

Eastern Philosophy in Couple and Family Therapy

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A. **Name of Theory:** Eastern Philosophy in Couple and Family Theory

B. **Synonyms** (optional section, use * after each synonym in body of text)

C. Introduction

Psychotherapy is often regarded as the connecting point between the East and West. Many of the core concepts in psychotherapy can be traced back to the key elements within the three main Eastern philosophical schools of thought – Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. In particular, the global movement of mindfulness, which stems from Buddhist thinking, has influenced the development of couple and family therapy in the 21st century.

D. Prominent Key Figures

Gautama Siddhartha, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Liezi, Confucius, Jay Haley, Milton Erickson, Gregory Bateson

E. Description

Eastern thought was first formally introduced to Western philosophy and psychology when British scholars began to translate Indian spiritual texts such as *Bhagavad Gita* in the 1700s (Germer, Segel, & Fulton, 2013, p.11). Western philosophy is broadly defined as striving to find and prove the “truth,” while Eastern philosophy accepts the truth as given and is more interested in the state of “being.” The term, “Eastern philosophy”, covers a broad spectrum of concepts, thoughts, and philosophies from various regions including India, China, Korea, and Japan. At times, the term includes Persian, Arabic, Babylonian, and Jewish philosophies from across the Middle East. Since the 1700s, ideas from Eastern philosophy have become widespread in psychotherapy literature. Despite its Western origins, the art of psychotherapy often involves addressing elements of the body, mind, and soul, which challenges the logical thinking or established truth that Western philosophy is

known to embrace. Thus, it could be argued that psychotherapy is a field where East and West are bound to intertwine.

Some aspects of Eastern philosophy are found in the theories and practices of almost all of the founders and prominent figures in the family therapy field. Many of the core concepts of family therapy, such as holism, interdependence, circularity, and homeostasis, are conspicuously similar to the essence of the Eastern worldview, where both call for awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things that are inseparable parts of a cosmic whole (Capra, 2010). The current body of literature on the mutual interrelation of all things that are inseparable parts of a cosmic whole (Capra, 2010). Although these three mainstream Eastern philosophical schools of thought are quite different from one another, their distinctions are often blurred when applied to clinical discussion. For the sake of clarity, a brief description of each is outlined below:

Buddhism

Buddhism was founded between 563BC and 483BC by an Indian prince named Gautama Siddhartha, later known as Buddha. He lived in the comfort of his palace until the age of 29 years, when he first had a chance to catch a glimpse of the outside world. On the four occasions that Buddha left his palace, all he witnessed was human misery, including giving birth, aging, falling ill, and dying. These experiences of human suffering had such a profound impact on him that he decided to become a monk and devote his life to the pursuit of enlightenment.

Buddhism draws heavily from Hindu philosophy, such as the belief in reincarnation and the search for ways to achieve salvation. Buddha himself wrote nothing. After his passing, his immediate disciples began to preserve his teachings through enforced memorization and oral recitations. The *Pali Canon* is a result of such process that took four centuries, from 5th century BCE to the 1st century BCE, before it became a complete written version.

Buddhism focuses on the quest to enlightenment, which involves four noble truths. The first truth is that life contains inevitable suffering, from birth to aging to death. The second truth is that suffering is caused by desire and the craving for its gratification. The third truth is the elimination of suffering by extinguishing the three fires of greed, delusion, and hatred. This then leads to the fourth truth – the path to the cessation of suffering, a state in which “no passion remains,” and attainment of Nirvana. Buddha believed that people are in a state of endless suffering and the only way to extinguish suffering is to eliminate desires and achieve a state of “no-self.” By rejecting the common notion of the self, one could be free from the suffering associated with it.

Around 100CE, Buddhism split into two main schools: Theravada, the classic Buddhist teachings as mentioned above, and Mahayana, which focuses on the notion of “emptiness.” The view of Mahayana is that all reality is devoid of any discernable content or description. The Mahayana Heart Sutra maintains that everything about our identities and the ordinary world we reside in is empty and has no true content. It proclaims that even the four noble truths are empty. The Heart Sutra questions the basic Theravada teachings that distinguishes between the ordinary realm of life, death, and suffering, and the realm of Nirvana, in which suffering is extinguished. It suggests that the two realms are actually the

same. Not only is the ordinary realm of life and death empty of descriptive content, even Nirvana, the very solution to our misery, has no descriptive content.

