

The Neglected Wheel of the Mental Health Movement.

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‘Trauma is transgenerational’ If not through genetic make-up, it travels through reliving of experience. It is ingrained in the stories shared during evening teas, and family gatherings. It is ‘ancestral’ for oppressed communities, because it is never-ending and the space to escape is non-existent. This is the trauma that lives through structural oppression and yet it finds little space in mental health discussion.



It has always bugged me to see “SOCIO-ECONOMIC REASONS” being mentioned under the causes of mental distress with no further elaboration. Hence often it doesn't enter the mental health movement. This article is going to try and elaborate on how social/political identities that people have, interact with their psychological well-being and their opportunities to actualise their potential.

The first time a child prominently interacts with the outside world, diverse people, and different cultures is through formal education. Their **interpersonal relationships** with the teachers, other students in a class play a major role in their ability to enjoy the classroom and eventually have a healthy relationship with school and studying. This relationship is either based on the commonality between them or the compatibility of their differences. The latter results when these differences are engaged with, and provided with equal pedestals.

However often these conversations are exclusionary. Some cultures make it to the discussion while others are ignored. The history talks of Gandhi and Nehru, never of the men and women you celebrate at home. You are not so familiar with mainstream mythologies of Sita and Ram, because yours is different. The seemingly harmless message that you are different is thus concluded. Your caste or religious identity is often used to establish you as cruel everytime there is a conversation about animals and food. The folk songs that the class sings together aren't yours. When few times, your history is talked about, you are cornered to teach them, rather than it being a conversation, hence you aren't just different. There is also no space for your differences.

Of course, there is a larger ethnic disproportionality to blame but most often this is how it transcends to the grassroots.

When the pattern continues within peer groups, it leads to the child craving for importance in a particular space. Hence they either unconsciously get gravitated to crowds where their experience is not alien or to, - rarely if they manage to find - those who integrate the differences without awkwardness.

Apart from this seemingly subtle and unintentional impact on interpersonal interaction, the next challenge becomes the **feeling of belongingness**.

Oppression and exclusion are justified through the 'otherisation' of communities. The experience of this exclusion is anyway familiar to people from minority communities, hence the feeling of belongingness to any public community or space such as colleges, schools, social groups for a person, is clouded by the feeling of alienation and dissociation. This is furthered by the direct perception people have of you. The history books demonize you; your culture is questioned by bigots in classrooms and libraries and, You aren't seen beyond the community you belong to, you are stripped off your individuality, you are stereotyped, your friends' parents don't like you because of your social identity, every other day you read about the hate crimes, where you could have been the victim simply because of who you are.

All this and more leaves nothing for you to trust, and without trust there is no belonging.

Of course not always is the community you are born in your safe space, of course your aspirations are often suppressed by those who seem to be your own, but the process of recognising it when is accompanied by hatred of the outside leaves you with nowhere to go. Not to forget minority communities are often closed and rigid and immobile, because their engagement with the larger nation or other cultures have been threatening to them. As a defence their own norms are strengthened and any questioning, not only seems dangerous to them but is also seen like a personal defeat.

Hence what further comes into play here now, is also the hierarchies and layers of status within your own community (example: being a Dalit Muslim, or a Muslim woman). Most often this internal oppression is excluded or neglected even in social movements that claim to uplift the marginalised. (example : White Feminism or the Pride Movement being exclusionary of intersectionality of identities.) What you are left with now is layered oppression, and no recourse.

Self-esteem shapes from what others think of you and your own self-perception. Your relationships with the structures you are part of and the people around you are filled with anxiety. This eventually leads to an even more anxious self-esteem. When you don't feel involved, you don't feel belonged, and hence you feel unprotected. When external structures seem too huge to control or rebel against, you hold yourself accountable for your emotions. This is where the process of self-hate stems from. You desire to be as entitled, as comfortable as those around you. Hence another message that reaches you, is that it's better to be THEM than it is to be you.

Once you've internalised your own inferiority, that of your history, your culture and your lifestyle, it shapes your **experience with your family**, and everyone who taught you this culture and made you grow up with it.

Maslow and Rogers are the two advocates of 'living a fulfilled life.' They primarily demanded high self-esteem as a prerequisite to this self-fulfilment. Minority communities are often deprived of it.

Keeping all this in mind what comes next is how this individual interacts with **opportunities**. Primarily, you never think you deserve them. Because, as you are told, the spaces, the fields, the land isn't yours in the first place. Secondly, because these opportunities are the only way for you to 'claim the space' you feel the extreme pressure to absolutely win. The bar for you to rise up the ladder is way too high. Also, because if one of us won't win, we will all be seen as losers. It's like every time a Muslim woman talks women rights, she is expected to speak for the whole Muslim community, she's not allowed any individuality of her opinion. It's as if those at the peak of the social hierarchies are sitting on a bench and you are showing them what you have to offer in order for them to humanize us. Each one of us, on behalf of a million others.

Specifically, what I wanted to highlight here is never feeling confident enough to demand a leadership position anywhere.

Another psychological construct that is hampered through social oppression, is **Motivation**. Of course, all the aforementioned reasons are a part of why someone would set their goals low, but there also is a vicious cycle involved here. When very few people from the oppressed communities are given a pass to the social spaces by the dominants, it makes one feel underrepresented. It makes one feel that the goal is too unattainable because you don't have reference points to look up to. You don't know people LIKE you, who have been able to achieve what you want to. You feel hopeless and you dream low.

As far as representation is concerned, the fact that pop culture also most often stigmatises you, worsens your opportunity to have role models. Everytime you see someone with a shared identity as you on screen, it's a blood-thirsty savage. When you aren't positively shown in any model, you often feel you are doing something wrong. You don't find the recourse everyone else does in the art that is supposedly your cultural heritage. Plus, the stereotypes impact how other people engage with you too, and perceive you. Once you manage to recognise these prejudices, you are only left with correcting them. Your relationship with art becomes oppositional rather than complementary.

Mental health is anyway stigmatised all over the world. The corresponding stigma of social identities makes access to help, and mental stress itself unequal for all of us. If this movement will not take forward all stakeholders, we will birth another exclusive social movement that will have to be reformed by many other movements. Therapists and psychologists need to consider oppression, politics and ugly realities of inequalities as worthy of research and intervention. Otherwise Cross cultural Psychology will simply fail. We can't drive this movement neglecting one of its wheels.