

Simon T.M. Chan

THE MANIFESTATION OF FAMILY TRIANGULATION IN ASIAN-CHINESE FAMILIES AND ITS RELEVANCE TO FATHER-SON CONFLICT

The concept of family triangulation has existed in the West for more than 30 years, but the extent to which it can be applied in the East has not been demonstrated. Using a case study conducted by a leader in the field and building on the interplay of three dyads, this study uses the four-step model of assessment (Minuchin et al., 2007, Assessing Families and Couples: From Symptom to System, Allyn and Bacon, New York) to articulate the manifestation of the phenomenon in Chinese families. The results show that father-son conflict arises from mother-son attachment and hidden father-mother conflict; the father-son conflict presented in the case study illustrates the intertwined relationship between these dyads. Finally, the significance of the triangular perspective in dealing with father-son conflict in Asian-Chinese families is noted.

Keywords family triangulation; Chinese culture; father-son conflict

Introduction

Family triangulation is a well-developed concept in the West. However, how it plays out in the context of Chinese culture is not well understood. In particular, limited work has been carried out on the manifestation of family triangulation in Asian-Chinese families. In this study, we review the current research on family triangulation and connect it to the relevant literature on Chinese idiom and opera stories. Drawing on the four-step model developed by Minuchin *et al.* (2007) for assessing family dynamics, we explore how the features of family triangulation are manifested. We draw conclusions regarding father-son conflict in the context of family triangulation and also triangular exploration.

Concept of family triangulation

Family triangulation is one of the eight key concepts developed by Bowen (1976, 1978), the leading proponent of intergenerational family therapy (Bowen, 1976, 1978).

Family triangulation occurs when the conflict between two people is detoured. The relationship is stabilised by involving a third person (Nichols, 2010). In *Working with Relation Triangles*, second-generation Bowenian therapists expand the concept of triangulation (Guerin *et al.*, 1996) and explain how triads became part of family therapy and psychological thinking. Bowenian therapists work on the relevant clinical techniques, structures, processes, movements and functions of the relationship triangles. In other words, triangulation is short for ‘relationship triangle’.

Family triangulation in the landscape of family therapy

Triangulation is a concept widely accepted by Western family therapists. Satir (1991) argued that people come into this world as a part of the primary triad – father, mother and child. The structural school of analysis identifies three subsystems in the triad system (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993). An example of detoured conflict might be when parents who cannot resolve conflicts within their dyadic relationship divert their concerns onto their child. The child is then absorbed into the parental conflict. In this manner, spousal conflict facilitates paternal conflict and mother–son attachment and leads to familial triangulation. As the child is passive, parental conflict is the primary source of the problems.

The concept of family triangulation can be traced back to Freud’s Oedipus complex (Bowen, 1976), which was, however, concerned with individuals (Freud, 1954). In the West, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) shifted the focus to the mother–son dyad, and the concept of triangulation has since been central to the field of family therapy (Greenberg & Pinsof, 1986). When attachment theory was initially proposed, the convention was to refer to the ‘mother–son’ relationship; today, this would be referred to as the mother–child relationship. As this study is focused on father–son relationships, it will continue to use the term ‘mother–son’ relationship.

Byng-Hall (1990), a colleague of John Bowlby at the Tavistock Clinic, argued that attachment theory has implications for family therapy. He argued that from an attachment perspective, a fundamental aim of family therapy is to create a secure enough base within therapy for the family to explore how each member, and the family as a unit, can provide a secure base for one another outside of therapy. Moreover, he regarded attachment theory as a base for family and couple therapy, in which the therapist should establish a temporary secure base within therapy to help families feel safe enough to explore new ways of relating (Byng-Hall, 2001). Other attachment theorists placed the primary emphasis on understanding how children organise dyadic relations with an attachment figure. In contrast, Byng-Hall (2002) delineated how the family system may serve as both support for and threat to children’s attempts to preserve a sense of security. In integrating attachment and family system theories, Byng-Hall postulated that family characteristics outside of the emphasis on parental responsiveness and sensitivity (e.g. family scripts, the interplay between marital relations and parent–child relations) played a prominent role in the development of children’s patterns of insecurity and parentification.

