

Understanding a Client's Gift-Giving Behavior in Psychotherapy from a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: A client's gift-giving behavior is not an unusual interpersonal event in psychotherapy. However, this topic has received relatively little attention in studying how a client's gift affects the therapeutic process and professional relationship. Moreover, the cultural perspective of a client's gift-giving behavior is limited in psychotherapy research. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the meaning of a client's gift-giving behavior from an ethical and cultural perspective and to offer therapists with pragmatic guidelines in developing a healthy therapeutic relationship with Asian ethnic clients.

Keywords: Client's gift-giving behavior, Therapeutic relationship, Cultural perspectives, Boundary issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gift-giving from a client to a therapist is not unusual in psychotherapy because presenting a gift is a universal human behavior and usually intended to express a client's gratitude, appreciation and respect. However, a client's gift-giving behavior has received relatively little attention in studying the therapeutic process and professional relationship. (Knox et al, 2009; Smolar, 2002). Therapists are reluctant to openly discuss this phenomenon because receiving a client's gift is oftentimes considered as an unethical behavior which violates boundaries in the therapeutic relationship (Brendel et al., 2007; Zur, 2016).

In addition, the cultural perspective of a client's gift-giving behavior and its relation to clinical practice, such as ethical dilemma, has been ignored in psychotherapy research. In most clinical situations, a client's gift-giving behavior is strictly interpreted by the psychotherapist's own cultural experience, rather than that of a client. Consequently, such interpretation may deter culturally diverse clients from engaging with a healthy therapeutic relationship with a therapist. Hence, understanding cultural implications of a client's gift-giving behavior assists therapists to increase their culturally competent clinical practice and to make them select more ethically appropriate decisions.

In most mental health professions' Code of Ethics, such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA), American Counseling Association (ACA), and the American Psychological Association (APA), a client's gift-giving behavior is not specifically addressed, but broadly describes clinically "appropriate gift-giving" as ethical (Zur, 2016). Hence, there is no clear ethical and legal prohibition against receiving a client's gift within the therapeutic relationship. However, in certain circumstances, therapists may encounter a gift-giving dilemma or be subject to an ethics complaint or formal discipline upon receiving a client's gift.

Therapists' discomfort and unawareness of giving and/or receiving gifts in psychotherapy affect their ability to understand the meaning of a client's gift-giving behavior and develop an appropriate and professional therapeutic relationship with a client. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the meaning of a client's gift-giving behavior from an ethical and cultural perspective and to offer therapists with pragmatic guidelines in developing a healthy therapeutic relationship with Asian minority clients.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories, Types and Meanings of Gift-giving Behavior in Psychotherapy

Since Freud's first reference to clients' gifts in psychotherapy, psychoanalysis theories interpret a client's gift-giving behavior as an expression of unconscious communication, a defensive function, acting out of the transference, and/or reparation (Hahn, 1998). Furthermore, psychoanalysts explain that clients' gift-giving behavior is to win favor, to express symbolic desires about the therapist, to please the therapist, to be more intimate with the therapist, to bind the therapist, to replace the inadequacy of verbal expression, or to protect against fear or anger (Knox et al. 2009). Since these theories associate a client's gift-giving behavior with his neurotic wishes, they warn therapists against accepting the client's gift, suggesting that it risks the healthy therapeutic relationship.

In contrast to psychoanalysis theories, the intersubjective theory views acceptance of a gift as promoting a client's self-acceptance, while refusal of a gift activates the client's defensive mechanism and potentially leads him to experience a rejection of the self. Furthermore, when therapists express their interest in a client's gift, they may help the client discover the symbolic meaning of the gift. As a result, therapists can gradually shift their focus from the object of the gift to the client's meaning of the gift, and in turn, build a more accepting and supportive therapeutic relationship (Hahn, 1988).

Despite the theoretical differences between psychoanalysis and intersubjective theory, Drew and his colleagues (1983) identified three universal types of gifts and their associated meanings that were frequently recognized in clinical therapy situations: 1) a gift as a tip to the therapist for his service, (2) a gift for regaining the client's status which was temporarily lost due to a client's dependent relationship, and (3) a gift as a payment of homage or sacrifice to the therapist who helped a client solve problems. Regardless of the three types of gifts, however, a client's gift-giving behavior is complex and beyond the therapist's awareness. Hence, it is useful for a therapist to analyze various types of gifts and their meanings from a continuum perspective, instead of categorizing a client's gift-giving behavior according to a specific theory. In detail, at one end of continuum, a gift is a form of ritualistic, traditional, and cultural behavior to promote a client's self-acceptance while on the other end of the continuum, a gift serves as a metaphor which creates another implicit meaning or neurotic wishes. For example, a client's giving of a family photo at the termination of therapy might be a metaphor of the client's unresolved issue of transference. A client's gift-giving behavior, in this circumstance, may convey aggression to make the therapist uncomfortable for terminating his service prematurely. Thus, it is important for a therapist to implicitly acknowledge the client's intention for gift-giving from a continuum while evaluating its general type, monetary value, timing, frequency, and consequences on treatment when a client presents a gift.

