

How does the Asian diaspora heal: An examination through *Everything Everywhere All At*

Once

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Everything Everywhere All At Once (EEAAO) is an absurdist comedy-drama film about the experiences of an Asian-American family with themes surrounding mental health and familial relationships. With the increasing frequency of transglobal migration, healthcare providers must become better equipped to deliver care for these populations (Lin & Cheung, 1999). Literature has explored how mental health services are not readily utilized by minorities, due to the cultural stigma that surrounds mental illnesses (Livingston et al., 2018). This highlights more recent research into the importance for practitioners to take on the framework of cultural humility in their practice (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). In knowing the complexities surrounding parent-child relationships, especially so for immigrant families as they navigate acculturating to the host culture, media becomes platforms that can help make sense of these intricate experiences. *EEAAO* has not only provided a representation of the nuanced experiences of the Asian diaspora but also a painfully honest look at the way intergenerational trauma (IGT) impacts this community. This film lends itself as a vehicle to expand on aspects of the empirical literature regarding IGT, the model minority myth, and family communication. It serves as an accessible frame of reference to understand the intersections of mental health and Asian diaspora identity for mental health practitioners (Han et al., 2024). *EEAAO* effectively uses the dynamics between the characters Evelyn, Joy, and Gong Gong to illustrate how IGT is experienced by and hurtful to the Asian diaspora. The film works towards overcoming mental health stigma by normalizing open communication within families. Implications for practitioners in considering the importance of familial relationships within counselling will be discussed.

The movie follows Evelyn, a Chinese immigrant who runs a struggling laundromat with her well-meaning husband Waymond, while also navigating the strained relationship she has with her daughter, Joy, who is a lesbian. Evelyn's father, Gong Gong, is visiting for his birthday

when she is thrust into saving the multiverse from the evil Jobu Tupaki, Joy from a different universe. Jobu Tupaki goes through the different multiverses searching for a version of Evelyn who understands her. In the process, Evelyn learns to navigate the different multiverses, exploring alternative versions of herself and gaining a new perspective that heals herself and the relationships around her.

Creative formats like films have the power to give voices to stories not often told. Media plays a large role in how individuals contextualize themselves, often acting as socializing agents (Mok, 1998). It also has the power to explore the topic of oppression, while also offering liberation and healing in the same space (Han, 2024). Despite the upward trend in the number of Asian characters in movies, specifically in lead roles, stereotype-confirming representations remain prevalent (Besana et al., 2019). There is great stigma surrounding mental health, with research identifying that collectivistic, rather than individualistic, cultural groups are more likely to discriminate against people with mental illness due to their preference for conformity (Yu & Mak, 2022). The stigma surrounding mental health is often the reason for the underutilization of mental health services, and racial minorities, such as Asian Americans, who hold higher levels of self-stigma are even less likely to seek help (Nam et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2006; Masuda et al., 2009). Thus, *EEAEO* bridges the lack of representation of the Asian diaspora lived experiences and subverts the stereotypes that often plague films by directly placing these characters, Asian immigrants, in the spotlight, and making them more than the sum of their parts. Given the stigma surrounding mental health, I will explain how *EEAEO* becomes even more significant for its representation and amplification of marginalized voices.

Through her struggle with depression, Joy represents the experiences of Asian American children navigating the challenges of communicating with their immigrant families. Though not

explicitly stated in the movie, some scenes clue audiences into the state of her mental health. The specific symptomatology of depression identified are depressed mood, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidality (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Her depressed mood is apparent from the very first scene, where she stares blankly at the laundry cycle going on while out of touch with the rest of her surroundings, not noticing her girlfriend approach her (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:03:30). Feelings of worthlessness as a symptom can also be identified as Jobu/Joy introduces “the bagel” to Evelyn, stating that after she put “everything” on a bagel, it becomes “the truth” and this truth reveals that really “nothing matters” (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:59:47). Suicidality acts as another indicator for audiences as Jobu/Joy states that the real reason they built the bagel, which turns into a vortex, was to destroy herself. She wanted to see if she went in, she might finally be able to escape and “actually die” (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:42:27). Joy’s challenges with mental health are contextualised within IGT, which exacerbates her difficult parent-child relationship with Evelyn as she doesn’t understand Joy until the end of the movie when they choose to explicitly communicate with each other.

Trauma and mental illness have established interactions, even specifically linked to the severity of mental illness and its development over the lifespan (Isobel et al., 2019). Gaps in parent and child cultural orientations are also related to poorer adjustment (Chen et al., 2014). Given that, it should not come as a surprise that Joy’s difficulty in her relationship with Evelyn causes her mental distress and pain. Regarding the impact trauma has on mental health, it leads to the importance of trauma-informed care, particularly within familial relations (Isobel et al., 2019). IGT, specifically, is the process that parents with unresolved trauma experienced through migrations, violence, poverty, and oppression; it can also include relational trauma, which is then passed down through the generations through interactional patterns (Hesse & Main, 2000; Isobel

et al., 2019). The trauma experienced may inform parents about the way they navigate their roles as caregivers, especially if they weren't able to process their own trauma and replay such attachment patterns with their children (Isobel et al., 2021). Within EEAAO, IGT is portrayed directly through the dynamics between Gong Gong and Evelyn, where she expressed resentment for how easily her father let her leave for America with Waymond despite his disapproval, underscoring the strained relationship they have. IGT has therefore impacted Evelyn and Joy's relationship, and throughout the movie, we see these two characters work to address this problem, making it key to healing their relationship.