Meanwhile, Stevenson-Hinde made use of the concept of triangulation to integrate mother–child dyad studies with father–child and father–mother–child studies. Stevenson-Hinde started as an attachment theorist devoted to mother–child dyad

studies (Stevenson-Hinde & Hinde, 1986). After joining Byng-Hall, she extended attachment theory to father–mother–child studies, i.e. from dyad to triad studies. Noting that the triangulation concept supplemented the mother–child attachment theory, Stevenson not only expanded from dyad to triad but also from mother–child to father–child studies. Her unique contribution was to advance attachment theory beyond dyad studies, to include the family context. The implications of attachment theory for family systems and family therapy have since been widely studied (Stevenson-Hinde, 1988, 1990; Byng-Hall & Stevenson-Hinde, 1991).

Byng-Hall and Stevenson-Hinde (1991) argued that ‘insecurity within one relationship may influence expectations and interactions in other relationships’. This can exist in four different ways: (1) capturing an attachment figure, (2) turning to an inappropriate attachment figure, (3) inappropriate response to attachment behaviour and/or (4) anticipating loss, similar to a past loss. These points were illustrated over the course of therapy involving a family with two young children. To some extent, their argument helped to explain the mechanism behind triangulation; if the mother feels insecure in the marital relationship, she may turn to an inappropriate attachment figure – the son in the context of the father–mother–son triad. The effect may be that the son becomes attached and/or triangulated and then carries the anxiety of the mother.

Stevenson-Hinde (1990) also linked attachment theory with family system theory. She concluded that

a family systems approach provides a context for the development and maintenance of dyadic attachment relationships. An attachment approach provides a focus on the expression of and response to attachment behaviour within a family. Uniting the two approaches has implications for both research and intervention.

Using attachment theory, Johnson (1996, 2002) and Johnson and Whiffen (2005) developed emotionally focused couples therapy, which is a brief, empirically validated approach that focuses on helping clients restructure negative interactive patterns (attaching–withdrawing and pursuing–distancing) that have become habitual and have created emotional removal or remoteness, or have led to an attack–attack pattern.

The foundation of attachment theory is the idea that each of us needs the accessibility and responsiveness of attachment figures to achieve a sense of personal security and experience a sense of trust and safety. Marital distress signals the failure of an attachment relationship to provide security, protection or closeness, resulting in anxiety and a sense of vulnerability in one or both partners. Couples may hide their primary emotions (their real feelings, such as fear of rejection) and in their place display defensive or coercive emotions (secondary, reactive emotions such as expressing anger or blaming when afraid). This may lead to negative interactions in which each partner fears revealing his or her primary emotions. Repeated over time, this pattern destroys one’s trust in a partner’s willingness to exhibit honest primary emotions, which in turn become buried even further. Emotionally focused therapists use the therapeutic relationship to help couples access and reprocess the primary emotions underlying their emotional bond and move their negative interactional sequences towards affiliation and engagement.

In this decade, attachment theory has been applied to a wide variety of situations, such as adolescent and adult attachment (Crowell *et al.*, 2008; Dozier *et al.*, 2008), group work (Markin & Marmarosh, 2010; Page, 2010) and even for clients with specific problems, such as eating disorders (Tasca *et al.*, 2011), child custody issues (Main *et al.*, 2011) or psychosis (Berry *et al.*, 2008).

In sum, attachment theory explains the ethological nature of the bond between mother and child. The theory also accounts for the relationship between a history of exposure to inter-parental discord and a child's psychological symptoms. In terms of marital distress, the anxiety of the mother directly undermines a child's sense of security in the inter-parental relationship, which in turn results in the insecurity of the child. The impact of marital distress upon the child is also investigated in the field of family therapy, along with the triad relationship.

Previous studies on attachment theory have provided a solid base for understanding the mother-child dyad, which is one of the three dyads in the father-mother-child triad. The other two are the father-child and father-mother dyads. If it is true that mother and child are linked by a strong bond, it is not difficult to understand why, when parents are in conflict, a child drawn into the triangle often identifies with the mother's emotion rather than the father's. The concept of family triangulation expands attachment theory from mother-child dyad studies to father-child and father-mother-child studies. The interplay of attachment theory and family triangulation in dyad and triad relationships is therefore the foundation of this study of father-son conflict in the context of the father-mother-son triad.

