Review Article

Cultural Heritages and Mental Health: Towards the Self-Nature and Its Implications for Psychotherapy

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Abstract

No matter where you live and what culture you belong to, you may encounter the four big questions of human existence. Where do I come from? Why am I in this life situation? Why do I suffer? How do I find salvation? Our cultural heritages store wisdom for how we can successfully cope with these four questions and become an ideal person with the most optimal self-functioning. Accordingly, the theories, objectives, and methods of mental health intervention might be profoundly influenced by our cultural wisdoms and their origins. The formal Mandala Model of Self (MMS) was developed to describe the well-functioning self in various cultures. The MMS is suitable for elucidating the relationship between cultural heritages and mental health through its four concepts: biology, the ideal person, knowledge or wisdom, and action. It is based on the Psychodynamic Model of Self-Nature (PMS), as well as the assumption that the psychodynamic process of transitioning from the self to the self-nature exists in all cultures. The self-nature is defined by its own culture, entirely oriented toward the good of wholeness, the well-functioning self with full potential. The self-nature implications for psychotherapy include the therapeutic goal, the achievement of which has four steps and requirements for the therapist. A conclusion with suggestions for future research is provided. Specifically, I address the effort needed to analyze cultural heritages to develop their formal and substantive structures. I describe the epistemological strategy for analyzing cultural heritages and include three successful examples of its application.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; Mandala Model Of Self; Self; Self-Nature; Biology; Ideal Person; Knowledge/Wisdom; Action; Mental Health; Psychotherapy

Introduction

No matter where you live and what culture you belong to, you may encounter the four big questions of human existence [1]. Where do I come from? Why am I in this life situation? Why do I suffer? How do I find salvation? Generally, our cultural heritages store wisdom for how we can successfully cope with these four questions and become an ideal person with the most optimal self-functioning [2,3]. Accordingly, the theories, objectives, and methods of mental health intervention might be profoundly influenced by one's cultural wisdoms and their origins [4,5]. In addition, many clinical researchers have shown that social and cultural mechanisms may offer a rich, recovery-supportive social milieu especially beneficial during psychotherapy [6-8].

The formal Mandala Model of Self (MMS) was developed to describe the well-functioning self in various cultures [2,3]. The MMS is suitable for elucidating the relationship between one's cultural heritage and mental health, which I describe in the first section. In the second section I draw upon the Psychodynamic Model of Self-Nature to establish the point that the psychodynamic process of the transition from the self to the self-nature exists in all cultures; the self-nature is defined by one's culture, entirely oriented toward the good of wholeness, the well-functioning self with full potential. In the third section, I describe the self-nature implications for psychotherapy

drawing on the MMS, which includes four steps to become an ideal person and attain the self-nature state. Finally, a conclusion with suggestions for future research is provided.

Cultural Heritage and Mental Health: The Mandala Model of Self

The Mandala Model of Self (MMS) was developed as a general theoretical model of the self which is applicable to all cultures [2,3]. The MMS was inspired by a famous 9th-century Buddhist Borobudur temple in the center of the island of Java, Indonesia (Figure 1). It is the world's largest Buddhist temple and is a UNESCO world heritage site. Borobudur temple built in the form of a Mandala to represent Buddhist teachings and has 10 stories that symbolize how people live in their world. How one cultivates the transition from the self-state to the self-nature state, or Buddha, is symbolized by the fact that the temples are surrounded by a 6-story square surrounded by a 3-story circle. The top story is the central dome surrounded by 72 Buddha statues, each seated inside a perforated stupa.