The model minority myth adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of the IGT. Defined as how specific minority groups, such as Asian Americans, should serve as a model for other minority groups because they have managed to excel academically, socially, and economically (Gupta et al., 2011). Evelyn internalizes this myth by lying to her father that they have been doing so well that they're applying for a new business license, when, in fact, they are being audited (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:12:52). The model minority myth intersects with mental health as it dissuades Asian immigrants from seeking help as their "resilience" should have made them immune to emotional breakdowns and behavioural problems (Lin & Cheung, 1999). This desire to save face coupled with the internalization of the model minority myth explains why Evelyn's relationship with Gong Gong continues to be strained. The pressure of trying to prove her father wrong, that she is successful in her business and her family, bleeds into Evelyn and Joy's relationship, helping us understand the intergenerational mechanisms at play.

IGT often manifests within parent-child relationships where experienced traumas from previous generations are repeated. Evelyn's difficulty in fully accepting Joy's sexuality, just as

Gong Gong didn't accept Evelyn's choice of partner in Waymond, highlights this. Despite Evelyn being "open" to Joy dating a white girl, Evelyn still introduces Joy's girlfriend, as a friend to Gong Gong, because he "is a different generation" (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:32:26). Joy is hurt by this and storms away. Even as Evelyn goes after Joy, she hesitates before only telling Joy to "eat healthier" because she is getting fat (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:11:02). This lack of open communication, choosing to stay silent about the actual topic at hand, is a common strategy in Asian American families struggling with trauma (Lin & Suyemoto, 2016). In Evelyn's struggle to communicate and directly address the pain Joy feels, Evelyn is unable to meet Joy's emotional needs, illustrating the persisting cycle of IGT.

At the climax of the movie, Evelyn's healing is symbolized through her ability to navigate the multiple worlds after experiencing "everything". The dialogue that ensues highlights the important role communication plays in the healing process, with interventions often focusing on facilitating culturally sensitive processes that improve communication skills which help families embrace their history (Kim, 2023). Evelyn has healed from her trauma regarding the relationship she has with her father when she says, "it's okay if you can't be proud of me. Because I finally am proud of myself" (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:59:16). She addresses not only the relationship that she has with her father but also the relationship that Gong Gong has with Joy, how he "may see in her all of [his] greatest fears squeezed into one person" (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:59:16). But despite it all, Evelyn has learned to accept Joy for who she is. Evelyn addressing these relational dynamics act as the catalyst to how all three characters heal, as we see that Joy is saved from being sucked into the bagel vortex with Evelyn and Gong Gong anchoring each other.

It is crucial to consider the intertwining family relationships in the healing process (Lin & Cheung, 1999). Forgiveness, connectedness and relationship restoration within family interactions are often key to the process of reconciliation of parent-child relationships in Chinese populations (Lyu & Lu, 2022). When Joy tells Evelyn that she doesn't "want to hurt anymore" and that she just wants Evelyn to "let [her] go", it allows audiences to understand that acceptance is difficult and when there are enduring dynamics, there often will be a reluctance to accept this change. What makes the healing so poignant in this movie, is that Evelyn also openly communicates about the difficult feelings she faces as Joy's mother, saying that "of all the places [she] could be, why would [she] want to be here with [her]?" (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:59:16). But the resolution Evelyn offers Joy is that despite these difficult feelings she has as her mother, she will "always want to be here with [Joy]" (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 2:06:47). This scene involving both mother and daughter acknowledging their own hurt while working to understand each other aligns with the focus on facilitating communication to address IGT in clinical settings (Kim, 2023).

EEAAO has provided a framework to understand the process by which an Asian American family has been affected by IGT and their path to healing. However, it is also important to note that healing in vivo doesn't occur simply through one conversation. It has been found that there are no differences in youth's willingness to seek support from family and even their comfort in initiating these conversations (Lee et al., 2022). However, this should not take away from the rich representations that this media has offered us, considering that there is a need for mental health resources for Asian American families in making sense of their trauma.

As Han et al (2024) have argued for the power behind media as a space for healing, *EEAAO* has helped to articulate the experiences of the Asian diaspora. Tying this back to the importance of representation and the role that media plays, this film has been bountiful in its representations. *EEAAO* has created nuanced characters with mental health struggles while showing audiences what open, candid conversations regarding parent-child relationships look like. Given this, I echo the sentiments of Han et al (2024), stating this film would be a beneficial resource for practitioners and families to help make sense of Asian diaspora experiences.

Throughout this paper, I have contextualized how *EEAAO* represents IGT among Asian diaspora and the process of healing between Gong Gong, Evelyn, and Joy. Specific scenes have been analyzed to understand how intergenerational trauma is present in the film, from the way the characters converse (or lack thereof) with each other, to the conflicts that occur between characters. Finally, an exploration of how each character heals and impacts the family unit's overall acceptance and growth from IGT gives audiences a glimpse into the importance of communication and implications for the importance of family dynamics in clinical practice.

While I have explored how *EEAAO* has masterfully used the dynamics between the characters to explore IGT and mental health, the queer identity of Joy was not explicitly incorporated due to the chosen scope of the paper. This is a limitation as there are intersections to the identities that queer people of colour have. Literature has identified that Asian sexual minorities are at more risk for stigma (Poon et al., 2011), and have their own unique experiences with mental health. Future explorations into how these intersectionalities also impact familial relationships would be beneficial in better understanding the diverse Asian American identities in the context of mental health services.

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