Triangulation as a cultural concept in the Chinese context

In Chinese culture, clinicians have questions about triangulation, such as 'What is family triangulation in actual practice?' They may ask further questions, such as 'If family triangulation exists, how is it manifested in Chinese families?', 'What part does a mother play in the father-son dyad in Chinese families?' and 'How can mother-son and father-mother dyads affect father-son conflicts?' Before answering these questions, it is crucial to consider whether the concept of family triangulation has been acknowledged in Chinese culture. If triangulation means detouring conflict between two people by involving a third person to stabilise the relationship between the original pair, the nearest phrase to be found in Chinese language or literature is the idiom, 'three legs become stable' (三足鼎立). This 三足鼎立 refers to a traditional three-legged Chinese container found in the middle of a palace/temple. The existence of triangulation in Chinese families has not been clearly acknowledged in mainstream Chinese literature. However, Hsu and Tseng (1974) highlighted the complex father-mother-son relationships in the storylines of Chinese operas. They surveyed, classified and analysed 100 classical Chinese operas and their contents. They were particularly interested in the themes of mother-son, father-son, mother-daughter, father-daughter, man-woman, husband-wife, siblings and in-law relationships. Triangulation appeared in 12 of the father-son opera stories in which mothers played a key role. A common theme of father-son conflict was estranged paternity. Traditionally, this has been encapsulated in the concept of the Oedipus complex in the West

(Freud, 1954), whereas in Chinese culture, it is portrayed through Ding-Shani's story of wild goose shooting (薛仁贵杀子).

In the story 'Ding Shang's Wild Goose Shooting (薛仁贵杀子)', a man, Xue Ren-Gui (薛仁贵), leaves home for the army shortly before his wife gives birth to a boy, Ding-Shang (薛丁山). The boy lives alone with his mother in the mountains, and when he grows up, he supports his mother by hunting. The father, now a famous general, returns from the war 18 years after leaving home. On his way home, he meets an excellent young archer who can easily shoot down a flying wild goose, just like himself. While he is admiring this young man's performance, a tiger appears and is about to harm the young man. To rescue the young man from this wild beast, the father aims to shoot at the tiger but, by mistake, kills the young hunter. When he reaches his wife's house, he finds a pair of man's shoes and becomes angry. Then he learns from his wife that the young man he has killed is their son.

Zhang (1992) contrasts this story with the Oedipus one and makes the following comment:

In the Greek tragedy, Oedipus kills his father at the crossroad when his father is on his way home. The Chinese Oedipus story also occurs when the father is on his way home, but despite the striking similarity of the setting in the two stories, the solutions are different, for in the Chinese Oedipus story, it is the father who kills the son instead of the other way round. That is, instead of parricide, the Chinese Oedipal story ends in pedocide. In Freudian terms, the Chinese version focuses on the son's fear of castration by the father; the Greek version focuses on the son's murderous resentment in the face of the castration threat. In fact, in both cases, the killing is done when the people involved have no knowledge of their kinship.

Despite these similarities, whether family triangulation really exists in contemporary Asian-Chinese families is still controversial, as its expression in traditional Chinese opera may not represent reality among Asian-Chinese families. The phenomena of family triangulation can only be examined within a contextual background. Therefore, we have used an in-depth case study of a single family to explore the way family triangulation is manifested in contemporary Chinese families.

Exploratory study

This exploratory study examines the manifestation of family triangulation in Asian-Chinese families. It is based on the four-step model developed by Minuchin *et al.* (2007) to assess family dynamics, including family triangulation. In step 1, the therapist opens up the presenting complaint; in step two, the problem-maintaining interactions are highlighted; step three is a structurally focused exploration of the past and the final step is an exploration of alternative ways of relating. Through this model, the researcher can track changes from the perspective of family triangulation. Such a model not only serves the purpose of clinical process exploration but also supports clinical process research by providing a tool to track the manifestation of various concepts, such as family triangulation.

The tracking starts in step one with an individual, usually the one with the presenting problem. The presentation problem in this case study is father–son conflict. Therefore, in step one the therapist has to open up the individual issues, mostly related to the son, and explore how these are linked to father–son conflict.

To explore the triangulation-maintaining interactions in step 2, it is necessary to remember that each triangle comprises three dyads and that the interplay of the three dyads organises the problem-maintaining interactions within the triangle. The father–mother conflict can shape the interaction of father–son, making it a conflictual relationship, while the mother–son dyad becomes much more enmeshed. The enmeshed mother–son relationship can further aggravate the conflictual relationship between father and son.