The Borobudur temple provides a formal and universal model that describes how the well-functioning self-strives to attain ultimate happiness in all cultures [2]. When the model is used for psychological research and to highlight its implications for a particular culture, special attention should be paid to the cultural heritage that people draw upon to deal with the problems of daily life. The end goal of
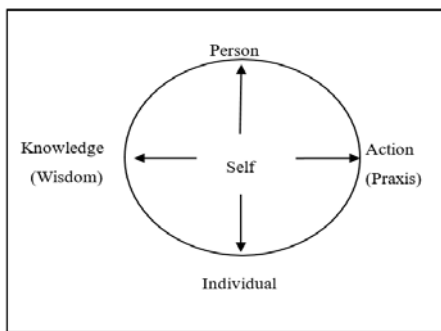
Figure 1: Buddhist Borobudur temple.

Figure 2: The self being influenced by four forces: The individual, wisdom, action, and the person.

the self in all cultures is to become a well-functioning self with full potential, as well as to attain authentic and durable happiness. According to this model, people living in their world are symbolized by a circle surrounded by a square (Figure 2). Aniela Jaffe (1964) noted that European alchemists played an important role in Europe around 1000 A.D, when various sects developed [9]. The tradition and practices of the European alchemists were to purify, perfect and complete certain objects. The alchemists sought to integrate mind and body, creating many names and symbols to denote this integration. One of these symbols was called the quadrature circle.

Jaffe (1964) indicated that in a wide range of contexts the circle represents the most important aspect of life, the ultimate wholeness or the well-functioning self [9]. Examples are the sun worship of modern religion, primitive peoples, myths and dreams, the mandala of Tibetan lamas and sacred architecture in every civilization. The square, in contrast, represents the flesh, secularism and objective reality. Therefore, the mandala can be regarded as a symbol for the prototype or deep structure of the self in different cultures. It allows us to construct a universal model of the self that illustrates the relationship between the individual's attributes, actions and cultural heritages [2].
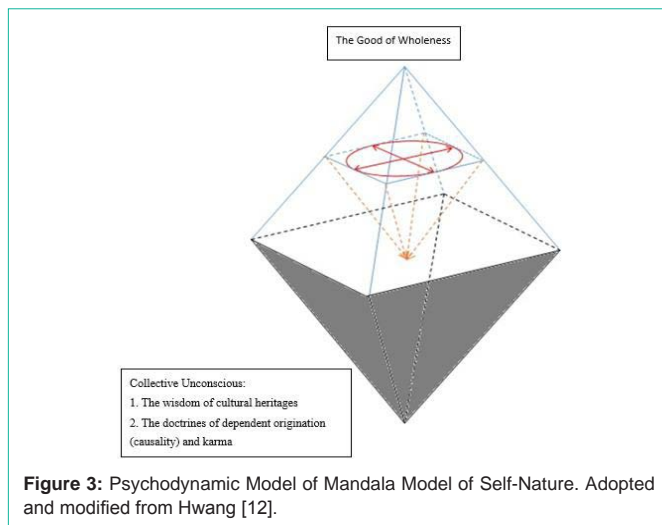
According to the MMS [2], the self is influenced by four forces: the individual, wisdom, action, and the person. The individual is biological and desire-driven. This biological individual initially gives the self a personal identity or uniqueness, a feeling of ownership of various phenomena in the mind, body and external world [10,11]. This sense of self is part of a hedonic principle and a deep-seated, reflexive false belief and is the main source of emotional disturbance [11]. However, the emotional disturbance caused by the desiring self allows us a very good window to cultivate the self. The person is sociological or cultural; it embodies people's actions to achieve a

specific goal in line with the appropriate and permitted behaviors defined by their culture. Every culture has its own definitions of appropriate and permitted behavior. Each class of actions is endowed with a specific meaning and value that is transmitted to the individual through various channels of socialization. The self is psychological, the seat of daily life experience. In the conceptual framework of Figure 2, the self is the locus of empirical experience. The self takes various actions depending on the social context, and it engages in self-reflection when blocked from attaining its goals. All four of these terms are located outside the circle but within the square. This arrangement means that one's self is being influenced by forces from the individual's external environment. Each of the four forces has a distinct implication for mental health, as I briefly discuss later.