Regarding the effect of client's gift on the psychotherapy, Knox and colleagues (2009) identified that most clients who give gifts to their therapists have kept a good relationship with them because they consider maintenance of a good therapeutic relationship as the most important therapeutic concern. Some clients perceived that giving a gift simply is a way of strengthening their therapeutic relationship or celebrating their important events with others, including their therapists. This finding demonstrates that the therapists should either accept or reject their client's gift in a way that builds a strong therapeutic relationship.

Furthermore, when a therapist accepts the client's gift without putting any conditions on the gift, it is most beneficial to strengthen the therapeutic relationship because a client feels safe and respected. However, when a therapist adds conditions in receiving a gift, he may lose the client's trust, consequently damaging the therapeutic relationship. If the therapist rejects the client's gift, he needs to honestly but carefully converse with the client so that the client recognizes that the therapist rejects the gift, not the client himself, and his rejection of the gift does not negatively impact their therapeutic relationship.

Clinical and Ethical Issues of Boundary in Gift-giving Behavior

A boundary is the permeable and dynamic edge of appropriate behavior which determines a therapist's role and sets either acceptable (helpful) or unacceptable (harmful) behaviors in a therapeutic relationship. However, it is not always easy to discern when and where a boundary is violated. Hence, a therapist should be aware of where he ends and where the client begins without losing his own self because a therapist's awareness of boundary violation not only prevents harm for both a client and a therapist (i.e., therapist's self-injury), but also promotes the client's best interest (Amaglo, 2022). Through ongoing awareness, a therapist should be legally, morally, and ethically responsible for monitoring professional boundaries and protecting the client's interests.

Although maintaining clear and ethical boundaries is required of a therapist, discerning a clear line of boundary differs in accordance with the definition of boundary and theories of psychotherapy. In detail, Gutheil and Gabbard distinguish a boundary violation from a boundary crossing (1993). Boundary violation occurs when a therapist misuses his power to exploit and/or harm a client for the therapist's own benefit. In contrast to boundary violation, boundary crossing is a deviation from traditional analytic and risk management practice which neither exploits nor harms the client. Hence, boundary crossing might have the potential to advance the therapeutic alliance between a therapist and a client. One type of boundary crossing which benefits a therapeutic alliance and relationship building is a client's giving of a gift and therapist's receiving of a gift in psychotherapy.

In addition, discerning a clear boundary differs in accordance with the theories of psychotherapy. For example, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the firm and rigid boundary and avoids any types of boundary crossing such as a therapist's acceptance of a gift from a client. Psychoanalytic therapists view a client's gift-giving behavior as an attempt to manipulate the therapist or to earn the therapist's attention and love. By giving a gift, a client who feels unworthy and unloved can try to increase the chance of receiving the therapist's love. Psychoanalytic theories are likely to view therapists who accept gifts as interfering in the transference analysis by acting out and gratifying an unconscious impulse. Hence, psychoanalytic therapists tend to analyze the potential meaning of a gift and use it as "grist for the therapeutic mill," rather than uncritically accepting the gift (Zur, 2011). Unlike psychoanalytic therapists, humanistic, feminist, behavioral and cognitive therapists emphasize the importance of congruent relationship between a therapist and a client and support any boundary crossing, such as gift-giving, if they are likely to enhance therapeutic effectiveness and professional relationship (Zur, 2011).

Cultural Meaning and Context of Gift-giving Behavior

Regardless of the therapist's theoretical background or ethical stance, a therapist should understand how cultural meanings of a gift outside the psychotherapy are associated with the ethical boundary issues in a therapeutic relationship because a gift has different meanings in different cultures. In most Asian cultures, power and social class between a gift giver and receiver is clearly distinguishable and has different meanings in each gift-giving behavior. For example, giving a gift in formal occasions (e.g., birthdays, weddings) is to express the giver's respect toward the receiver by giving more expensive gifts or cash, while giving a gift in informal occasions (e.g., social gatherings) is to show the giver's appreciation for the receiver's hospitality and kindness by giving inexpensive and thoughtful gifts, such as foods or drinks (Stubbs et al., 2024). In both occasions, if a receiver, especially in a position of power or senior, refuses a gift, it is considered extremely disrespectful.

In a therapeutic relationship, most Asian clients may view a therapist as a person who is in a position of power and authority. Thus, an Asian client who values gift-giving behavior as a desirable and healthy action expressing both respect and gratitude to his senior or helper (e.g., therapist) may equivalently perceive a therapist's rejection of his gift as a rejection of him in developing a psychotherapeutic relationship. If a therapist does not consider the cultural meanings of a client's gift-giving behavior, he may do more harm than good in psychotherapy (Corey et al., 1998; Gerig, 2004; Zur, 2011). Hence, a client's gift-giving behavior should be understood within the client's own cultural context to avoid misunderstandings which could result in a client taking offense when a therapist does not accept his gift (Zolkefli, 2021).