In step 3, the therapist structurally focuses on exploration of the past. In the context of triangulation, this is mostly related to marital conflict. Therefore, the therapist will explore how the marital discord developed and how it is sustained.

In the final step, alternative ways of relating in the marital relationship are explored. It becomes marital therapy and can be regarded as de-triangulation.

Case study

To establish methodological rigour, a professional scriptwriter transcribed the sessions and also recorded non-verbal messages, such as body movements and changes in facial expressions. A trainee in family therapy then read the script to increase the reliability of the transcript. An experienced translator translated the Chinese quotations in this paper. Finally, a case study database (Yin, 1989) was created to allow other investigators to review the data directly, rather than rely on the written report. This also served to enhance reliability. An experienced family therapist was invited to review the database to countercheck whether a therapist could capture the four-step movements. In relation to confidentiality, pseudonyms and arbitrary cities are used to protect the privacy of the family in the case study.

Ka Fai, aged 12, a Form 2 student and the eldest son in the family, did not attend school for half a year after his parents had arranged a new school for him. The school social worker had provided individual counselling for him, particularly concerning his emotional and school difficulties. Ka Fai himself was not motivated to contact the social worker; instead, he only stayed at home. The parents therefore approached the counselling service of a non-government organisation where they had four sessions of family interviews with a family therapist trainee who was also a family physician. However, the trainee was unable to make progress in the sessions, and the family was then referred to Dr Minuchin during his visit to Hong Kong in 1996. Dr Minuchin made use of the information from the previous sessions and then further explored the father–son conflict in this family.

Step 1: opening up the presenting complaint

In the consultation session, the therapist first connected with the son by complimenting him on his oral English and asking how he managed the homework as he had been absent from school for half a year already.

Therapist: (To the father) . . . He (Ka Fai) is doing O.K. in his subjects, do you agree?

Father: That depends. I arranged a school for him, and I think it is a good school. He doesn't like the school too much because I arranged it for him. I think he's fighting with us just . . .

Therapist: I am confused. (Points at the son) Your father says you don't go to school because you are fighting against him. Is that right? You did not go to school, not because of the school but because of your father!

Ka Fai: Partly.

Therapist: Who is winning?

Ka Fai: Nobody wins.

Therapist: What would be the victory?

Therapist: It is important to know what would be the victory . . . you don't want to be defeated (The therapist moves to sit beside Ka Fai and leans forward). Why do you need to defeat him (father)?

Ka Fai: He doesn't respect me and doesn't ask my opinion.

Therapist: He doesn't consider your opinion?

Ka Fai clearly stated that the father–son dyad was battling over schooling. He also said that his refusal to attend school was his way of rejecting his father, and so far, neither of them had won. At a later point, the mother intruded into the dyad. When the therapist encouraged Ka Fai to talk with his father, to see whether he could successfully negotiate with him, he assigned the mother an observer's role. When the father started the negotiation by facing Ka Fai and asking him, 'What are your opinions?' the mother interjected, 'You (Ka Fai) should speak louder so that the others are able to hear your opinions'. However, the therapist stopped her by saying, 'You are an observer'. The second interruption happened within the next 2 min when the father further probed Ka Fai about his opinion. Ka Fai replied in anger and the mother said, 'He (Ka Fai) said his classmates bullied him'. Obviously, the mother was trying to provide background information, but at the same time, she again intervened in the father–son interaction. If the therapist had not stopped her again by saying 'Observe only', the interaction between the father and son would have shifted to become a parental or mother–son transaction.

Step 2: highlighting problem-maintaining interaction

The therapist asked the mother why Ka Fai had so much power.

Mother: When he was in primary school and in a new secondary school, he behaved properly. After his absence from school, I tried to accommodate his requests. Even when his requests were unreasonable, I would compromise.

Therapist: Then you treat him as a small child as well. (The therapist pretends to be a child jumping around and clapping his hands to demonstrate.) It is not good for him to be so powerful.

Mother: I regret giving in to all his requests.

Here, the mother admitted that she gave in to most of Ka Fai's requests and reflected that she cared for him as well. The therapist thus encouraged the couple to discuss how to help Ka Fai become a 12-year-old and not an 8-year-old boy.

