



# The Application of Satir's Iceberg Theory in Family Therapy: Evidence from the film text, dialogue and Evelyn's Characteristic in Everything Everywhere All at Once as an example

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**Abstract.** This research aims to delve into the typical Chinese family structure and parenting approaches by analyzing the behavior of main character Evelyn and the dialogue between characters in the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Evelyn is a Chinese woman who immigrated into American with her husband and operating a laundromat for living. The iceberg theory of Virginia Satir is used to decode the deeper meaning of dialogues and scenes in the whole movie and help to analyze the characteristic of Evelyn and how her personality is influenced. This research can help to enhance the knowledge of the comprehensibility to the film, the main character Evelyn, and the related psychological theories. Furthermore, it has certain implications in figuring the problem of Chinese style parenting approaches and the strategy to improve it.

**Keywords:** Family therapy, Satir's iceberg theory, ADHD, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

## 1 Introduction:

The science fiction, family, comedy *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which directed by Dan Kwan, have already been popular among Chinese filmland and become one of the most controversial phenomenal movies. The film adopted the elements of multiverse and the concept of cinephilia model as well. It focused on the magic reality of an Asian American immigrated family with multi-dimension, trying to delve into the parent-child conflict from original family in the post-pandemic of covid-19 era. By travelling through the multiverse in the way called 'jumping' with the soft science fiction and inserting different story lines of the related universe in the film, it completed the reconstruction of family relation with a universal philosophical viewpoint, and also the reinterpret of the proposition of human life.

While the series of expanding and extended theme, which about family educational system, parent-child relation, emotional projection and so on, in this film are equivalent to Satir's iceberg metaphor theory and the theoretical model of the application of family education. Based on the research objects such as the arrangement of film text plays, the relationship between dialogue and characters, and the subjectivity of meta universe to psychoanalysis, this paper applies Satir's Iceberg Theory to sort out and summarize the iceberg model concept map of the heroine Evelyn, her husband Vermont and daughter Joey in the whole universe in a flash, so as to deduce the impact of this family education mode on parent-child relations, and extract universal conclusions from individual cases. By adopting Satir's psychological theory, the inner side of the character can be linked with the relationship, the plot, as well as the surrounding environment so that it would be easier for the audience to figure out the traits of a certain character. The iceberg theory, however, helps to categorize the mental layer, providing a new approach for the audience to delve into the character [1].

## **2 Satir Model and Iceberg Theory**

### **2.1 Satir Mode**

Virginia Satir is an American author and psychotherapist, one of the leading figures in family systems theory [2], and a pioneer of positive psychology, who has been praised by the famous American magazine *Human Behavior* as "everyone's family therapy guru". She believes that each life has a unique growth path and that whatever lessons and impressions the old growth models have given to people, they deserve respect. Psychotherapy aims to arouse people's understanding and perception of their ability to solve current problems, and by experiencing beautiful moments they ultimately achieve "harmony of mind and body, the harmony of inner and outer self" to maximize their potential.

From the perspective of psychotherapy, the Satir model falls within an experiential family therapy frame, a treatment model which is based on a series of beliefs and theoretical assumptions about human nature. One of Satir's assumptions is that a person can change and even if there are no external changes, changes will take place inside of the person. For example, as one's inner feelings can change, his perspective may change slightly. Moreover, everyone is constantly interacting with external systems, so his internal system is more or less influenced by external things and circumstances. Satir's other assumption is that the problem itself should not be stressed, but how to deal with it should be emphasized. Although one can't change what has happened, he can face and manage this better. This is a unique feature of Satir's theory, which focuses more on human growth and future development. Her third assumption is that people have all the resources they need to survive and thrive, which is not a blindly optimistic assumption about human nature. Satir has drawn this conclusion by analyzing her years of clinical experience. She believes that since everyone is a mentor, the solutions to problems are to enable people to tap those resources and find the right middleman, thus becoming better [3].

## 2.2 Iceberg Theory

The Satir model of therapeutic intervention mainly focuses on three areas: the intrapsychic, the interactive, and the family-of-origin [4].