To further grasp the notion of emptiness, Zen Buddhism was founded in China in around the 5th century. It is renowned for its paradoxical, meditative puzzles. It focuses on experience, resists verbal coaching, and has no creed. In Zen, enlightenment cannot be attained through rational discourse and doctrine. The experience of enlightenment is transmitted from the mind of a seasoned teacher to the student in training. Zen can be regarded as the most mesmerizing aspect in Buddhism that has captured the fascination of intellectuals and psychotherapists worldwide.

Taoism

Taoism emerged in the 4th century BCE, during China's Warring States period. In Taoism, the way to end social chaos was to return to nature or to the time before the appearance of the feudal system in China. Taoism is taught through three important texts. The first one is the *Tao Te Ching* or *Book of the Way*, believed to be written by Laozi around 450 BCE. *Tao Te Ching* is an anthology of sayings, specifying a "hands off" policy. It was compiled to instruct kings on government. The second one is *Zhuangzi*, written by Zhuangzi around 369–286 BCE. *Zhuangzi* contains vivid stories and parables that is intended for the general public.

The third book is the *Classic of Complete Emptiness*, written by Liezi around 300 CE. Contrary to the Taoist rejection of desire, Liezi proposed a more carefree attitude, claiming that desires for beautiful things, good food, music, and sex are simply human nature. There is no need to suppress them.

The central concept in Taoism is the notion of the Tao, which means "way" or "path." It refers to the fundamental ordering principle behind nature, society, and individual people, as described in *Tao Te Ching*:

The Tao that can be named is not the eternal and unchanging Tao. The name that can be spoken is not the eternal and unchanging name. The nameless is the source of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of all things. Always be without desires and you will see mystery. Always be with desire, and you will see only its effects. They are both a mystery, and where mystery is the deepest we find the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful (*Tao Te Ching*).

Tao is seen as an indescribable source of all existence that can only be grasped by mystically experiencing its subtlety. It emphasizes the notion of non-action (*wu wei*), which proposes that things should flow simply, with spontaneity, and without being contrived. The notion of non-action goes hand-in-hand with that of non-mind (*wu-hsin*). Taoism rejects traditional methods of education, such as learning from a teacher. Accumulated knowledge is seen as hindering creativity and causing one to become inflexible or subject to a false sense of security.

Taoism shares many ideas with Buddhism, particularly in the notion of emptiness and the rejection of desires. Its naturalistic attitude is often in contrast to Confucianism, which contains doctrines and rules of governance.

Confucianism

Confucius (551–479CE) was a teacher and philosopher who offered his solutions to end the social chaos during the Warring States period in China. He traveled to the various states in China to give advice on good governance for 13 years. It is believed that his disciples recorded his teachings in four major Confucius texts after his death. These texts have had a profound influence in East Asia for almost 3,000 years.

The principle record of Confucius' teaching was *The Analects*, written as clusters of conversations between the Master and his students. It emphasizes the importance of virtuous conduct, addressed in four specific themes: ritual conduct, humanity, filial obedience, and good government.

Unlike Buddhism and Taoism, which focus more on the attainment of self-actualization, Confucianism is the major school that emphasizes social, political, and family systems. In contrast to the naturalistic characteristics of Taoism, Confucius recommended a strong infrastructure with a clear set of rules and doctrines, governing all aspects of social life in the government and family systems. Confucius maintained that good government begins at home and believed that there is a proper way of behaving for virtually every activity. Rituals and traditions were regarded as the observable glue that binds society together. The family unit is seen as the primary social unit and family members are expected to actively participate in the learning of ritual conducts, which are seen to refine and elevate the quality of lives and serve as a tool for moral instruction.

Filial obedience (*hsiao*) is the area in which Confucius' teaching had the most influence in shaping government and family structure. He held that there are five relationships (*wulun*) that underlie the order of society: father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife, elder friend-junior friend, and ruler-subject. Within these relationships, the subordinate person is duty-bound to show obedience while the superior person is expected to show kindness. Under this notion, the husband is expected to be more dominant and the wife more obedient in the husband-wife subsystem, much against gender-equality values in modern society.

Despite that, Confucianism did offer a more pragmatic approach with clear doctrines to guide interpersonal conducts at all levels of government and social structure. These structures are still heavily referenced in discussions on Asian families today.

Viewed separately, these three major schools of thoughts are very different and sometimes contradictory. Collectively, they form crucial parts of both historic and current Eastern philosophy.

The Mindfulness Movement

The Buddhist term “mindfulness” originated from the Pali word *sati*. It refers to psychological states of awareness through meditation, a discipline whereby one pays attention to thoughts, feelings, and body sensations in the present moment, without having to be altered or avoided (Bishop et al., 2004). In 1930, Freud believed the mind and body sensations in the

present moment to be essentially regressive. The fact that the University of Massachusetts mindfulness-based stress reduction program (Kabat-Zinn, 2013), would turn into a big enterprise 35 years later was unimaginable in 1979.