Mother: I hope to have a happy family. I hope you can cooperate, and I hope we won't reject the current method. I feel sometimes that his demands are quite unreasonable. But if we don't cooperate, it'll make him confused. (Sobbing) Our family will break down. It's not talking about who's right and who's wrong. My opinion is that we should act congruently so as to help him. Sometimes, I hope you won't just reject the son's opinions and think they're all wrong. Instead of that, we can think about them.

Father: Now, it's my turn. Our son's behaviour does not correspond to his age. I think he'd respect and listen to parents at this age. He's quite childish as he likes watching those cartoons, which are suitable for 3 to 4-year-old children. There're some problems in his personality. (He paused for a while.) He likes playing games, um . . . I don't mind, but he spends too much time on it. It affects his studies. At his age, he should be self-regulated to manage his time and work. But he fails to do so. So I think he's not a mature adolescent For instance, he refuses to listen to me, to not to watch TV at midnight. It becomes hard to control myself and not to scold him.

The mother had encouraged the father to be more patient in dealing with Ka Fai. The mother herself was longing to be listened to and respected. She found it difficult to cooperate with the father and thus vented her angry emotions. However, the father responded abruptly by saying, 'It is my turn to say something . . .'. When the father talked about the son not listening to the parents, he really meant that the son did not listen to him. In fact, he himself did not listen to his wife's sobbing. Instead, the father responded to her tears by asserting his opinion about parenting and dismissing her emotions. This became the first sign of parental disagreement, which contrasted with the father's statement that the couple could compromise in their parenting.

On the contrary, it was Ka Fai who paid full attention to what the mother said, though he had been told to sit at a distance. When the mother burst into tears, it was Ka Fai who showed he was listening attentively by leaning forward. Again, the closeness of the mother and son was demonstrated.

The therapist stressed the importance of this segment by clarifying the effect of the parent's behaviour upon the son and shared his observations with both of them. He sat next to the son and placed his hand on his shoulder.

Therapist: They are not helping you. They're only expressing their own voices and their own opinions. As usual, your mother says yes, and your father says no. You're being put like this (he puts up the son's arms sideways like a cross and flips them over). You are in between. (Pauses for a while.) (To parents) You both are so certain you think you are right, and then your son is caught in the middle. You need to change I want to tell you (father), sometimes when you are angry with him (Ka Fai), you are angry with your wife. I want to tell you (mother), you protect him (Ka Fai) when you are angry with your husband. So Ka Fai is in between you two.

So Ka Fai is suffering and confused. How can you both be good parents? Now, you are less than one parent because you both are continuously fighting against each other.

Here, the therapist highlighted the parental conflict, which had resulted in a family structure in which the child is triangulated. The theme of triangulation was pointed out by the therapist here, but the family members remained silent and had no direct response to this theme at this time.

Step 3: structurally focused exploration of the past

The therapist highlighted the differences between the subsystems and invited a change of action from the parents, directing their focus away from Ka Fai. The parents were invited to discuss how to help their son behave more maturely. The therapist added that the father treated his wife and son as young and inferior and did not regard them as adults. The father focused on the son but ignored the needs of the mother. The therapist refocused the father in the couple discussion and stressed that the couple should deal with each other directly. The couple further shared their viewpoints, and the mother started to cry.

Mother: (Sobs) It's because of your work; you don't care about us. I don't want to be a strong woman, I'm just a woman. I know I need to take care of my family, but not only I need to. I have suffered a lot during these 20 years (pauses for a while), and you just played a role to point out who's right and who's wrong. I want to change, but you still stick to your own opinion. (Pauses for a while.) I feel helpless. At one time, I wanted to run away. I don't want to be hurt by loved ones. As a husband, don't always blame me about our son's behaviour. I have tried my best.

It was the first time the mother had shared how she had been criticised by the father for the past 20 years. Her husband was so rigid and blaming that she had thought of running away from the family. The father listened in silence and seemed to accept the grievances of the mother, whereas the son listened to the mother attentively. The hidden parental conflict was again explicitly shown. The therapist, after exploring the dyads and observing the family dynamic, summarised the dynamics of triangulation and the pain of the mother in his final remark, which led to the fourth step of exploring alternative ways of relating.