The intrapsychic system has been identified in terms of the iceberg metaphor. The areas or components of the iceberg include (1) behavior, (2) perceptions; (3) expectations; (4) yearnings; (5) self, and (6) feelings. More details are shown in Figure 1 [5].

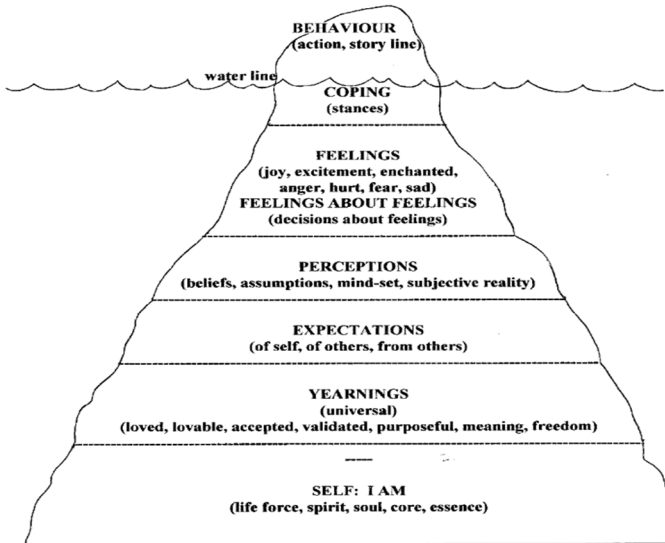


Fig. 1. Satir's iceberg theory (Image source: drawn by the author)

A therapist should understand the internal experience of the client, comprehend different levels of the iceberg, and ask different questions related to personal feelings, perceptions, expectations, and yearnings. After understanding these issues, the therapist should set positive goals to help the client determine his situation and express unmet expectations. Clients are encouraged to find ways to fulfill their desires, accept themselves, love themselves, appreciate what has been done, forgive themselves, and take responsibility. Besides, they are helped to overcome the barriers they have found and understand internal and external harmony. The intrapsychic is the starting point for treatment, followed by the area of relationship interaction in life [6].

## 2.3 The Intervention of the Satir Family Therapy Model in a Parent-child Relationship

Although a family is a basic unit of society, the modernization drive to a certain extent has exerted an impact on the stability of the family and sparked a series of issues, such as parent-child relationship, children's education, division of a single-parent family, parents support, husband, and wife, grandparents raising grandchildren, which threatens social harmony, and stable development. Among them, as the parent-child

relationship is the most common issue, the intervention of the Satir family therapy model in a such relationship plays an important role in promoting social harmony and stability, giving play to the potential of each social member, and indirectly propelling the development of society.

An individual's self-consciousness and outlook on the world mainly come from the family of origin, in other words, from the parents and their views. As people grow older, they unconsciously repeat their parents' patterns of interaction, even though they sometimes don't suit them or even have a detrimental effect on them. Thus, they can't ignore the influence of family on personal development. From this perspective, when parent-child relationships are intervened, their childhood or previous family experiences, and old patterns of family interaction should be studied to analyze the impact on their own lives and such relationships. Parents and children are encouraged to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of their internal interaction patterns, make positive choices, and learn to give up the negative ones. Therefore, these parental problems can be solved in families.

At present, one of the most popular forms of family therapy is the Satir model which is also one of the main forms of treatment in foreign clinical practice. In the model, active approaches and therapeutic approaches are employed to reproduce the communication patterns used in the family through games, simulated family conversations, sculptures, etc. Family members are aware of the impact of miscommunication patterns, thus reflecting and perceiving the patterns. Under the guidance of a social worker or family psychologist, family members learn new forms of interaction that promote change throughout the family [7].

In conclusion, the Satir family therapy model provides a practical, feasible method with a favorable effect to improve the family parent-child relationship. In the process of intervention, the iceberg theory model can be used to help the client clear his mind and better set service goals. In the service process, communication posture sculpture, interactive intervention, meditation, and other techniques can be used to improve the poor parent-child relationship for the family. At the end of the therapy, clients can strengthen their family relationships by meditating again.

