



FTA Newsletter



Multigenerational Approach in the Malaysian Cultural Context

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A Malaysian Story

About two months ago, a family of four, of Indian ethnicity, came for a consultation together with the grandfather. The presenting issue concerned a five-year-old boy, Jimmy. He was constantly agitating his one-year-old cousin, who lived in the same household. At the same time, it became clear that Jimmy also wanted to play with his cousin, but he did so in a rough and dysregulated way, which alarmed the adults around him.

There were significant family conflicts, particularly involving the wife of the father's brother, as the two families were living together in one home. At one point, Jimmy defecated in the living space used by his uncle's family, which heightened the level of distress and concern.

Using Maurizio Andolfi's approach, we followed the five-year-old into his family system. Very quickly, the focus shifted from Jimmy's behaviour to the conflict between his immediate family and the family of his father's brother. From there, attention moved to the living arrangement itself: two siblings and their families living together with the grandfather under one roof. This arrangement felt organically imposed rather than consciously chosen, and it had never been openly discussed.

As the session unfolded, the grandfather's unresolved grief over the loss of his wife at a young age came to the surface. For the first time in 25 years, the son was able to see how emotionally in pain his father was in relation to this loss. What also became evident was the way the children had taken on a protective role toward the grandfather, feeling a responsibility to "take care of dad." This unspoken obligation appeared to underpin the forced cohabitation and the ongoing tensions within the household.

By the end of the session, the family looked stunned but deeply grateful. These issues had always been present, yet they had never been named or spoken about. Now, they were out in the open. Invisible loyalty—a powerful dynamic in many Asian families—had been addressed respectfully and effectively within a single session. In typical Maurizio style, we thanked the child for bringing the family to therapy and closed the session.

Over the following two sessions, the family was able to communicate to the grandfather, in a kind and respectful way, their need for space to live as a nuclear family. They were also able to reassure him that this was not a cut-off, committing instead to spending Sundays together. This decision helped renew the couple's relationship, which had been under increasing strain due to the unresolved living arrangement. Jimmy, too, appeared noticeably calmer (according to the parents) than when we first began.



What Makes the Multigenerational Approach Work in Malaysia

Across West Malaysian communities—Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others—family life is deeply collectivist. Identity is defined relationally, shaped by interdependence, obligation, and shared responsibility. Within this context, distress is rarely experienced as an individual problem alone but as something that emerges within relationships. The multigenerational approach resonates strongly with this worldview, as it understands symptoms as relational phenomena rather than individual pathology. Many families also come specifically to the Andolfi Centre because they are aware that the multigenerational approach attends to how the past continues to shape present relationships. This idea resonates strongly within the Asian cultural context, where history, ancestry, and family legacy are deeply valued. Families often welcome the possibility of reconciliation with parents and older generations, experiencing therapy as a rare space to explore intergenerational influences—something that is still uncommon in most conventional therapy practices in Malaysia. All this makes the use of the multigenerational approach in the Malaysian context very easy and welcomed.

In Malaysia, as in other Asian societies, intergenerational loyalty remains a central organising principle in many families (like the story above). Filial piety, respect for elders, and duty-bound relational roles reflect deeply embedded moral frameworks that have sustained families across generations. The multigenerational model offers a language to explore these loyalties not as obstacles to change, but as expressions of love, survival, and meaning. By attending to inherited emotional legacies and unspoken family contracts, the approach reduces blame and invites compassion into the therapeutic process.

Malaysia is characterised by a high-context communication style, in which meaning is conveyed primarily through atmosphere, relational cues, and implicit understanding rather than through explicit verbal challenge. While this style serves to preserve harmony, hierarchy, and relational safety, it often results in important relational realities remaining unspoken, unresolved, and difficult to bring to conclusion. Within this cultural context, a distinguishing feature of the multigenerational approach is the deliberate inclusion of children in therapy, as the use of children's narratives offers a culturally attuned pathway for the indirect expression of conflict. This practice is frequently experienced as both culturally congruent and therapeutically powerful. Children are commonly perceived as emotionally sensitive and relatively unencumbered by adult agendas, allowing their voices to be received as less confrontational and more trustworthy within the family system. Their presence enables difficult relational realities to surface indirectly, reducing overt blame while preserving harmony and face in a cultural milieu that places high value on respect, hierarchy, and relational continuity.