Therapist: (Turns to the father) ... He (Ka Fai) has become the knight of the mother. You expect your wife to respect you, and Ka Fai is also asking for the same thing. (Leads Ka Fai to sit next to the mother) Ka Fai tries to be your (mother) ally and protects you. (Faces the father) That is your responsibility. Your wife is lonely. She feels empty. She has nobody to talk to. She came to need a son of eight years to comfort her. She needs your help, and you are not helping her. If you want him to grow up, you have to fulfil her needs...

The therapist explained the theme of triangulation and addressed the mother's loneliness; the mother responded by expressing her grievances in the marital relationship and kept on nodding her head to show her agreement with the therapist. The father kept silent for 5 min, nodded thrice, and expressed his sincerity by shaking hands with the therapist. Ka Fai did not respond much to what the therapist said but kept on observing his mother. The unique feature in this case was that the son became part of the parental conflict by protecting the mother.

To conclude, the son was totally involved in the family triangulation, in the sense that he took his mother's side and rejected whatever his father did. The son had rejected the father to fight for the mother as a knight. The 'map' for alternative ways of relating is very clear: start from the father–son dyad, then move to the husband–wife dyad and change how the son is triangulated. This map is useful for the exploration of a clinical process which turns a son, who is in conflict with the father, into a 'Mother's Knight'.

The manifestation of family triangulation

The features of the case were conceptualised as follows.

Feature 1: paternal alienation

Father and son were aloof and strangers to each other. The mother acted as the mediator by informing the therapist that the father and son had a poor relationship, and neither the father nor the son appreciated each other. According to the concept of mother–son attachment, the son is emotionally close to the mother and hence absorbs the anxiety of the mother, who in this case suffers from grief and low satisfaction in her marital relationship (Byng-Hall & Stevenson-Hinde, 1991; Byng-Hall, 2001). The son derived his image of his father from his mother, instead of through direct communication. Remarkably, the paternal alienation could be interpreted through both the identification of the father via the mother's descriptions, and the absorption of his mother's emotions towards his father.

Feature 2: mother–son attachment

The mother–son attachment was clearly manifested, in that the mother was the key attachment figure, as predicted by attachment theory. As Bowlby (1979) remarked, the human infant has the primary need to establish an emotional bond with a caring adult. Significantly, this study ascertained that the mother maintained a close emotional bond with a figure, regardless of whether the figure was a child or an adult. On the whole, an enmeshed mother–son relationship existed, with the son paying close attention to the mother's life. The son was more familiar with the mother's emotional experience than with the father's. In fact, the mother was the primary attachment figure for the son. This relationship is also expressed in most Chinese opera stories, such as *Si-Lang Visits His Mother* (四郎探母) and *The Great Filial Piety that Moved Heaven* (黃龍公探地見母, 1974). In structural family therapy, the concepts of the enmeshed mother–son and the disengaged father echo this phenomenon.

Feature 3: father–son conflict reflects mother–son attachment and father–mother conflict

The previous sections discussed each dyad, namely father–son, mother–son and father–mother. The interrelatedness of these three dyads is worth further attention, as manifestations in any dyad may reflect features of the other dyads in the context of family triangulation. For example, the problem of father–son conflict correlates with the existence of mother–son attachment and father–mother conflict. In the context of the father–mother–son triad and the mother–son attachment, once the couple is in conflict, the emotions of the mother are likely to be absorbed by the son, who will then tend to reject the father (Byng-Hall, 2002). Therefore, father–son conflicts can be elicited by mother–son attachment and/or father–mother conflict. When familial interaction is disrupted by paternal conflict it is not a single conflict or attachment that is the problem; the conflict may involve spousal conflict and mother–son attachment. Clinicians should be aware of these insights when dealing with families with father–son conflict or family triangulation issues (Graulati & Heine, 2001). The findings can be stated in individual terms rather than at the dyad level. The loneliness and anguish experienced by the mother were absorbed by the son, who was the one who acted. In the context of triangulation, the son stood by the mother to compensate for the neglect, complaints, and even the beatings suffered by the mother. The son crossed the boundary of the sibling subsystem and actively took on the role of the mother in the parental conflict. Attachment theory supplements the understanding of the concept of triangulation (Stevenson-Hinde, 1990; Byng-Hall & Stevenson-Hinde, 1991; Byng-Hall, 2001). The nature of the mother–son attachment explains why the son stands by the mother instead of the father in marital conflict.