Furthermore, in certain Asian cultures, like India, Cambodia and Far Eastern countries, gift-giving is a ritual and traditional behavior which offers a gift not to the person, but to the spirit in the person (Liu et al., 2024). In such cultures, gifts are perceived to be able to cure mental illness if the gifts please the spirit of the receivers or ancestors carried by the sick person. According to this cultural tradition, a client feels rejected, offended, or insulted, if a therapist refuses to accept his gift due to an ethical boundary concern. A client even feels that therapeutic relational bond between the therapist and himself failed, and his mental illness will not be cured. Moreover, a client may mistakenly interpret a therapist's rejection of a gift as a lack of genuine interest in his client or that the therapist is insulted because the gift is too small or not valuable enough to be considered as a gift.

In a psychotherapeutic relationship, Asians tend to perceive a therapist to be an expert, authority, senior, and a figure of diverse role models such as a mentor or a coach. As a result, Asian clients may expect a therapist to provide multiple interpersonal relationships beyond the therapeutic one (Liu et al., 2024). Some Asian clients seem to believe that personal relationship with a therapist helps them to advance and seal therapeutic relationship, although it is considered a boundary violation and conflict of interest from a Western-trained therapy perspective. According to this cultural context, an Asian

client's gift-giving behavior needs to be understood as a cultural way of advancing the therapeutic relationship by engaging in a personal relationship with a therapist, rather than an issue of violating an ethical boundary. In this cultural context, "No-gift policy" suggested in therapeutic relationship is meaningless and does not lessen the client's feeling of insult or rejection when the therapist declines client's gift. Consequently, the client is likely to hesitate to trust the therapist because he perceives the mental health provider as a stranger who refrains from personal relationship when he rejects a gift.

Implementation in Psychotherapy

There is no single and right way to deal with clients' gift-giving behavior in psychotherapy. In general, accepting a client's gift ethically and clinically is determined by clients' cultural values and motivations, therapist's theoretical orientation, training, agency policy and their profession's Code of Ethics. Keeping these diverse factors in mind, this paper suggests some general guidelines that can be implemented to offer culturally competent psychotherapy to the client. For this purpose, a therapist must explore his own attitudes, motivation, biases and stereotypes against gift-giving behaviors of non-dominant cultures. A therapist understanding his own bias helps him avoid misinterpreting a client's gift-giving behavior based on his own cultural assumption. Reciprocally, if a client feels his therapist respects his cultural meaning of gift-giving behavior, it enhances a healthy therapeutic relationship.

In addition, a therapist should not indiscriminately decline client's gifts out of fear of ethical violations because it may cause the client to feel rejected or disrespected, and consequently, damage the therapeutic relationship. To avoid any ethical violation, a therapist should carefully analyze the client's gift-giving behavior in the client's cultural context and his motivation for giving a gift. Most importantly, a therapist should evaluate the impact of accepting or rejecting a gift on building a healthy and strong therapeutic relationship. Oftentimes, a therapist inviting a client to discuss his personal and cultural meaning of a gift-giving behavior, rather than the meaning or symbolism of the gift itself, is useful to building a strong therapeutic relationship. When discussing the cultural meaning of gifts with a client, a therapist should not initiate a discussion compulsively but carry out the conversation with thoughtfulness and clinical sensitivity (Zur, 2016).

Other important factors that therapists should consider in analyzing client's gift-giving behavior are: (1) the nature of therapy services (e.g., mandatory, voluntary, fee-based, phases of treatment, etc.), (2) types and monetary values of the gift (e.g., symbolic gift, expensive gift), (3) timing of the gift (e.g., termination, holidays), (4) impacts of gift to other people (e.g., other clients in a group therapy), and (5) potential challenges associated with receiving a gift (Gerig, 2004). Finally, it is important to document the therapist's decision and its rationale along with his personal feelings and professional stance.

III. CONCLUSION

A client's gift-giving behavior is a significant interpersonal event that has received relatively little attention in psychotherapy research, although some Asian cultures perceive gift-giving and receiving as a healthy and appropriate therapeutic relation. When a client presents a gift, a therapist is challenged to maintain professional and ethical boundaries but should have the flexibility to respond with warmth and appreciation. A therapist should invite clients to talk about the meaning of their gifts and then accept them, particularly if the gift is a part of a cultural tradition in which clients express gratitude to a therapist. When deciding to accept or refuse a client's gift, the therapist must consider whether the overall clinical benefit of accepting a gift outweighs the risks to the therapeutic relationship if he rejects a gift. A therapist should be responsible to promote the client's best interests and ethical boundary by balancing and weighing not only all the considerations enumerated above, but also a cultural context governing gift-giving behavior while adhering to the profession's Code of Ethics.

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