Self, the Abilities of Socialized Reflexivity and Self-Exertion

According to Hwang [11], the self has one important capability, reflexivity. Reflexivity means that the self is able to explain and monitor its acts. The individual's self-identity and social identity have very important implications for self-reflexivity. When individuals intend to act, their decisions may be influenced by all four forces in Figure 2, especially if they identify with a particular social role. On the one hand, individuals must think about how to act as a socialized person. On the other hand, as a biological entity, they are pushed by various desires. When they take action and encounter barriers, they may engage in action-oriented self-reflexivity, using information available in their stock of knowledge or wisdom. Knowledge or wisdom works as a function to guide reflexivity and actions such as memorizing, storing and organizing various forms of knowledge or wisdom from the culture. Knowledge or wisdom is a personal stock of knowledge leading a person to act appropriately in various social contexts. If the barrier persists, they may take further steps to search for a solution from this stock. If they identify with a particular social group, they may communicate with other group members, thereby constructing a mutually shared social reality that may be plagued by specific problems. Individuals may then have to search their stock of knowledge to find solutions to these problems on behalf of the group.

According to the theoretical model, the social praxis of the self in a given context is pulled by two forces—the person as a social agent and the individual as an organism. To act in a manner accepted by society, individuals who want to satisfy their own desires must learn how to act in accordance with the sociomoral order, using the process of socialization guided by their wisdom. The self possesses socialized reflexivity. The socialized reflexivity of the self is the ability to engage in reflection on the meaning of life, spirituality and morality (3). When persons plan to act, their action may be influenced by all four forces. Persons need to think about how to perform as an ideal person as recognized by their culture. Socialized reflexivity has the beneficial effect of generating insight into present realities as well as greater clarity in one's thought processes and self-exertion. The self possesses the other important capability, self-exertion, which leads to exerting great effort to overcome difficulties and achieve goals in different social contexts [3]. Specifically, when persons intend to act but come across barriers or conflicts arising from the biological individual, namely various desires, they may employ information available in their stock of knowledge. If the barrier or the conflict remains, the socialized reflexivity of the self takes further steps to

Figure 3: Psychodynamic Model of Mandala Model of Self-Nature. Adopted and modified from Hwang [12].

achieve a solution, drawing from its knowledge or wisdom. In short, the self is defined by two main capabilities-socialized reflexivity and self-exertion.

We conducted studies representing the first empirical examination of the role of the MMS in mental health [3]. These two factors, socialized reflexivity and self-exertion, along with the following three empirical studies, were used to develop a measure of the MMS. The MMS Scale (MMSS) has satisfied standard psychometric criteria. A correlational study demonstrated that the MMSS, along with its two factors (socialized reflexivity and self-exertion) validly measures certain mental health constructs. A quasi-experimental study reliably distinguished persons engaged in the cultivation of the mandala self from those who did not. Finally, a study with adolescents demonstrated that the MMSS is a better predictor of resilience than extroversion or neuroticism. The three studies provide empirical support for the theory underlying the MMS and its key contribution to mental health.

Psychodynamic Model of Self Nature: Towards the Self-Nature

As mentioned in the earlier section, the Borobudur temple is a three-dimensional Mandala. The MMS is a cross-sectional slice of the Borobudur temple and represents a specific moment of the self. Therefore, the complete MMS is three-dimensional and composed of two pyramids, which form Psychodynamic Model of Self-Nature (PMS) [12], as shown in Figure 3. The upper pyramid represents the individual's course of life in pursuit of either self-nature status or its absence. The lower pyramid symbolizes the individual's collective unconscious, which influences the self. All of one's experiences, beginning with birth, are stored in the personal unconscious. There are two kinds of collective unconscious. The first kind stores the intellectual life and information of our ancestors belonging to a specific cultural group, from their earliest beginnings [12]. It might get this information through implicit and explicit cultural learning from our experiences of interacting with significant others and our cultural heritages. Generally, the collective unconscious stores our cultural heritages, or wisdom. The second kind of collective unconscious is rooted in Buddhism, which includes the doctrine of dependent origination (causality) and karma, the notion that each

and every occurrence becomes a cause of all subsequent occurrences throughout space and time [11]. Based on these doctrines of dependent origination (causality) and karma, the collective unconscious might include our intellectual capacities and information we obtain before our birth.