Mindfulness training and other forms of meditation have since been recommended for a wide range of medical conditions. As many as 20 million people were reported to be using meditation for health purposes in the 2007 census report on adults seeking complementary or alternative medicines in the United States. The Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement (MBRE) program for couples (Carson, Carson, Gill, & Baucom, 2004) is one clinical example, which introduced a range of mindfulness exercises to couples, including partner yoga, loving-kindness meditation, and mindful touch, over the course of eight weeks.

Mindfulness research soared in the 2000s following Harvard professor, Herbert Benson's studies of the physiological responses of the Tibetan monks during meditation in the 1980s. Studies have been conducted on almost every topic that has a remote connection to mindfulness and most of them claimed to have high success rates in using mindfulness as a remedy for treatment. However, in a massive meta-analysis of meditation programs conducted at John Hopkins University, it has been found that mindfulness meditation had only a "small yet consistent benefit in relieving anxiety, depression, and pain." Depressive symptoms have been found to have improved by roughly 10% to 20%, which is similar to the effect of antidepressants (Goyal et al., 2014).

The attitude toward mindfulness between the East and the West has been described as being fundamentally different. In the East, meditation is viewed as a lifelong practice within a rich spiritual context. In the West, it is considered a short term intervention to achieve clear goals (Wylie, 2015). However, this does not stop the mindfulness movement from gaining popularity among contemporary couple and family therapists. Many therapists consider the core elements of awareness, acceptance, and staying in the present in mindfulness psychology to be powerful concepts when used in conjunction with traditional clinical processes (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013). In addition, it is generally agreed that mindfulness has had a positive effect on relationship satisfaction, empathy development, and skillful communication (Gambrel & Keeling, 2010). Numerous studies note the benefits of mindfulness practice on various aspects of a couple's relationship, including an increase of intimate relationship satisfaction and a more secure attachment (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). It has also been suggested that Buddhist practices of accommodation to suffering, in particular, could shift the traditional focus in therapy from change to acceptance, within the contexts of couple and family therapy (Gehart & Collum, 2007).

F. Relevance to couple and family

Various aspects of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have had an impact on the development of different approaches within the field of family therapy. However, when Zen Buddhism ideas entered the clinical field in the 1950s, the psychodynamic ideology contained premises so opposite from Zen that it was impossible for the two approaches to connect. The focus on insight in psychotherapy was in sharp contrast to the absurdity in Zen, such as its infamous riddle, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" which seems to defy any logical responses. Milton Erickson, who also spoke in riddles and paradoxes, was possibly the only therapist whose approach was different from psychodynamic theory at the time. In this regard,

he may be considered the first Buddhist therapist in the West. Following that, family therapists began to develop an interest in the notion of paradox in Zen. The use of rephrasing, an attempt to challenge the meaning of reality, was a popular technique used by early pioneers such as Carl Whitaker and members of the MRI group. In the family therapy development that followed, its systemic perspective fit well with the Eastern philosophy that all things exist as inseparable and contradictory opposites. The symbol of Yin and Yang, the masculine and feminine sides of human relationship, has become universal in addressing any dyadic relationship within the family system.

The influence of Zen Buddhism can be seen in the work of Haley, who considered the ideas behind Western psychopathology matched the basic premise of Zen – humans are seen as trapped in the wheel of life and keep repeating distressing behavior. The more a person attempts to escape from this destiny, the more they are caught up in it (Haley, 2013). Haley held that once problem-maintaining patterns have been understood, they may be altered through carefully designed direct or paradoxical interventions. He believed that like Zen masters, therapists must be experts at bypassing resistance. The paradoxical nature of Zen can be found to have strongly influenced his strategic and directive Western therapy in promoting change.

The continuous questioning of the perception of reality in Zen Buddhism that attracted early family therapy founders was also addressed in the Constructivism movement that followed. Eastern philosophy perceived the entirety of reality as one empty thing that is incapable of distinction or descriptive content. This is similar to the Constructivist view, seeing everything as filtered through the mind of the observer. Constructivists believe that the world can only be experienced subjectively, through the observer's own unique constructs of the environment. Constructivism emphasizes cognitive meaning and personal interpretation rather than action. Under this model, therapists don't assume that they know how families should change, but would explore the assumptions people have about their problems. However, this seemed to be where the East and the West diverge. Constructivist therapists use words or conversations to change narratives and reconstruct a new reality. Eastern philosophers abandon words altogether, focusing on experience, keeping a "non-mind" and "non-self" stance.

