Culture and Psychoanalysis*

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First of all, let me congratulate you on the 90th anniversary of the Chonnam National University Hospital. It is great honor to deliver a lecture at such an honorable occasion as this. I have to admit, however, that although I have developed an interest in this field, lecturing on this topic is rather difficult because I have to spend most of my time struggling with patients in my office.

The question of how to define "culture" is not an easy one at all. Let us look at Campbell's *Psychiatric Dictionary* (1989), which represents one among scholarly definitions.

Culture The totality of all the individual artifacts, behaviors, and mental concepts transmitted among the members of society by learning what remains of man's past working on his present to shape his future.

The distinction is made between material culture, including tools, shelter, goods, technology and nonmaterial culture, as values, customs, institutions, and social organization. According to H.W. Dunham(*Archives of General Psychiatry* 24, 1971), culture is a total way of life in a group of human beings, including shared patterns of belief, feeling, and adaptation, which serves as a guide of conduct in the definition of reality.

We need to pay attention to the fact that in Campbell’s definition the totality of human life or the total way of life is emphasized. Within this framework of the definition of culture, we can consider some characteristics of culture(Tseng & McDermott 1981).

First, culture contains differences depending on nations, tribes and societies, but there are also commonalities. For example, the Korean, Japanese and Chinese cultures all belong to the East Asian culture block and are different from occidental culture, and thus have a common understanding of the terms "shame culture" and "guilt culture". Hence, they all can be referred to as "shameoriented cultures," but they do have idiosyncratic characteristics that help us identify one culture from another.

There also exist common cultural phenomena among people living in East Asia and those in Western countries and those in yet other cultural blocks. I remember an individual who travelled around the world with his backpack saying, "There are common expressions throughout the world they include laughter and the gesture expressing hunger."

Second, culture is changing. Even within a single space, it continuously changes though the speed of change might differ. Seoul, the city where I was brought up, has changed rapidly, indeed. The middle and high schools that I went to have been turned over to wealthy businessmen and have became an art gallery. The site of the college campus where I received premedicine education now has lines of residential apartments and the campus has moved to the outskirts of the city. There have also been as many changes in life styles and attitudes as there have been in the physical environment I sometimes feel difficulties in adjusting to these changes. This may be relevant to the fact that the Western culture infiltrates our society without any filtering and that individuals receive too much influence from mass media.
Third, when we discuss the culture of a group in terms of certain label, that label may seem to well represent the culture, but there still is a great diversity in that specific culture. In other words, when we think of Korean culture, we can think of certain outline, but there exist subcultures that are quite different from the general outline we may have about Korean culture. In my case, I had worked 10 or so years as a psychiatrist in Seoul before I started working in Cheonan, about 80km away to the south of Seoul. I find many similar aspects in diseases and in attitudes toward life of those living in Seoul and Cheonan although I find different aspects as well from time to time. For example, there are many more people in Cheonan visiting a psychiatrist for alcoholism and more Cheonan people commit suicide. I also found that they have looser sexual morals than Seoulites. When it comes to the expression of emotions, Cheonan people tend not to express or hold back their emotions. Instead they release their emotions in action. They are less tenacious about money. I also have come to realize that they feel some sort of complex about people from Seoul.

Applying such observations to the atmosphere of the South-North Korean summit talks might be a little bit absurd, but it is also be strange to view both South Korea and North Korea in similar terms of Korean culture.

Meanwhile, psychoanalysis has also undergone many historical changes.

There had been conceptual changes even during the formation period of Classical Psychoanalysis; however, more controversies arose as to the possibility of summing up all the diversities from a single perspective when ego-psychology and self psychology developed. These developments resulted in an increased diversity in psychoanalysis. Finally, in 1989, the 36th International Psychoanalytical Congress in Rome chose as its main theme “Common Ground in Psychoanalysis.” Discussions on ‘common ground’ are still progress in many fields of psychoanalysis.

In his discussion on common ground of psychoanalysis in general, Wallerstein (1990) said that psychoanalysts should maintain common training and scientific attitudes despite many theoretical diversities. Especially, he emphasized the attitude that focuses on transference-counter transference. Tyson (1991), discussing the common ground on the Centrality of the Oedipus Complex, saw that the framework of transference, resistance, the concept of the dynamic unconscious, psychic conflict and defense (as defined by Freud in 1914) is maintained.

Aside from such theoretical diversity, we also need to pay attention to the argument that different cultural blocks may have different interpretations of psychoanalytical terms or concepts. For instance, Reheim (1973) thought that the ‘superego’ had many different kinds of components, and Cho (1996) pointed out that the meaning of “sublimation” differed from one culture or person to another.

These examples are not confined only to the field of psychoanalysis therefore, due considerations should always be made in the course of discussing how to relate culture and psychoanalysis. For instance, Narita (1995) began with the following statement when discussing family violence in Japan.

In other countries, including the US, the term “Family Violence” refers to all types of violence taking place in the family, and particularly to wife-beating and child abuse. In Japan, however, this phrase refers to the violence against members of the family, including the parents and grandparents, by adolescent children.

It is also necessary for us to figure out the recent directions of psychoanalysis.

