

The Discovery of Self-Disclosure

Group discussion with Asian-American Women (including some who were interviewed for this issue) 7/8/2014

The subject of self-disclosure came up spontaneously at a lunch on 7/8/2014 at the Irashi restaurant in Chinatown, Boston. It came out of a discussion of “depression,” a word that does not translate well into Vietnamese, Japanese or Chinese, according to my Asian-American informants. Chien-Chi Huang explained the problem by translating “depression” into Chinese by drawing a calligraph (a Chinese word-symbol) with several layered meanings. Part of the word meant “sadness,” another part “frustration”—but, Chien-Chi explained, these ideas were qualified by being described as “symptoms.” The bottom part of the word-symbol meant “symptom.”

This addition medicalized the experience of depression in a way that no one at the table liked. This view is often reflected in the greater Peer Community, with the “Medical Model” of mental illness being juxtaposed unfavorably with the preferred “Recovery Model.” The Recovery Model teaches that a person who has a mental health crisis can get better (though not necessarily remain permanently free of mental health issues).

It was fascinating to learn: each Asian language speaker spoke of a different problem with translating the word. Yuka Gordon said that a translation of the word “depression” into Japanese would be “disease of darkness.” Anh Vu Sawyer said that the translation of the word “depression” would be romanticized as involving darkness, loneliness and the tendency “to withdraw into ourselves.” She agreed with me that the Vietnamese description would be a poetic description. However, Anh Vu added, depression would be classified as a “sickness” which would damage the reputation of the depressed person. Anh Vu agreed with me that the depiction of someone with the depression-sickness would be a condemnation.

This subject of translation came up in our planned discussion about Recovery Stories and Self-Disclosure. I had led off with the question, “What kinds of things about yourself would you not want to see printed in the Transformation Center newsletter?”

The perceptions of non-Asian-Americans about Asian cultures were among the concerns discussed by the participants, and possibly misrepresenting one’s culture-of-origin. “We are protective of our community,” Anh Vu explained. Christina Chan added, “I am careful to say, ‘This is my opinion.’” Some misconceptions that I have been told about before include the perception of Asians as always professionally successful, intelligent, good at mathematics, etc.

However, the biggest concern with self-disclosure appeared to be the reaction of one’s family. As Anh Vu put it, “We have to die before we can say that kind of thing.” There was a chorus of laughter. This concern had partly to do with a perception in Chinese culture, and possibly other Asian cultures, that a depressed person is “lazy.”

When discussing self-disclosure within the Asian-American communities, participants talked about re-assuming obligations and restrictions associated with their cultures. As one put it, “You be conformed by them.” Thus the opportunity to talk about their experience in the broader Peer Community was a positive experience for all the participants, although with some reservations.

“The truth sets us free,” explained Anh Vu. “I discover more of who I am. [When I self-disclose.] Revelation is part of human life.”

All the participants were positive about typical American reactions to a person who has overcome adversity: “Americans love ‘Come-back Kids’!” they enthused. Yuka Gordon mentioned that she had some concern after hearing recovery stories that had a dramatic degree of abuse or suffering, that her story would have a “So what?” effect on her audience. In Yuka’s story, she connects her parents’ and teachers’ stellar expectations of her academic performance with her depression. (See “An American Adventure.”) The other participants in the discussion assured Yuka that her story would not be seen as insignificant. “Asian-Americans will relate to it,” several participants said matter-of-factly.

Motivations for self-disclosure were quite high-minded. In communities where it is not customary to talk about mental health conditions, one participant thought that there might be people in the audience who identified with the speaker. One participant spoke of “civil engagement, social awareness” that would “affect policy-making.” This comment got a lot of agreement, with the suggestion that disclosure by Asian Americans might help with recruiting more Asian-American mental health workers.

Another comment, from Anh Vu Sawyer, suggested the use of “grassroots cultural brokers,” (for example the Southeast Asian Coalition, Mutual Assistance Associations, Asian Women for Health, etc.). These cultural brokers, influenced by individuals who were willing to disclose mental health issues, could “figure out ways to eradicate the stigma of mental illness and educate/inform our people [concerning] the importance [of] mental health.”

Despite their cultures’ negative views on depression and other mental illnesses, the interviewees concurred that Recovery Stories which include self-disclosure can benefit the Asian-American community. In the words of one local Japanese-American community activist, they “break the silence” surrounding the subject of mental health.

For information about the Breaking Silences Project, directed by Pata Suyemoto and Christina Chan, see: <http://breakingsilencesproject.blogspot.com/>

Chien-Chi Huang later responded in writing to a question about how and where she wanted to affect policy-making: “I think we need to educate the community members as well as the policy-makers and providers [about] how [the] “model minority myth” is hurting our community and how “suffering in silence” is not a virtue or a good practice. I’d like to see a media campaign to help de-stigmatize the mental health issue and the behavior of seeking help. More resources are needed for developing a pipeline of culturally competent work[ers] serving the Asian populations.”