### **3 The Influence of Dialogue on the Relationship between Individual Iceberg and Characters in Parent-Child Interaction: Take Evelyn as an example.**

In his theory of family education, Satir pointed out that the most important manifestation of parent-child interaction lies in daily dialogue. Film is an audio-visual art, and human voice dialogue, as the most important sound element in film and television, has become a necessary writing carrier for the ideological connotation and emotional theme of film. The dialogue between family members is characterized by triviality, arbitrariness and directness, but it is more likely to produce "inconsistent communication" in dignity maintenance and emotional value observation due to the influence of family structure, status and affiliation. Satir believes that in the collision of "individual iceberg" between people, the party who loses dignity is easy to derive four kinds of

moods, such as "ingratiation", "blame", "super-reason" and "interruption", and this ineffective communication will not only fail to connect parent-child iceberg for a long time, but also lead to sharp parent-child conflicts and family crises, resulting in a spiritual gap that is difficult to eliminate. Because the analysis of the psychological level is closely related to the personality and behavior experienced by the characters, it will provide real and powerful theoretical support [8].

Viewed in this light, the behavior and dialogue that takes place in the film, especially the conflict between mother and daughter Evelyn and Joy, can be made more reasonable. Satir said that effective parent-child communication can stimulate inner energy and create positive emotions. When Joy of the Alpha Universe attaches herself to her daughter Joy in the real world, she begins to question her mother with a vengeful heart. At first, Evelyn uses the skillful cosmic jump to resist her daughter's negative emotional expression in the form of matriarchal violence. What she says the most to her daughter is "I'm your mother ...." Obviously, this cannot alleviate her daughter's anxiety. Satir believes that parent-child communication should first change each other's attitudes and basic views on human nature. In the magical multiverse jump, Evelyn experiences the wavering faith of multiple paths leading to different outcomes, and finally says to her daughter, "No matter what, I will cherish this time." [9]

### 3.1 Contradictions lurking in everyday conversation.

Evelyn, the mother in "Everything Everywhere All at Once", as the "breadwinner" of the family's diligence and thrift, excessively restricts and controls her daughter Joy's personal life with the overbearing traditional Chinese family education. After Joey came out of the closet despite opposition, he took his girlfriend Betty to the laundry. Evelyn sent her daughter to the car and casually dropped her, "You should lose weight. You're too fat." Making Joey speechless, this seemingly plain and irrelevant remark, in fact, shows that in the mother-child relationship, Evelyn occupies the position of absolute leadership and dignity. She went to her daughter's car to express her "bon voyage" or love, and transformed it into an expected projection of the nature of a command, which not only reflects the crushing of women's power, but also the strong point of view in the iceberg. Joey, on the other hand, doesn't dare to talk back and just gets on the bus silently, which is a sign of his subordinate position and long-term resignation.

Evelyn: I have something to say to you!

Joey: What?

Evelyn: You.....You have to try and eat healthier. You are getting fat.

This suppressed emotion is not only the iceberg expectation of low self-esteem, but also the invisible cause of Joey's eagerness to devour his mother and destroy the world in other universes as the devil "Job Tubaka".

In the dialogic language system, the interpersonal function divides the interlocutor into two parts: the giver and the demander. Halliday believes that "mood" and "modality" are important components of the interpersonal function. In the individual iceberg metaphor theory, the behavioral posture is only one eighth of the surface, while in the dialogue, the tip of the iceberg is divided into three parts. Satir proposed that if

the effect of parent-child interaction is 100%, then the speech is 7%, the tone is 38%, and the facial expression is 55%, which shows that in the process of dialogue, the large-scale symbols of emotional transmission lie in the actors or dubbers, representing the pronunciation of lines and facial performance.

Because the protagonist in "Instant Universe" is a Chinese immigrant and the dialogue in the film is mixed with Mandarin, English and Cantonese, it is obvious that Evelyn has more relaxation of tone and modality when using Chinese, and can grasp the point of view under the iceberg from the micro details, while in English dialogue, it is relatively flat and moderate, lacking cadence and rhythm. Her mother often said, "You shouldn't be like this," and Joy basically only knew English, so that it was difficult for her to guess or understand the true meaning or desire and expectation of her mother by her tone and mood from an early age, so there were many ineffective parent-child interactions with iceberg connection difficulties. For example, when he introduced Joey's girlfriend Becky to his father-in-law, he initially said "This is Joey's friend" and then changed to "This is Joey's girlfriend". The change of the line was the change of his mother's attitude. So the first complete and systematic dialogue between mother and daughter took place in the inorganic life universe-mother and daughter became two adjacent boulders, through the presentation of subtitle bubbles, to convey the character's language expression, "There are no rules here, I want to be close to you." After omitting the tone of voice and facial expression, the communication between mother and daughter has undergone a qualitative leap, conveying warm emotional value to each other.

