

Looking at boundaries from an Asian-American perspective

Boundaries, in one form or another, are a common topic that Asian-Americans bring with them into counseling sessions. The theme may manifest in complaints of fatigue, burnout, anger issues, relational stress, and more. Often underlying these complaints is a sense of discomfort around confrontation and ambiguity around what boundaries are and whether they are appropriate to set. Cultural factors are at play. These four factors of Asian culture will help you better understand why it is difficult for Asian Americans to set boundaries.

VALUE	MESSAGE	STRUGGLE
<p>Filial piety</p> <p>This value has its roots in Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies, which assert that children are to respect and honor their parents. Because parents are the source of a child’s life, children are expected to obey and defer to the needs of their parents out of thankfulness. Although many Asian families today don’t necessarily practice or strictly adhere to Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist beliefs, these values and traditions are still present in societies where these philosophical and spiritual beliefs form the backbone.</p>	<p>“You owe your parents everything.”</p>	<p>How filial piety may show up: “If I tell my parents I don’t want to translate documents for them anymore, won’t that show that I’m ungrateful or a bad child?”</p>
<p>Hierarchy</p> <p>In a similar vein, Asian culture is predominantly hierarchical. Respect is given to those who are older, or more experienced, and the expectation is often that those who are inexperienced or younger will defer to those who are more senior. This can be seen in the social rules that govern family gatherings and meals (who gets to eat first), drinking culture (who serves the drinks), greetings (use of honorifics in language), etc. This is also illustrated in work settings, where managers or individuals of authority demand tasks of subordinates and expect compliance. Because these cultures are hierarchical, the abuse of power is not uncommon.</p>	<p>“Listen to and respect those who are older or more experienced.”</p>	<p>How hierarchy may show up: I feel frustrated when my parents tell me to go over to my grandparents’ house every weekend.” “I get so angry when my boss tells me to get a task done, but I can’t talk back to him.”</p>

<p>Collectivism</p> <p>In collectivism, the values and interests of the group trump those of an individual. Whether that group is the nuclear family or an ethnic group, it is implied that the values and perceived benefits of the group hold more importance over those of an individual. Strict adherence to norms, whether they are familial or national, is expected. Individuals are expected to defer to the needs of their family or the group. Maintaining the “face” of the unit is more crucial than an individual’s needs or wants.</p>	<p>“The group is more important than you.” “Keep the peace.”</p>	<p>How collectivism may show up: “I can’t tell my parents that I don’t want to pursue medicine – they would be so disappointed and angry. My whole family is in medicine...it would be embarrassing.”</p>
<p>Shame</p> <p>A sense of shame implies messages such as, “I’m not good enough,” “I’m bad,” or “Something is wrong with me.” This notion of shame is shared between Western and Eastern cultures. However, in Eastern cultures, shame is more layered in that you can also bring shame upon those around you. “Don’t make us look bad.” “How you behave is a reflection on us.” In Asian cultures, shame is often used as a negative motivator to ensure that people live up to social expectations. A common joke is that an Asian parent will ask a child why they got a 98 when they could have got 100 on a test.</p>	<p>“There’s no place for making mistakes.” “You should be better.”</p>	<p>How shame may show up: “I’ve been struggling with depression for years, but my parents would never let me take medication for it, because they’re afraid others will think I am crazy. They just tell me to get over it and be happy.”</p>

Each of the above cultural values poses challenges to boundary-setting because they encourage individuals to defer their own needs in the interest of others. Rather than addressing conflict or a difference of opinion, Asians are more likely to seek resolution by keeping quiet, passively going along with the other party, or by avoiding the topic altogether. Long-term, this deference can lead to burnout, bitterness, and resentment.

God calls boundaries good. We see it in how he laid out creation (Job 38:4-11), in modeling a day of rest and weaving one day of sabbath into each week, in laying out his laws that are meant to protect us, and in other areas.

Here are some guidelines when working with Asian-American clients to set boundaries:

1. **Don't dismiss the client's ties to family.** If you say to a client things such as, "Who cares about your parents?" or "You get to decide what you want to do with your life," they will likely shut down, tune out, or will feel like you do not understand.


Instead, let the client teach you about their culture. Being a great counselor involves being a great student. Ask your clients questions such as, "What should I know about your cultural background that would be helpful as we get to know each other?" "What did your family structure look like growing up?" "What are some examples of how you struggle to make decisions when it conflicts with what your family wants?"

2. **Don't assume that a Christian shouldn't have ties to their Asian culture.** The gospel is for all people. Paul went to great lengths, in books such as Galatians, to show that Christians did not have to adopt all Jewish cultural standards for salvation. In the same way, we should not confuse Euro-centric Western values as necessarily scriptural or gospel-centered. Help Asian-Americans clearly think through parts of the culture that they can value and then other parts that need to be transformed by the gospel.

Instead, retell the gospel. When clients choose to follow Jesus, the Bible tells us that they are adopted into God's family — God is their loving Father, who has their best interests in mind, which can come through loving boundaries. For those who have grown up with overbearing, belligerent, strict, or critical parents, the concept of a patient and loving Heavenly Father that loves them in spite of what they do or don't do may be foreign; yet, that is what they need to be assured of to begin setting boundaries with those around them. When they can see God as loving and gracious, Asian clients may find it easier to make decisions about calling, career, and dating.

3. **Reframe boundaries as God-given and loving.** The cultural backdrop for Asian-Americans often lends to the idea that boundaries are selfish, but setting boundaries is a way to steward our resources and love wisely. We can only love intentionally and well when we discern healthy capacity. For example, a client may overstretch themselves by serving on the worship team, the usher team, and the meals team at church, and, as a result, not serve 100% on any team. Discuss with them how saying yes to some things and no to others may be more loving as it shows intentionality and commitment.

But don't make all boundaries the same. Because of cultural factors, drawing boundaries may look different for Asian Americans. Don't draw an arbitrary hard line and expect them to follow it. Collaborate with clients to discern a boundary where it feels



healthy, but also explore ways that still allow them to honor their family. Give them time to work out what is best.

Normalize the experience and struggle of boundary setting. Clients are bound to feel anxious, make mistakes, and retract their steps in the process of setting boundaries with others. This is a normal process in learning. Explore with them feelings and hesitations around setting boundaries and help work through them. Encourage them to start small.

Overall, let the Holy Spirit work. The challenges of boundary-setting are often not isolated incidents – they happen within the context of culture. Yet, your presence as an empathic, culturally-informed, and patient witness, along with the power and comfort of the Holy Spirit, will help Asian-Americans navigate through the messiness of boundaries.

ⁱ The term “Asian-American” is a generalization for those of Asian descent, but the writer recognizes that there are many cultural nuances and differences among Asians (for example: Pakistani-Americans vs. Bhutanese-Americans vs. Chinese-Americans). As with each individual and culture, differences abound. This article is not meant to be prescriptive, but a general description of what the writer has seen in their own clinical practice in working with Asian-American clients, particularly from South East and East Asia.