Conclusion

Father–son conflict in the context of family triangulation

This case study provides an alternative understanding of father–son conflict in the postmodern era that is relevant to Chinese culture. Building on the traditional Chinese proverbs of ‘stern father, merciful mother’ (嚴父慈母) and ‘Wu Chou Bu Cheng Fu Zi’ (無仇不成父子), which means ‘hatred binds the father and his son’, family triangulation suggests that father–son conflict echoes both hidden mother–son attachment and hidden father–mother conflict. Consequently, the concept of paternal alienation can be identified in the context of family triangulation. The son is likely to become more attached to the mother and more distant from the father. Of course, it is impossible to conclude that all families with marital conflict are likely to experience father–son conflict or that all father–son conflicts involve marital conflict. However, this examination of the manifestation of Chinese father–son conflict in the postmodern era demonstrates that the triangular perspective may be significant and should not be disregarded. Many Asian scholars have questioned the validity of triangulation in the Asian context, as they consider it a Western norm that may not exist in other cultures (Chun & MacDermid, 1997; Bell *et al.*, 2001; Graulati & Heine, 2001; Rothbaum *et al.*, 2001). However, family triangulation is not new to Chinese culture as can be seen in

the idiom ‘three legs become stable’ (三足鼎立). Further, the narratives in popular Chinese operas corroborate the existence of such a hidden dimension in our culture (Hall, 1990). Two final remarks highlight potential issues to be pursued in future research. According to current thought in family therapy (Nichols, 2010), conflict is often avoided for fear of blaming from the family. The two concepts of family conflict and family triangulation are the mislaid treasures of modernism in the field of family therapy.

Triangular exploration

Practitioners are strongly encouraged to consider the triangular perspective in their practice, especially in cases of father–son conflict. The exploration of family triangulation could be used in dealing with father–son conflicts or with emotional and behavioural problems among adolescents in general. We hope that clinicians in the Chinese community will adopt the concept of family triangulation and use it to disentangle triangulated sons. For instance, therapists could focus on assisting the father to not only realise the significant role of the mother in the father–son relationship but also encourage him to support the mother and thus de-triangulate the son. Finally, therapists may consider sharing the metaphors of opera stories with family members to clearly highlight and symbolise their roles in the family play. Optimistically, the concepts of family conflict and family triangulation that are currently the hidden treasures of modernism in the field of family therapy (Nichols, 2010), could be fully exploited to benefit individuals, families, clinical practitioners and family therapy science in general. This exploration of triangulation in cultural context also illustrates how theories can adopt or be relevant to increasingly diverse clients, rather than requiring clients to adapt to therapeutic models.

References

- Bell, I. G., Bell, D. C. & Nakata, Y. (2001) ‘Triangulation and adolescent development in the U.S. and Japan’, *Family Process*, vol. 40, pp. 173–186.
- Berry, K., Barrowclough, C. & Wearden, A. (2008) ‘Attachment theory: a framework for understanding symptoms and interpersonal relationships in psychosis’, *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, vol. 46, no. 12, pp. 1275–1282.
- Bowen, M. (1976) ‘Theory in the practice of psychotherapy’, in *Family Therapy*, ed. P. J. Guerin, Gardner Press, New York, pp. 145–198.
- Bowen, M. (1978) *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Jason Aronson, Inc., New York.
- Bowlby, J. (1973) *Separation: Anxiety and Anger*, Basic Books, Inc., New York.
- Bowlby, J. (1979) *Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, Tavistock, London.
- Byng-Hall, J. (1990) ‘Attachment theory and family therapy: a clinical view’, *Infant Mental Health Journal*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 228–236.
- Byng-Hall, J. (2001) ‘Attachment as a base for family and couple therapy’, *Child Psychology and Psychiatry Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 31–36.
- Byng-Hall, J. (2002) ‘Relieving parentified children’s burdens in families with insecure attachment patterns’, *Family Process*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 375–388.