Tyson (1986) studied the development of countertransference and suggested the following major phenomena (1) from Ucs to Cs, (2) from reactions to transference to all reactions (3) from the analyst's neurosis to the analyst's functioning (4) from self-analysis to self scrutiny (5) from obstacle to contribution. These phenomena are also observed in other fields of psychoanalysis.

Sandler et al. (1992) emphasized a renewed understanding of Preconscious System, and Wong (1987) said that there had been increased understanding of preoedipal conflicts and aggression.

When we consider the diversities, changes and developments in culture and psychoanalysis, we come to know that the question of where to focus becomes important in the culturepsychoanalysis encounter.

In the review article “Cultural Psychiatry in Korea A Historical Sketch (1994)”, Kwangiel Kim, the author of Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Korean Traditional Culture myth, shamanism and the occult (1991), summarized the development of Korean cultural psychiatry. According to Kim, psychoanalysis was mostly applied to the study of narratives and shamanism, and it was also widely adopted.
in the study of “filial piety,” which is one of the characteristics of Korean culture.

When it comes to many discussions on the existence of Oedipus conflicts in Korean culture, the theory of classical psychoanalysis was adopted. However, a question might arise as to whether theory of classical psychoanalysis can also provide an appropriate understanding of contemporary Korean culture or contemporary Korean society. This theory was indeed appropriately applied for the understanding of the culture and consciousness structure of the Korean people based on Confucian influence and shamanism.

A recent bestseller Junshik Choi’s *Is There Culture to Koreans* (1999) candidly describes the exclusive and family group-oriented Korean cultural characteristics which are quite negative even from the perspective of the Confucian cultural tendency. According to Choi, Koreans tend to be incapable of caring others, and are hasty, impulsive and disorderly. Although this book may have become a best-seller because many Korean people generally agreed with Choi’s conclusions, but it failed to go beyond mostly phenomenal descriptions.

*Hwabyung* also mainly conveys sociophenomenal description as syndromes relevant to the Korean culture, instead of psychoanalytical interpretation.

The phenomena as described in such references can be better understood when recently introduced new psychoanalytical theories are applied instead of classical psychoanalysis. This opinion is supported by Chun (1996) who emphasized defense mechanisms in psychoanalytical considerations on the process of people’s joining newly emerging religious groups. Moreover, Moser-Ha (1999) studied the process of resolving the Oedipus Complex with changing phases in Korean mythology and in the cases of Korean patients. This study suggests that the application of contemporary psychoanalysis instead of classical psychoanalysis can be made in full extent to the psychoanalytical study on culture.

Now, let us turn to the discussions in the clinical situation.

Kim (1991) observed role-responsiveness as counter-transference mechanism during his psychoanalytical psychotherapy treatments, and reported how the therapist’s strong Confucian value systems affected the treatment process. Sohn (1996) reported, in “Characteristics of Transference of Koreans in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy,” his experience of 86 times of psychoanalytical psychotherapy from classical psychoanalysts during his training period in the U.S. His summary is presented below:

The author presented the experience in undergoing psychoanalytic psychotherapy focusing on transference.

Characteristics of transference of Koreans in psychoanalytic psychotherapy were suggested as follows:

1) Koreans tend to develop initial positive transference because they regard the therapist as the respected authority.
2) Koreans have difficulty in the development of an intense transference because they do not express their thoughts and feelings freely.
3) Koreans tend to express their aggression or hostility toward the therapist implicitly and indirectly because they are passive-dependent.
4) Suppressed or repressed Oedipal conflict by filial piety might be activated in the transference situation.

In relation to treatment phase, let me give you an example of one of my patients.

K is a 34-year-old housewife. She had worked as a public official until 8 years ago, and then she married through a matchmaker. Her husband seemed trustful. After their marriage, she gave birth to two children. Her husband tended to ignore her opinions and drank almost everyday on business excuses. From time to time he used violence against her. When K’s mother-in-law injured herself and required care, the couple had a quarrel. The husband reminded his wife of “filial piety” and did not hold violent language on her. He was saying, “I know your hardship but take good care of my mother. I have only one mother, but I can get another wife any time.”

After the quarrel, my patient could not sleep, and fell into depression, and finally went to a psychiatrist. She was even thinking of divorce, but she told me that she could not divorce him because of her concern for her children. She told me that she became depressed solely because of her husband’s dogmatic attitude. Furthermore, she suggested that I call him and give him proper guidance.

This patient makes me think of cultural factors unique to Korea: Korea, Korean women, matchmaking, husband’s violence, raising children, alcoholism, divorce, conflicts between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, etc. However,
when we apply psychoanalytical treatment, professionals will have the priority to evaluate and clinically approach patient-internal factors. These factors include the patient’s ego function and the essence of the patient’s inner conflicts, though it is important to understand those cultural factors. From the perspective of patient treatment, there surely exists a contact between psychoanalysis and culture and we should consider both sides. However, when we focus more on culture, it may bring up the problem of deviation from the mainstream of psychoanalysis or an approach to inner world.

Finally, it goes without saying that the rapid expansion of the Internet in our lives will bring forth yet another cultural change. In this case, how will psychoanalysis be applied? Psychoanalysis is past-oriented in its scientific property therefore, it may be too enormous a task for psychoanalysis to anticipate the future. Yet, is it not worth considering if the change will surely take place?

References

Choi JS (1999) : Is There Culture to Koreans? Seoul : Sagyejol