Based on the PMS [12], the concept of ogdoad represents the formal structures of consciousness, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. According to the PMS, the psychodynamic process of transition from the self to the self-nature exists in all cultures. The concept of self-nature (自性) originated in the cultural tradition of Chinese Buddhism (漢傳佛) [12]. The first Chinese Buddhist scripture, the Altar-Sutra (壇經), documents the life of Huineng (惠能), the sixth Patriarch of Ch'an Buddhism (六祖禪宗). He picked up his master's hint, understanding that he was asking him to come to the master' room at midnight, at which time the master, who was the fifth Patriarch of Ch'an Buddhism (五祖禪宗), taught him the Diamond Sutra (金剛經). When his master Hongren (弘忍) read the sentence, "You should cultivate yourself to be free from any desires or attachments and then you will have bodhicitta (應無所住而生其心)" Huineng was completely enlightened. He read out the following the sentences that came to his mind:

"Who could have expected that one's self-nature could be pure (何期自性本自清淨)? Who could have expected that one's self-nature could be free from birth and death (何期自性本不生滅)? All the laws and reality of the world are within one's own self-nature (何期自性本自具足). Who could have expected that one's self-nature could be changeless (何期自性本無動搖)? Who could have expected that one's self-nature could create all the laws of the universe (何期自性能生萬法)?"

One's self-nature is defined by one's culture, entirely oriented toward the good of the ultimate wholeness, the ideal and well-functioning self. Generally, in contrast to the self, the self-nature involves the cultivation of morality and wisdom, particularly when attractiveness emerges from egoism and desires [12-14]. For example, the three major Chinese cultural traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism aim for attainment of the self-nature state of the good (至善) [15], the nonself/Buddha state (無我/佛) [11], and the unity of the self and Heaven (天人合一) [16], respectively. A basic but important premise and ultimate goal of psychotherapy is to help the client attain this self-nature state to become a fully functioning person, achieving its full potential and authentic, durable happiness.

There are two common approaches to attaining happiness or mental health in Western psychology. One approach is the hedonic and the other approach is the eudaimonic [17]. The hedonic approach is to fulfill one's desires and avoid pain. This approach might lead to self-indulgence. If it attains happiness, it is a fluctuating happiness [11,18]. The eudaimonic approach is to pursue self-actualization or fulfilment of the fully functioning self, analogous to autonomy, competence and relatedness in Western psychology [19]. We may say that happiness in Western psychology comes from satisfying, maintaining and strengthening the self. However, the eudemonic orientation of the self-nature in the context of the cultural heritages represents a quite different approach from that of Western psychology in pursuing happiness [14]: cultivating the transition from the self-state to the self-nature state.
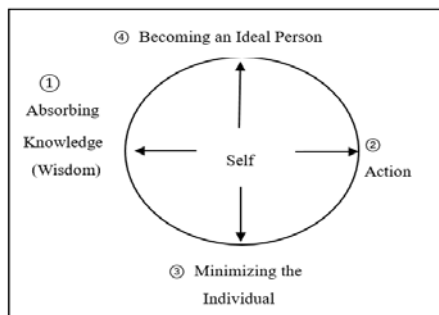
Figure 4: The self-nature implications for psychotherapy: The Four steps.