### **3.2 Contradictions under the influence of Chinese and Western cultural systems**

On the early stage of Evelyn's life, she got literally education of Hong Kong style which has a significant influence in building her personality regarded as a mixture of traditional Chinese culture and western culture. Because although in the past decades, Hong Kong had a rapid development and became more pragmatic, efficient, outgoing, global-minded, competitive and adaptive to trends, they still remained the traditional cultural values in mind, especially in the aspect of family [10]. According to Wong, the way of Chinese parenting system is far more distinctive than Western parenting system. The former is prone to be more authoritative, being eager to take control of everything alongside their children and exerting pressures on them to be so-called successful; this kind of parents have little consideration for the person as an individual [11]. For Evelyn, a woman who born and raised in HK and immigrant to American later, embodies both features when parenting her daughter, Joy, and treating her father.

Waymond: Evelyn, calm down. I know you want everything to be perfect for your father's party, but he's going to see you've nurtured a happy family and a successful business. He'll be proud of you.

On one hand, her mind has been cultivated by western style thinking, she tries to understand and show respect to Joy even though Joy got tattoo and had a girlfriend, which is Evelyn can hardly accept. In the movie, Evelyn dared to fight against her

father for her love with Waymond. It's her part of west. On the other hand, she has her Chinese traits deep inside, especially when communicating with her father and asking Joy to keep the secret that she is a lesbian, even ask Joy not to bring her girlfriend to the party, the Chinese part of Evelyn occupied the dominant. Also, it not hard to find that behind all the efforts she still tried to prove to her father that she has a successful career and happy family which is so-called 'successful' in traditional Chinese concept.

Joey: I know you haven't always likes Becky, OK, but.....

I like Becky. She is very nice.

Evelyn: You are very lucky..... your mother is open to you dating a girl

And she is a white girl.

But GongGong, his heart cannot take it, especially after a long flight.

### 3.3 Conceptual changes after experiencing various universes

As Koca said, the iceberg theory is Satir's main metaphor for the components of human beings, which is regarded as a system of associated dimensions and variables, in which a change in one element or dimension leads to a change in the relevant dimension [12]. So at the end of the movie, we can see that after going through so many universes and experiencing almost every possibility, Evelyn's personality has changed a little. When her father in the parallel universe with lived by wheelchair variation mecha rein Evelyn, Evelyn recall her to elope with her husband, the father said to her, "I don't have you the daughter" she displayed great pain, then she thought of the perspective-taking to transform, to understand the joey's real needs, and try to meet their needs, she was full of tears, "It doesn't matter if you don't like it or accept it, because it's me," he said affectionately and firmly. This sentence contains the great power of affection, instantly influenced the crazy Joey, mother and daughter with the consistency of the heart, to satisfy each other's sense of value, while in the corresponding universe, Evelyn began to show sincere acceptance from the heart. Instead of hiding the fact that her daughter Joey has a girlfriend from her father-in-law, she decides to take a step and introduce Becky to her father as her daughter's girlfriend. The mother-daughter relationship forms an iceberg of connection, Joey is shaken, and Evelyn saves herself and her daughter, completing the purification and treatment of family education.

Evelyn: Father, what are you doing?

GongGong: Do not call me father!

You are not my daughter.

## 4 Research of Satir Family Therapy on ADHD Patients -- A Case study of Evelyn

ADHD is an attention deficit disorder that includes a combination of persistent problems, such as difficulty concentrating, being distracted by foreign objects, divergent

thinking, poor patience, and interrupting others [13]. Evelyn, the movie's main character, is a typical patient. At the beginning of the film, when the hero communicates with her, she never seems to listen to herself; as she brings clothes to the guests, things are ready, but when she sees the opera on the TV screen and hears rumors nearby, she begins to wander around and introduce herself; more vividly, some strange things have appeared in her tax returns, such as a karaoke machine, but the man explains that "my wife always tends to confuse work and hobbies".

