to a more painful emotion, shame, which they both experienced, but differently. Yoko had a strong sense of societal shame. She felt that she had failed in her marriage. She lacked the financial security that other Japanese people had. She felt that she was failing her parents' expectations. Frank felt that he had failed in his life. The couple needed to respond to one another's vulnerability and reach out with empathy and compassion, which resulted in transforming negative self-views and in building emotional connection. The work helped both partners develop the capacity to regulate their own and the other's emotions. Working with the couple's interactional patterns in the here-and-now that lead to negative, distressing emotions is very useful when working with intercultural couples. It opens up discussion about internal emotional experiences that are not always communicated accurately to the other partner. The couple can also experience the immediate benefits of their new behaviors.

Third, the therapist emphasized positive emotional experiences as they occurred both in and outside of sessions. Building on and expanding on positive experiences was important, particularly in the early phase of therapy as the couple did not have sufficient positive emotional resources to tackle distressing problems. This included giving the couple assignments that were designed to engage them in new behaviors that would increase positive emotions each experienced for the other.

Finally, the sense of building a shared culture for the couple is important: Instead of looking at and evaluating each other through the lens of their separate cultural standards, the couple can recognize and appreciate what the two create out of their intercultural experiences. The therapist needs to notice and affirm such creative attempts that will empower the couple to thrive in a cultural and social environment where cultural otherness is not sufficiently appreciated and welcomed.

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