The Self-nature Implications for Psychotherapy Drawing on the MMS

The case of sam

The setting is a drug abuser treatment center where education, individual and group counseling are available. Sam comes to counseling because of his substance use. He was convicted of taking illegal drugs, and the judge determined that he needed professional help. Sam recognizes that he does have problems, but he cannot give up his use of drugs. He undergoes an intake interview and provides the therapist with this information:

"I was a drug abuser before. I got caught with drugs in the street and I was tested by the urine drug screen indicating taking illegal drugs. The judge determined that I needed to come to the center again." He then complains that the judge decided that he needed to spend more time than last time in the center due to the previous conviction. "I can successfully get clean and sober in the center. But I will take drugs out of the center. I just want to get drugs, from the bottom of my heart. It is just like that drinking makes you feel relaxed and comfortable. This wonderful feeling stays in the mind. You will like to experience the wonderful feeling but not for a long time."

Therapeutic goals

It might take a long time to achieve the ultimate goal of the self-nature state. There are three stepwise goals. The first goal is to alleviate clients' symptoms. Then they feel happy, and they can be encouraged to pursue more happiness. The second goal is to make the clients commitment to seek understanding their cultural wisdom. The third goal is to get them to form the habit of cultivating self-enlightenment.

Four key steps for Sam, drawing on the MMS

As a therapist, you need to introduce and to get the client to execute the four steps in sequence (Figure 4). Note that a therapist usually assesses clients' causes or problems for their symptoms. The first step is to assess clients stock of wisdom and then teach them about their culture's wisdom. You should also strongly encourage clients to develop a rational philosophy of life based on this cultural wisdom so that in the future they can avoid hurting themselves again. You need to teach them how cultural wisdom will lead them to become a fully functioning person with full potential and authentic, durable happiness. The previous sections on cultural heritages and mental health and the PMS: Towards Self-Nature can be used as a kind of instruction manual. You should encourage clients to engage in activities that will counter their self-defeating beliefs and behaviors

and replace them with alternatives reflecting their cultural wisdom. However, it might take a long time to learn the cultural wisdom. If the clients reap the benefits of absorbing cultural wisdom, leading to alleviation of their symptoms, this is a good time to teach them advanced cultural wisdom. The therapist must dispute the false beliefs and thinking caused by the desiring self and teach clients how to substitute their cultural wisdom, leading to healthy behaviors incompatible with the false beliefs and thinking, as well as with self-defeating and self-indulgent behaviors. Some clients might not like or be used to being told to learn. They would like to see effective results before learning. For such clients, you might decide to wait and teach them cultural wisdom after the second step, described next.

The second step in the therapeutic process is to explain to clients how their desiring self causes emotional disturbance and get them to take action based on their cultural wisdom so as to alleviate the emotional disturbance. Specifically, the clients should focus attention on their conation, motivation, attention, cognition, affect, and behavior, and then evaluate them in comparison to their cultural wisdom. Clients thus become self-reflexive objective evaluators of themselves. They need to recognize the differences between their conation, motivation, attention, cognition, affect, and behavior and their cultural wisdom, and then adjust or change them to bring them in line with the standards of their cultural wisdom. There are four levels of action:

Level 1: Chaos. Clients are unable to tell the differences between conation, motivation, attention, cognition, affect, and behavior on the one hand and cultural wisdom on the other.

Level 2: Differentiation. After learning their cultural wisdom, clients begin to understand the differences between their conation, motivation, attention, cognition, affect, and behavior and the standards of their cultural wisdom. They see that something is different.

Level 3: Identification. Clients' recognition of the differences becomes clearer and better.

Level 4: Action. Clients act to minimize the differences.

To further decrease emotional disturbance, the therapist takes a third step to help clients change their thinking and actions by minimizing the individual, the desiring self. Although it may be unlikely that we can entirely eliminate the individual, we can exert ongoing effort to reduce the frequency of such thinking and action caused by the desiring self. The therapist encourages clients to identify the desiring self that they have automatically accepted, the cause of the emotional disturbance, demonstrating how they are continuing these patterns and reminding them that change is possible with persistent effort. Minimizing the individual or one's desires can alleviate the symptoms or suffering. Clients are encouraged to gradually gain faith from executing the self-cultivation process. To further minimize or give up desires by obeying specific precepts, clients can be taught meditation and wisdom.