- Byng-Hall, J. & Stevenson-Hinde, J. (1991) 'Attachment relationships within a family system', *Infant Mental Health Journal*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 187–200.
- Chun, Y. J. & MacDermid, S. M. (1997) 'Perceptions of family differentiation, individualization, and self-esteem among Korean adolescents', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 59, no. 2, pp. 451–462.
- Crowell, J. A., Fraley, R. C. & Shaver, P. R. (2008) 'Measurement of individual differences in adolescent and adult attachment', in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, eds J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver. 2nd ed. Guilford Press, New York, pp. 599–634.
- Dozier, M., Stovall-McClough, K. C. & Albus, K. E. (2008) 'Attachment and psychopathology in adulthood', in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, eds J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver. 2nd ed. Guilford Press, New York, pp. 718–744.
- Freud, S. (1954) *Origins of Psychoanalysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess. Drafts and Notes, 1887–1902*, Basic Books, New York.
- Graulati, E. & Heine, B. J. (2001) 'Separation – individuation in late adolescence: an investigation of gender and ethnic difference', *Journal of Psychology*, vol. 135, pp. 59–70.
- Greenberg, L. S. & Pinsof, W. M. (1986) *The Psychotherapeutic Process: A Research Handbook*, The Guilford Press, New York.
- Guerin, P. J., Fogarty, T. F., Fay, L. F. & Kautto, J. B. (1996) *Working with Relationship Triangles: The One-Two-Three of Psychotherapy*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Hall, E. T. (1990) *The Hidden Dimension*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Hsu, J. & Tseng, W. S. (1974) 'Family relations in classic Chinese opera', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, vol. 20, pp. 159–172.
- Johnson, S. M. (1996) *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Marital Therapy: Creating Connection*, Brunner/Mazel, New York.
- Johnson, S. M. (2002) *Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy with Trauma Survivors: Strengthening Attachment Bonds*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Johnson, S. M. & Whiffen, V. E. (2005) *Attachment Processes in Couple and Family Therapy*, The Guilford Press, New York.
- Main, M., Hesse, E. & Hesse, S. (2011) 'Attachment theory and research: overview with suggested applications to child custody', *Family Court Review*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 426–463.
- Markin, R. D. & Marmarosh, C. (2010) 'Application of adult attachment theory to group member transference and the group therapy process', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 111–121.
- Minuchin, S. & Nichols, M. P. (1993) *Family Healing: Tales of Hope and Renewal from Family Therapy*, Free Press, New York.
- Minuchin, S., Nichols, M. & Lee, W. Y. (2007) *Assessing Families and Couples: From Symptom to System*, Allyn and Bacon, New York.
- Nichols, M. P. (2010) *Family Therapy Concepts and Methods*. 9th ed. Allyn and Bacon, New York.
- Page, T. F. (2010) 'Applications of attachment theory to group interventions: a secure base in adulthood', in *Adult Attachment in Clinical Social Work: Practice, Research, and Policy*, eds S. Bennett & J. K. Nelson, Springer, New York, pp. 173–194.
- Rothbaum, F., Rosen, K., Ujiie, T. & Uchida, N. (2001) 'Family systems theory, attachment theory, and culture', *Family Process*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 328–350.

- Satir, V. (1991) *The Satir Model: Family Therapy and Beyond*, Science and Behavior Books, Inc., Palo Alto, CA.
- Stevenson-Hinde, J. (1988) 'Individuals in relationships', in *Relationship Within Families: Mutual Influences*, eds R. A. Hinde & J. Stevenson-Hinde, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 68–80.
- Stevenson-Hinde, J. (1990) 'Attachment within family systems: an overview', *Infant Mental Health Journal*, vol. 11, pp. 218–227.
- Stevenson-Hinde, J. & Hinde, R. A. (1986) 'Changes in associations between characteristics and interactions', in *The Study of Temperament: Changes, Continuities and Challenges*, eds R. Plomin & J. Dunn, Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, pp. 115–129.
- Tasca, G., Ritchie, K., Conrad, G., Balfour, L., Gayton, J., Lybanon, V. & Bissada, H. (2011) 'Attachment scales predict outcome in a randomized controlled trial of two group therapies for binge eating disorder: an aptitude by treatment interaction', *Psychotherapy Research*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 106–121.
- Yin, R. K. (1989) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 2nd ed. Sage Publications, Inc., Beverly Hills, CA.
- Zhang, J. (1992) 'Psychoanalysis in China: literary transformations'. In *Psychoanalysis in China : literary transformations*, ed. J. Zhang (1919–1949), East Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, pp. 56–57.

Simon T.M. Chan, Phd, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work at Hong Kong Baptist University. Address: Department of Social Work, Hong Kong Baptist University, Renfrew Road, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong. [email: simon@hkbu.edu.hk]