Aspects of Taoism resemble the cybernetics concept, whereby all systems have their own way to self-regulate and a "don't touch" approach is highly preferable. Gregory Bateson's (1972, 1979) theory of the pattern that connects suggests that every family member is connected to everyone else. A change in one person's behavior leads to a change in all family members. Therapists might use observation and interviewing processes to understand this pattern and describe their insights to family members. However, any attempt to change this pattern through the unilateral exercise of power may lead to unintended consequences, threatening the integrity of the system. Bateson felt strongly that this pattern of organization must be respected. This position clearly matches the "non-action" philosophy that is prominent in Taoism. Later social-constructionist therapists, such as Andersen, Cecchin, Boscolo, and Hoffman, also adopted this position.

Confucius teachings, which places great attention on family structure with clear prescriptions of rules and boundaries among each of the subsystems, may be closer to Ludwig von Bertalanffy's general systems theory, in which inter-relationships between elements altogether form the whole and hierarchy and boundaries are considered essential elements in the production of new patterns. Confucius teaching is generally considered to be the backbone

to understanding families of the East and has been referenced in almost all of the literature on Asian families. At the same time, his ideas on family and organizational structure share some similarities with those in Salvador Minuchin's Structural Family Therapy, which also focus on family structure, boundaries, and hierarchy, particularly in working with children and adolescent delinquent problems. Confucius ideas on gender role distribution are certainly dated and feminist critiques may even find them offensive. Yet, his ideas on the importance of family rituals can be observed in the work of contemporary therapists such as Evan Imber-Black (Imber-Black, 1993).

It should be noted that couple-hood is not addressed specifically in any of the three major Eastern schools, other than an emphasis on achieving balance between Yin and Yang. Ironically, mindfulness in Buddhism practice, which supposedly addresses one's inner-balance, is widely used by modern therapists as a way to prepare individuals in couple therapy. Despite their different worldviews and diverse ways of manifestation, the East and the West are constantly in the process of mutual exchange and interactions. It is expected that the different cultures and philosophical ideas will continue to mix and match in various forms, giving new shape to couple and family therapy interventions worldwide.

G. Clinical example of application of theory in couple and family therapy

Emma and Sam are a middle class couple in their mid-thirties. They have two young children and have been living relatively settled lives until two months ago, when Emma found out that Sam has had an extra-marital affair. When she confronted him angrily, he dismissed the affair and said that it was "just a fling". The conflict between the couple escalated and they came for couple therapy to deal with their dilemma.

To break the stalemate, the therapist helped them stay in touch with their conflict and learn to live with it by realizing how their circle of reactivity is causing them to be trapped in the entanglement. As a first step, she suggested that they delay their reactions toward each other while paying attention to their own emotional process. Through meditation and concentrating on their own emotions, the therapist guided Emma to get in touch with her feelings of hurt and betrayal from her husband's extramarital affair. In doing so, her feelings of hurt and anger became more intense, and she began to cry aloud. The therapist then guided her to be aware of the existence of these negative feelings and not to ignore them, while helping her separate herself from these feelings so that they would not affect her as much in her reactions to Sam. Through a guided imagery exercise, the therapist guided Emma with, "I know these feelings are there. I don't like them, but I don't need to get rid of them. They are there, but they can not overwhelm me!"

Following the same process, the therapist also guided Sam to acknowledge his intense feeling of guilt and remorse, as well as his inability to respond to Emma in facing her rage and blame. Realizing that these emotions had been blocking him from getting closer to his wife, he began to face Emma's pain and accusation instead of running away from her as he previously did.

Throughout the couple session, the therapist was very mindful in bringing the couple's attention to the here-and-now moment. After engaging the couple to concentrate on their own emotional reactions, the therapist began to encourage them to relate to each other in a more satisfactory manner, now that their own emotions did not stand in their way of

communication. As a result, the couple was able to deal with the hurt and sense of abandonment that they both experienced and work through their interpersonal conflict. Ultimately, Sam begged for forgiveness from Emma, who was finally ready to forgive him. The therapist has helped the couple reestablish intimacy and survive the damage of a nasty extra-marital affair.

This is one example of how a therapist adopted a mindfulness framework to couple therapy. She worked alternatively between the partner's internal and interpersonal processes until the couple was able to establish intimate conversation and connection. Mindfulness exercises, including meditation and yoga, were used to assist estranged couples to rediscover one another.

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I. Cross-References

Boundary in Family Systems Theory, Cybernetics in Couple and Family Systems, Family Structure, Strategic Family Therapy, Structural Family Therapy, Meditation in Couple and Family Therapy, Mindfulness in Couple and Family Therapy