Working with the whole family in the therapy room is another defining feature of this

model. In Malaysia, many practitioners who identify as “family therapists” tend to focus primarily on the presenting problem and the individuals directly involved. For example, when conflict arises between a mother and daughter, therapeutic work often involves only these two family members, with the rest of the family excluded. In contrast, the multigenerational approach deliberately brings the entire family into the therapeutic space and, where relevant, includes members of the extended family such as grandparents. Rather than treating difficulties as isolated relational problems, symptoms are understood as embedded within a wider network of intergenerational relationships, loyalties, and emotional histories. For many Malaysian families, this way of working is initially unfamiliar. However, it resonates strongly with cultural values that emphasise family interconnectedness and respect for ancestry. Over time, this approach has become a distinguishing feature of the Centre’s work and has contributed significantly to its unique reputation within the Kuala Lumpur therapeutic community.

Therapists in West Malaysia are often expected to combine professional expertise with moral and relational authority. Maurizio’s emphasis on authenticity, emotional presence, and active engagement aligns well with these expectations. Families frequently respond positively to therapists who participate relationally rather than maintain strict neutrality, experiencing this stance as containing and trustworthy. Spiritual and religious beliefs also play a significant role in shaping meaning for many families, and the multigenerational framework allows suffering to be understood within broader narratives of morality, destiny, and relational legacy. In this way, faith, values, and ancestral stories can be integrated into therapy rather than challenged or pathologised.



Some Challenges

While there are a lot of positives, the approach must be applied with a high level of cultural sensitivity. West Malaysian cultures are generally reserved, with emotional restraint closely associated with respect, modesty, and social harmony. Elements of Andolfi’s model that emphasise overt emotional or bodily expression—such as hugging, physical proximity, or sculpting techniques—can initially evoke discomfort or

resistance. In a cultural context that values introversion, shyness, and emotional containment, these interventions may feel unfamiliar or intrusive.

For this reason, emotional expression itself often meets resistance, not because families are unwilling to engage, but because these ways of engaging fall outside their cultural repertoire. Such interventions cannot be introduced too quickly. They require careful pacing and the gradual building of trust between the therapist and the family. Therapeutic leadership here involves knowing when not to intervene, allowing safety and alliance to develop before inviting deeper emotional or embodied work. Being slow, respectful, and attuned is therefore critical.

Another challenge emerges around the inclusion of children in therapy, particularly when working with couples. In the Malaysian context, parenting is a highly protective project, and many parents believe strongly that children should be shielded from adult difficulties. As a result, inviting children into the therapeutic space—especially when the presenting concern appears marital—often requires time, explanation, and reassurance. Parents may worry that children will be burdened, exposed to conflict, or emotionally harmed. This hesitation is usually an expression of care rather than resistance. Including children, therefore, calls for thoughtful contracting and a clear articulation of purpose, helping parents see how children’s presence can support family understanding without placing them in adult roles.

Involving extended family members can similarly raise concerns about privacy and “saving face,” as family difficulties are often regarded as private matters. Bringing these issues into the open may evoke shame or social anxiety. Clear boundaries, strong contracting, and a gradual approach to multigenerational involvement are essential to ensure that therapy feels containing rather than exposing.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the multigenerational approach has established a **distinct presence in West Malaysia**, attracting families specifically seeking to explore the impact of their past and engage in reconciliation within the family. By bringing the whole family into

therapy, the Andolfi Centre offers a unique and culturally sensitive pathway for addressing relational distress, fostering understanding across generations, and supporting meaningful change. This approach demonstrates that when therapy integrates authenticity, cultural attunement, systemic thinking, and a developmental perspective, it can effectively address the complex needs of Malaysian families while building a reputation for innovation and trust within the local context.

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Family Therapy Academy



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