Cultural wisdom can be understood and learned through cultivating the process of minimizing the individual or desires. It is unlikely that we can give up desires entirely. Though it might take a long time to attain the state of ideal person in the final step, it is hoped that clients can achieve the habit of executing self-cultivation toward

the self-nature state. It is important to attaining life's goals that we give direction to behavior leading to the fully functioning person with full potential and authentic, durable happiness.

It is suggested that we form the habit of executing the self-cultivation process and steps 1 to 3 and gradually minimize the individual and desires. Usually, you will gain happiness, calm, and peace during this process, especially when the individual and desires become weaker and occupy less of our time. One important criterion for successfully forming a habit of executing the self-cultivation process is feeling discomfort if you do not practice steps 1 to 3 every day or even more frequently than that.

Requirements for the therapist

Analects (論語), one of the most important annals of wisdom in Confucian societies, makes this point as follows. "Only a person who is well self-cultivated can cure others (修己安人)" (Analects, Xian Wen, Ch.42). A therapist needs to possess cultural wisdom, act based on this wisdom, and minimize the desires in order to maintain the habit of self-cultivation of the process towards attaining the state of the ideal person.

Conclusion

The present paper elucidates the cultural heritages and their role in mental health, drawing on the Mandala Model of Self (MMS) and Psychodynamic Model of Self-Nature (PMS). Based on the cultural heritages, it is assumed that the ultimate goal of the self is to achieve authentic and long-lasting happiness by helping one to move from the self state to the self-nature state. The self-nature implications for psychotherapy include the therapeutic goal and execution of the four steps and requirements for a therapist. Many empirical studies support the proposition that understanding and practicing cultural heritages leads to good mental health. For instance, many recent findings related to Buddhism show that mindfulness [20,21], compassion [22-24] and meditation [25-27] cause increases in attention, positive emotion and subjective well-being. These effects can be primarily explained by the self-nature concept of the nonself. This is because all these practices steer us from our desires and the individual, and therefore from suffering, leading to increases in positive emotion, attentiveness and subjective well-being.

However, there is an urgent need to ground the cultural heritages, psychotherapy and psychology in more evidence-based research. Most cultural heritages are not scientifically well-structured. It is necessary to analyze the formal and substantive structures of the cultural heritages. Then we can systematically learn and absorb the structures of wisdom from the cultural heritages. These formal and substantive structures also offer theoretical guidance for the accumulation of such evidence-based data to inform the cultural heritages of psychotherapy and psychology. The epistemological strategy for developing these structures has two stages [28]. The first stage is to construct a universal model of the self. The second stage is to use this model to examine certain cultural heritages. The approach is considered anti-positivism and critical realism [28,29]. A good example is the Nonself Theory (NT) based on Buddhism [11]. A universal model of the self, the MMS [2], was used to analyze Buddhist teachings in constructing the NT. The other two good examples are studies that made use of the MMS to analyze Confucian and Taoist

teachings and construct the Confucian Self-Cultivation Model [15] and the Unity of Self and Heaven Theory [16].

In the present paper, I argue that the cultural heritages offer a reliably useful road map for dealing with life's adversities and attaining authentic, durable happiness. Moreover, they help provide solutions for many mental health problems. They can help both those who are happy and unhappy. People who are happy engaging in self-centered psychological activities emphasize the need to maintain, satisfy and strengthen the self. They want more happiness. Unhappy people, who suffer from unsatisfied needs in the desire-driven sense of self, want happiness. Although more research is needed to support the proposition that understanding one's cultural heritage improves mental health, I hope that this paper stimulates future research for the mutual and beneficial development of cultural heritages and current psychological theory, research and practice on the one hand, and unravels the secrets of why the cultural heritages have endured for thousands of years on the other.

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