Deirdre: I was just hoping you could enlighten me as to how as a laundromat owner, a karaoke machine could constitute a business expense?

Waymond: Sorry, my wife confuses her hobbies for business.

The occurrence, development, and outcome of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are significantly affected by the family environment. Family intervention mainly affects the internal environment of the child's family, helps the family to develop effective behavior management style and gentle communication strategies, which has a positive impact on improving the child's symptoms, and boosting the parents' mood. Parent training and systematic family therapy are the most important interventions for families. Family intervention with behavioral management and system has a certain therapeutic effect, while parental intervention combined with medication or other treatment options is more effective than unified treatment. In China, parent training and organized family therapy are the main means of family intervention. Although some progress has been made in research on this aspect, the long-term outcomes of family interventions, and individual, optimized treatment plans need to be further studied in the future.

According to the McMaster Family Communication model [14], some studies have found that the family structure of children with ADHD has the following characteristics: low communication efficiency and lack of channels, conflicts of family roles, improper division of labor, low intimacy, inappropriate emotional responses, excessive or lack of emotional intervention, lack of behavioral control, excessive protection or improper troubleshooting. Based on the above characteristics, the main objectives of family intervention are as follows: 1) to change the original family pattern and adapt to the rigid cognitive system and behavior pattern; 2) to help families to identify and understand kids' symptoms, and find the function and meaning behind their symptoms; 3) to provide family support for them to avoid conflicts and other external stimuli.

At present, the main techniques of family intervention include parent training, family therapy, and other combination therapies. Among them, family therapy encompasses systematic family therapy, organized family therapy, and many other treatments.

Since 2002, Professor Wang Yufeng has been trying to apply eight levels of Buckley parenting education, which proves that the method is suitable for Chinese culture and the current situation in terms of content, behavioral ability, and parents' satisfaction. Based on the study, he has developed practical training materials, including the Eight Stages of Parenting a Disobedient Child [15]. Huang Huitao and other scientists have found that a comprehensive intervention approach — treatment of training parents combined with medication, can improve the effect of ADHD interventions. In



addition, parental behavioral training combined with toluidine and atomoxetine can improve parents' satisfaction with treatment and significantly improve their kids' symptoms [16]. At the same time, it has also been reported that a combination of other comprehensive treatment programs (such as the combination of medicine and education) shows better clinical effects [17].

In conclusion, family intervention has been found to be beneficial in improving the family structure and functioning, as well as boosting parents' mood and self-efficacy. Family intervention programs for children with ADHD are mainly organized intervention programs or treatments, and behavioral interventions are the main treatment methods.

In the future, medical departments, psychological clinics, and schools, together with communities and families, should take more responsibility for family intervention for ADHD patients. For example, 1) they can develop a comprehensive management program and study its effect; 2) in the family intervention, they should study how to improve the effectiveness of the parental intervention, improve the "educational ability" of parents, and examine the long-term outcome of family intervention and factors affecting the treatment effect; 3) to optimize and improve the parent training programs based on the existing ones, appropriate training programs can be offered to families with various characteristics of ADHD.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper uses the Satir model in psychology, through further analysis and appreciation of the lines and plots of the film, obtains the understanding of the protagonists in the film, and brings ADHD into the discussion to explore its feasibility in the film setting and character image. Evelyn, a 55 year old American immigrant, has a messy marriage and parent-child relationship. After experiencing various universes, Evelyn finally found a way to solve life's dilemma. Evelyn herself can be regarded as a contradiction full of conflicts, and she also lives in a life full of contradictions. Her high independence and stubbornness stem from the integration of Chinese and western education in Hong Kong in her early years, her father's preference for boys and his adherence to traditional concepts. The contradictory character shaped from the original family is causing trouble in the new mother daughter relationship. This article aims to see the big from the small through this typical character image and story plot. Although the times and concepts have been improving, most families in China are still in the same Chinese family education as in the film, that is, to establish unshakable parental authority and ignore the independent existence of children in the family.

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